

# **Thoughts on Admission to Selective Colleges & Universities**

by Dave Crooks

There are many ways in which colleges and universities select students. Each school has its own standards and processes. As such, there is no substitute for a dialog with the college admissions office of those schools you are interested in. It is essential that you understand what each of your prospective colleges is looking for from their applicants. Also, by way of definition, typically, a college or university is defined as “selective” if fewer than 30% of those applying are offered admission.

## **Getting into a selective college is a lot like getting a job**

It's very unlikely that you would get a job in this day and age by merely mailing in an application. However, many students expect to get into college this way...and it's often a fatal mistake.

Typically, when you apply for a job you've done some homework to understand the company, its products, its competitors and its position in the industry. Only then do you prepare and send in a resume, typically with a cover letter explaining why you are the person that company should hire. Later, you follow up on your resume and schedule an interview to sell your particular skills, experience and abilities relative to the needs of the employer. These same steps need to be taken in applying to a selective college or university.

Each college or university has a unique personality...and their goal is to match the personality of the student to the school's personality. You need to help them do this.

Selective colleges and universities like to keep an eye on their ratings. One of the important ratios used in these ratings is the percentage of entering students who stay and graduate from the particular college or university. This is an indication that the student has made a good choice and fits in well at the school, and that the school has made a good choice by admitting this student in the first place. However, getting this match right is very difficult for the admissions staff if all they have in front of them is a Common Application.

## **Determining the student's personality**

First, the student needs to understand his or her personality, strengths and weaknesses, learning style, appropriate social environment, and appetite for risk. An easy way to do this is to ask three friends and three relatives or neighbors who know you well to write down three things that come to mind when they think about you. These should be mailed or emailed anonymously to the student's parent. Mom or Dad can then summarize the data and give the summary to the student (your friends and relatives will be more comfortable doing this if the student doesn't know who says what).

## Determining the college's or university's personality

Understanding the personality of the college or university is a little more difficult. There are several ways to accomplish this:

1. It is hard to convey to a school that you are seriously interested in them if you never set foot on the campus. Visit the school and take the tour. But don't stop there! Walk around on your own. Spend time in the campus bookstore, student union or cafeteria talking to students. They will be glad to help you because they were in your shoes just a few years earlier. You want to ask open-ended questions, such as:
  - a. What makes ABC College unique?
  - b. What is the personality of ABC College?
  - c. What do you like best about ABC College?
  - d. How did you choose a college to attend?
  - e. Why did you choose to attend ABC College?
  - f. How has your perception of ABC College changed since you've been here?
  - g. Why should I decide to attend ABC College?

*Be sure to write down the responses...you will need this information in the future.* (Note: If your schedule allows, try to avoid scheduling an interview the same day as your campus visit. At a minimum, take the tour and walk around the campus before the interview. It helps to have time to digest and distill the information you gleaned...and to prepare responses to questions in the interview that effectively match you to the school.)

Spring break is a great time to visit campuses. Many colleges have their break the first or second week of March...and high schools have their break shortly after that. *You want to visit the campus when college is in full session (as such, it is less productive to visit on a weekend or during the summer).* Also, *it's never too early to start visiting campuses to "put your toe in the water."* Don't wait until the end of your junior year or the fall of your senior year!

You should consider talking to the department chair if you have an idea of what subject you want to major in. Many times this person can influence the admission decision. If you're interested in sports, try to schedule some time with one of the coaches.

2. Senior weekends are another way to find out a lot about a college or university, although you can probably only do one or two of these, so use them wisely for schools you're truly interested in and perhaps are taking a second look at. And go prepared. The student should have done their homework in advance and have prepared some questions. Parents should have discussed with the student what they want to get out of the experience...and then reflect on this when the student returns home.
3. Talk to students who graduated recently from your high school and who are currently attending the colleges or universities that you are considering. Your guidance department should be able to give you a list. If you're a senior, Thanksgiving and Christmas vacations are a great time to have a face-to-face conversation with them. If you're a junior, you can do this over the summer (but get the list before school is out).

4. Attend college fairs and talk to the admission staff or alumni at the table. You should have done your homework on the particular college or university before coming to the college fair and have prepared some questions (some of the questions in #1, above, might be appropriate). If you do go to college fairs, look the college rep in the eye, greet them formally with your name and a firm handshake. *Most importantly, get the rep's name and email so you can follow-up.*
5. Attend visits by college reps to your high school. Be sure to do everything in #4, above, and sit up straight in the front row and take notes. The rep can tell if you're interested! Listen for information about the college or university's personality.
6. Many times your high school counseling or guidance staff will have personality information about a particular college or university.

Here are some examples of a college's or university's personality (obtained talking to students in the cafeteria of the College of William and Mary in Williamsburg, VA):

- Dedicated to excellence
- A community of scholars
- Not as pretentious as an Ivy League school
- A student body very involved in campus activities
- 300+ years of tradition (second oldest university in America) and a lot of school spirit
- Professors are involved with students both academically and socially (they sit on the lawn with the students at lunchtime, sit with the students at sporting events, and invite students to study sessions at their house)
- Excellent relationship between the students, administration and faculty
- Students have a voice in everything that happens on campus
- Great sense of community on campus
- Wide variety of activities on campus...and you are encouraged to start new activities
- Class size is small so that all students can actively participate in the education process
- All classes are taught by professors...grad students aren't utilized
- Not a big party school...students make their own fun on campus (80% of upperclassmen choose to live on campus because that's where the activity, energy and fun is)
- The college is making a major effort to become more diverse
- The college is making more funds available for student research projects

**Keeping your name and interest level in front of the colleges and universities you are interested in**

Once you understand who you are and the college's or university's personality, the next step is to start communicating with the school and reflect a match between the two personalities. If your personality doesn't shine through in your communications with the admissions rep, your essay and your interview, your chances of being accepted at a selective school will be diminished.

It's essential you keep your name and interest level in front of the college or university as much as possible. *This is particularly important in the month prior to the admission decision* (for regular admission, this is typically February).

Assuming you obtained the email address(es) of the admission rep when you were at a college fair, the college rep who visited your high school, or the admissions rep you met when you toured the college, you want to communicate regularly with the admissions office. It is essential that you demonstrate an understanding of the college's personality in these communications...and reflect your personality.

Here are some "excuses" to communicate with the admissions rep:

- After initially meeting the admissions rep, thank them for their time and answering your questions. Be sure to show your understanding of the school...and why you think there is a good match
- When your application is complete
- When you get your first quarter or semester grades in your senior year
- When you are coming to visit campus (try to make an appointment to see the admission rep you've been in contact with)
- When you win an award
- When you get your ACT or SAT scores
- After you have visited campus
- After your interview
- When you get elected to a leadership role in an activity or sport (be sure to tell your goals for the organization under your leadership)
- When you determine the school is your #1 choice
- What you learned from a senior weekend visit

Normally, all email communications are stored and included in your college admission file. As such, avoid telephone calls...the information will be lost.

### **Are selective colleges and universities just looking for grades and test scores?**

No. Typically, grades and test scores are only half of the equation. You need to go the extra mile in this competitive era of college admissions (the number of applications for Fall 2009 are predicted to be the largest ever).

While on the topic of grades, it is important that the student take a challenging course load (some or all honors and AP courses) and have A's and B's in those courses. Selective schools look at these courses as college level material and high grades in advanced courses will help the college or university feel more confident that you can produce similar results if accepted.

State schools tend to use test scores in their initial sort, more so than grades, because it "levels the playing field". However, private schools tend to rely more heavily on grades than test scores. Ideally, the student will have high test scores and high grades, simplifying the decision for the admissions office.

Consistency of grades or steady improvement is essential. If you had a bad semester, an explanation is warranted on the application.

In addition to the match between the student's and school's personalities (discussed above), selective colleges and universities are looking for extracurricular activities, an essay that reflects the student's personality, diversity, and a person of character who shows the prospect for continued intellectual development.

Selective colleges and universities want to see longer term commitments to extracurricular activities...so quality is better than quantity. Demonstrated leadership in an activity is a definite plus (but expect to get questioned about your goals for this organization and the results when you interview). Having some balance in your activities is also important. It would be better to have one community service activity and one sport rather than two sports. Activities that take place outside of high school should certainly be included, such as church activities, scouts, interest groups, community service, etc.

Essays need to reflect the student's passions, accomplishments and aspirations. Many times a selective college or university will provide a topic to write on...and the challenge for the student then becomes how to cleverly reflect "me" in the essay. The student needs to jump off the page to the reader of the essay. If you get to choose your topic for the essay, select an experience that changed your perspective, led to a deeper meaning, or taught an important lesson. "Canned" essays and verbiage off the Internet or from a book will risk a rejection letter because the admissions staff can easily recognize them and will realize the application doesn't reflect the genuine "you". The same is true where parents write the essay for the student. Remember, the admissions departments in these schools read, literally, thousands of essays. They know what's real!

Colleges are looking for diversity among students. As such, ethnicity can help you. Most schools strive to have a student body that reflects the makeup of the population at large. Geographical diversity is also important to many colleges and universities...so living in a location where few of their students live will help you (the opposite is also true...if you come from an area where the bulk of the school's students come from, it's harder to get accepted).

If you have special talents and skills, they can help you in the admissions process by separating you from the other applicants. Don't hesitate to put a DVD containing an example of your special talent or skill in with the application (be sure to reference this in the application and put your name on the media). Individual honors or awards can also help differentiate you from other applicants (you should not include team or group honors/awards unless you are applying for a sports scholarship). Being a recruited athlete is a very important factor. Work with your coaches, the athletic department and the guidance department to make sure that you are being "showcased" to schools that are looking for your skills.

Many college admissions staff check Facebook, MySpace and other social networking sites, especially if the student is borderline. Students should clean up their pages prior to mailing applications and think about whether everything on their pages is something they want the

admissions staff to see. Likewise, student email addresses should be something that is not off-color or in bad taste.

While many selective schools like to see the children of their alumni attending their schools, it is unclear whether this is a significant advantage in this day and age. The same is true of family finances. Being able to write the tuition check is unlikely to help...unless you want to go further and fund the construction of a new building on campus!

Finally, it's essential that the entire application is prepared by the student...and that the application genuinely reflects the student.

### **Is an interview necessary?**

An interview is often the best way to sell your personality, character and eager mind. If they are offered, interviews are essential to getting accepted at a selective school.

Like interviewing for a job, you will want to be well prepared. You must understand the personality of the college or university before you arrive for the interview. The worst thing you can do in any interview is give short, yes/no, answers...remember, the interviewer is trying to understand who you are and how you think. Short answers only frustrate the interviewer. You should expect questions such as:

- What has been the most rewarding part of your time in high school?
- What has been the most challenging part of your time in high school?
- What would you do differently if you were going to attend high school all over again?
- What has been your greatest contribution to your high school?
- Describe an experience in your life that was a revelation to you.
- What activities, situations or circumstances in high school caused you to grow intellectually and emotionally?
- How has your experience in high school prepared you to be a student at ABC College?
- Describe your leadership experience in the "activity/sport". What were your goals for the group and how were these realized?
- How will you use these leadership skills at ABC College?
- How would you describe yourself? How would your parents describe you?
- What are your goals after college?
- Why will you be a good choice for ABC College?

### **Are recommendations important?**

Yes! Ideally, these will reveal your personality and character, reinforcing your other communications with the college or university.

Ask your teachers and counselors if they will write you a "strong recommendation". You don't want a form letter. Help the teacher or counselor prepare the recommendation by providing them with some background material about you, including your activities (in and out of school), your successes in high school, your personality, and your aspirations.

## **Should we employ a college admission consultant?**

“Consultants” come in many shapes and forms. They can be a parent, a relative or family friend, a guidance counselor or a paid professional. Regardless, it’s always great to have a coach. However, the role of a coach is to encourage, advise, and help the player reach their full potential...but the coach doesn’t play the game.

So, if a consultant is going to assist and encourage the student to do the best job he/she can in preparing an application that genuinely reflects the student, then the consultant serves a useful purpose. However, if the consultant is going to prepare a “canned” application based on an interview with the student (and family), then he/she is doing the student a disservice...and the college admissions staff will likely see right through the application.

If a student has trouble with interviews, a consultant may provide significant value in helping to prepare the student for this uncomfortable experience.

Outside consultants can also take a lot of the stress and trepidation out of the college selection process...for both the student and the family.

## **What actually happens in the admissions department?**

Admission reps (and in some cases alumni volunteers) are reading applications 8-10 hours a day, five days a week, for 6-8 weeks. Typically, 20% of applications go into the accepted pile and 20% go into the rejected pile on the first pass. As such, most applications will end up in the 60% “maybe” pile.

The odds are, therefore, that your application will end up in the “maybe” pile. That’s why it’s so important to have had an on-going dialog with the admissions rep...the admissions department will have a lot more material about you than just the application. You’ve had a chance to sell yourself in these communications and answer the question, “Who is this person and why should we want him/her in our college community?”

## **How many selective schools should be applied to?**

Without a doubt, the quality of applications is much more important than the quantity. It’s better to do a great job on a few applications rather than hurriedly applying to a multitude of colleges and universities. Selective schools typically have 4-10 applications for each student they admit...so a poorly prepared application is almost certain to end up in the 20% reject file on the first pass.

A proven strategy is to apply to two or three “stretch” schools, a couple of “probable” schools, and a couple of “safe” schools...perhaps six or eight in total, but certainly not 15 or 20! Students are rarely happy with the results of the shotgun approach and, given that your goal is to demonstrate your REAL interest in the school, it is impossible to put the individual effort into that many applications. And, if you’re not REALLY interested in the school, why apply?

**In summary...**

- Know who you are
- Truly understand the schools you apply to
- Visit the campuses of those schools
- Use your essay and other communications to show why you are a great fit at the school you're applying to
- Apply to a reasonable number of schools, do a first class job on each application, and stay in front of the admissions department of those schools

This is a great time in your life—enjoy it!

And good luck!

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