

## **Finding that edge in competitive college applications**

*"Sometimes, your friends and family know you better than you can describe yourself."*

Year-end deadlines are approaching for stressed-out high school seniors applying to college. For most, getting into college is their first big competitive bottleneck, and today's seniors are getting squeezed tighter than ever because more and more students are applying to the same popular schools, forcing them to accept fewer applicants. Last year, Penn State's University Park campus admitted 62 percent of the 30,000 who applied. Lehigh University took 39 percent, and the University of Pennsylvania mailed back thick acceptance envelopes to just one in five applicants.

These odds push some parents to pay \$10,000 or more for SAT tutoring or private college counselors. This would seem to give wealthier and better-informed kids an advantage. But money can't buy incredible talent or replace authentic creativity. In the end, a college application reflects the time and effort that goes into it. To improve your chances, follow these steps to craft an application that stands out from the crowd.

Every application should have a consistent message. Emphasize a distinctive persona. Describe yourself as a photographer who plays lacrosse; a scientist and budding politician; an engineer with entrepreneurial ambitions. Give readers a unique tagline to remember you by.

Don't stress about test scores. Most admissions officers realize that SAT scores don't always determine the best students, just the best test-takers. Strong grades are more important, but there's more to learning than being No. 1. Don't sacrifice extracurricular activities just to be valedictorian. If you have poor SAT results or a lackluster academic year, use your essays to describe the lapse as a challenge that you overcame.

Take the most challenging course schedule you can handle. Tough classes are more important than perfect grades. A future English major who earns a 'B' in an AP calculus course will impress admissions officers more than if she got an A in an easier college prep course.

Do something you're not asked to do. Getting good grades, volunteering, and joining the band or Key Club aren't impressive. They are what you're supposed to do. Projects you initiate yourself, such as writing and directing a community play or starting a volunteer program will earn you a spot in a competitive college's

freshman class. Colleges are looking for self-starters.

Optional materials are no longer optional. When college applications allow you to submit "optional materials" it's an invitation to sell yourself. Send an art portfolio, news clippings, creative writing, screenplays, or a DVD of athletic highlights.

Be specific and concise. Colleges want to know why you're applying: Tell them with details. Identify subjects you want to study and name clubs you're interested in. If you're seeking a challenging academic climate, explain why.

Meet early with your recommendation writers. Popular teachers are often swamped by dozens of reference letter requests. Help them and yourself by giving them plenty of information and time. Provide a "brag sheet" of your accomplishments, summarize the theme of your application. If the teacher allows you to see the letter (never ask, as the decision is up to them), review it and make suggestions.

Share your essays with multiple readers. Sometimes, your friends and family know you better than you can describe yourself. Share your essays early and often with readers you trust. Get help with grammar and spelling.

Financial aid is there for the taking. If you think your family can't afford a \$35,000 tuition, think again. Many universities, especially elite schools with large endowments, provide generous grants and merit scholarships. If your family makes \$60,000 or under, your parents might not pay a cent to attend Harvard, and most schools admit students without weighing financial need.

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