

*CollegeAdmissions100.com's*

# Professor's Guide To College Admissions

**First Edition**



**Dr. Stephen Murray**

**College Admissions 100** | A global college  
discussion

# Admissions Guide

First Edition

By Dr. Stephen Murray

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# 1 Introduction

So you've decided you want to go to college. Now what? Some people are really lucky and have an inside connection with the world of higher education. Their parents went to college, and there are several generations of college go-ers in their families. It was always expected of them that they would go to college, and their entire upbringing was geared toward making them the kinds of people who would do well in the college admissions process.

But, even if you're one of these lucky ones, the college admissions process can be full of surprises, disappointments, and anxieties.

While nearly everyone is assured of getting into some college or other, you still might find it challenging getting into the college of your choice. Entrance at many colleges is highly competitive. If

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you hope to go to a highly selective college, then you might be surprised to find that many of those who apply are truly exceptional people. Even if you excel academically, as well as in your extra-curricular activities, you might still come across to college admissions officers as being “average,” when considered against the many other exceptional applicants.

Students who don't have college-goers in their families, and whose upbringings did not really gear them toward going to college, will often face many of the admissions challenges even the fortunate students just mentioned face. However, if it turns out that you come from a disadvantaged background, this could be a help to you in the admissions process. I will say more about this later.

This book is for everyone. Regardless of your socio-economic, ethnic, and educational background, this book will help you better to

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understand the college admissions process. And it will help you to make better decisions in preparing to submit your college applications.

Moreover, you don't need to be applying to a highly selective college to be able to make use of this book. The kind of information you'll receive will help to make you a better candidate for admissions at any university.

Are you thinking of applying for entrance scholarships or other kinds of financial aid to help cover the costs of your degree? Then you should be especially interested in making yourself the best candidate you can be. Even if you're going to apply to a college that isn't extremely selective – so you aren't worried about the competition for getting in – you can rest assured that you will face stiff competition when it comes to applying for the limited number of scholarships there are these days.

This book is written from a unique point of

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view. Many books on college admissions are written by high school teachers or guidance counsellors. These are important points of view to take into consideration when you're thinking about applying to college. But I am offering different point of view: the point of view of someone who has spent ten years of his life in post-secondary education – both as an undergraduate and graduate student – and who went on to teach at the post-secondary level at major research universities. I have a lot of experience actually leading college classes, and being part of college communities. And there are various things that *I* look for in an ideal college student. You might be surprised to find out what kinds of students professors hope to be able to teach.

Many college applicants have found my point of view useful to them as they navigate the admissions process. But, again, my point of view is not the only one there is – and you should consider different perspectives as you make these

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important decisions that will significantly impact your life.

You might already know that at many colleges, professors don't actually play very active roles in the process of selecting an entering undergraduate class. They do not have the time to do this, between carrying out their own research, and teaching. Admissions officers (who are not themselves professors) tend to read most of the applications. Still, professors will often be represented on admissions committees. This means that they will read some of the applications for the given year. And, obviously, what professors value greatly informs how admissions committees make their decisions. If professors are continually unhappy with the kinds of admissions decisions being made, it is almost guaranteed that things will eventually have to change.

In what follows, I'll begin by discussing the

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nature of the college admissions process. Then I'll discuss ways in which you can prepare yourself to be the best candidate you can be in the period leading up to that all-important day on which you actually begin to assemble your admissions materials and get ready to send them off to the colleges to which you've chosen to apply.

The information I'll be discussing is information that every college applicant needs to know. I would find it very unfortunate if someone who had dreamed throughout his or her life of studying in college, or at a particular kind or calibre of college, couldn't do so simply because he or she lacked this information.

I would encourage you to share this book with anyone you like who you think can benefit from it. But I ask that if you are making use of this book, you visit [CollegeAdmissions100.com](http://CollegeAdmissions100.com) and take a few seconds to register for free.

## 2 Why Do *You* Want to Go to College?

Obviously, different people have different reasons for pursuing a college education. Some college students are in college mainly because they want to please their parents – or worse, because their parents are actively forcing them to be there. I have seen my share of these students. It is usually quite easy to tell who they are (in fact, sometimes they are quite open about this when they're talking to me). These students sometimes make it and complete their degrees. However, it is an unfortunate fact that many will not finish.

As you apply to college and prepare to spend thousands of dollars of your or your parents money – in some cases to taking on massive debts in order to finance your education – keep in

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mind the following sobering statistics. As Forbes magazine reported, in the U.S. in 2009, more than one million freshmen will begin degrees at four-year colleges as full-time students. However, *six-years* from now, only about 500,000 of these students will actually have earned a degree. If we ignore students enrolled at highly-selective, elite, colleges, then the expected graduation rate after six years is closer to 40 percent.

Going to college before you are ready, or for reasons that are not your own, can end up wasting large sums of money and eating up time that could perhaps have been spent in more productive ways.

How do you know if you're ready for college? Making this decision will require you to do some serious soul searching. You must take the time to think about who you are, what you're most passionate about, and what you ultimately would like your life to look like. You can seek the

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guidance of your friends or family – especially your parents. These people will often have a lot to offer.

But you might also find it helpful to work with a counsellor at this stage if you can afford it, or if you have access to free low-cost counselling in your area. School guidance counsellors tend to be overworked, and, unfortunately, might not have time to give you the attention you need. This is a key time of transition in your life. It is a time when you must begin making your own decisions and taking on responsibility for yourself and the world around you. There will likely be few other times in your life at which so many things will change so rapidly for you. You might feel overwhelmed, stressed out, and desperate to put on the breaks. Don't neglect your emotional well-being at this stage, otherwise you could end up having to clean up a bigger mess a few years down the road.

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Having said this, there are clear advantages to going to college and completing your degree. If you have any inclination at all to attend college, you should take that inclination very seriously. If you feel that college is right for you, then you should do your best to gain admission at the college you most want to attend.

You might want to go to college, but have some reservations. Perhaps you are worried about what it will be like, or you're unsure whether you will be able to complete the work. It is fine to be worried about these things. But don't let these fears prevent you from jumping in and reaping the rewards of attending college. The fact is that college coursework need not be *that* hard. If you've been doing well enough in high school, chances are you will also do relatively well in college (although, you might need to put in a bit of extra work at first getting the hang of the college way of doing things).

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So, what are the advantages of a college education? One advantage which is widely known is that you will likely emerge with ways of thinking that are significantly broader than those you have had in the past. You will be encouraged by your professors to think about topics that are not typically covered in the high school curriculum, and to think about these topics in new and creative ways. Your professors will tend to have a strong passion for their discipline.

It is not unusual to find history professors, for instance, who *live* their disciplines. They are constantly working on writing a new book or article in their subspecialty, they love to talk about their work with their colleagues on the faculty, and they regularly jet off to conferences to meet with others who are just as passionate about their work. Of course, it is not just history professors who tend to be like this. Biology professors, math professors, psychology professors, literature professors, and so on, all have a tendency to be

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passionate about the ideas they work with.

You might find the way of life of the professor surprising, bizarre, even obsessive. Perhaps you would be partly correct in thinking this. But I prefer using the word “passionate” to describe this lifestyle. Academia is a place where truly passionate people thrive. This is something you must keep in mind when you are presenting yourself to a prospective college (I will say more about conveying your passion to admissions committees later).

Because of the passion of those around you, as a student in the college environment, you almost cannot help but to internalize new ways of thinking and discover new, fascinating ideas to explore.

There are also more practical advantages to going to college. The National Center for Education Statistics in the U.S. reported the following median annual earning statistics. For

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male full-time workers between the ages of 25 and 34 with only a high school diploma or GED, median annual earning was \$30,000; for female workers in this category, the figure was \$24,000. On the other hand, for male workers in this age group with a bachelor's degree or higher, the median salary was \$50,000, and for their female counterparts, the median salary was \$41,000.

These are very significant differences. Now, money isn't everything. For some people, pursuing their dreams means embarking on a path that does not involve a college education. For all we know, many such people will be happier in their lives earning less than college graduates earning more in jobs that they don't really enjoy. Still, if you are to some extent motivated by money, or could see yourself being very happy working in one of the many different kinds of jobs college graduates occupy, then you have a strong reason to take going to college – and finishing your degree once you're there – seriously.

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Maybe you already know that college is for you at this point. Perhaps you are still unsure, but are still curious to hear more about how college admissions work and what you can do to make yourself into a competitive applicant if you decide to apply. Either way, you will want to read on.

## 3 Where Do You Want to Study?

Many of you will be hoping to study at a four-year college, undertaking what might be loosely called a “liberal arts” education. This is the sort of education in which one isn't aiming to achieve any specific professional qualification at the end of one's degree. Rather, one takes a variety of courses in the arts and humanities, and/or in the sciences, in order to broaden one's outlook, and to learn “for the sake of learning.” Of course, in the backs of most such students' minds is the question: how will this particular course of study help me to get the kind of job I want once I graduate? But the point of a liberal arts education is to prepare you to work in a variety of settings, or to be in a position to embark on further education in graduate school, medical school, or law school.

### 3 Where Do You Want to Study?

In the UK, it is possible for students to study medicine, dentistry, or law straight out of school. This is pretty much unheard of in North America, where it is widely required that students complete at least several years of an undergraduate bachelor's degree in the arts or sciences before being eligible to apply to such programs.

This raises an important point which you must keep in mind: college admissions standards and conventions can vary from one part of the world to another. For instance, if you are hoping to study at a university in the U.S., you will find that the admissions process you must complete in order to gain admission at most moderately to highly selective college can be quite a bit more complicated than the process you must complete to be admitted in comparable degree programs in other countries, such as Canada or the UK.

In the U.S., nearly every college requires applicants to have taken the SATs. SAT scores will

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often be given more weight by admissions officers than the applicant's high school grades. High school grades tend to be considered to be less useful and reliable than standardized test scores, since different schools can have different grading practices. This is not to mention the phenomenon of grade inflation (which is found both in high schools and at universities). That is, over the years, average grades teachers and professors have been giving out have been creeping higher and higher.

To apply to a U.S. college, you usually must submit at least two recommendation letters and an application essay, in addition to your grade transcripts and standardized test scores. In some cases, you might even be interviewed.

Contrast this with the requirements for applying to study PPE (Philosophy, Politics, and Economics) at Oxford University in the UK. To do this, you must take a standardized test called the

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“Thinking Skills Assessment,” and must submit an application to the University through UCAS (the Universities & Colleges Admissions Service – which performs a role similar to that of the U.S.'s “Common Application”). The UCAS is an application system which allows you to apply to as many UK universities as you like at once. You will need to submit a personal statement and details of your background, and have someone write you a letter of recommendation. If you make it to the final round, you will be interviewed at an Oxford college by a “tutor” (this is the term used to refer to a faculty member) at an Oxford college. Not all UK universities make it common practice to interview finalists in the admissions process. If you are applying to study in the UK, you should find out whether any of the universities to which you are applying require this.

Canadian universities do things differently. There is no standardized test that is the equivalent of the SATs that all applicants must

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have written. However, most Canadian students will have written some form of “provincial exam” in their home province. Admissions committees will generally ask for these exam grades – unless, that is, the applicant has been admitted early. When this occurs, the admissions decision will be based primarily on the student's high school grades earned up to the middle of grade 12. What is notable about Canadian universities is that they do not generally require you to submit letters of recommendation or personal statements, and rarely interview applicants to degrees in the arts or sciences.

For instance, on its website, Montreal's McGill university tells prospective applicants that admissions decisions are based on the student's academic record (that is, on his or her high school record). There will often be a focus on the student's performance in any prerequisite courses for the particular program of study that the student wishes to enter.

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What is of note – and will surprise many applicants to U.S. colleges – is that McGill tells its applicants that “extracurricular activities are not significant in the admissions decision.” In the U.S., on the other hand, it is next to impossible to be admitted to a selective university without having an impressive history of participation in extracurriculars.

With all this in mind, you will need to decide where you want to study. Will you study in your home country, or abroad? For many students, it will make the most financial sense to study in their home country (more on this in a moment). But others will be attracted by the idea of leaving the country.

If you are the adventurous type, you might like the thrill of living outside of your country. If you are an American and have had your heart set on being a doctor since you were three years old and want to get straight to it, you might decide that

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applying for a place to study medicine at a UK university is the right choice.

These are important, and difficult, decisions that take time to make. That is why, ideally, you'll start thinking carefully about where you'll want to study – especially if you're seriously thinking of studying abroad – a few years before you reach 12<sup>th</sup> grade.

## 4 Money Matters

The costs of studying abroad can add up. This is especially true for citizens of Canada and the UK, where tuition for home students at universities (which are mostly public rather than private), is a fraction of the cost of the overseas tuition they would pay were they to leave. But for American citizens contemplating studying at a private college, the difference might not be as significant.

Consider some figures. For 2009-2010, the undergraduate tuition fee at the London School of Economics for UK and European Union students is 3,290 GBP (roughly 5,081 USD). The tuition fee for all other students is 13,680 GBP. This is roughly 21,128 USD.

The undergraduate tuition fee at the University of Western Ontario, in Canada, for Canadian

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students studying for degrees in the arts or sciences is 4,991 CAD. For international students, the fee is 23,478 CAD. These non-domestic fees can sound steep, but many American students will be less inclined to bat an eye.

For instance, according to U.S. News and World Report, tuition and fees for the University of Chicago in 2009-2010 are \$39,381. This does not include room and board or textbooks.

Many students will face financial constraints which will require them not only to stay within their home country, but also within their home state, province, or county. If this is your situation, you can rest assured that it is never a bad idea to save money at this point in your life. How comfortable are you about being saddled with upwards of 100,000 USD in debts at the end of your four year degree? With this money, one could buy a house, start a business, or embark on any number of projects that could potentially be of use

to one's community.

Colleges have extremely savvy and powerful marketing campaigns which aim to sell you an image. More than ever, colleges and universities are interweaved with the corporate world and follow corporate models. These are giant organizations, often with unthinkably large endowments (Chicago's is \$5,933,760,896 – that's right, almost *six billion dollars*) which spend enormous amounts of money.

The most selective and expensive colleges in the U.S. hope that you will truly believe that you will be getting a better education, and perhaps even that you will be “set for life” if you attend their college. It is important to think critically about the images they are selling. (Ironically, the capacity for this sort of critical reflection is precisely what you should be learning to do in college!) It is just not clear that you will really be any more “set” if you attend an expensive private

college than if you attend a public college.

I am not saying that you should not spend the money on a private education, but only that you should weigh the costs and benefits of your decision. Clearly, you must make this decision for yourself. The only wrong decision is the one that does not respect your own character and values. You will need to think carefully about your values, and about what you think you want out of your life. There are lots of different ways of living a good and satisfying life, and while having attended an elite private university will enhance some peoples' lives, it will not necessarily serve to enhance *everyone's* life.

So far, I've discussed some of the ways in which admissions procedures and conventions can vary university to university, and from country to country; and I have also tried to get you to think about some of the financial implications of going to college. The next chapter will focus on how

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admissions work at many competitive colleges, especially in the U.S.

After that, I will be discussing ways in which you can make yourself a more competitive applicant at the colleges at which you choose to apply, as well as a better contender to win appealing entrance scholarships that can lessen the financial burden of studying at college.

## 5 The Admissions Game: Early Admissions

The way in which admissions work at even the most selective U.S. colleges will probably surprise you, especially if you are new to the world of college admissions.

You might have thought that all students are, or should be admitted on the basis of their academic abilities alone. But this is far from the reality.

Just consider a college that has openings for 2,000 students in a given academic year. Suppose further that this college offers what is called “early decision.” For those who don't know, early decision is quite common in the United States. The idea is that, although graduating high school students may apply to many different colleges,

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they are only allowed to apply to *one* college for an early decision. The student must make this application early on in his or her senior year – in the fall – before any of his or her senior grades are ready. The college will then make its early decision regarding this student by December or January. This means that the admissions decision will be made primarily on the basis of the student's transcript for grades nine through twelve, as well as SATs that the student has written – likely in his or her junior year.

What is unique about early decision as opposed to regular admissions is that, once a student has applied for early decision at a given college, he or she *must* accept any early offer that the college makes to that student. The student cannot change his or her mind later. In fact, he or she must immediately withdraw any other college applications that are pending.

It is to a college's advantage to admit a large

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number of early decision applicants, for several reasons. One is that it makes it easier for the college to plan ahead logistically for the upcoming academic year. That is, it makes it easier for the college to answer questions like, who will be living in which dorms? And, which special resources will be required for the incoming freshman class?

It is also to the college's financial advantage to know that it has firm commitments from a large segment of the entering class. If it did not have early decision, it might find in the spring that, although it has made 3000 offers to students, only 1500 students have chosen to enroll – and that the rest have decided to pursue their education with the college's competitors. Early decision helps colleges to maintain a level of financial security they otherwise could not have.

A third reason why colleges like to employ early decision is that, people who work at colleges – like most other people – have *egos*. It is satisfying to

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the ego to know that someone has chosen to commit to you in the exclusive way that early decision requires.

Moreover, the college hopes to be able to start from this initial strong commitment to build a strong relationship in the years to come. This relationship will be vital to the college's efforts to persuade you to donate money to them once you have graduated and are an alumnus (many colleges rely *heavily* on donations in order to cover their operating costs).

Finally, early decision applicants tend to be highly motivated, good students. They tend to have had college on their minds for several years, they have taken steps to write the SATs early, and they've generally been sufficiently attentive to their grades in order to be ready to present competitive transcripts before their senior year has even gotten under way.

Given all these advantages to colleges, many

## 5 The Admissions Game: Early Admissions

quite predictably choose to admit a sizable percentage of freshmen students through early decision. It is typical for between 30% and 40% of entering students to be early decision applicants.

This means that, in an entering class of 2000 students, 600-800 can be expected to have been admitted through early decision.

## 6 So You Want to Play College Sports?

Of the remaining regular admissions applicants, you might be surprised to learn how these are allotted, as well as at the ways in which admissions standards can vary depending on the category into which you fit.

If the college you're applying to places any weight on its athletics programs (as many U.S. colleges do), it can be expected that something like 20% of the regular admissions spots will be reserved for student athletes – basketball players, hockey players, football players, swimmers, and so on.

Admissions requirements for athletes can be lower than they are for applicants who are not recruited for their athletics. Colleges are willing to

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admit talented athletes even if these athletes lack the grades and scores that some other applicants have.

Students (and faculty) who are not themselves particularly talented athletically, much less interested in watching sports, sometimes wonder why so many spots are reserved for athletes. Isn't a college supposed to be a place where the intellect is supreme? If you're not an athlete, you might be thinking to yourself: why have I slaved all these years in school to get straight A's and high standardized test scores only to be passed over by someone with lower grades who happens to have a talent for sports?

This is an understandable feeling to have. However, the college's perspective is slightly different. First, it hopes to build a well-rounded community of students with a diverse set of skills and talents. Athletic ability is, to be sure, quite different from intellectual ability, but admitting

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students with these abilities is part of the colleges efforts to build a well-rounded community.

A college recognizes that putting in the time needed to truly excel at a sport in high school can require a student to make sacrifices when it comes to getting exceedingly high grades and test scores. But that is a tradeoff that a college is often willing to make for the sake of its own well-roundedness.

I should note, however, that colleges will not typically admit students who they feel lack the academic ability to complete their college coursework. But that is not necessarily such a stringent requirement, since there is no reason to think that the coursework will present insurmountable challenges – even for students with less than A or B averages in high school.

Beyond hoping to build well-rounded communities, colleges like to admit talented athletes because a strong athletics program is

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thought to help the college's image for marketing purposes. These days in the U.S., high-level college athletics such as football and basketball are broadcast on national television. A recent basketball game between Villanova and Georgetown that was televised on ESPN attracted 1.5 million viewers. When a college team is doing well, it is spoken about widely, its logo is prominently displayed to millions of viewers, and the college's brand does well, overall.

I can imagine those who are not athletically inclined still protesting that none of this is pertinent to the issue at hand. Perhaps you *wish* that colleges did things differently, placing less emphasis on academics. And you would be correct to note that, at universities outside of the U.S., athletics seem to be given far less importance. But clearly there are many students, professors, and members of the public who are not even directly affiliated with any college, who take great pleasure in following and supporting college

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athletics. Whether this is a good thing or a bad thing will depend on your perspective – but it seems unlikely to change in the near future.

## 7 Legatees and Ethnic Minority Students

Another category into which applicants can fall is that of “legatee.” A legatee of a particular college is someone whose parents and/or grandparents attended that college. A moderately to highly selective college might set aside somewhere in the area of 15% of its freshman openings for students in this category. Like the category of recruited athletes, the acceptance rate for the category of legatees will typically be higher than it would be for general applicants. In other words, if you fall into this category, you might have some advantage when it comes to your chances of being admitted to the college in question.

Like the admissions advantage afforded to recruited athletes, the advantage afforded to

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legatees strikes some people as unfair. The reason, of course, is that being a legatee, like being an athlete, is a characteristic that is not directly related to one's intellectual abilities – in the way that grades and standardized test scores arguably are. But we have already seen that colleges are not pure, intellectual havens reserved only for the academically and intellectually elite. They are communities and institutions, and they are at least partly motivated by financial considerations.

Financially speaking, it makes sense for a college to cultivate lasting relationships with families over the course of several generations. These families become attached to the college and feel a closeness towards it. For instance, in my own case, my parents felt quite happy when I chose to do my undergraduate degree at the same university they had both attended. And, at the time, I took a certain amount of pride in following in their footsteps. When a family feels this kind of

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attachment toward a college, the thinking is that they are also more likely to contribute to it over the years when the development and alumni affairs offices contact them as part of fundraising campaigns.

The next admissions category employed at most colleges in the U.S. is that of “ethnic minority.” Especially sought after students in this category are African American students and Hispanic students. It is not unusual for something in the area of 10% of the places in a freshman class to be set aside for recruited minority students, or roughly 200 places in a class of 2000.

Academic admissions standards for recruited ethnic minority students can be lower than those for general applicants – just in the way that admissions standards for recruited athletes, and legatees will tend to be lower than those for general applicants.

Again, in varying the standards in order to

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increase the number of students belonging to a certain category represented on campus – in this case that of “ethnic minority” - there is the risk of giving impression that admissions decisions are being made unfairly. If a student belonging to an ethnic minority is chosen over a student with higher grades and test scores who belongs to the ethnic majority, this student may feel hurt and threatened.

These are entirely justifiable feelings. But hopefully they are mitigated somewhat by a full understanding of what exactly one is getting into when one chooses to attend college. One is choosing to be part of a community with a certain set of values, and a certain relationship to its past practices. As far as its past practices are concerned, it is widely known that colleges in the U.S. and worldwide have employed highly discriminatory admissions practices, and have often served to preserve and promote the wealth and privilege of society's elite – rather than

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providing opportunities for advancement for all. This is the reality.

So a college community's values are partly shaped by its own history. And it is your decision as to whether or not you will try to join a given college community. To properly make this decision, you must do everything you can to understand what that community values, and you must contemplate whether these are values that you wish to accept.

This is probably just what you would do if you were deciding to move to a new town, city, or country. For example, if you were considering moving to a country with a political and economic system widely divergent from the one you are used to, you would need to compare what you value with what that country values. Suppose you're thinking about moving from a country governed by a free-market democratic outlook to one with a socialist outlook and a planned

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economy. In such a case, you would have to ask yourself how flexible you are with your values, whether you can respect the values espoused by the other community. After all, you are contemplating becoming part of *that* community.

In the same way, you must take the time properly to understand what a given college community values. If you are rejected for a reason that you feel is unfair, you must not take this rejection too personally. Instead, you should just understand that your sense of being angry and hurt likely arises from the fact that the college's values are not necessarily the same as your own. If you had exactly the same values as they did, then, you would probably not be hurt! You would have done exactly what they did in choosing a recruited applicant with a less impressive academic record than yours over you, and you would see what they did as the morally right thing to do!

## 7 Legatees and Ethnic Minority Students

I personally feel that it is important for colleges to operate with an understanding of their past, and to do what they can to contribute to the bringing about of a more fair and equitable society. One way for them to do this is to seek out applicants from backgrounds they have historically shunned. This includes not only ethnic minority applicants, but also ethnic majority applicants from lower socio-economic backgrounds (many colleges, in fact, do take socio-economic background into consideration when making admissions decisions).

Making up for past moral wrongs is not the only reason why colleges seek to create ethnically diverse student communities. There is also an educational value to having students in the classroom who have very different experiences. One of the main educational aims of a liberal arts college education is to help students to broaden their outlooks and to learn to view things from points of view other than their own.

## 7 Legatees and Ethnic Minority Students

Ideally, this will occur through students sharing diverse points of view in the classroom, and through ensuing debate in which all sides do their utmost to understand and respect their fellow students' points of view. Developing a broader outlook and increasing one's capacity for empathy is considered by many colleges to be an essential outcome of a well-executed liberal arts education. But if everyone in the classroom comes from more or less the same ethnic (and socio-economic) background, then it is not clear that achieving this outcome will really be possible.

The point, then, is that colleges value diversity not only to rectify past mistakes, but also to help in the execution of the very educational goals they set for themselves.

So far, I've talked about several categories of admissions: early decision admissions, recruited student athletes, legatees, and recruited ethnic minority students. I have not mentioned another

## 7 Legatees and Ethnic Minority Students

category that often comprises a small percentage of admissions – the category of students with highly unique and specialized, but sought after skills.

For instance, playing a unique musical instrument – such as the harp – at a very high level can be to your advantage if the orchestra is in need of a harpist. Being a highly talented student actor or director could be to your advantage if the college is looking for students to revive a waning tradition of student-led productions.

If you have a special and unique talent such as this, it is to your advantage to point this out on your application, or even to attempt to make direct contact with relevant professors or college officials ahead of submitting your application to find out if there is currently a need on campus for someone with your special talent.

## 8 General Applicants

Together, the categories discussed so far can represent something in the area of 75%-80% of college admissions in a given year.

This means that general applicants who belong to none of these categories must compete for the remaining 20% of places. For a freshman class of 2000 students, this will mean that only about 400 places are left for such applicants.

However, at top colleges there will likely be many thousands of applicants competing for these few hundred places. If you are a general applicant to a selective college, then you will face extremely stiff competition. You will need to be considered a truly exceptional applicant in order to be admitted from this applicant pool.

Shortly, I will discuss ways in which you can

## 8 General Applicants

make yourself into a highly desirable applicant. But before I do, it is worth being explicit that it is generally to your advantage for your application to be considered in one of the applicant categories discussed in previous chapters.

Obviously, you cannot control whether you are a legatee or whether you belong to an ethnic minority. But you can control whether you apply to a given college for early decision, and to some extent whether you are recruited as a student athlete or possess a unique and sought-after talent that you've cultivated to a high degree.

For instance, if you are a high school student and you cross-country ski competitively, then you might consider whether it is worth putting in the time needed to improve upon your talent in order to be able to compete at the college level. This is something that you can discuss with your coaches. If you are going to pursue this avenue, you will eventually want to make contact with the coaches

## 8 General Applicants

at the colleges to which you hope to apply in order to find out whether they would be interested in having you play for them.

But suppose there's just no way that you're going to be able to become good enough at a sport or other activity to play collegiate sports, and you don't fit into any of the other categories we've discussed. You're a general applicant, for better or worse. What can you do to make yourself more appealing to college admissions committees? In the next few chapters, I offer some tips on becoming the best possible college applicant.

## 9 Key Qualities of Exceptional College Applicants: Cultivating Passion

## 9 Key Qualities of Exceptional College Applicants: Cultivating Passion

If you have decided that you want to go to college – regardless of where you plan to attend college, or even which admissions category you fall into – then you should try to make yourself into the most appealing applicant you can be. I will now begin to discuss some key qualities that college admissions officers seek in applicants. If you can demonstrate in your application and/or your admissions interview that you possess these qualities, then you will have a leg up over many of the applicants.

Additionally, if you hope to receive an entrance scholarship, then you will be in competition with some truly exceptional students. You will need to be as strong as you can be – and possessing these qualities will help you on this front, too.

In order to truly convince a college that you possess the qualities in question, the best thing you can do is to actually cultivate them in yourself. Many admissions officers can spot a fake

## 9 Key Qualities of Exceptional College Applicants: Cultivating Passion

– a student who pretends to possess these qualities, but who lacks them deep down. If you want to truly be viewed as an exceptional applicant, then you will have to internalize these qualities (if you do not already possess them).

Aristotle suggested that we need to develop character virtues while we are young, and we cultivate them through practice. It is the same with these qualities. You need to work at them, practice embodying them, and develop your character so that you possess these qualities deep down.

The first quality, which I take up in this chapter, is *passion*.

As I've already mentioned, colleges are places filled with passionate people. The professors tend to be exceedingly passionate about their specialty, and they are most invigorated by students who are also passionate about what they are learning,

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and about ideas more generally.

These passionate students are the ones with whom professors have the best and most fulfilling classroom interactions.

You might think that because you have the highest marks in your high school, you will automatically be every professor's dream. However, if you never participate in class, lack curiosity, despise debate, never challenge or truly think critically about ideas, then you lack the passion that most professors hope to see in their top students.

Colleges work differently than at least many high schools in this respect. In high school, it can often be enough simply to parrot what the teacher has said when you write exams and essays in order to do well. You can often do well even though you're only operating on auto-pilot, without any passion at all. However, to be a truly

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exceptional college student – the kind who your professors secretly wish will choose to go to graduate school and one day become their colleague – you must have passion.

The whole tone of the university can depend on the degree of passion the students have. If the professors are bored and unhappy with their students' lack of interest and passion, then they will tend to become bored and unhappy in their teaching. They will resent having to teach, and wish that they could be spending the time on their own research, for which they have endless passion. In fact, this is not an uncommon attitude for professors to have. This, in turn, can negatively affect the entire atmosphere of the university.

Nobody wants to study or work in such an atmosphere. That is why admissions committees hope to admit students who have demonstrated that they are passionate and curious people.

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Given the importance of passion to your success in college, how do you demonstrate to admissions committees that you have passion? There are several important things you can do. One is to actively participate in your high school classes, especially in the classes of those high school teachers you will ask to write you letters of recommendation. You want your teachers to pick up on your passion for the subject, and to be able to comment on it in the letters they write for you.

Another thing you can do is to complete an independent research project that you plan and execute almost entirely on your own, perhaps with some guidance from a high school teacher. This will involve doing your own research in the library and – ideally – using some articles from scholarly journals. You will then be in a position to mention this project in your application letter, and to have your school counsellor and/or teachers who write recommendation letters on your behalf comment

## 9 Key Qualities of Exceptional College Applicants: Cultivating Passion

on the exceptional initiative you took in going beyond the school's curriculum to pursue your own passionate interests.

Academic passion is not the only kind of passion that matters, of course. If you are engaged in extracurricular activities (as you should be to be a competitive applicant), then you should develop a passion for these, too, and be able to demonstrate this passion to admissions officers.

Your passion for the theater, say, is evident when you devote many hours to becoming the best actor you can be, when you do everything you can to be involved in theatrical productions, and when you enhance your training by attending workshops and clinics. Ideally, you will also have received some form of official recognition for your achievements that you can discuss in your college application.

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If you are involved with a charity or a non-profit organization (as you should be if you wish to be a truly exceptional applicant), then you should try to be passionate about your work there. You should take your commitments seriously, and devote enough time to what you're doing to demonstrate that your interests are not merely superficial.

Nobody can be passionate about everything – there isn't enough time. Generally speaking, to truly be viewed as passionate by admissions committees, it is better to be involved in fewer, more specialized activities in very substantial and committed ways, than in many activities in only superficial, dabbling ways.

Incidentally, this is typically how college professors exercise their intellectual passions. Their passions are typically focused on a very specialized area of scholarship – such as 16<sup>th</sup> century Italian poetry. A professor might spend

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his or her entire career focused on just this area, and never grow tired of thinking, speaking, and writing about it. Whatever else you might think about this professor's way of life, you must admit that he or she has passion.

## 10 How Unique Are You?

The next quality that you should try to cultivate is your *uniqueness*.

Colleges receive thousands of applications each year, many from highly qualified people. But the fact is that many of these applicants look more or less the same on paper. They all tend to be very accomplished in their extra-curricular activities, to have high grades and standardized test scores, and to have highly praising letters of recommendation written on their behalf. How is an admissions officer to decide between such applicants?

It would be understandable if an admissions officer grew tired of reading pretty much the same application over and over again, and wished for nothing more than to see something unique for a change. By being a unique person, you will stand

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out in the eyes of an admissions officer. If you already look impressive on paper because of your grades and extracurricular activities, then your uniqueness will likely only serve to give you an edge. In fact, I would guess that in some cases, students with a less impressive academic record but who have truly unique characters might be put ahead of students with better academic records but who are utterly typical in every respect.

Uniqueness matters not only for the purposes of waking certain admissions officers from the slumber brought on by the monotony of overachievers they evaluate, but also because of what was said earlier regarding a college's aims.

A college aims to create a community, and a community in which everyone is the same is a boring community for most involved. This is true both academically and non-academically. Academically, unique students make for interesting class discussions and debates through

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which new ideas are generated. Non-academically, college campus life can be enhanced when the people you see walking around every day and with whom you interact are not predictable in everything they do and say.

It is quite possible that you are not comfortable right now being a truly unique individual. The younger you are, the more difficult is the act of breaking out from what you are “supposed to be” and following your own path.

As children, most of us look up to our parents and strive to be like them. As we age, we might find that this is no longer our main aim. Instead, we hope to act in ways that are accepted by our peers in school, and to conform to images of youth that are presented in the media. At least when I was growing up, the word to describe this conformity was being “cool.” I'm pretty sure it's still the right word today!

The point is that as long as you're striving to

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conform to some image or other – whether it's the image you have of your parents as gods when you are very young, or an image of coolness – you're not really being yourself, or discovering what really matters to you and makes you unique.

I don't really have any specific advice on how you might go about becoming unique. How could I? If I were to tell you what exactly you should do to become unique, then if you listened to me, you wouldn't really be becoming unique. Would you? You'd only be trying to live up to my image of what you should be.

As I mentioned earlier, however, I do think that seeking counselling at this time in your life can be extremely helpful. Working with an independent counsellor can help you to make sense of the stresses and emotions involved in the transition you are making from youth to adulthood. In the process, you might learn more about who you really are and where you see yourself going in

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your life. This might help you to shed your reliance on pre-given images and to truly encounter what makes you unique.

If you pursue this strategy, you will want to work with a counsellor who is comfortable working with young people going through transitions in their lives. You might meet with the counsellor every week or so for a while, and you might begin doing this at some point in the 11<sup>th</sup> grade. It is in the 11<sup>th</sup> grade that much of the chaos of the college application process begins. This is when you are forced to begin to make fairly binding decisions that will have very big consequences for the way in which your life will unfold, at least in the near future.

Your school guidance counsellor might be someone with whom you can have counselling sessions. In all likelihood, this person is very overworked and will not have time to give you the attention you deserve. But even if your school

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counsellor is willing to work with you, you should think carefully about whether this is a good idea. Don't forget, your school counsellor is not a neutral party in the college admissions process. He or she will likely be writing you a letter of recommendation. For this reason, it's advisable to be careful about what you do and don't disclose to your school counsellor.

For instance, you don't necessarily want your school counsellor to get the impression that you have serious doubts about going to college, even if you do. You want your school counsellor to be able honestly to convey an impression of you as someone who is quite certain about wanting to go to college. Even if you have serious doubts about going to college now, it could be that in a few months, those doubts have gone away. In that case, you'll want your application to be as strong as it can be.

On the other hand, any counsellor you work

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with to discuss broader issues, concerns, and goals for your life, should be someone with whom you will feel comfortable disclosing nearly *anything* that's on your mind. This is the best way to grow through the counselling process, and ultimately to use that process to discover what makes you truly unique.

You might have a very special counsellor at your school who you feel is capable of playing these various roles. However, you should not take for granted that your school counsellor is capable of doing this.

## 11 Can You Put Yourself In Another's Shoes?

# 11 Can You Put Yourself In Another's Shoes?

The next quality to cultivate is *empathy*.

As I've stressed already, colleges generally aim to educate students to become more capable of viewing issues and ideas from many points of view. This involves being able to put yourself in another person's shoes. Such a person might be someone with whom you strongly disagree when it comes to one or more issues you both take very seriously. Still, it is an important skill to be able to identify with the other person, and to truly understand what thoughts he or she is having and what emotions he or she might be feeling. This skill is empathy.

Some people come across as having almost no capacity for empathy. They come across as close-

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mindful, set in their ways, and stuck in their own self-centered world. If you give admissions officers the impression that you are this sort of person, you have virtually no chance of being admitted to their college – especially if you are competing for one of the very few general applicant spots.

If you have no capacity for empathy, then it is unlikely that professors will be able to have the kinds of conversations they want to have with you in their classrooms. Moreover, you will not be able to have meaningful conversations and debates with other students in your classes. As a result, the college will be unable to achieve one of its most coveted goals of giving you the opportunity to broaden your outlook.

Students must come to college with at least some level of open-mindedness, and that goes along with being capable of empathic understanding.

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If you feel that you are lacking in empathy, you should do your best to become more empathic – perhaps by spending time with people who are different from you, or who have suffered in ways that you have never suffered. You can do this through community service, or by taking part in academic exchanges and other similar programs.

Reading widely can also help you to develop your empathy. When we read, we are often forced to engage quite carefully with other points of view. Reading requires exerting a certain level of effort that watching TV or films does not usually require. It is easier to dismiss another's point of view without really thinking about it if it is flashed on TV in a 30 second clip, than if you've taken the time to read what that person has to say and to carefully contemplate his or her message.

Incidentally, if you hope to go to a top college and you do not yet read widely, then you should start doing so immediately! You should read books

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and articles that are not required by your school, and your reading should cover lots of different subject areas and literary genres. By reading in this way, your vocabulary, knowledge, and thinking skills will develop in crucial ways. This will help you to do better on standardized tests, and to be in a position to write impressive application letters and to have intelligent discussions with admissions officers during interviews that leave them with the impression that you are a truly superior applicant.

Anyway, back to empathy. If empathy is your strong suit, then this is something you should try to convey in your application and/or in your interview by talking about the ways in which you have demonstrated this quality. For instance, maybe the moment you first put yourself in the emotional position of a homeless person you saw suffering on the street, you were suddenly jolted into action. You subsequently devoted significant amounts of time to working at a homeless shelter.

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Or, maybe while you were traveling through a different country with very different customs, you engaged in meaningful dialogues with people there and made some progress towards understanding their point of view on the world.

It is important that you find some way to demonstrate your empathy. You must not to come across to admissions officers as lacking in this quality, or your application will be a lost cause.

## 12 Tying It All Together: Leadership and Maturity

The two final qualities you should cultivate are *leadership* and *maturity*.

College admissions committees seek out students who have demonstrated leadership in their schools and in their communities. Admitting leaders is important to admissions officers for various reasons.

Many of the clubs and activities that are essential to making college life fun and interesting for all students are student-run. If none of the student body is at all interested in taking on leadership positions – with everyone preferring, say, to lock themselves away in their dorm rooms to study day and night – then the college is effectively dead.

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Another advantage of admitting students with a proven record of leadership is that, when these students graduate, it is likely that they will continue to take on leadership roles in the working world and in the community. As they do this, these alumni make names for themselves. This ultimately reflects well on the university that educated them. For example, many colleges boast on their websites that such-and-such prominent politician, writer, actor, or business person graduated from their college. They do this in order to boost their own profiles, which helps them to attract students and money.

Finding individuals who will one day be leaders in their fields is one of the tasks that admissions committees hope to accomplish. To prove to college admissions committees that you are capable of leadership, you should not only be able to list specific leadership positions you have held in your school or community. You should also be able to describe how you helped the particular

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organization with which you were involved to change for the better.

For instance, what did you do to make the student council run more effectively while you were the secretary? How did you use your position as captain of your sports team to lead the team to a better season than it has had in previous years? If the organization did not improve under your leadership, what have you learned from the experience that you will apply to future leadership positions you'll take on? These are the kinds of questions that college admissions officers will likely have on their minds as they assess your leadership abilities.

The final quality is maturity. In order for college admissions committees to have confidence in your ability to do well in college and be capable of completing your degree, they want to know that you have a high level of maturity.

In attending college, you will likely be living

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away from home for the first time, and will be responsible for making many of your own decisions. What will you do with this freedom? The hope is that you will not squander your tuition money on partying and clothes, regularly sleep-in and skip all your classes, or act in ways that cause the college campus to have a childish atmosphere.

Use every opportunity you can to convey to the admissions committee that you are capable of acting and thinking in mature ways.

One thing that sends a message of *immaturity* is allowing your parents to become explicitly involved in the college admissions process. Your parents should not make any unnecessary contact with college or admissions officials on your behalf.

You can convey your maturity through the language you use to talk about yourself and others. Do you sound like a very young person in your application letter because of the language you use (constantly using the word “cool,” for

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instance), and by remaining focused on fashions and trends that are primarily of interest to teens?

What kinds of extracurricular activities do you take part in? You can demonstrate your maturity by showing that you are willing to take some responsibility for the community and the world around you, and that it matters to you to make these better places to live. Finally, if the college you're applying to wishes to interview you, then you can convey your maturity by the way you dress, carry yourself, and interact with the interviewer.

It is obvious that maturity is not something you can fake. Rather, it is something that you must grow into, often with the help of role models. The most mature college applicants will likely have been thinking and acting in more adult ways than their peers for several years. If you are still early in your high school career and are reading this book, then you should begin thinking about what

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maturity means to you, and about how you might gradually begin the process of taking on a more adult outlook on the world that involves greater levels of commitment and responsibility.

## 13 Conclusion

Hopefully, I have given you some things to think about! Being viewed by admissions committees as a superior college applicant, and/or being competitive for college entrance scholarships, generally involves much more than getting good grades and having high standardized test scores. You must also be a certain kind of person, the kind of person who is passionate, unique, empathic, mature and a leader.

These qualities take time to develop. In fact, they are never *fully* developed, since we can all possess these qualities to greater degrees than we do now. Even so, some college applicants will have these qualities to higher degrees than others. You want to be an applicant who is viewed by admissions committees as having them to a high degree when compared to the other

applicants. To do this, you want to be sure to get the word out to admissions committees that you do possess these qualities, through the kinds of things you discuss in your application, your application essay, and/or interview, as well as the ways in which you discuss them. Moreover, you want those who write your letters of recommendation to be able honestly to comment on your possession of these qualities.

If you begin to think about steps you'll take to make yourself a desirable college applicant early – preferably even in the 8<sup>th</sup> or 9<sup>th</sup> grade – that will help you to choose the kinds of activities you want to be involved in carefully. You will be able to work to cultivate the qualities I've discussed. For instance, you might start thinking about taking on leadership roles in your school and community, engaging in meaningful extracurricular activities, and looking into what sort of person you are and what you want your life to look like.

## 13 Conclusion

If you start early, you will also be less likely to be faced with a high-anxiety panic situation in the 11<sup>th</sup> grade when you realize that within just a few short months, you will need to write the SATs and choose which colleges you'd like to apply to (and possibly visit them) – all while trying to keep up good grades at school. This is not to mention that at that time you will also have important relationships with your friends, partners, and family members that you'll be attending to. You would not be alone if you found being in this situation very overwhelming!

It's never too late to develop the qualities I've been discussing. And, hey, if you don't get into your top college for your B.A., don't sweat it. Keep working on growing as a person, and good things are certain to happen to you.