

The Application to a Competitive College: Some Brief Suggestions

Applications to all schools, but especially competitive colleges and universities, need to be completed with care and thoroughness. Unfortunately, according to James Wickenden, who was Dean of Admissions at Princeton in the early 1980s—his advice is just as important today as it was then—sometimes students do not pay “sufficient attention to the quality of the materials they submit or devote enough time to the preparation of the application.” In summarizing her own experience over many years, Joyce Slayton Mitchell, a prolific writer about the college admissions process and a college counselor at a New York City independent school, recently wrote:

The first communication to the dean of college admissions will be your application. It is filed first—on top of everything else in your folder—and as far as the dean is concerned that application is you. So be sure that it looks as good as you get—spelling and grammar-wise, and neatness too! Writing your application is a major opportunity to distinguish yourself—to document your clarity, creativity and competence. (p. 111, *Winning the Heart of the College Admissions Dean: An Expert’s Advice for Getting into College*, 2001)

The advice of Mitchell and Wickenden is clear: take the time, put in the effort and use the application as a means to enhance your admissions chances.

As Scott Gelband, Catherine Kubale and Eric Schorr, former admissions officers at Yale, have written in *Your College Application* (1991), there are three major parts of the application: academic (courses, grades, rank, test scores), personal (activities, essays and perhaps the interview), and supporting documents (teacher recommendations, counselor report and supplementary materials). Here, we concentrate on the last two parts: the personal and supporting documents profiles.

The Personal Profile

1. Interests and activities in and out of school

With very competitive colleges, this information is especially important because their admissions officers are seeking to build first year classes with varied talents and backgrounds. Full, detailed descriptions of extracurricular activities should be given. In other words, you need to go beyond a simple listing and indicate, where appropriate, the depth of commitment (for example, number of hours per week), level of competence (awards and honors) and the nature of the organization in which you were active (for instance, if you are president of the Latin Club at EHS, describe the activities you organized. If the space on the application is insufficient, attach another piece of paper, describing activities perhaps in the form of a chart. You also need to concentrate on significant activities. Be selective. As every admissions counselor will tell you, it is not the number of activities listed, but the quality of your participation—that is, significant contributions and personal growth—that counts.

You may not have been able to participate in activities or develop interests because you have had a part-time job. In this situation you may want to describe your job and briefly discuss what you have learned about yourself and others from the experience.

In discussing your talents and skills, look for opportunities to tell admissions people how you can contribute to the life of the college or university. Conveying to the admissions staff what you can do for the college is just as important—perhaps, even more important—than what the college can do for you.

2. The Essay (or Personal Statement)

One, if not the most, important part of the application to a competitive college is the personal statement. Indeed, at some schools you may be asked to write several essays. Without doubt, the preparation of an excellent essay is hard, time-consuming work, but if you want to increase your chances of admission, then the effort is important. This statement should be one of the best pieces of writing that you have done at Edina High School. At the same time—and I hope that this will take the pressure off, if you are feeling it about the essay—almost no one is admitted or denied solely on the personal statement.

The essay is an opportunity to let the admissions committee know who you are and what is important to you and why. Don't make the mistake of thinking that admission person wants a particular answer. As Delsie Phillips, Director of Admission at Haverford, states: "Be honest, genuine and forthright."

Selecting a topic. First, sit back and think, think a lot—though don't agonize—about your activities, interests, hobbies and experiences for the past few years. Then write down your reactions to, observations about and opinions of these possibilities. Pick the topic that really means something to you.

Approach to writing. At the end of your essay, ask yourself this question: has the reader learned more about me as a person? If the answer is yes, your essay has been effective. Keep in mind from the outset that the admissions committee wants to learn about you as a person more than about the activity. They learn about you when you share reflections, observations and perceptions. In doing this, furthermore, you often demonstrate growth as a person which can make your essay powerful. Strive to be personal and specific. As a way to achieve this end, Fred Hargadon, formerly of Swarthmore and Stanford and now at Princeton, has a piece of good advice—consider telling a story.

8 Mistakes to let other applicants make

- Do not get an undue amount of help from others. You might want to discuss the choice of topic or get an overall reaction to an essay from another person. If the essay is not yours, admissions officers will invariably be able to tell and your candidacy will surely suffer. A related point: don't try to fake interests or involvement; admissions committees will usually catch them.
- Never use an essay to repeat what you have stated in other parts of the application. Obviously, your essay is not going to be a listing of extracurricular activities or interests. Of course, you might take an activity and elaborate on it in your essay.
- Don't make your statement too short because it might be interpreted as a lack of interest. On the other hand, don't ramble on for pages; more often than not, the admissions officer will be bored, not stimulated. When specific instructions on length are given, don't diverge too much. Also, be careful about using too small a font size. An admissions officer may have to read hundreds of applications, and we don't want the person to have to strain to read your piece.
- Never put yourself in a position where you have to rush to complete an essay. Revising is one key to a good essay, and revisions need time. At the same time, a few students have to watch the other extreme: in the search for a perfect essay (they don't exist), they overedit with the possibility that freshness and spontaneity are lost.
- Don't misspell any words.
- Make sure that your essay is legible.

- In most cases, do not use the personal essay to explain problems, low-test scores or weak grades. There is usually another place in the applications to handle such situations. On the other hand, an essay in which you describe how you overcame a difficulty can be very effective.
- Make an effort to avoid using exactly the same essay for each college. Unless, of course, the schools are asking exactly the same question. **Where appropriate and possible, try to tailor your essay to fit the programs and strengths of the particular college.**

3. The Interview

While the essay is an opportunity to present yourself in writing, the interview gives you the chance to put your best self forward in person. Unlike the essay, however, the interview has very little to do with acceptance at most competitive colleges. This doesn't mean that it has no role, but the part it plays is very small. If you do interview—and some competitive colleges use alumni networks for this purpose—here are some suggestions:

Preparation. You should prepare in three ways. Read up on the college. Next, based on this information, think of some questions that you want answered, but haven't been covered in the college's informational materials. Finally, be ready to discuss yourself: interests, plans for college, strengths, etc.

During the interview. My basic suggestion: let the interviewer know who you are as a person. To accomplish this goal, you will need to talk about yourself—your passions, your interests.

Interview Dos

- Be honest
- Listen carefully to the interviewer's questions, and respond, not just with facts but also with thoughts and feelings
- Make eye contact
- Be energetic, enthusiastic and positive

Interview Don'ts

- Be monosyllabic
- Spend time making excuses
- Chew gum, nails, hair
- Ask the interviewer to compare colleges
- Criticize your school, teachers or friends
- Be disinterested or nonchalant

4. Other specific tips for completing your application

- Make a photocopy of your application. Fill it in first, then transfer it to the original. Neatness is a necessity!
- Work from the easiest to your most difficult application. The process of completing the less demanding applications will help when you come to the more difficult ones.

- With the recommendation forms to be completed by your counselor and selected teachers, there is generally a place at the top of the forms to waive your legal right to see these references when you matriculate at the college. *We suggest that you waive this right.* Most college admissions people prefer a recommendation written in confidence. If you have chosen your recommenders wisely, there should be no reason for you to see what they have written.
- Start early! If you put an application off until two or three weeks before the deadline, your procrastination will probably show and lessen your chances for making the most positive impression.
- Make a photocopy of your part of the application before you send it.

Supporting Documents Profile

- 1. Teacher recommendations.** These references are very important in the application process at competitive colleges. They are closely read. Specifically, teacher comments are vital in the admissions process as they support other data—high school record, essays, school recommendation—to form a picture, most important, of your academic qualities, but also of your personal strengths.

Who to ask—some guidelines

- Ask teachers who have taught you recently. If possible, try to get a teacher who has taught you in more than one course; for example a 10th grader and senior. Or better yet, ask a teacher who knows you from a class and an extracurricular activity.
- If you are making a case for a strong interest in a certain area in your application, select teachers who can support your application. For example, if you are portraying yourself as a budding scientist, you will want to include a science teacher as one of your recommenders.
- A number of competitive colleges will ask for two teacher recommendations. In these cases ask teachers from different subjects where you have done well. At least one of your recommenders should be able to comment in detail about your writing.
- While you should ask teacher(s) from classes in which you have done excellent work, this doesn't mean that you have had to achieve all A's in their courses. If you were well motivated, worked hard and exhibited a positive attitude, your teacher was probably impressed

How to ask—some suggestions. Please see the handout “On Processing the Application.”

- Given the amount of work teachers to at EHS, and the number of recommendations some teachers write, you need to do everything possible to make the teacher's job as easy as possible. Please closely follow the suggestions in “On Processing the Application.”
- Again start early.
- Limit the number of teachers you ask. If two recommendations are required by several colleges to which you are applying, then you only need to ask a total of two teachers. Each teacher could prepare a letter that they can photocopy and attach to the teacher recommendation form. Photocopies of the letter are perfectly acceptable.

- You might want to discuss your choice of teacher recommenders with your counselor.
- When you give the recommendation forms to the teacher, prepare a cover sheet that clearly lists the deadlines for each college (cover sheet available in the Counseling Office).

2. School (Counselor) Recommendation. Almost every competitive college will ask you to obtain a counselor recommendation. The counselor recommendation is part of the secondary school report that you submit to the Counseling Office.

To prepare this recommendation, your counselor will probably ask you to complete a questionnaire about yourself. Please return this form with as much detail as possible and return it to your counselor as promptly as possible. It is probably a good idea to meet with your counselor to go over your interests and activities. Your counselor will also have comments from three teachers that you select to complete blue sheets for you.

What goes into the counselor recommendation? Your counselor will usually comment on your academic record, contributions to school and community, other interests and commitments and personal qualities.

3. Other parts of the application, often calling for brief essays:

- Why are you applying to (name of college)?

Colleges often ask you to write a brief paragraph on your interest in their school. Use this question as an opportunity to demonstrate that you have done your research on the college. Go beyond the general; be specific by referring to what you may have learned through a visit to the college, talking with a professor, attending a class, etc. Also, you may want to refer to other sources of information you have used such as an in-depth study of the college's website.

- What is your intended major?

Make sure that the major you select is offered by the college! If you are undecided, you can still use this question as an opportunity to let the college know more about you. For instance, Mitchell suggests that you might state that you are undecided, but then go on to write about a subject which has interested you in high school and that you might pursue in college.

4. What other supplementary materials might be included?

Strongly consider adding any other information that is an important part of your life and hasn't been covered in other parts of the application.

- If you are deeply involved in a community activity, you might want to include a recommendation from the organization's advisor.
- The same is true for a school-based activity.
- If you have played sports at EHS and want to participate at the intercollegiate level, contact the coach at the college. Write a letter of interest describing the extent and depth of your participation. You might want to include a copy of this letter with your application. Depending on your sport, you might want to use a sports resume.

- What about art work, music or writing? If you have a highly developed talent, you will want to explain and document it. If you decide to send any material, it should be of the highest quality because it could be well reviewed by a demanding faculty person. Talk with a teacher or advisor about the material you are thinking about sending. They should feel very positively about it. Limit the material that you send—it's quality, not quantity that counts. For example, if you write for the newspaper, send your best article, not several.

Advice from admissions director, William Hiss of Bates College had this to say about application extras: "I don't need a chocolate layer cake, your kindergarten report card, or all the poems you wrote in the ninth grade. I am very interested in seeing the results of whatever it was you consider your finest accomplishment, whether that be photographs of your set designs or genetics research of Scottish dancing."

Guides About Applying to College

In recent years, there have been many books written about applying to colleges. Three excellent ones that you might find in local bookstores or area libraries are:

Fiske, Edward and Hammond, Bruce. *The Fiske Guide to Getting Into the Right College*. 1997

Gelband, Scott, Kubale, Catherine and Schorr, Eric. *Your College Application*. New York: The College Board, 1991.

Mitchell, Joyce Slayton. *Winning the Heart of a College Admissions Dean*, 2001

David W. Breeden

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