

Advice from Successful Students

Learn from our successes and our mistakes

We've gathered students from top universities such as Harvard, Princeton, Stanford, MIT, Caltech, and others to write about their experiences in college admissions. We hope you find their perspectives helpful as you go through high school, apply to college, and even as you transition into college.

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Why do you want to take a variety of classes?

By Ben Hiebert

Ok, you're in high school, and you're ready to make your schedule for the next year. You want to make sure that you're taking classes that will prepare you for college, and you want to make sure that you get the most from your high school education.

When you are selecting classes, you always want to take as many upper-level classes as you can. Even if the subject matter isn't what you're interested in, you'll want to show that you are capable of taking and succeeding at Honors, AP, or IB level courses. However, there is a limit to this philosophy: "It should not interfere with your other passions and interests." This means that if you have to choose between taking Band, which you have taken for 6 years prior, and Honors Amphibian Biology when you don't like amphibians or biology, you shouldn't take the honors class just because it's an honors class. Go ahead and take the class that you like and that fuels your passions. Because in the end, colleges are interested in people who are extraordinary and you can show them that you are indeed such a person by taking Band to hone your music playing skills. Try to strike up a balance between the honors classes that you are taking and the classes that reflect your passions. If you really love classes that are offered at high levels within your high school, be sure to take those classes above all others.

Now, let's say that you are looking at your schedule, and you find that you have taken all of the high level classes that you want to take and you are now debating over what other class(es) you should use to fill the gap in your schedule or perhaps not taking a class at all because you don't need the credits to graduate.

In high school, you'll want to take as many classes there as you can. There are only two real reasons for scheduling a less—than—full course load. The first is if you are on a strict diet of upper level classes, and you know that the time commitment of an extra class would cause your other classes to suffer. The second one is if you are involved in a sport that takes up a good portion of your free time. This added time commitment could detract from schoolwork time, so it can be wise to take a slightly lighter load when you are participating in a sport.

However, if you don't fall into either of these categories, fill your schedule with an extra class. If you have ever been curious about a subject that is offered, now is the perfect time

to take it. Ever thought it might be fun to do some metalworking? If your school still has a shop class, give it a try and see what all of the fuss is about.

There are many classes that are not honors classes that provide you with useful skills that will make life much easier when you are finally on your own out in the big world. Take a cooking class or a money management class, both of these skills are vital in the real world.

Be careful around an Intro to course like an Intro to Business or an Intro to Marketing. These courses will oftentimes present a highly topical and simplified version of marketing or business, which is usually as much of an introduction as you can get by watching a movie about business or marketing. This isn't always the case, but you will want to go and talk with the teacher and see if you can get a copy of the syllabus. Look for guest speakers and other signs that this course is well connected to the industry. It is beneficial to ask around and see what other people who have taken the course think of it.

In the end, you will always learn something from whatever class you take. Taking classes that are less rigorous academically can give you a break from studying - plus the opportunity to learn something useful.

There is no "I" in Team

By Suzanne Xie

The net envelops the bright green ball. The point is over. The game is over. The match is over. Whether a victory or a loss, each tennis match has been a building block of experience. Whether or not you excel in a sport, either scenario has a positive interpretation. If you are good at team sports, you gain leadership and valuable skills, and if you struggle with sports, you learn from your failures and gain determination. As long as you have the willpower to learn and play, it is never too late to pick up a sport. It is something that will physically, mentally and emotionally train you for future trials in life.

Aside from the grueling practices in the rain, high school sports are also an integral part of the college application process. As a member of a sports team, you add a positive component to your college application resume. Just as in any other high school extracurricular activity, a team sport can demonstrate leadership ability. Working as a team gives you the opportunity to prove yourself as a responsible leader as well as a dedicated team player. The various trials in a sport develop determination and perseverance. Through struggles, sports teach you to overcome defeat and learn from past mistakes. The mistakes of losses in competitive sports are a valuable lesson in improving your mental toughness, which can be transferred to many other activities.

While participating in sports provides an important element of balance for the college application, the individual quirks of a sport last for a lifetime. By building a healthy habit of competition, you can learn to handle pressure with calm—a skill widely valued in college and the workplace. Sports bring people together, and as an active participant in high school, you will meet many different people and make new friends. At the same time, you

will have fun, exercise your body, and mature on various levels. If you can manage your time wisely in high school and handle a sport, why not seize these benefits?

Thinking About Extracurricular Activities

By Rajah Sehkar

First of all, let's clear up what "extracurricular activities" are. If you're thinking, "Hey, I play video games a lot and that's outside the school curriculum," unfortunately you're out of luck. On the other hand, if you're the five-time World Gaming Champion, you may have something to work with. You see, when you're applying to colleges, what really matters about your extracurricular activities are material accomplishments that you can point to and impress application reviewers with. If you play the piano, that's nice, and probably something you enjoy. But a college admissions officer isn't going to care; lots of people play the piano. If you've achieved some distinction in playing the piano, however maybe you have played in concerts, or have produced your own recording, which was a best seller then you're in business. What you want is to stand out from the crowd.

At this point, you may be thinking, "Uh oh, I'm not a virtuoso violinist, hence I'm screwed for getting into colleges." Don't worry. In high school there's plenty of time to develop a great extra-curricular resume. The thing is this no matter who you are, there is some activity you can be great at. You might not be able to win the Intel Science Search or the state swim meet. You don't need to. The key is to try a variety of different activities in high school and find one that you like. Then put a lot of time into it. Chances are, you will find after a little while that you are making some noteworthy accomplishments in that activity. If you aren't, you ought to push yourself every now and then, by asking yourself, "How can I be more involved with this activity?" Maybe you can start a club at your school, or be the president of the club at your school. Maybe you can organize a region-wide community service project. Some way or another, find something that will impress those college admissions boards.

By the time you read our sage advice though, chances are you don't have much time left before applying to college to make any more stunning accomplishments. Ideally, one would start planning for college as soon as high school begins, but that rarely happens in practice. You might have participated in certain fairly common activities in highschool such as holding an office in student government or working for your school newspaper without winning any spectacular accolades. So what can you do to buff up your resume and make your activities sound better? First, don't make anything up. Colleges will check what you put on their applications, and it is not unheard of for students to be rejected because they lied on their activities list. What you should do is this: focus on something particular from those activities, and how you made an impact on it. Maybe you wrote an

article for the school newspaper that exposed a controversial policy, or maybe you lobbied the school administration to put a vending machine in the cafeteria. Perhaps you run the definitive website on Pokemon card games. Focus on specific things you did, and try to play that up on your application.

But how important are extra-curricular activities for getting into college? The answer is two fold: extra-curriculars don't matter at all, and yet they are all-important. If you don't have good grades and test scores, extra-curricular activities will get you nowhere. Don't fool yourself into thinking your great resume will make up for a bad GPA. If you're getting straight C's and D's, no amount of community service will make up for that in the eyes of college admissions. No matter what, your grades and test scores will be the bottom line for getting into college, so don't blow off your work. Now, having said that, if all you do in high school is get good grades and test scores, some admissions officers will be likely to think, "How boring." Though it may seem paradoxical, good grades alone will not get you into college either (although you stand a much better chance than with bad grades). This is where the extra-curriculars really are important. If you have good grades and test scores, and you can point to one of those stunning accomplishments mentioned before, you are to get into whatever college you want, whether it's Harvard or the state university. Even if you don't have the trophy room factor going for you, having a good extra-curricular resume is the piece of the puzzle that, when combined with good grades and test scores, will give you a good chance at getting into any college. They let college admissions officers make a connection with you as a real person who could be going to college next year, not just a couple numbers.

After having provided a run-down of the admissions benefits of extra-curricular activities, we leave you with one last tip. Extra-curriculars are fun! How often in school do you get to do exactly what you like, with people you like? And on top of that they help you get into college! So don't be too worried about the cutthroat-admissions aspect; get out there and have some fun!

Evaluating Yourself for the Future

By Richard Tong

While college is the next big step to think about in your life, it is never too early to be thinking about what else life is truly about. Academics have played a major part of your life throughout high school, but as you enter college, you will realize that it is not all that matters. As you get older, you'll realize that a 4.0 GPA in high school is irrelevant to your true personal and professional goals. While laying out the exact path of your future is not necessary at this very moment, you should have some idea of what is required of you now in order to get there.

I have experienced my share of epiphanies throughout the beginning of college and I am

sure there are many more to come. Being born in a Chinese family, with a Chinese mom, and a Chinese dad, grades have been the only thing that ever seemed to matter. After receiving a C on a US History test, my parents would always yell at me, “How do you expect to get into Cornell with grades like that, much less become an architect. If you keep this up, you’ll be back home flippin’ burgers at McDonald’s earning minimum wage for the rest of your life.” Sure, my parents were right on the money with that one because all architects need to know about the Puritans’ theories on predestination. But they did scare me enough to get my butt into gear and start planning out the next steps in my career. I began taking my summers seriously, interning at an architectural modeling company in Manhattan and enrolling in Cornell’s summer study program in architecture. My artwork became much more valuable to me in constructing a portfolio to send out to colleges as well as firms. Personal relationships became more important to me, as I realized from my internship, much business that is done in the world is through the people you know and the connections you have.

Enjoy the simplicity of your life now, because it will only get more complicated as you get older. Set goals for yourself throughout college--personal, professional, as well as academic, because even though your GPA may not matter to that business deal, it will matter in getting you that internship that sets you on your way to that deal. Know your plan and execute it. But make sure you do not jump ahead of yourself and cross bridges that you have not even come to yet.

Are the AP Tests Worth My Time and Money?

By Ben Hiebert

Well, are those AP tests worth it? You can check out the charts below and see how the top colleges in the nation consider AP credits. But before you get too excited about passing out of your freshman year in college, remember this: sometimes colleges grant ‘General Elective’ credit for AP scores. This ‘General Elective’ credit is useful if you want to graduate early because it means you have to take fewer electives at the college. However, if you are looking to test out of a course in an area that you are majoring in, some colleges will only give you placement into an upper level course within your concentration. As for IB scores, most colleges consider a 6 or a 7 to be equal to a 4 or a 5 on the AP exam, but few colleges actually list the credit given for IB classes. You are highly encouraged to call or email the admissions office to see exactly what kind of credit is offered for each of the AP examinations.

Some colleges offer their own tests to see whether or not students have the knowledge necessary to test out of their courses. These placement examinations are also often used to see whether or not students are qualified to test into advanced level courses. So even if you don’t do as well as you’d hoped on the AP test, at some colleges, you can redeem

yourself by testing well on their placement exams. Some colleges only accept or give credit or placement based on your performance on these exams. We highly recommend calling the admissions office at the college you are considering to get the exact details of the college-administered exams.

You are encouraged to look at the links to the college websites for more details, especially if you are considering applying to (or have already applied to) the college. There may be other stipulations for credit to be awarded.

NOTE: For colleges which do not advertise their AP policies, or who give AP credit selectively based on request, specifically CalTech, Harvard, and UPenn, we recommend calling the admissions office and the office of the division that you are considering for information.

The Myth of the Well-Rounded Student

By Joe Jewell

Of the many persistent myths and misconceptions surrounding the college application process, there is perhaps none more pervasive than the myth of the "well-rounded" student. Conventional wisdom, as dispensed by most well-meaning guidance counselors and parents, holds that colleges seek to admit students who have their toes in a little bit of everything. Those who single-mindedly excel in only a few areas will be seen as too focused or unbalanced, the kindly adult advises: "it's better to be well-rounded". Thus the star thespian is advised to go out for track, the music prodigy feels compelled to run for student council, and the phenomenal athlete joins clubs with reckless abandon.

The stereotypical student who seems to have it all: good grades, a sport or two, some volunteer hours, and a long list of clubs, and doubtless earns accolades on the high school level as the ideal student is in fact not going to stand out at all, in a sea of similar college applicants. "Well-rounded with a lump or two" might be a more apt description of the truly ideal college applicant. The basic package does have to be there-academic excellence and some evidence of the ability to interact productively with other students are non-negotiable-but Ivy League and equivalent schools could fill their classes several times over with applicants bringing excellent grades and SAT scores and the standard list of cookie-cutter National Honor Society-type high school activities. The students whose true passions shine through on their applications are those who are likely to be admitted to their top choice schools. Conversely, the admissions committee will see right through and

immediately discount a laundry list of clubs that demonstrate no authentic commitment or real initiative for the student. This effect is even more pronounced when the committee is presented with a long list of activities joined only in the junior and senior years.

To put it another way, universities want to build a well-rounded *class*-that is, a class full of students who avidly pursue a diverse range of interests rather than admit individually well-rounded *students*. The amateur pianist who ran cross-country and served on the student council might sound like a good applicant, but the musician who performed as a soloist with local orchestras, the athlete who won a state championship in her event, and the young leader who volunteered on half a dozen political campaigns will win out every time, even if their individual profiles are much more unbalanced. In fact, that's quite likely to be the case, as the time commitment required to pursue one or two activities to some degree of excellence probably precludes spending much time on the usual range of extracurriculars. Beware of overload, especially if it might hurt academic achievement: aside from a few recruited athletes, even the best extracurricular activities will never trump a poor academic record and/or low test scores.

None of this is meant to imply that students should quash genuine interests in favor of specializing or appearing more focused. Nothing could be further from the truth. Believe it or not, after reading thousands of applications, admissions officers become quite skilled in teasing apart activities truly pursued out of love from those done "just to look good". Especially early on in a high school student's educational career, it's great to explore a wide range of interests. As you mature, it's only natural that some activities will become better-loved than others, and you will naturally settle into those pursuits. Be aware of this process and seek to grow in responsibility and achievement in the things that you are passionate about. When the time comes to do the applications, try to convey your evolution through high school as a person with deepening interests, and knit together your activities where possible-your unique personality should be the common thread.

In a discussion with another admissions committee member at a top-ten college about his thoughts on extracurricular activities, he thought that it was best for students to follow their own path: "Let your best qualities shine through by doing the things that coincide most closely with what you enjoy. Ignore people who say colleges especially prefer that you express your good personal qualities through specific activities X and Y, for example 'sports and community service.' I promise, they speak nonsense". In the end, we agreed, a student with passionate interests, even if they are somewhat off the beaten path-in fact, *especially* if they are somewhat off the beaten path-is truly the hot commodity in college admissions.

Don't worry about rounding out your facets: they're what make you stand out. So polish and play up all your bulges and angles, because in the high-stakes game of competitive college admissions, outstanding is exactly what you want to be.

About the author: Joe Jewell served on the admissions committee at Caltech, his undergraduate alma mater. After notching a perfect SAT score, he co-authored a best-selling study guide. In 2001 he founded PrepMe, a premium online test preparation

firm, with Karan Goel and Avichal Garg. A 2005 Rhodes Scholar, he is currently a graduate student in engineering at Oxford.

Top 10 Tips For Getting Into College Without Losing Your Mind

By Mimi Doe and Michele Hernandez

Co-Founders of Application Boot Camp and Co-Authors of "Don't Worry, You'll Get In!"

Best-selling authors Mimi Doe (parenting guru) and Michele Hernandez (college consultant extraordinaire) have come to the rescue with a collection of tips and strategies for anxious parents and their frazzled teens. Follow their advice, take a deep breath, and Don't Worry, You'll Get In!

1. Keep in mind that there is a college for everyone. Sure, the Ivy Leagues are extremely tough to get into, but the truth is, once you get past the top 20 most competitive colleges, many schools admit the majority of applicants.
2. Create a printed list of all the schools to which you are applying. Give it to your guidance counselor so that he/she is sure to send the official school report to every college on your list. Your application is incomplete without the school's documents even if you send in your part.
3. Studies have shown that applying early decision increases your odds for acceptance dramatically. So, get going. Spend time the summer before your senior year discerning your clear first choice college, then prepare your application. If you haven't already, check out our [Application Boot Camp](#) where you can work with us to finish your applications in 4 days.
4. Keep it to yourself. Don't enter into the frenzy of talk about colleges. This is your personal journey to finding the right college; getting crazy about everyone else's opinions will only bring you down.
5. Identify the teacher who is your strongest supporter, and then do everything you can to stand out in his or her class. This is who you'll go to first for that ever important recommendation.
6. Learn the fine art of saying "no" to activities that take you off course. Focus on a few things that you love and become really good at them rather than frantically trying to do everything.

7. Set up a specific schedule during the year to study for any upcoming standardized test: For instance, Wednesday evenings from 9-10:00p.m. We love the newly launched PrepMe.com which gives you expert one on one SAT tutoring and guidance from the comfort of your home.

8. Don't believe all you read. The best way to find out about a particular school is to visit in person, speak to students, observe a class and meet professors. Otherwise, you're just responding to slick marketing rather than actual traits of a college.

9. Let your academic passions guide your class choices. No college likes a cookie cutter applicant who follows the prescribed path and nothing else. The most interesting candidates follow their own interests and it shows.

10. Make time to relax! High school shouldn't be all SAT prep, hours of community service, and three different tutors in the name of "getting in". Get a life and you'll be much happier.

The College Visit

By Phillip Hall

I hope I am not the first person to inform you how important a visit to a college campus really is during your application process. If it is at all possible to visit, please do so. I cannot imagine why anyone would commit to live four years in a campus he or she had only seen through college infobooks and tiny internet photographs. You have to physically go to a campus and talk to current students to feel what it's like to live there. The only people I know who are unhappy with their college decisions had not visited the campus beforehand. Convinced? Ok, good. At least try to visit the colleges you are really serious about, and definitely do not apply early decision without having visited the school you are binding yourself to.

When should you visit? When you can, is my first answer. Whenever, during your high school career, you have the opportunity to visit a college you are even remotely thinking about applying to, do so. Many people wait until their senior years to visit schools they have already filled out applications for, or are in the process of applying to. This is not always a good idea – visiting colleges can help you by narrowing down your list of schools, or by pointing you in different directions. I recommend most of your visiting be done in your junior year, although sophomore year is definitely not too early to begin your search. When to go? If you can only go during summer, that's fine – most campuses still have tours and information sessions then – just remember that it's summer, and although the campuses will be at their prettiest, you will be inhabiting them in the fall and winter months. If the school you are visiting is in California, you probably won't have to take this into account – but if you are visiting colleges in New England, definitely try to picture them looking dreary on a rainy day – if you still like where you are, that's a good sign.

When I visited campuses during my junior and senior years, I usually flew out to the campus on a Thursday night with my father, stayed at a hotel that night, and went to the admissions department first thing in the morning on Friday. I always tried to visit on a weekday so I could sit in on classes – this I found was an easy and interesting way to find out a lot about the school. Usually, the admissions department has a list or course catalog showing you the classes you can visit on a particular day. If you show up early (the earliest classes usually start at 8:30, so I was at the admissions department by 8:00), you can pick one or two classes to go see. Pick classes you think look interesting to you, as this will help you evaluate it more easily – Am I interested in this teacher? Am I understanding what he or she is teaching? Note the location and time of the classes, and the professor's name. Try to show up early at the room, introduce yourself to the professor and ask if you can sit in on his or her class – they always are happy to let you sit in. If you show up early, you will usually be the first person there, so you can watch the other students come in. Do they seem friendly? Are they interested in the class? Are they welcoming to you? Most importantly - could you see yourself as one of them? Do you want to be? During the class, evaluate the educational atmosphere – do students seem to be getting the material? Is the professor trying to help them get it? Do the students participate and ask questions? One word of caution – I have seen several visiting high school students who, in visiting a class, feel somewhat uncomfortable and raise their hands and ask questions, hoping either to seem like they are smart enough to fit in or to impress the professor. This is generally not a good idea – if you have a real question, feel free to ask it – but you shouldn't feel uncomfortable. Remember, the other students in the class went through what you are going through right now, and the professor has had many students visiting his classes. After the class, go up to the professor and thank him or her – in my experience, professors here ask you if you have any questions about the school, and you have an interesting opportunity to find out about the school. By just visiting a class like this, you can find out what it's like to attend a real class at the college. It's a unique experience.

One other note here – if you are interested in a particular department or you know you want to take classes in a certain area, say molecular biology or American History, you should, a few weeks prior to your visit, write a letter or email to someone in the department (If you're unsure, pick the department chair, or undergraduate director, or someone with a similar official title) introducing yourself, enclosing a copy of your resume, and asking if he or she perhaps has time to talk to you when you will be on campus. Also ask if he or she will be teaching a class you could visit that day. Do not feel embarrassed at all in doing this – this is part of their job and they are always interested in meeting potential majors, especially if the department is not a huge one. This can only help you. Two-to-one odds say they will agree to meet you for a half-hour or more, giving you a big advantage – such professors usually write a letter to the admissions department saying that they talked to you and would be glad to have you at the school. The one school where I did not meet a professor like this was the one school I didn't get into. I would strongly recommend you do this, if there is a department that interests you. Professors are usually very nice.

So what else should you try to do when you visit a campus? Many admissions departments point to their "information sessions" and "campus tours." These are usually

available several times daily, and you can ask at the admissions department when they will occur when you go in to find out about course listings. Also, the times and locations are usually posted on the admissions department web pages or available in those big guide books to college visiting. If you only have time to spend a few hours on the campus, the information session and campus tour are what you should spend your time on. If the college provides only on-campus interviews, it might be a good idea to schedule one in advance – interviews only help you, and this is a good way to go about it.

First, the information session – this provides you with an opportunity to ask human beings for information you can just as easily gather from the college's website or from any of several guidebooks. I have sat in silence as parents asked about male-female ratios, average class sizes, faculty-student ratios, and other statistics printed in many other places. Usually there are one or two admissions officers and ten to twenty students with one or two parents each, in a large room filled with lovely pictures of the school. You can ask any questions you want about the application process, and the admissions officers will happily tell you how hard it is to get into their school. You can also identify the girl who aced her SAT's when she asks, "How important are SAT scores?" And don't follow the example of the students who try to sell themselves at these information sessions, asking questions like "Will I be able to continue providing countless hours of community service here?" I always wonder if these students genuinely believe that the admissions officers will think to themselves, "Wow, what's the name of that redhead who's asking these great questions – I have to go put her in the accepted pile." Honestly, I haven't thought of a really good question to ask at these things. I can, however, provide answers to the questions I hear asked most often. These include:

"Grades and scores are important, but we're looking more at how you are challenging yourself and at the variety of your courses. We also want to see you are involved in extracurricular activities like athletics and community service, but dedicated involvement and/or leadership in one activity is more important than limited involvement in several. The essays allow us to find out who you really are."

"The deadline is January 1"

"Early decision is binding – if you apply early, and are accepted, you must come. Early action just lets you know earlier than regular decision, there is nothing binding."

"The tour leaves from here right after we're done."

"The bathroom is down the hall on your right"

As you see, most of this you could either intuit for yourself or find elsewhere. So why go to the information session? First, if there is a legitimate question that you have, this is the best place to ask it. Secondly, and actually more importantly, there is always a signup sheet upon which you need to put your name and address down. This not only ensures that you will be mailed an application, if you haven't requested or received one yet, but also is the record that you in fact did visit the school. This goes into your application as a sign that you are interested enough to visit – it's not the most important part of your application, but it can only help, and it's the one thing you need to be sure to do before you leave – make sure the Admissions department knew you had come. A lot of people do

not do this – make sure you are one of the ones that do. Even if you haven't applied yet or sent your SAT scores, you should still put your name on this list, so if you do apply, they will have your name on file as having visited the campus.

The "Campus Tour" should also be a part of your visit. I use quotes because the tour is extremely selective as to what it shows potential students. My friends who are college tour guides tell me that they have a specific path to follow which steers clear of any ugly parts of campus. These ugly parts happen to include several of the dormitories inhabited by freshmen. The tour does point out important parts of campus – the admissions office, the student center, the athletic facilities, and, if you are lucky, a dormitory – if you are very lucky, a real dorm room. My dad and I used the campus tour to orient ourselves for our real tour – I made sure to go back and look at the student center, and I also, using a campus map, walked through the areas we had conveniently passed by, viewing the buildings where I would probably spend my time. You can ask students coming out of dormitories if they will let you in to the buildings, and they usually will. Check for cleanliness, sanitary bathrooms – see if it's a pleasant place to live. Also, talk to students you see – be sociable. See if they like the college and see what they don't like about it. Four years is an awfully long time to live someplace you're not happy with. By the time you leave campus you should have some idea about how you would like to live there.

Above all, you should enjoy your campus visits – I had a great time at each place I visited. I crossed several names off my list of places to apply, and I circled places I really liked. I ended up making my final decision based upon my college visits. They were, for me, perhaps the most important part of my application process. My visits were the only times I could actually see what it was like to go to college, and I was able to decide whether or not I liked what I saw. I wholeheartedly recommend making the college visit an important part of your decision-making.

The Interview

By Nick Staubach

By Nick Staubach

So there you are, sitting nervously before that alumnus or alumna of your dream school, the one who has been assigned to evaluate your scholastic potential through a personal interview. Thoughts and ideas are racing through your head like channels on TV when your little brother controls the remote. And even worse, when the conversation starts, your mind automatically shuts down. You suddenly feel incapable of expressing a single thought—every student's worst nightmare.

O.K., so maybe not every student will find himself in this scenario. Yes, there are those rare people fortunate enough to possess the ability to maintain the function of their brains even under such pressure. Supposing you are not one of these people, it is preparation

alone that can save you from such a fate. And supposing that you are one of these people, you just might find yourself better off having read the following suggestions anyway.

5 Tips you'll likely find everywhere:

Dress up – It's a matter of professionalism and respect. When in doubt, it is better to over-dress than to under-dress.

Be punctual – Leave yourself extra time to travel to your interview, arriving early if necessary. You want to be there waiting for your interviewer. If he's there waiting on you, then you have wasted some of his time. You can guess how much more of his time he's going to spend on your recommendation.

Speak clearly – There's no point in talking if the interviewer can't understand what you're saying.

Be animated – Vary your volume and pitch according to the material about which you're speaking. A monotonous voice will simply bore the interviewer, which is one of the last things you want to do.

Be courteous – Enough said.

5 Tips you'll likely not find everywhere:

Know your application – If the interviewer has read your application, so should you! Yes. I know you're saying that you're the one who wrote the thing! But if it's been awhile (and interviews often take place months after the application deadline) be sure to review what you've written within a day before your interview. This reminds you of what the interviewer will know; you definitely don't want to repeat or contradict yourself.

Smile! - Smile when you shake your interviewer's hand and throughout the interview. Smiling is contagious, and you will likely get the interviewer smiling back at you. And smiling feels good. It will alleviate your nervousness and put the interviewer in a good mood at the same time.

Keep eye contact – Be an active listener while the interviewer is speaking, looking him in his eyes. When you speak, keep eye contact. Only while you're formulating an answer in silence should you relax from eye contact. Even then, do not look down, up, or away from the interviewer; simply look past him or slightly to the side.

Tell a story – If you're all tensed up at the beginning of the interview, answer the next question with a story—preferably a story about which you are excited. Humorous stories work very well. You will be amazed at how quickly you forget your troubles as you launch into a re-creation of that time when . . .

Think out loud – When you're faced with superlative questions ("What's your most life-altering experience?", "Who's the person who has influenced you the most?", "Who is the one person you'd like to be ?", etc.) which you cannot answer quickly—you just can't think of one, talk your way through it. The process of getting to the answer is just as important as the answer itself

Follow up with a thank-you letter – This should become automatic whenever someone gives you some of his time. Not a fruit-basket or bouquet of flowers, just a quick note to let the interviewer know how you appreciated his time and attention.

Getting Shining Letters of Recommendation

By Suzanne Xie

Recommendations are Important

If your guidance counselor tells you that no part of your college application is more important than anyother, he or she is both right and wrong. So what exactly does this mean? It means that college admissions are more competitive today than they have ever been before. This means that colleges need to look closely at each segment of a student's application to differentiate between students. At the same time, this means forgetting to pay close attention to one segment can be detrimental to your chances of being accepted. It also means that your letter of recommendation has nearly the same weight as your GPA, as your SAT score, your extracurricular activities, and your personal essay (to a certain extent).

Teachers are My Friends

Assuming you have a good relationship with your teachers, you have your foot in the door to a great letter of recommendation. Traditionally, schools would like you to have two recommendations: one from the Math/Science department and one from the English/History (social science/humanities) department. If you are applying to specialized schools, then you may consider obtaining recommendations from sports coaches, music teachers, or past employers. Just make sure that you use those two recommendations to their full capacity; they should highlight different aspects of you as a student and person. That being said, they should both paint a positive picture of you and they should definitely not contradict each other.

I Need Some Teachers to be My Friends

If you feel that you are not close enough to any of your teachers to really inspire a great recommendation letter, do not fear because there is still time as long as you are willing to make an effort. Start by talking a lot more to your teachers. Go to them after class with questions and build a casual relationship by asking them how their day is going. Once you have gotten past this first barrier and can say “Hi” to them in the hallways, you are ready for the second step. There is surely more to you as a person than your name and the grades that that teacher gives you. You need to convey this to your teacher as well. Set up a meeting time with your teacher to chat. In most cases, teachers are delighted to get to know their students. You can use these conversations to get to know if your teacher would be the best person to write you a recommendation (Do they respond to your questions with interest? Do they like you?) and also to let your teacher know what kind of a person you are (What kind of college do you want to attend? What are your career goals? What are your personal goals?).

Once you have chosen the teachers that you feel the best fit with, ask them politely if they will write you a letter of recommendation for college. Obviously, because of your charm and hard work, they will agree to do so with pleasure. By now, you should have a list of your extracurricular activities that you should give to the teacher. Also, it is best to give them a short list of some qualities, projects, or work that you would like them to highlight. If you have an educational resume, use it instead.

Check the Box: Waive Your Rights to the Recommendation

MAKE SURE you check the box allowing the teacher’s recommendation to be confidential. Many teachers feel uncomfortable writing recommendations for students who want access to them in the future. Teachers want to tell the truth about you and if you just ask them beforehand whether or not they feel comfortable writing you a positive recommendation, they will tell you. Teachers who do not feel comfortable writing a strong recommendation will let you know and you can ask other teachers. So stop worrying! From there on, it’s smooth sailing! Make sure you thank them afterwards and write them a thank you card. If you want to be classy, avoid the Hallmark and supermarket aisle thank you cards and use a set of blank thank you cards.

Writing the College Essay

By Ben Hiebert

So you’ve looked at your essay, carefully chosen an essay topic, and now you’re ready to write. But how do you start writing? In the beginning, don’t consider the word or page limit, if there is one. As you edit your paper, you’ll go back over and trim or add things to make it fit. When you start, don’t even think about the length except in the general sense — is this a short essay, a medium essay, or a long essay. With that in mind, just start writing.

If you are writing about an event in your life, it can be easier to just start by describing the event and its importance. You don't even need to start by prefacing the actions that lead up to the event, introducing the characters or anything like that. What you need to focus on when you are doing the first version of your essay is the event itself and why it is meaningful. This also applies to questions like "What is your favorite book" or "How do you see yourself in 10 years?" On your first draft, you want to make sure that you focus on answering the question and why it is meaningful to you.

Next comes the editing process. What you have already written might be a large or awkward collection of memories and childhood events. Now your task is weaving them together into a coherent essay. This is where you shape the raw material that you wrote during the first draft into a presentable, intelligible whole. Go back through and ask yourself — do I explain this event/character/reason properly? Does the passage flow together as a whole? You should be editing for content, not for grammatical errors or for length. Before you concern yourself with fitting your essay into a given number of words, you want to make sure that it makes sense.

Once you have a good, well-written piece, it is time to begin chopping. Chances are, what you have written is longer than the space allocated for you. But don't start by eliminating paragraphs willy-nilly — first take a long, careful look at what you have written already. Can you combine two sentences and save some words? Is a sentence or two redundant? Can you rework a paragraph to make it shorter while preserving the same meaning? During this stage, you will also want to look at grammar, spelling, and word choice. Make sure that all of your sentences are correctly punctuated, and that you haven't committed spelling errors that the spellchecker hasn't picked up. It is during this time that you can consult a thesaurus to spice up your words a little bit. But be careful — don't use the thesaurus to just pick out large synonyms; only use it to remind yourself of good, appropriate words that you neglected when you were first writing your essay. **DO NOT USE WORDS THAT YOU DON'T KNOW.** Just don't. Oftentimes, even though a thesaurus states that a word is a synonym, it may not be a direct synonym, or it may convey some other secondary meaning that you aren't aware of. **IF YOU LOAD UP YOUR ESSAY WITH BIG WORDS JUST TO IMPRESS THE ADMISSIONS PEOPLE, THEY WILL THINK YOU ARE DUMB.** That's right. They will think that you know how to use a thesaurus, but that you don't actually know how to write.

If, after going over all of your sentences and all of your paragraphs, you find that you are still over the word limit, then it is time to reconsider how your essay is constructed and what really needs to be said. Then start cutting out paragraphs or parts of paragraphs to make an essay that still makes sense, but that is shorter in length. To do so, you may have to focus on only a small part of the larger essay that you had in the beginning.

Now you should have a nice, polished essay. Time to start showing it off. Get your parents to read it, get your friends to read it, but most importantly, get your English teacher and school counselor to read it. Your English teacher will help you with any punctuation or

sentence construction mistakes you may have made, and your school counselor will provide you with some insight as to how your essay compares to other college essays he or she has seen. Finally, after you have had 5-10 people look at your essay, go back over it one more time and try to incorporate any good suggestions that they had. Remember to take all of the advice you get with a grain of salt — this is your essay, and if someone who reads it wants you to change it entirely, feel free to consider their suggestions and ignore their advice. This may seem like a lot of work; however, a well-written essay can be used on multiple applications.

10 Essay Tips

By Suzanne Xie

- Focus on a unique characteristic of yourself — highlight one or two strengths!
- Have a variety of people read it for you (friends, parents, teachers, coaches, maybe your pet?) — they will give important advice from different perspectives, which is valuable.
- Proofread thoroughly — the perfection of a spelling bee champion will not make you, but a grammatical mistake could break you.
- Have a strong introduction to catch the readers' attention because they are reading through a lot of them — have a clear thesis in mind.
- Be sincere. Don't write an essay for the sake of writing an essay - readers will see right through that and won't take you seriously.
- Be sure to answer the actual question (you'd be surprised at the number of people who don't acknowledge the question), but make sure that you are revealing enough information about yourself to give them an idea of who you are.
- Remember your target audience — think about what they are looking for and use a personal characteristic of yours that would best fit the college (but be clear, and don't suck up)..
- Do not be informal, but do not write like you are Shakespeare — you just sound corny and dorky.
- Do not use rhetorical questions and avoid clichés!
- Be innovative — creativity is a plus, since these people are reading a lot of essays everyday! Just remember that a good essay comes from inspired motivation—not from checking off points.

Happy writing!

Making Time to Write Your Application Essays

By Suzanne Xie

Do not procrastinate when it comes to writing college essays or preparing portfolios. You definitely DO NOT want to have to stay home just to finish up college applications while your friends are out having fun! Doesn't this remind you of that anti-drug commercial about "having that talk with your kids about saying no to drugs"? Well, in many cases it is. When it comes down to it, these applications just need to get done.

Here is a good way to think of it: there are going to be many times in life where you can be lazy and it will not make much of a difference. For instance, you can be lazy with doing your laundry, with washing the dishes, or with walking the dog. However, all of these may lead to a rancid smell in your house. Most smells will not seriously change the direction of our life; however, college application procrastination might.

What NOT to think:

Thought 1: "Well, that application is not due until next month. I will do it later."

Proper Response 1: "I'll get my rear in gear, sit in front of the computer, and just try typing up a draft. Who cares if what I come up with isn't even close to a final copy? I can rewrite it later."

Thought 2: "I can just scrimmage some old writing samples and artwork for my portfolio. I'm sure I can find some stuff."

Proper Response 2: "I don't think that colleges will appreciate a paper that a high school English teacher graded a 'B-' or some drawings in crayon on the backs of used napkins."

The Correct Attitude:

"I will have a good work ethic and start working—NOW!"

"Parties can wait; the essay cannot."

"I'll just lock this door for the weekend, unplug the land line, stop using instant messaging, and turn off my cell phone. That way I will get some real quality time with my college applications."

How to Get it Done: A Sample Schedule

15 minutes: Organize a list of essay questions from the colleges you are most interested in.

15 minutes: Brainstorm some topics to approach the essay with – come up with a list of ten topics.

1 minute: Randomly choose one of the topics. If you are indecisive, then use the good old eeny-meeny-miny-moe method.

45 minutes: Write for thirty minutes straight without taking any bathroom or snack breaks. Try not to pick up your pen – not even to think. Continue to write and let the words flow on the topic that you chose. This way, your real voice will most likely show through.

This exercise will most likely warm you up to the essay-writing process. After doing this a few times, you should have a basic, solid essay to work from. Writing sessions will become easier as you start to understand what you want to say to the admissions staff and how you want to present yourself. Got some time? Start writing now!

Highlight Your Strengths

By Suzanne Xie and Avichal Garg

The college application process is not meant to be a breeze; it's meant to push you further and force you to think about yourself a little more. Obviously it is not possible to reveal your entire personality or all of your fascinating experiences through a few sheets of paper. I know this, the admissions officers know this, and most importantly, you know this. So, now that that expectation has been dealt with, you need to ask yourself: "What parts of myself do I want to portray?" Admissions officers don't have time to sit down and ponder what type of student and person you are through the representation of your extracurricular activities and interests. Since this is the case, it is your job to make sure that your point shows through. Choose one or two (tops) main attributes about yourself that you want to impress the admissions officer with.

One of the most common things that students use is "leadership." Almost everyone these days calls himself a "leader." But, instead of constantly stating it, how can you allow that trait to shine through? There are many activities that involve leadership skills. Your activities can range from being the captain of a tennis team to officer in student council to editor of a literary magazine to a camp counselor. Basically, any position of responsibility involves leadership ability. Along with being a leader, other qualities will come across as well – such as: dedication, hard work, sociability, charisma and perseverance.

It all depends on how you personally want to spin it off to them. If you have an amazing experience or position that clearly demonstrates these attributes, just mentioning it in your

list of activities may not be enough! Develop your essay around that experience and work through it with some good storytelling and creativity. Just because you choose to describe an experience or a certain characteristic does not mean it needs to read like an encyclopedia. For instance, I personally focused on leadership through perseverance. One of my essays was based upon the fact that I ran for office seven times within my first two years of high school. And do you want to know how many times I lost? I'm going to tell you anyway – seven times. It was not until my junior year that I finally attained the position that I had coveted since my first day in high school. Instead of just writing about the wonderful things I did once I was in office, it shows something different about me as a person to hear my sad history of losses. Doesn't it? Now you probably think I'm pathetic. Well, that's ok! Perseverance, remember? Besides from the obvious and attractive qualities such as leadership and hard work, you may want to present a more personable side to yourself. It's great to write about all the hardships that you may have survived, but you don't want to make yourself seem like some Greek god with no weaknesses. You don't need to be perfect in order for them to accept you. Be creative, be light, be serious, be interesting, be clear, be honest, BE YOURSELF!

At the end of the day, if you make yourself out to be someone you're not, you could very possibly end up at a college or university that is not a personality match for you. Ending up at an established institution of higher learning is extremely important, but as important (if not more important) is being at a college or university that is a personality match for you. If you are unhappy, surrounded by people vastly unlike yourself, and in an environment that does not allow you to grow to your fullest potential you are only cheating yourself. By being yourself on your college applications, you ensure that you are accepted to the colleges and universities that are strong personality matches for you, and ultimately give yourself the best chances of long term success in college and afterward.

An International Student's Perspective: India

By Aditya Singh

International Students Have It Tough

The college admission process is an extremely daunting process for most people, but none more so than for international students. I speak from experience when I say that international students sometimes feel as though they are at a great disadvantage when they apply to colleges in the United States. The U.S is an unknown country for them, and they have very little domestic help from their schools and fellow classmates -- most domestic schools naturally deal primarily with their own country's admission procedures. Thus, getting good, valuable advice is extremely difficult.

You Need More Than Great Grades to Get Accepted

I received a pleasant surprise exactly one year ago when I received Stanford and Harvard

acceptance letters in the mail. Initially, I was in a state of shock. I could name a bunch of my friends who had applied to the same universities as I did, with better SAT scores, but failed to gain admission. After analyzing my application for a few days, I realized that some subtle -- yet crucial -- points that I had kept in mind when preparing my materials perhaps didn't occur to other applicants. There are international students who fail to gain admission to top colleges even with perfect SAT scores, stellar academic records, and other great achievements. Conversely, there are some students who surprise everyone by beating the odds and getting into the university of their choice. If you, as an international student, keep a few simple tips and tricks in mind while applying, you will definitely increase your probability of getting into a top college.

Strong SATs are Important, but You Will Need More

It's true: that little number is definitely an important part of your application. However, a great SAT score alone won't guarantee you admission, and merely "good" scores won't hurt your chances a great deal if your application still stands out in some way. At my high school in India, there were kids who took the SAT three or four times, only to increase their score from 1500 to 1530. Frankly, top colleges like Stanford and Harvard prefer students whose scores surpass a particular threshold, usually in the range of 1450 to 1500. It is important to spend some serious time preparing for the SATs. Do not blow them off. If you are a natural ace, then just make sure you take a lot of practice tests. If you feel that you are not naturally in the 1500+ range, then it might help to do some special preparation whether it is through books or courses. It is recommended that you not take the SATs more than 3 times. Just don't do it!

Different Approaches for Different Schools

Most colleges look for certain characteristics or traits in their incoming international students. These usually remain the same from year to year. The primary purpose of having international students at any university is to add diversity to the institution. However, different colleges emphasize different aspects of this "diversity" factor. Try to capitalize on this by personalizing your applications — especially your essays — to match the preferences of each school. I quickly realized that Stanford University prefers international students who have a great deal of international exposure; that is, students who have lived in two or three different countries in their lifetime. With this in mind, I made sure that my admission essays reflected that aspect of my personality and childhood. I spent the first 10 years of my life in the United States, then migrated to India and spent the rest of my childhood there before coming back to the United States for college. My application essay dealt with how I handled the transition, and how both phases of my life contributed to my character and made me the person who I am today.

On the other hand, when applying to Harvard I adopted a different approach. I realized that Harvard expects its international student to possess a certain level of political awareness and maturity. Instead of dwelling upon "international exposure" as I did in the previous essay, I zeroed in on India's great religious diversity and that diversity's relationship to religious conflict. My primary focus was on the Godhra riots that struck

Gujarat, India — how the events affected me on a personal level and the impact they had on my classmates at school. It helps to do your research and to get an idea about what your dream college expects from its international students. Ask international upperclassmen who were admitted to the universities you're interested in what they wrote about, or look through essay samples on websites like PrepMe.com.

International Students Have a Tough Time with Financial Aid

Another important question that most international students raise is, "How important is the role of financial aid in the admission process?" The sad reality is that finances play a pretty big role at some of the more selective colleges. Students who are self-sufficient and who can finance their education without any institutional assistance have a greater chance of being admitted than their counterparts who may require considerable financial aid. My advice would be to try to request as little financial aid as possible from your top choices, while extracting as much financial aid as possible from your safety schools. However, at need-blind institutions like Harvard, finances are not a factor. Such institutions will meet your financial aid requirements if they accept you — contact the admissions office if you are not sure of a school's policy. Keep in mind that very few schools are wealthy enough to be need-blind even to international students. One of our partners, InternationalStudent.com, provides specific financial aid advice for international students.

Do Not Let Others Write Your Essays

Many international students commit a grave mistake by entrusting their application essays to unqualified imposters who pretend to be "professional counselors" and claim to guarantee admission to extremely selective colleges like Stanford, Princeton, Caltech, Harvard, MIT, etc. Remember, an application essay is meant to be an intimate, personal account of something that describes you and what you are passionate about. In order for that personal color to shine through, the essay must be your work! You must not fall prey to these frauds -- all they're interested in is making a quick buck! I know many bright students with great potential and good writing skills who succumbed to the conmen. Consequently, they were rejected by all of their top choices. Steer clear of dubious "professional counselors." A legitimate admissions counselor may offer advice on your essay, but will refuse to write it for you. Good counselors will help you brainstorm and let the real you shine through. Perhaps more importantly, integrity and honesty are values that are important to all academic institutions. Even if you do get into a college with essays written by someone else, you will not feel good about yourself. Just avoid the hassle!

Relax!

Finally, take a deep breath and remember that you don't have to be Superman to get into a top college! Be honest, be yourself, and most importantly, make that personal uniqueness show in your application. If you follow these guidelines and use common sense, you will do just fine.

Considering Women's Colleges

By Suzanne Xie

“All girls?! All?!” screams girl A.

“Only lesbians go there,” states girl B.

“You’ve got to be joking,” laughs girl C.

These reactions are common amongst girls when presented with the idea of going to a women’s college. I responded in a similar way when brainstorming a list of preliminary colleges to apply to. However, it became one of my final choices the week before my decisions were due. How did this come to be? Well, after thinking over the aspects of an all girls college, there are many positive attributes.

Most women’s colleges promote teaching subjects in female-friendly ways and create institutional environments which are healthy for young women. Attending a women’s college gives you the opportunity to experience a supportive female network without the distraction of males. A women’s college develops strong young women in a welcoming atmosphere that promotes independence and individualism. In a classroom full of women, it is easier for girls to speak their opinions without feeling self-conscious in front of male peers. This trains girls to become more self-confident in their ideas and beliefs, which leads to a refreshing self-awareness that is lacking in many co-educational colleges. While learning more about themselves, girls can gain a better grasp of the power of their feminine side. With these refreshing aspects, there is a greater chance for young women to lead in and out of the classroom at a women’s college.

Though this lack of male competition helps girls develop more independence while they are at college, it may have a negative effects on them after they leave this secluded environment. Women’s colleges should not be viewed as a place for girls to temporarily hide from the male dominated world. After graduating from a women’s college, a co-ed workplace or graduate school may come as a shock for some students. The adjustment between excelling at a women’s college and succeeding in the subsequent co-ed life can be hard to handle after four years without men.

Keeping in mind that a women’s college is not the right fit for all girls — sources have shown that women’s colleges are more successful than co-ed colleges in graduating unique women that report high levels of satisfaction, whether academic, developmental, or personal. A women’s college is ideal for preparing girls to attain the top positions and lead in their career fields. Studies show that one third of the women board members of Fortune 1000 companies graduated from women's colleges. In addition, one of every seven state cabinet members graduated from a women's college; women's college graduates also make up 20 percent of the one hundred most powerful people in Washington D.C. The Black Enterprise Magazine identified that 20 percent of the most

powerful African-American women in corporate America graduated from women's colleges. With these exceptional statistics, a women's college may just be the place for the inner you to shine.

Some notable graduates of women's colleges:

Madeline Albright — Wellesley
Barbara Bush — Smith
Hillary Rodham Clinton — Wellesley
Geraldine Ferraro — Marymount
Edith Hamilton — Bryn Mawr
Madeleine L'Engle — Smith
Sylvia Plath — Smith

[The Military Academies](#)

Weeding Out

By Ben Hiebert

So you're looking at college. You want to go someplace that's fun, cheap, and gives you the best education in the field you're looking for. But there's one problem. Every college brochure you have advertises its college as "Fun, cheap, and the best education." How do you know which is the right one for you? Start by making a list of your preferences. What do you want to major in? Do you want a big school, a medium sized school, or a small school? Where do you want to go to school—East Coast, West Coast? What is your price range? How high do you value the student-to-teacher ratio? Do you want a party school or someplace more stoic?

Next, you will want to narrow down the schools into ones that fit your preferences. This will probably give you a large chunk of schools that sound like a good fit for you. You'll need to whittle these down to the ones which you actually want to apply to. To do so, you'll need to know the overall strategy for applying.

Most students apply to 3–7 schools. You'll want to arrange your schools into 3 categories: Sure Bet, 50–50, and Long Shot. For the Sure Bet, you want to select 1 school which you are absolutely certain that you can get in to and that fits your other preferences and has a good program for your major. State schools are usually a good choice for this, and usually they are cheaper than out-of-state schools, too. You only need one Sure Bet because it is a sure thing—you are guaranteed to at least get into this college, and if all else fails, you can attend it and be successful.

Next, you'll want to select 2–3 50–50 schools. These are schools that you are pretty sure you will be able to get in to, and that perhaps provide you with more opportunities than the Sure Bet schools. Finally, you will want to pick 1–3 Long Shot schools—schools that are really selective and that you have a slim chance in getting in to. However, there is always a chance, which is why you still want to pick a few Long Shots, and apply to them.

With this in mind, you can sift through the schools accordingly. For many students, the expense of the school is a big factor, and can help narrow down the Sure Bet and the 50–50 schools to schools which are inexpensive. However, most highly selective schools are expensive, and narrowing down this category to inexpensive colleges would throw out every school. Fortunately, the highly selective colleges offer financial aid packages if you do get in to them.

Another criterion that can help you narrow down your schools is the strength of the major. Some schools are well known for their Computer Science program, while others are known for their Anthropology department. Do some research on the schools that you are pretty sure you can get in to, and see which ones have the best programs in the area of study that you are considering. You can check the school websites, the US News and World Report Rankings, or ask your counselor if he or she can provide more detailed information. Check to see if a school offers a special program that is particularly interesting to you.

The last facets of the school that you want to consider are its statistics. What is the graduation rate? What percentage of students come back after their freshman year? What is the alumni giving rate? Do they accept AP credit or credit for classes that you have taken in high school? What percentage of graduates get jobs/get accepted to graduate school?

In the end, it is up to you which schools you want to apply to. Make sure that you know what you want from a school, and that the school is offering what you want before you apply. Take into consideration all of the factors which are important to you—cost, location, size, reputation—narrow down the field to a few colleges which fit what you are looking for in an education. A little bit of planning can save you from making a big mistake in applying to and perhaps enrolling in a college that is not right for you.

Should I Apply to a Special/Specific Program or a General Program at a University?

By Anil Tanner

With competition increasing by each passing year, many college applicants are looking into special programs that allow students to pursue a specific course of study straight out

of high school. The merits of such programs have always been a point of discussion, but for the right student, a special program of study can enhance his or her college experience immensely.

Special programs are offered by large and small schools alike although there are some that are better known than others. Many of the programs have agreements with graduate schools, giving students a conditional acceptance to the graduate school and sometimes accelerating the time it takes to complete an advanced degree.

Is it for you?

Traditionally, special programs within a college or university tend to be more competitive than the application to the school alone. A student with a proven interest in the specific area of study will usually have a much greater chance of matching well with the program and securing admission.

Although acceptance into the program is what is likely on your mind, you should also consider that a student with only mild interest is setting himself up for a struggle, especially if the program penalizes students who quit.

Most students aren't in special programs and many don't have any idea what they want to study in college as a high school student applying. There is nothing wrong with wanting to explore different areas during college, and if you feel you still need to explore, then a special program might not be for you.

Read the fine print!

These programs are usually very enticing to attract top applicants. Before leaping into a specific program, do some research to find out if there are penalties for students who decide to leave the program. Some programs will allow students complete freedom, meaning they can remain in the program if they enjoy it, but are free to move to other areas of study within the university at any time without penalty while others might not award any degree unless you complete the program in full.

Beyond the contractual aspect of leaving the program, be sure to look into specific requirements for completing the program. Some medical programs, for example, still require students to take the MCAT and get a certain score, while others only require students to maintain a certain GPA to continue with the program. Moreover, each program will have its own set of required courses to prepare students for advanced study in that specific area. Identify these requirements when researching such programs.

Applying

As with all applications, you should begin as early as possible. This is especially important for special programs since they will usually require additional components on top of the standard application to the college or university. This usually means additional essays on the specific area of study, but can include on-campus interviews as well.

The best advice for applying to a special program is to show your genuine interest in the area of study. This doesn't necessarily mean that you have to do Nobel-prize winning cancer research to impress a medical program, although such activities do help if done out of genuine interest. Learn the specific benefits of the program and show the admissions committee that you would utilize the opportunity to the fullest.

I'm in!

After receiving responses from the schools you applied to, don't immediately enroll in the program that was the hardest to get into or the one you've heard the most about. Deciding where to go from a list of top schools and programs might be just as tough as the application itself. Think back to what you want to do and what you want to study. If you can't see yourself doing anything but medicine, business, engineering, or whatever your program might entail, then give the special program additional consideration.

Now review your options at the other potential schools. Could you study this same subject at the other schools? What are the rewards of studying the subject in the special program as opposed to in a general program at another school? Does the special program restrict your other interests heavily?

Applying to and deciding to attend a special program can be a tough task for even the most well-prepared high school student but the reward can be especially satisfying as well. To ensure success in the application process, research your interests and options in depth and learn as much as you can about how each program caters to your interests.

With hard work and good preparation even the most prestigious special programs are within reach.

Should I Apply to a Special/Specific Program or a General Program at a University?

By Richard Tong

When deciding whether or not to apply to a specific program, you should have considerable dedication to pursuing that particular field of study to the fullest extent. These programs are exclusively designed with high expectations for the students who choose to undergo such studies. General programs enable you the choice of experiencing various subjects before delving into the specifics of having to choose a major.

In my college application process, I applied to both specific and general programs. I knew before applying that I wanted to study architecture, but I was unsure of the type of program that would fit me best. Cornell University and Cooper Union topped my list of choices with specific five year program studies in architecture. The University of Illinois as well as the University of Michigan offered different programs, commonly referred to as

“2+4” or “4+2”. Within these programs, students would begin general studies, for one or two years, and gradually work architectural classes into their coursework. For example, at Michigan, after studying two years within the College of Literature, Science, and Arts, students would begin a four year program in the Alfred Taubman School of Architecture. After their fourth year, they would earn a Bachelor of Architecture, and after six, a Masters of Architecture. Illinois offered a similar program, only reversing the process slightly. The major difference between the two types of programs lies not only in the way they are structured, but also in the way they are taught. The schools providing specific studies offer a much more theoretical look at architecture, as opposed to the fundamental basis used by general study programs.

When comparing specific versus general programs in a field of study, there will most often be a difference in the academic structuring of the material taught. And in most cases, such as this, it would be very helpful to ask permission to sit in on a lecture, listen to critiques of students’ work, and talk to students about their ongoing projects. I also took advantage of a summer program, offered by Cornell University to high school juniors, exploring architecture. After that experience, I knew a specific program of study was what I truly wanted from my college. For you, making the choice between a specific or general program should be well thought out. If you are unclear about your future, work through a general program, taking courses within the field of study you wish to explore further. If you jump into a program that is too intense or competitive in its content, you may find yourself wanting something else. But for those who truly know in which direction they would like to see their career go, I highly recommend applying to a specific program. Why not get started early?

Applications for Art, Music, and Other Schools with Special Applications

By Jung Paek

If you're planning on applying to an art or architecture school, be prepared for a few extra requirements along with your typical application. These requirements apply mainly to those universities that have separate departments or schools for the intended major. For example, Syracuse University has a School of Architecture and a College of Visual and Performing Arts. What happens in universities like these is that, on top of the general requirements for a typical application (basic info, essays, short answers, transcript, extra-curricular activities, etc.) the separate schools/departments have requirements of their own. Generally speaking, art and architecture schools will request a portfolio.

Almost all art schools will require that a portfolio be submitted with the general application. The format of the portfolio varies upon the college. Most schools prefer slides, but some may ask for photos. Whatever the format may be, the medium used, the original size of the piece, an approximate date, and possibly a title should always be included with the

slides or photos. These can be written on a separate index sheet, or next to the slides/photos themselves. Be sure to follow the instructions and requirements of each school. If you have any questions, don't be afraid to call and ask them.

Architecture schools with four-year, Bachelor of Science or Bachelor of Arts programs most likely will not ask for portfolios. However, almost all architecture schools with five-year, Bachelor of Architecture programs will require that a portfolio be submitted. Like the art schools, the format for these portfolios may vary slightly. Again, most schools prefer slides, but photos are sometimes requested. Be sure to follow the instructions and requirements issued by each school. Sticking to the format requested is very important. Remember, the people reviewing your portfolio probably have already seen many before yours, and will probably see many more after yours. Although the process is supposed to be "fair," a simple annoyance could cause the reviewers to place your portfolio at the bottom of the pile, or even worse, to not review it at all.

The contents of your portfolio should not only reflect your talent or your "artistic ability," but they should also reflect some sort of potential and growth. However, this does not mean to include the very first drawing you ever made back in kindergarten, and then other drawings that you've done recently that you consider to be "masterpieces." The timeframe of all the pieces you choose should be within 1 or 2 years. For architects, schools are not looking for how versatile you are, or how many different kinds of medium you've experimented with. Most important and most dominantly present in your portfolio should be pieces that display your free-hand drawing abilities. Simply put, pencil drawings. Free-hand drawing is one of the clearest ways for a reviewer to truly assess talent, potential, growth, etc. Also, free-hand drawing is one of the most basic skills. Presenting them with your strong ability to draw with a pen or pencil (whatever the subject may be) is more powerful than presenting them with pieces made with many different materials. This applies to art applicants as well, although having some sort of variety in your medium may be appreciated.

For architecture applicants, examples of your technical drawing skills are much less appreciated than examples of your free-hand drawing skills. Technical drawing is a simple technique that is quickly learned and that tells nothing. Unless the drawing is exceptional (as in its concept or its representation), do not include technical drawings. If you have attended a summer architecture program in which you made models, do include them if they are presentable.

Ask an art teacher for help in selecting pieces for your portfolio. What you may see as "bad" may actually have many more merits than you may think.

Many of the top art schools, and a few architecture schools (namely Cooper Union) require that a Home Test/Examination be completed. The home test is usually sent out sometime in January or February (if you are applying regular admission), and approximately a month is given to complete it. The home test is a multi-part examination

that consists of various “art projects.” For example, one part may be to create a composition of various manufactured items. Remember, this test is not a standardized test. It is a test meant for them to see your potential as well as your ability. Your idea is just as important as the representation of it. Follow the directions of the home test, but remember that they are looking for potential and ability, as well as concept and idea. Often, the directions are not as clear or obvious as one would like them to be, so be creative and thoughtful.

Different Factors in Deciding How to Choose a College: Why I Picked Chicago (Part I)

By [Karan Goel](#)

The college you attend will shape you in many ways. Regardless of the field you study, the specific classes you take, and where you end up afterwards, your college will influence your opinions, your friends, your thought process, and your outlook on life. The goal of this article is not to stress why I believe the University of Chicago is better than Duke, M.I.T., Rice, and Wharton (thought it may very well be), but rather, why it is better for me and to highlight how I thought about my decision. Also, please take no offense to what I say regarding each school - I am merely stating my own viewpoints. On certain issues, they may be completely incorrect while on others, my opinions may provide you valuable insight. Either way, I am simply seeking to let you understand how I made my decision

You may have read the *Newsweek's 2001 How to Get Into College* issue article on my quandary over picking between my top two choices: The University of Chicago and the Wharton School of Business at the University of Pennsylvania. Before I heard back from any colleges, I had devised my own "Karan Goel News & World Report Rankings" for colleges. It is important that we all create our own criteria for evaluating schools. I sat down and thought about what mattered to me and here is what I came up with. I decided in the left column to write specific attributes of a college that mattered to me and why. On the right side [of the table you will see below] I decided to grade and rank the importance of these characteristics (on a scale of 1-10 with 10 being the most important):

Trait	Importance (1-10)
Urban Delights - access to cultural attractions, museums, nightlife, and a variety of restaurants	7
Overall Academics - strong overall academic reputation in a variety of fields because I want a strong broad-based education	9
Strength of My Concentration - school should be strong in my specific areas of interest	10

(economics/business, biology, computer science, and political science). <i>Keep in mind that depending on which school I would have gone to I might have chosen a different concentration depending on the strength of that area at my chosen school</i>	
Nice Campus – want to feel like I am at a college, not in the middle of a huge city (I know, I’m picky, I want urban pleasures without losing the feel of being at a serene college)	5
Reputation/Future Job Prospects – how will this college help me in my professional career? How will it help me get into a professional or graduate school?	6
Merit Scholarships – I am fortunate enough not to need financial aid, but a merit scholarship would still be nice in helping my parents afford the cost of college	2
Overall Feel – how did I like the college when I visited it? (I visited all of them except Rice). How was my experience with the students, classes, programs, etc.?	10
Study Abroad Opportunities – I have lived in four countries, traveled to many more, I speak three languages and I would like to learn more. Which university will give me the best opportunities to go abroad to explore other cultures and languages?	6
Special Programs – what special and unique programs does the university offer that cater to my needs? Are there any special programs to support entrepreneurship?	4

As you can see this is an extensive, but by no means exhaustive, list of criteria that one may use. I have just listed the items that were of special importance to me. You should do the same for yourself before you visit the schools and make your final decision. Good luck!

Different Factors in Deciding How to Choose a College: Why I Picked Chicago (Part II)

By [Karan Goel](#)

Rice— in a big city (Houston), but yet with a campus that still seems nice. The overall academic reputation of Rice is strong, but its specific strengths lie more in the sciences and less in the social sciences. Rice has a strong reputation, but not one as strong as the other four colleges. However, Rice did offer me a significant merit scholarship and strong study abroad opportunities with some interesting special programs. My interviewer was extremely nice and helpful and gave me an excellent impression of the school, yet it did not stand out in my mind as a place that fit my needs in terms of an academic institution with a high power faculty. **Eliminated from consideration.**

Now I was left with Duke, M.I.T., the University of Chicago, and Wharton (University of Pennsylvania):

M.I.T. — in a big city (Boston), but with a gorgeous campus and some really neat buildings. M.I.T. clearly has a very strong reputation worldwide and has the world's second best economics department with an extremely strong computer science department and biotech research abounds in Cambridge. M.I.T. would probably give me an amazing technical education, but I was not sure how broad-based or well-rounded it would be. Most of the students I met were very intelligent, yet did not strike me as people with a variety of interests. Many students at M.I.T. participate in Greek life (fraternities and sororities), which I am not a big fan of, and this was a significant turn off. I was very unimpressed by the study abroad options that M.I.T. offered and eventually decided that despite my extremely attractive tour guide, the school was a bit too technical and in some senses a little gloomy (for instance, M.I.T. has a high binge drinking rate) for me. **Eliminated from consideration.**

Duke — not in a big city (Durham), and in fact, not really much fun. Although the university does an excellent job of promoting student activities, Durham isn't really a major cultural center with an international feel. Duke clearly has a very strong academic reputation, but perhaps not on the same level as M.I.T., University of Chicago, and Wharton, and its programs in economics and political science were not particularly strong (although Duke's biology and computer science departments are amazing). Duke has a good reputation, but it is rarely considered an academic powerhouse. In addition, Duke offers very few merit scholarships and was willing to give me very few AP credits (I was going to have taken 11 AP exams). They did, however, have some excellent study abroad programs, and I really loved the student body. The students were jovial, friendly, and made me feel right at home. However, I realized that the combination of great weather, lots of parties, a freshman campus completely separate from the rest of the college, and the lack of academic seriousness would make Duke a poor fit for me as I would probably not spend much time studying. It was hard to do, but **Duke was eliminated from consideration.**

Now came the hardest part, thinking of the two schools that had been my top choices all along: The University of Chicago and Wharton (University of Pennsylvania). I knew that I

wanted to be an entrepreneur and start my own companies, and everyone thought that Wharton, the world's number one rated undergraduate business school, was the place for me. Almost everyone, at least — my mother, my English teacher, my history teacher, and my principal/guidance counselor thought that I would like the intellectual feel of the University of Chicago.

Let me be clear: this was nothing short of the toughest decision I've made in my entire life. I spent the entire month of April agonizing over the decision. I visited many colleges before even deciding where to apply and went back for last minute visits in April of my senior year (the crazy April when most of you will have to make your college decisions) to the University of Chicago and Wharton (University of Pennsylvania) before I made my final decision.

During the month of April I spoke to all of my friends, my teachers, my family, even people I had met online through college message boards to see what others thought. I had friends from high school at both colleges and e-mailed them regularly with questions that might aid me in making my final decision. Here is how my thought process came out:

Wharton (University of Pennsylvania) — in a big city (Philadelphia) with a variety of cultural attractions. The area that the university is located in is nice, but not gorgeous. Obviously one of the top universities in the world in terms of academic reputation and especially in the field of business, Wharton is the undisputed leader in undergraduate business education. Not only that, but they accepted me to the special Wharton scholars program for the top 10% of the incoming class that would allow me to take special classes and participate in special programs. The program also offered a 5-year B.A./M.B.A. option that allowed students to sub-matriculate into the Wharton M.B.A. program after their junior year. The facilities were amazing — the school is extremely professional in its approach. However, what really made my decision was my final visit during the special Admit Event in April. First, sitting in on classes, I was struck by the segregated nature of the campus. Students of various ethnic minorities all sat together and did not seem to intermingle very much — this really bothered me. Also, the classes were somewhat prosaic and there were very few questions. Most students I spoke to were interested in very non-entrepreneurial pursuits — not what I had expected. My overnight visit and chats with various students showed that the students were not as happy as I would have liked and many were there as products of the “I got rejected from Princeton/Harvard/Yale so I came here” philosophy. I wanted to attend a school where students were truly excited to be there and this was not it. Just as my parents were about to put on the “Proud to be a Penn Parent” pins, I let them know, “I’m not going here.” **Eliminated from consideration (ALMOST).**

The University of Chicago — in a very big city (Chicago, duh!). The campus in the Hyde Park neighborhood of Chicago was gorgeous, it's close to the lake, near the Museum of Science and Industry, views of downtown and Chicago's gorgeous skyline can be obtained from just the third or fourth floor of many buildings on campus. The University of Chicago is considered to be the world's top liberal-arts education with the most Nobel

laureates of any university (more than most countries in the world in fact) with the world's most highly-reputed economics department of Hayek, Friedman, and Fogel fame. The CORE curriculum which requires students to study in the humanities, social sciences, arts/theatre/music, civilization-studies, and the sciences really attracted me. It was more than just the distribution requirements of other schools, but a serious effort to construct a well-rounded individual. The philosophy of "We don't teach you how to think, we give you the tools to think and approach every problem" made me realize it was the place for me. I loved the student body, the students were friendly (though quite odd at the dormitory I stayed at), and the classes I sat in on were incredible from an excellent class on genetic engineering to a small seminar on advanced Sanskrit. The university also offered me a merit scholarship, had an excellent array of study abroad programs (which gave me the chance to spend three amazing months in Barcelona, Spain), and many interesting programs. There were some negative aspects, however. The university is not in the world's safest area, though as I have learned by living here, you just need to use your common sense and you will be fine. The winters in Chicago are a little bit painful and dreary as well. However, I just fell in love with the school, I felt at home, and honestly, that feeling that you have that you are at the right place is the biggest indicator that you are making the right decision.

However, even after finishing these visits, I thought to myself — maybe it was just that weekend, maybe I am just being silly. Wharton is the best business school for undergraduates in the whole world. Do I really want to spend four years in the numbing winters of Chicago? Don't I want to be connected with Wharton's vast alumni network so that I can leverage that to start companies?

I thought some more, and not only did I realize my heart wanted me to go to Chicago, but I realized it made sense. Chicago's economics department was and is the best in the world. I did not need to study business as an undergraduate to be a successful entrepreneur — that's what work experience and an M.B.A. are for. Chicago also has THE WORLD'S BEST BUSINESS SCHOOL and I could (and did) audit and register in classes there to supplement my liberal arts education. I could learn about a broad array of subjects and be an "interesting" person. Wow, I could learn about Homer, Smith, and Nietzsche while studying price theory! I could be in an amazing city and gain contacts through the university and the community. I could be a better entrepreneur because I would be surrounded by creative, open-minded people.

I finally **decided on The University of Chicago** and I have not regretted my decision for one second. It is an amazing school and an amazing place. All of the other schools I considered were pretty amazing too, but Chicago was even more amazing and was the one that was right for me.

MIT versus CalTech

By Joe Jewell

MIT or Caltech. It's a choice that faces more than a few technically-minded high school seniors each year. Both schools are ultra-selective, but the profile of the student they're looking for is so similar that if you can get into one, the other is at least a good possibility—which leaves, for the lucky ones, The Choice. On the face of it, the schools seem quite equivalent. Both have extremely high average SAT scores, more guys than gals, a reputation for non-stop studying, and the tendency to turn out graduates who go on to very successful careers in math, science, and engineering. However, despite a host of similarities, the schools do have their differences, and your academic and non-academic experiences are likely to vary significantly based upon where you end up. I was confronted with this choice three years ago, and though I feel I made the correct one for myself, it was certainly tough. I'd like to share a few of the insights I gained in researching both schools while I was still deciding, along with some of my experiences after, to help you along on your way.

By far the defining difference between the two schools is size. At MIT, the freshman class is the size of the entire student body at Caltech. It really is a world of difference. Though both might be called “small” schools compared to a state school behemoth like Berkeley or the University of Michigan, the dissimilarity in the feel of 900 undergrads versus 4500 is quite tangible. As with most factors, this cuts both ways. At Caltech, you can reasonably expect to know most people in your class (and everyone in your dorm) by name, and most of the rest of the undergrads at least by sight. At MIT, this isn't true—but conversely, there's a sort of anonymity possible at MIT that is simply out of the question at Caltech, and if you have a (non-academic and non-music) special interest, the larger student body means more students who possibly share your interest. Interestingly, both MIT and Caltech seem to have ample opportunities for musicians. (There is, quite possibly, some truth to the notion that musical ability and mathematical acumen go together.) Similarly, Boston is one of the most famous and storied college towns in the world—but it's hard to beat Los Angeles for sun, temperature, and access to the beach.

For general academics, it's hard to give the edge to either school. Obviously, a science or engineering graduate from either school will have a significant advantage over the non-MIT-or-Caltech graduate, but making distinctions between the two is akin to splitting hairs. That said, it's important to recognize the difference in what each school has evolved and is designed to do.

Caltech is designed to lead to graduate school, plain and simple. Nearly 50% of undergraduate alumni eventually earn Ph.D.'s in a technical field, which is the highest percentage of any student body anyplace. The famous “core” curriculum, under which students take virtually the same classes regardless of major for the freshman year and part of the sophomore year, is designed to provide a solid and universal background in math and each of the major fields of science. In part, this includes five terms each of math and physics for all majors—even biology or economics. The broad foundation that all of that physics (plus the required chemistry, biology, and lab classes) provides is designed to be the basis not for entering the workforce immediately after the B.S., but for the

interdisciplinary collaboration common at the world's top graduate programs. In sum, while many Caltech students, especially in the engineering fields, do enter the workforce directly out of Caltech, the more usual path is towards graduate school. The emphasis on undergraduate research experience dovetails well with that emphasis. A quick survey of professors' web pages reveals that almost all research groups on campus have undergraduates associated with them, and 70% of the student body does a SURF (Summer Undergraduate Research Fellowship) project sometime during their time at Caltech.

MIT, of course, sends many of its students on to graduate school as well, but there is also an emphasis on entrepreneurship and applications of science that is sometimes lacking at Caltech. While Caltech just added an undergraduate Business, Economics, and Management major last year, MIT has for years had one of the nation's top business schools in the Sloan School. While visiting MIT, a senior proudly told me that "90% of MIT startups succeed" and I fully believed him (granted, this was in the heyday of the last decade's tech bubble at the time). The transformation of technical ideas from applied science into money-making possibilities seems to reach its apex at MIT. The Independent Activities Period, basically a month between fall and spring semesters that lacks regular classes, provides the opportunity for research projects, mini-internships with Boston-area tech companies, or a variety of offbeat, unusual, and interesting courses offered only during that time.

If you think the answer is as simple as "MIT for applied science, Caltech for pure," though, think again. Any variety of other factors can and should influence your decision. Cross-registration opportunities with Harvard (which, to be fair, are much-touted but little-used) might tilt the balance towards MIT for a future theoretical physicist who also has a passion for Russian literature or some other very specific subject that might not be covered by many classes at a technical school. On the other hand, a potential aerospace engineer might be swayed to Caltech by the possibility of doing a research project or getting a hands-on job during the term with scientists at NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory (located in Pasadena and run by Caltech). There is no one right answer.

I'm now a junior, and I have lived with the choice that I made—Caltech, by the way—for three years now. I'm confident that I made the right decision for me. What made my choice? Above all, it was the size. I visited both campuses and liked the small "feel" of Caltech's better. I suspected that this was a place where I could really make some personal bonds, and it turned out to be true—most students on campus know who I am, and I know lots of them too. My professors can learn the names of all the students in tiny classes (once you get past core), and President Baltimore or Dean Revel says "Hi, Joe" if we pass on the Olive Walk. Personally, the small size of Caltech has allowed me to blossom. I serve on the student government and am very active in the music program. I got a truly great research job (good pay, flexible schedule, publication coming this July) for last summer just by asking a prof after class one day. The work is intense, but the camaraderie of the student body and the support of my friends make it possible.

“Yeah, I’m not really a college student: I’m institutionalized.” So goes the joke that I often share with my friends back home in Michigan, most of whom attend more traditional colleges and perhaps even occasionally spend their weekends on something other than studying. Now, things aren’t really quite that bad at Caltech, despite the reputation—my weekend so far has included an orchestra concert, a movie with friends, and some time jogging, in addition to studying rather more lightly than I would on a weekday—but it is true that life at one of our country’s top two schools with “Institute” in the name is a little different than life at a “University” or a “College.”

Choosing Between Harvard, Princeton, Stanford, and Yale

By Jonathan Moy

“So do you have any advice?” I asked my friend Doug as I leafed through my acceptance letters. “I mean, is there some clear cut standard that I should use in making my decision?”

“Umm don’t pick the wrong school?” he replied flippantly as he sipped his coffee and sorted through his own acceptance letters.

“Gee, thanks, Doug. You’re a real help. I’m sure you were able to impart the same kind of breathtaking clarity in your application essays,” I shot back.

“Of course I was, Jon. That’s why the only two schools that I wanted to go to and that took me were MIT and Cal Tech,” he said with a sigh. “I probably would have done better if I had formulated some sort of mathematical proof concerning why I wanted to apply to whatever school.”

“Oh, you poor thing. MIT, and Cal Tech? Whatever will you do?” I said snidely.

Doug waited until I picked up my cup of tea and started sipping, so as to eliminate any chance of a sarcastic rebuttal, and stated, “And you’re one to talk? Mr. Harvard, Princeton, Stanford, and Yale? I wish all of us could have a decision as tough as that one before us.” A long pause ensued as both Doug and I returned our attention to the colorful packets before us, each selling their respective colleges in a morass of glossy photos and articulately phrased boasting.

“You know, none of our banter is going to help either one of us get any closer to making a decision,” I finally responded. “We’ve got to come up with some sort of standard with which we can weigh our options.”

Doug stared at me, slowly lowered his mug, and placed it back on the coaster before him. “So let’s make one and use it. I mean it can’t be that hard, right?”

If I had known how wrong Doug was, I think I would have quit right then and there and started throwing darts at a board with schools' names on them. Even after he and I came up with this "standard" that we kept talking about, I felt like giving up more than once. Choosing a college that you'll be spending the next four years of your life at is not an easy decision to make, nor is it exactly one that we're confronted with on a regular basis. Rather, it is a daunting one, and no matter how trite this may sound, the college that you eventually select will end up shaping the course of events throughout the rest of your life. I don't think I can describe how much time and deliberation that Doug and I put into the process of deciding which college would be right for us. If you haven't yet gone through this ordeal, you'll soon learn for yourself, and if you are choosing between schools right now, you know exactly what I'm talking about. I also don't know if you are going to find what I have to say to be helpful because all I can do is show you how I approached the process. But, I hope that you'll find at least something that you'll be able to apply in your own decision about which school is the best one for you.

The standard that Doug and I came up with is the 5 P's: people, professors, possibilities, prestige, and parents. How vital each one of these components is to you is something that you have to sort out for yourself, but we both agreed that the order in which I listed them was the one that we felt was most important. I went through each of the schools that extended me an acceptance, debated over how each one measured up to the others, and the college that did best was the one I decided on. Now of course I'm caricaturizing the process because it definitely wasn't as easy as I made it out to be, but that's roughly how it went. Here's how I thought about each criterion:

People

I decided that I wanted to surround myself with students who could work hard and play hard. I thought that pretty much every student at any serious school would meet this description, but after going on the admit weekend events for the schools I was choosing between, I learned otherwise. I can't stress enough how important these admit weekend events were because they were fantastic opportunities to watch how students at different colleges interacted with one another. At the risk of sounding stereotypical, I found that people at different colleges treated one another in very distinct manners. For example, I thought that Harvard students spent all day trying to prove to their peers that they belonged there, almost as if they had a chip on their shoulders. On the other hand, Stanford students spent much of their time pretending to be laid-back even though they worked harder than any student from the other schools I had visited by leaps and bounds, and were also victims of a less than stellar dating scene. The bottom line is that I would never have gotten a chance to get a feel for either college if I hadn't gone to the admit weekend events, and what I learned from them proved to be invaluable.

Professors

Because the last thing I wanted to feel like for an entire four years was a mere number, I wanted to go to a college with a learning environment in which the professors were

accessible and willing to meet with undergraduates. However, learning about how accessible the professors were took more than just looking at the brochures or by going to the admit weekend events. Instead, it took a bit of sleuthing in the form of talking to current students. Discussions over dinner at Annenbungh Hall revealed that Harvard students were taught by TAs even during their junior year, while students in a particular physics class at Princeton were taught by a Nobel Laureate who served milk and cookies during office hours. I would stress talking to students about how they feel about their academic experience because there is no better source for information than the people who are currently going through the system.

Possibilities

What is going to matter when you graduate isn't that you attended school X, but that you attended school X and you know your stuff. Unfortunately, going to a college that is world-renown but that isn't strong in the fields that you're interested in practically defeats the purpose of attending. Different colleges offer different arrays of possibilities for the future, and you should pick one that both caters to your strengths and offers you with the most promising set of possibilities. Luckily, this is something that I found I could glean from the propaganda packets (did I say propaganda I meant informational) that colleges mailed out earlier in the year and from each school's websites. Since both are designed to sell you the best aspects of a school, and they are reliable source of information about what a school has to offer. For example, I learned from Yale's thirty-page booklet that it has excellent programs for both music and theater, while from Stanford's website I learned that there is a linear accelerator on campus that can boast more than its fair share of Nobel Laureate researchers. However, neither websites or booklets are good at relaying prospective students with a school's weaknesses. Once again, that is something that you have to talk with current students to figure out. Later, I learned that Yale's music conservatory rarely takes undergrads, and that finding a professor at Stanford's linear accelerator who is willing to work with non-PHD students is harder than getting a letter of acceptance in the first place. Be deliberate when you're searching for reliable information about a college. Often times the best places to find out the truth about a school's weakness are from the current students themselves. So whether you're a music buff or a budding high-energy physicist, you should know the ins and outs about the possibilities at the colleges you're picking from lest you be unpleasantly surprised when you start freshman year.

Prestige

I think that this is the hardest category to deal with because there is a stigma attached with basing any part of your decision around this intangible concept we call "prestige," but I'm going to go out on a limb here and say that prestige is important. It's not the be all and end all, because as I said before what is going to matter when you graduate isn't that you attended school X, but that you attended school X and you know your stuff. However, during grad school applications or job interviews it does help to say that you go to Harvard, Stanford, Princeton, Yale, MIT, or any of the other big ticket schools out there, and anybody who tells you otherwise doesn't have a firm grasp of reality. Would it be better if

society didn't pay as much attention as it does to the college you go to? Maybe. Would it be better if the college that you went to determined less of your future? Definitely. Unfortunately, that's the way the system works, and things aren't going to change in between now and when you have to mail in your letter of intent. What you have to decide is whether prestige matters to you, and if it does how? For example, if you think that prestige is important, you have to decide if there is a material difference between how prestigious Princeton and Northwestern is, how big the difference is, and how much that difference matters to you. Most importantly, the importance you place on this criterion is something that you have to decide for yourself, because no brochure, website, or dinnertime conversation is really going to help you.

Parents

How much you let your parents affect your choice is, like prestige, something you have to decide for yourself. If you want to be close to home, or care a lot about their input, then they should be one of your prime considerations. If you don't think that their input is that important, then put them last on the list. To be fair, you should realize that your parents are most likely footing a considerable portion, if not all, of the cost of your education, so even though you may not relish the thought you should give their opinions some credence. On the other hand, no matter how much parents think they know about what's best for you, you are ultimately the best judge. In my opinion, if you have a disagreement with your parents about what school is right for you, you should trust your intuition. After all, what better source of information about what's good and what's not than yourself?

After long weeks of deliberation, I decided upon Stanford because of its energetic and entrepreneurial student body, the strength of its engineering and science departments, the accessibility of professors in freshman/sophomore seminars, and the weather, while Doug decided on MIT (hopefully not because of the weather). Both of us are happy at our respective schools, and I would like to think that this is the case at least in some part because of the effort that we put into making our choices. The lesson that I took away from the entire ordeal was that going to admit weekend events and talking to students, as well as looking introspectively to discover how important I placed prestige and parents in the entire scheme of things, equipped me with necessary tools to make an educated decision. While it certainly wasn't an easy one, the work I put into the decision ensured that it was a successful one.

Why I Chose a State School when Everyone Thought I'd Go Ivy

By Becky Somebody

I have always been an extreme planner; it is one of those nasty, intrinsic, type-A personality traits that, no matter how hard I try to eradicate, does not seem to fade away. No surprise, then, that my first college plans emerged of my own volition during the fifth grade. At 10 years old I saw my future path headed toward Yale and then to law school and eventually the presidency. At 11, Harvard replaced Yale as my school du jour and this

pattern continued quite unobstructed for the next five years. I read up on colleges, scanned U.S. News & World Report's college reviews, took the "right" courses, became the stereotypical "well-rounded" student, and told myself I would not settle for less than the most private, top-notch university in the United States. I swore up and down that Ohio had nothing to offer me and I snubbed the notion of anything that did not resemble a small, private college.

I was not alone in thinking that this was where my future lay.

In my competitive high school, it was relatively common knowledge that my grades and extracurriculars were strong and others assumed, as did I, that I would apply to at least one premiere private university. As it turned out, my application stack was relatively short and none of the colleges was private, much less small. All were state schools and most were large: The University of Wisconsin at Madison, The University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Indiana University at Bloomington, Miami University of Ohio, and The Ohio State University at Columbus. I never could have predicted that, in direct contrast to all my well-laid plans, December of 1999 would find me as a future Buckeye, with enrollment forms filled and admissions fees paid to The Ohio State University.

"Why are **you** going to Ohio State?" was a question I heard too frequently for my own liking during the latter half of my senior year. It is a bizarre experience to find others so vocally expressing their views of your future. However, as in any decision, there were many well-thought out reasons for my choice, all of which boiled down to three key points: money, opportunities, and the ever so ambiguous "gut feeling."

The most tangible reason for my decision was money. As the majority of college seniors know, elite private institutions carry a hefty price tag; estimated yearly costs often hover around \$40,000. At the beginning of my senior year, my parents informed me that there was no special account marked "Becky's college fund." While they did not demand it, they urged me to look at colleges where I was competitive for large scholarships. Merit-based aid was my only hope and most private universities generally dole out need-based financial aid, not merit-based. As a public institution, Ohio State's in-state estimated yearly costs of \$13,000-14,000 are nearly one-third those of many private universities. By November of my senior year, it was apparent that these costs would be reduced to virtually nothing once my scholarships were awarded. As a National Merit Semi-Finalist, I was eligible for full in-state tuition and \$4,500 a year for four years at Ohio State if, as a Finalist, I listed OSU as my first choice. In addition to this very nice university-sponsored aid package, Ohio Board of Regents offered me slightly over \$2,000 a year for four years if I chose to attend an Ohio university. All of this combined with some smaller scholarships meant that I was looking at four years of completely covered tuition, room, and board—with extras. The knowledge that I would never feel the financial burden of college and would be able to afford travel, clothes, entertainment, and other frivolities was one of the main attractions of OSU, and the primary factor that kept me from applying to any Ivy League school.

The second reason that I chose to attend Ohio State was the sheer number of activities in which I could become involved, majors I could study, and people I could meet. As one of the largest universities in the nation, OSU offered me exactly what I was looking for through its Honors Program. As an Honors student, I could take special Honors sections of courses if I wanted a smaller, more individualized, and more demanding setting. The Honors Program provided me with the attention and academic programming I wanted, accompanied by the resources and opportunities that come with a campus of nearly 36,000 undergraduates (and a total student body of nearly 50,000). While OSU offered me great academics and over 170 majors, it also offered me a wide array of extracurricular opportunities. In addition to its over 500 student organizations, OSU also had one of the largest intramural sports programs in the nation, offering its students everything from intramural flag football to underwater scuba hockey. And, if this was not enough opportunity, Ohio State is located in the middle of Columbus, the capital city of Ohio, meaning that there are many social, cultural, educational, and work-related opportunities to OSU students through the city resources.

Lastly, and most importantly, Ohio State appealed to me because of the way I felt after visiting campus and talking to students, faculty, and administrators. This is what I refer to as the “gut feeling.” Essentially, it boils down to how comfortable you feel on campus. While the attentiveness of OSU’s administration helped me feel at ease, there was nothing more exciting than visiting a school and seeing how enthusiastic the students were about their university. I visited about ten schools over the whole search process and only two were memorable for their students’ enthusiasm. Ohio State, however, was by far the more notable of the two. This was incredibly important because I was meeting students who had been similar to myself in high school and, not only were they succeeding tremendously at Ohio State, they were excited to talk to me about their university. The most common trait that I have found among students at Ohio State is their strong love for the school in its entirety; this enthusiasm about the university is contagious. By the time I was ready to make my decision, it was impossible to ignore the high praises I had continuously heard about Ohio State.

Having said all this, was my decision really that easy? Well, in a word, no. In fact, I fretted and, ridiculous as it was, even cried about it for a month or so. Although I had applied to five schools, I was constantly debating the merits of a sixth application to Princeton. In the end, I threw out my semi-completed Princeton app, signed my intent to OSU, and mentally prepared myself to be a future Buckeye. This was not easy, as long-lived dreams die hard. However, it was one of the better choices I have made, saving both time and angst. Princeton was too expensive, did not afford me the opportunity to double major, and, frankly, I did not want to face rejection (ultimate death to dreams) or acceptance, as either way I would not attend.

Looking back on all of this as a third-year Buckeye it is laughable how long it took me to come to these conclusions. Had I known as a senior in high school how happy I would be

at Ohio State, the fact that it was not the prestigious private school of my blueprint for life would not have mattered. The money I have saved through scholarships has helped me finance a summer study abroad program in Mexico, multiple winter and spring break vacations, and a summer backpacking trip through Europe. The opportunities have allowed me to pursue degrees in Sociology and Public Policy (self-designed), a Spanish minor, research, internships, political activism, and leadership, service, and social activities, all while managing to get my first ever bloody lip in intramural flag football. And, though all of this is great, it wouldn't be complete without the never-ending Buckeye pride that flows throughout campus. This pride stems from success in academics, athletics, community service, and volunteerism and manifests itself in knowing that the proper response to "O-H!" is screaming "I-O!", in pausing to hear the bells in Orton Hall ring, and in singing the words to "*Carmen, Ohio*" in Ohio Stadium while still trembling from the final second of the 2002 OSU/Michigan game. So when the rare person questions my college choice, I have two words for them: GO BUCKS!

Why Pepperdine

By Jessica Hancox

Some of you might be wondering - what about the smaller schools? Well, I am here to help. I attend Pepperdine University, Pepperdine is a small Christian school located along the Santa Monica Mountains in Malibu, California. There were many reasons why I chose Pepperdine. I had previously lived in Cincinnati, Ohio for all of my life, and while I enjoyed it there, I wanted to get out and try something new. I applied to ten different schools across the nation, both public and private, large and small, everywhere from neighboring cities to halfway across the country. I visited a few campuses, and Pepperdine seemed so right to me because of the cozy atmosphere, the amazing location, and the relationships students build with their professors. They don't make you feel like you are just a number at Pepperdine. Forty percent of the professors live on campus, and for the most part are both willing and eager to meet with their students often, sometimes even having them over for dinner. The classes are really small, with most having about 15-20 students in them. Most of my professors encouraged a lot of class discussion, so it was not just listening to them lecture all the time.

Pepperdine is affiliated with the Church of Christ, and along with that comes many optional worship services and groups, as well as some strict rules that everyone must abide involving alcohol and the opposite sex. It's a dry campus, meaning alcohol is prohibited anywhere on school property or at school events. Also, boys have to be out of girls' dorms by 1am and girls have to be out of boys' dorms by 1am as well. Along with that, no one is allowed to be in a "sexually compromising" position with another person. Other than that, it's really pretty lenient with rules as far as a Christian school is concerned. It's definitely one of the more conservative schools out there, and it often feels like we live in a bubble. It also has a great homey feel, and you never have to worry about it being unsafe walking around by yourself.

Though it was really hard to be that far from home at first, college life is a big transition for

anyone. I think some people prefer to stay closer to home, but if you are willing to step out of your comfort zone into something completely new to you, it's really exciting and a great opportunity for growth. After taking some time to adjust to wherever you choose, almost every college experience is amazing. I went from having a really hard time being on the other side of the country to spending the next year abroad in Germany, which by the way, I also really recommend studying abroad if it's a possibility.

Maybe small classes aren't important to you or you want a big school with a party atmosphere. Perhaps you want something private but not Christian. You have so many options with all the colleges out there, but I strongly encourage you do an overnight stay with a student in the places you go. People who do this generally get a really good feel for the university, different than just taking a standard tour of the general campus.

Personally, I am enjoying my time here at Pepperdine. I spent a good amount of time considering my options and my preferences for a college, and I think that I found just the right match for me. Good luck with your search.

Preparing for Internships in the Business World (Part I)

By **Karan Goel**

For most of us, it is important to figure out what we want to do after college, whether that be graduate school, professional school (business, law, medicine), or full-time work. Internships are an important tool for gaining experience and learning about one's preferences and interests. Perhaps most importantly, internships aid in attaining goals such as acceptance to a graduate school or employment in a particular job.

This article does not seek to provide career advice, but rather to provide advice to help secure an internship that will further your business career. It is by no means necessary to major in the fields of accounting, business, economics, finance, or marketing to enter the business world. Two of my best friends, both political science majors, have obtained excellent internships and jobs in not just the business world, but in finance—one at an industry-leading investment research firm and the other at a large hedge fund.

Skills: We All Need Some

First, let me emphasize that the most important skill in the business world is the ability to critically analyze problems with quantitative and qualitative methods. Well, what on earth does that mean? It means that to succeed, one should be able to look at an issue and analyze it using mathematical and statistical metrics (quantitative) together with subjective criteria (qualitative) to arrive at decisions. To put it another way, think of business skills in two main groups:

Quantitative (Hard Skills)

Accounting
Economics
Finance
Mathematics
Statistics

Quantitative Jobs

Accountant
Business Development
Corporate Finance
Economist
Investment Banking

Qualitative (Soft Skills)

Communications
Human Resources
Management
Marketing
Sales

Qualitative Jobs

Customer Service Rep
Broker
Marketer
Manager
Sales

Hard skills tend to be required for a solid foundation in business and are readily measured by aptitude tests, quizzes, brain teasers, etc. Soft skills tend to be handier as one advances in an organization to become the leader of a team, part of the management, or an entrepreneur. These skills are harder to test in an interview setting and, by the same token, also more difficult to learn through classes or books. As you can see, many jobs require a strong balance of both sets of skills.

That said, there are a variety of approaches to entering the business world—with a purely liberal arts education, a purely business-related education, engineering, etc. The best approach is one that combines the strengths of your academic program and extracurricular that help fill in your gaps. Regardless of whether or not one chooses to enter a certain field, a broad set of skills is the only sure way to be a strong candidate from a wide variety of jobs.

- Microsoft Access (if you will be working with any database or data management systems)

- Microsoft Excel (if you will be working in any accounting, finance, or quantitative field such as asset management, corporate finance, investment banking, trading, etc.)
- Microsoft PowerPoint (if you will be working in any situation where presentations are required such as management consulting)
- Microsoft Word (for everything!—try to make sure you know how to touch type)
- STATA (or other statistical program)

Now you are all wondering about what kind of internships are out there. Below is a description of the different “levels,” so to speak, of business internships. This is not to say that any one is necessarily better. Rather, this should show how different internships are regarded differently:

Level 1: Restaurants/Retail/Telemarketing

This includes everything from McDonalds to the Gap. I too did my share of retail while working in the Men’s Department of Florida-based Steinmart. Jobs such as these give experience, but mostly the kind you don’t want to talk about. It’s not too productive to tell your interviewer how you marked down sales and watched for theft for your job. A better approach is to learn how to “spin” this kind of experience. Think about what you learned from this experience? What would you change if you were the manager? How would you speed up the pizza delivery process? How would you improve your company’s customer database in order to better manage sale and frequent–customer rewards? Take these experiences and build on them. This kind of position is a good start, provides some cash, and is best to pursue during your high school years and perhaps your first year of college.

Level 2: Basic Office Jobs (Pure Grunt Work – Mostly)

This is the kind of “internships” that involve shredding papers, photocopying, faxing, doing various errands and are usually secured through friends, parents, family friends, professors, past bosses, etc. Sometimes companies recruit for such positions and disguise them as real internships where one is given responsibility. In the 1970s, such grunt–work jobs were considered the best one could do, but as times have changed, companies have realized the value of formal internship programs to develop future full–time employees.

Basic office jobs are found all over the place—often in suburban office parks near where many of us reside. These jobs also require some serious “spinning.” So even if all you actually did was get your boss coffee, order lunch from the local Chinese restaurant for the whole office, and organize a baseball game outing, figure out what you learned. Try to learn what office politics are about. What does the company you interned with do? Who are their competitors? What do they well and what do they do poorly? Glean what you can.

Level 3: Formal Corporate Internships

Most of these internships involve working in corporate offices doing accounting, finance, marketing, product research, etc. for large corporations such as Colgate–Palmolive, General Electric, Johnson & Johnson, Microsoft, Procter & Gamble, and Verizon. These internships provide valuable formal training and the chance to see how Fortune 500 companies work—quite interesting considering the amount of administration it takes to run a company with thousands of employees and billions of dollars in sales.

More likely than not though, these internships will either be very specific to one area such as accounting, corporate finance, or marketing a specific product or will be generalist internships which seek to expose you to the whole company. The latter will be interesting and exciting but you will not learn as much or go in depth to the degree you would with a more focused internship. Nonetheless, these are great internships that provide you with a solid brand name on your resume, but you need to learn how to explain that not only did you learn how to be part of a team (albeit the lowest person on the team), but you also learned about how organizations work, how teams work, etc.

Level 4: Start-Ups and Innovative Small Firms

While we have listed this as level 4, it could be lower than level 1 or higher than level 5 (the highest) depending on what you actually do at your internship, what you learn from it, and how you sell it to future employers. Personally, being an entrepreneur and starting four different companies including PrepMe have helped me get every interview under the sun, whether it be a prestigious consulting firm such as McKinsey and Boston Consulting Group (BCG), an investment bank such as Barclays Capital, Citigroup, and UBS, or other opportunities such as Cap Gemini Ernst & Young Legal and SG–2 Healthcare. Not to boast, but I have learned how to spin the entrepreneurship experience and it really comes down to having a story which I will get into towards the end of this really long article.

Working for a start-up can be incredibly rewarding whether you are the entrepreneur starting it or a participant on the team. One can learn a lot about teamwork, strategic management, how to develop an idea into a product, marketing, sales, operations, human resources—you can basically learn everything because a start-up is a microcosm which contains almost all of the aspects of every major business. It's really exciting to see how the same person can be in charge of customer service, marketing, and sales at the same time. On the other hand, if one doesn't step up to the challenge and take on new responsibilities and learn-by-doing, a start-up may provide no value at all. Start-ups don't have formal training programs; rather, one is expected to learn by making mistakes and taking chances.

After such an internship, make sure you can explain to a bigger company why you want that experience as opposed to the flexibility of the start-up experience. Good reasons include: direction, formal training, guidance, stability, structure, etc.

Preparing for Internships in the Business World (Part II)

By **Karan Goel**

Level 5 – Asset Management, Investment Banking and Strategy Consulting

First, here are a few firms that fit into these categories: Ariel Capital Management, Barclays Capital, Bain, Bear Stearns, Booz Allen, Boston Consulting Group, Citadel, Citigroup, CSFB, Goldman Sachs, HSBC, JP Morgan, Lehman Brothers, McKinsey & Co., Morgan Stanley, UBS Warburg, etc. These are the big players that mainly recruit at the nation's top universities, usually offer the highest salaries (unlike start-ups), expect 60–90 hours a week (much like start-ups), and can often lead to full-time jobs and careers.

When you are an intern for most of these companies, they lose money on you. For example, if a strategy consulting firm is paying you \$8,000 for 12 weeks during a summer, they are not making \$8,000 back on your work and this means they are losing money training you. Great opportunity! Take advantage of having someone else pay you to get trained. Most of these companies offer excellent formal training programs and the presence of their name on your resume is always a boost. However, make sure you can explain on paper why your experience has been different than the typical low-level intern who performs menial tasks. Highlight what you learned beyond making PowerPoint presentations at your strategy consulting firm and dumping 10-Ks into Excel at your investment bank.

It is important gain the skills and knowledge of the people you work with, along with the connections you will acquire. Make sure to stay in touch with recruiters, as they can be your saviors or the bane of your existence. When you interview for a new position with one of in your background, make sure you explain that you are genuinely interested in the job—not just how it will look on your resume because they might feel that you are just looking for names to slap on your resume.

Other Opportunities

While everything that exists doesn't necessarily fall into one of the above categories, most college level internships fit somewhere on this list. Experience in one of these industries will play a key role in securing a job after graduation.

Spinning Your Experience

It's crucial to tell a compelling story. The best way to convince an employer that they should employ you is to make it seem like working for them is part of your life story: it's your destiny to work at XYZ Co. For example, John is interviewing for an investment banking internship and this is his story:

"I have always been interested in investing. When I was 12, my mother got me the Stein Roe Young Investor game and I learned about the differences between different types of

investment vehicles. When I was 16, my parents gave me \$2000 to start my own online brokerage account and I invested it in two consumer durables companies and made a 24% return in one year, but then lost all of it next year. I learned a lot from the experience and realized that I needed more than just qualitative analysis to make good investment decisions. When I got to college, I enrolled in accounting and finance in order to understand the meaning behind P/E and EV/EBITDA ratios and various other metrics. I feel like working for _____ (John uses this same story at every place he interviews; he just changes the name and a few small details) because I want to build on my skills and work with intelligent people such as yourselves. I believe the team-oriented atmosphere at _____ (inserts company) will help me learn a lot. I hope that I will be able to add value here because I also value _____ (inserts main values/focus of the place John is interviewing).”

See—it makes sense. John is destined to work at every single investment bank he interviews with. Now, let’s not forget the other important components of qualifying for an internship (beyond the interview):

The Resume

- **GPA (and GPA in major if it’s better than overall GPA)** Note: many prestigious investment banks and strategy consulting firms will not interview anyone with a GPA below 3.5 (so go on—study!)
- **Major and classes taken** List relevant courses such as accounting or database management on your resume
- **Past Work Experience** Tell a story. Explain why you deserve the job and why you are right for the job.
- **Extracurricular Activities** This comes up all the time, but “leadership” experience is nice to have on a resume, no matter how fake or irrelevant it has become since everyone is the president of about five different clubs these days. It’s better to focus on one or two activities to show you are dedicated and not doing things just to list them on a resume.
- **Skills** Are you fluent in other languages? What about computer languages? Are you good with MS Excel and PowerPoint?

Conclusion

So that’s it—make a strong resume, get others to edit it (ask career advisors, human resources people, alumni, parents, etc.), and go rock your interviews. Before you do, though, make sure you have spent time thinking about what you want to do and how you will go about accomplishing it. Setting a path with definite goals can help you a lot. Good luck!

How to Balance Academics and Athletics

By Suzanne Xie

It's 3:00 PM and considering I only got 4 hours of sleep the night before, I was beginning to get annoyed with my tennis practice schedule. As I walked towards the tennis courts, the numerous assignments and papers that were due continuously flashed through my mind. Obviously, a part of me wanted to roll into bed and just catch up on sleep so that I could work well later on that night. My parents had warned me about juggling a sport along with other activities and still trying to keep my grades up.

Aside from this warning, there are awesome aspects to being a part of sport in college. Depending on the person, it may actually help your studies and focus in your work. Personally, playing tennis kept me in shape so that I had more energy to study. It's important to manage your time and energy efficiently, which will be a major asset for the future. Amidst the practices and game schedules, you need to learn how to get work done on bus rides, in short time periods between class and practice or practice and dinner. It's easy to look at the clock and say: "Well, I only have half an hour til practice, that's not enough time for anything." That's the lazy you talking. Any reasonable amount of time is precious and can be used for work or a power-nap (don't underestimate the power of power-naps: 20–30 minutes). It may even be easier to focus in short spans of time rather than sitting down in the library for long, strenuous hours. I find that playing tennis is also a stress-reliever; once I start hitting the ball, I forget about the unfinished work and dirty laundry sitting in my room and can focus on something fun and exciting.

Don't be intimidated by the stricter time commitment of sports—it's just like any other activity that you take on in college and dedicate your time to. Most coaches understand enough when it comes to academic conflicts as well. Plus, you are working with a team of other talented individuals who are committing the same time and also managing their schoolwork. Team bonding is probably one of the most awesome parts of playing a sport. Although joining a sports team may not be for everyone, college is a great time to explore old hobbies and new things, such as sports. Balancing athletics and academics will help to maintain mental, physical and emotional health; so, if you can make a team and enjoy the time you spend on the court, then why not give it a go?

If I Could Do It All Over

By Ben Hiebert

I'm in college now, happily sitting in my dorm room, attending classes, and socializing at the college of my choice. Thinking back on my High School career, there are a few things that I realize now I could have done back then which would have given me a leg up in college.

The first thing that I would have done differently would be to start the whole process

earlier. I began seriously looking at colleges when school started my senior year in early August. The early decision and early action deadlines were less than two months away at that time, and I admit that I was really not ready for them. It was not that I was unable to meet the deadlines—about 2 months was an adequate amount of time for me to get my recommendations and write my essays—it's just that I realize now that I didn't really have a chance to consider all of the colleges that would be interesting for me. I assumed that I wanted a small tech school or a small liberal-arts college, and I began narrowing my choices down from there. But I only considered a few of the absolute top-tier universities, without considering which one was right for my interests. I am interested in creative writing and computer programming, but the colleges that I was looking at didn't focus necessarily on those two areas. I think that with a few phone calls to a few colleges, and with a little more consideration of what I wanted to study and what schools would best provide that for me, I would have provided myself with a better platter of schools to choose from.

In the application process itself, I was generally satisfied with how things went for me. There are two major things that I would do differently if I had to do it over again. First, I would have schmoozed with my counselor a lot more. When the time came for me to request a guidance counselor recommendation, I realized that I didn't know my counselor at all. If I could do it again, I would have gone in to speak with her monthly throughout my junior year for random, insignificant things—for example, I would have asked her if she knew where a scholarship was that I already knew how to find. The point would be not to inconvenience her or myself, but to provide me with an opportunity to chat with her. I didn't really see the point then, but I did as soon as I realized that counselor recommendations are required for some applications. Make friends with your guidance counselor—it pays off big time.

I got wait-listed at a couple of colleges, and, since I received acceptance letters from other colleges at the same time, I really got disinterested in pursuing the other colleges. If I could do that over again, I would have aggressively followed up on the wait-list colleges for sure. I think that I really narrowed my opportunities by letting the wait-listed colleges slide.

Finally, I would have appealed my financial aid letter. It's not that I think it was exceedingly unfair; it's just that, as I later learned, colleges hold out a certain amount of financial aid funds from their general consideration pool just in case there are late applicants or something direly affects a student's financial situation—they still have funds to give that person. However, this doesn't happen that often, at least not in proportion to the amount of funds they set aside for it. This money usually just sits there, unless someone asks for it. If I appealed my financial aid decision, making proper mention of other scholarships that had been offered to me, I believe that I could have easily gotten more money from my college.

Hopefully you heed my advice well and learn from my errors. Good luck with your application process.

If I Could Do It All Over

By Catherine Wong

The greatest piece of advice I can offer about tackling college applications is to spend some quality time researching schools, both before and after applying. If I could change one thing about my experience applying to college, I would be sure to focus less on the actual process of applying and spend more time asking, investigating, and reading about schools. This research can save quite a bit of energy and time. After hearing back from schools and finally faced with deciding on a college, I realized I had applied to a number of schools that I was not even considering going to. The number of hours I spent on the applications for these discarded schools could have been better spent improving my other applications, applying to other schools, or simply enjoying my senior year.

Whereas I dedicated many sleepless nights tinkering with my essays, trying to create the perfect application, I spent no more than a day deciding which schools to apply to. Even worse, I decided on schools based merely on cursory online searches and on reputation. I would suggest spending the end of your junior year and the summer before your senior year, talking with people who are currently at the schools you are considering, investigating programs at these schools, and, if feasible, visiting campuses. Even as early as your junior year, begin asking your parents, your teachers, and your classmates if they know anyone currently attending schools you are considering. You would be amazed at how many people this type of search produces. I have found that current college students who graduated from your own high school (perhaps old friends) and family friends are particularly helpful to talk to because they come from somewhat similar backgrounds and think somewhat similarly. Be more critical of advice and information from people who do not directly attend the school you are looking at.

So you have finally made contact with current students, now what do you ask? Ask them questions about everything and anything—academics, campus life, programs, services, and their general opinion. In retrospect I wish I had asked more practical and less abstract questions, such as, “How often do you go home?,” “What kind of freshman requirements are there?,” or “What is campus housing and dining set up?” Try to ask the same questions to different people. Varied responses give the best foundation of information from which to decide.

I also wish I had asked more questions about specific programs. Because I had very little inkling about what I wanted to study or to do with my life, I did not know which programs to ask about and simply did not ask. Little did I know, my lack of knowledge gave me all the more reason to ask. If you have any interests at all in any subject, ask if the particular school has special programs in that field or if that department is any good. If you are like I was and have no leaning in any direction, ask people about their specialties because that is what they know the best. Ask them if they are involved with any specific programs and what they think about their major. You could also ask if the school is particularly known for any department or program.

It is by far the best to talk with current students about classes and courses, but if you have time you may also want to look at the course bulletin. The course bulletin gives you just as much information about classes and departments as current students have before they specialize. Finally if you can find the time and money, visit campuses. Campus visits are especially telling if you visit when school is in session and if you do not visit during admit weekend.

While the more research you do before choosing schools to apply to the better, many of us just don't have enough time. So how much investigation is necessary? Although I hesitate to name a specific number, I would suggest investigating schools at least until you can narrow down your pool of schools to under 10. Before applying, look into schools enough so that you can say, "If I get in, I would honestly consider attending and I can see myself at this school."

When applications have been completed and submitted, although you should definitely celebrate, you are not done. The most important part of the college application process is ahead of you—deciding on a college. With this decision must come substantial research. My greatest mistake is that I waited until after I heard back from colleges about admission decisions before I seriously starting investigating the schools. There is simply not enough time in the month between when you hear back from schools and when you must send in your decision to make an informed decision.

During your winter break of your senior year start glancing through course bulletins. Begin thinking about specialization and looking more at departments. Consider what classes you would take your freshman year. Be sure to continue talking with current students. Do not be afraid to contact people more than once. This decision is very important and they understand. Finally set aside time to sit down and discuss college with your parents.

All this time spent investigating schools seems exhaustive and somewhat excessive, but it's worth it. During my entire freshman year, I constantly questioned my college decision. "Did I make the right decision?" "Would I be happier somewhere else?" "Is it worth the money to come here?" These questions burned in my mind and made me especially upset at myself for not researching schools enough before I made my decision. Surprisingly, I found that most people I know questioned their college decision some point or another during their freshman year as well. Because of the decision's importance, I think that questioning one's college decision is almost inevitable. Thoroughly looking into colleges before deciding, however, will give you the peace of mind that you did all you could to make the best-informed decision.

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