

Tips for Applicants to Highly Competitive Colleges

It takes more than terrific standardized test scores and outstanding grades to be admitted to a highly competitive college – much more. You’ve taken and done well – very well – in most, if not all of the Advance Placement (A.P.) and accelerated/honors level courses your high school has to offer. You’ve earned high – very high – scores on your SAT I or ACT’s and SAT II’s. What else can you do to enhance your acceptability?

Unfortunately for some, yet fortunately for others, there exist certain uncontrollable factors, which can impact upon your admissibility. These “special” factors include being a legacy (immediate relative of an alumni), member of an underrepresented ethnic group, an international student, or being from a region of the country where students do not apply at a high rate.

For the purposes of this article, I will concentrate on those factors or qualities over which you can exert influence or control, thereby enhancing your marketability and thus increasing your chances of being accepted.

Start Early

Don’t wait until senior or junior year to begin investigating and learning about colleges. Ask questions and talk to parents, teachers, counselors, older siblings, friends and upper classmen about their college experiences. Meet with alumni and college representatives who visit your school. Attend college fairs. Use and peruse the resources and materials available in the guidance office and school library; surf the Internet. Visit some college campuses, both locally and while on vacation. The more informed you are the more comfortable you’ll be with the whole process.

Challenge Yourself Academically

As mentioned earlier, choose to take the most rigorous courses available to you at your school. Admissions officers want to see that you are motivated and willing to challenge yourself by taking an academically demanding schedule of courses. Don’t allow yourself to coast through a less demanding course with the intent of earning a higher grade. Remember schools will factor in a greater weighting for these highly courses, honors and A.P.s. In fact, on most every application from these highly competitive colleges you will be asked, as will your counselor, “What are the highest levels of courses your high school offers in each subject area?” *and* “Which of those courses have you completed?”

Practice and Prepare

The battery of standardized test you will be taking including the PSAT, SAT I, SAT II, ACT, and A.P. exams require preparation. It is not my intent to endorse or promote test prep courses. However, there is clearly evidence to suggest that the more familiar and prepared you are with a particular test, the greater the likelihood that your performance will be enhanced.

Follow Directions

How you fill out your application is almost as important as what you put on it. A neat, organized, concise, accurately spelled and complete application, whether it is sent electronically, typed, or printed, is an absolute must. Be certain all questions are answered, provide all of the information requested and meet, or better yet, beat the deadlines.

Get Involved and Stay Involved

Your extended participation in extra-curricular activities is a must. Hopefully, these activities are in line with your talents and interests thereby giving you a tremendous sense of enjoyment and gratification. You do not want to spend time and energy in any activities which you only hope might look good on paper. Rather, it is certainly an indication of your dedication and initiative to pursue a few activities over three or four years. The *quality* of your participation is much more important (and impressive) than the *quantity* of your activities. Besides, your continued involvement in these activities will only enhance your chances of raising to roles of a leadership level. Thus, being the captain of a team, an officer of an organization or the president or organizer of a particular club or program speaks volumes about your character and commitment.

Write a “Stand Out” Essay

Since stellar test scores and grades are the expectation at the highly competitive institution, your essay is perhaps the single most significant areas where you can shine. It is an opportunity for you to display your character and your intellectual passion as well as highlight your writing skills. It is through your essay that your individual values, sense of who you are, and what you feel and care strongly about can be displayed. So don't homogenize yourself and write what you think the reader wants to hear. Instead, write with conviction and passion for your point of view. You can't go wrong if it comes from the heart.

Choose Your Recommenders Wisely

Most of these schools will ask you for at least two, usually three, and sometimes even for recommendations. Therefore, as with our essay, your recommendations should reflect your attitude and approach toward academics and learning. Hopefully you have cultivated and fostered your relationships with those “key” teachers and your counselor so that they can write about you in an in-depth and personal manner. With your teachers, especially, you will have obviously done well in the course (or courses) and actively participated and contributed to the class. You might also consider a teacher who has known you over the years in another capacity such as a coach of a team or moderator of a club. Once again the emphasis here is being on the depth and quality of the letters not the quantity of them.

Impressive Interview

Either the on-campus or the alumni interview is a great opportunity for you to impress your evaluator in person in an otherwise paper driven process. So even if it is not required, it is good opportunities for you to, once again, display your interest, enthusiasm and initiative by arranging for this interview.

Highlight Accomplishments or Circumstances

If you dealt with and overcame an adverse situation, if you have accomplished an extraordinary achievement, if you have a fascinating job or hobby or you possess any unique talents, you want to be certain that you've conveyed this to the college. It is imperative to work this into your “portfolio” so to speak. Any authentic legitimate event, activity, or life situation that can help you stand out among the other applicants is a plus.

Serve Others

Any and all extended efforts on your part to offer your time, energy and talents to those who display a need for such efforts is certainly a worthwhile activity. Aside from the gratification and satisfaction you experience, you will have benefited others less fortunate and made some significant contribution to your community. This service is an indicator of your willingness to make a difference and eagerness to become involved outside of school.

Certainly a mention of enrolling in college-based summer programs, studying and /or traveling abroad, and possessing scholarship-caliber athletic and musical ability are important. However, when all is said and done and you have successfully addressed each of the aforementioned factors, your acceptance or rejection may still ultimately be affected by the size and quality of the applicant pool and what the institution wants its incoming freshman class to be and look like in that particular year. Therefore, it's important to know and feel that the process is not always fair and consistent, that whether or not the college admits or rejects you is not necessarily a reflection on you or your self-worth. Each college has varying goals that it works to accomplish within its student body from year to year and often students are admitted on the basis of how closely they fit the criteria contained within these goals.

So continue to work hard and strive to be and do your best regardless of the decisions being made about your admissibility. If you are a candidate for admission, you already possess most of the personal qualities necessary in order to be happy, productive and successful in whatever school that is fortunate enough to have you.