Applying to College or University

The Application Process

There are six main components to the college admission folder: the application, the academic record, the test scores, school and teacher recommendations, activities, and the personal factor which is represented by the essay, or the personal interview and sometimes a parent's assessment. During the entire application process, it is vital that you keep all relevant papers together in an easily accessible place. Consider The College Board's Notebook or something similar. Test score reports, application instruction sheets, and information and correspondence from colleges may all be necessary at one point or another. Keep complete and accurate records of everything associated with the application process. Record all deadlines on a calendar and consult it frequently.

The application includes simple biographical information such as name, current address, birth date, and parents' names. More than 350 colleges now accept the Common Application. With this application you need to complete the form once and make photocopies for submission to each college. The College Board's College Handbook lists all colleges that accept this application.

The academic record (or transcript) includes your specific courses and grades received. A class rank, indicating the student's competitiveness in relation to his or her peers, is often included. Most colleges will also monitor 2nd semester senior grades, so don't let down after college acceptance.

The emphasis placed on test scores depends upon the college's policy. Usually, the larger the college, the more important the scores are. But in all cases, test scores form only part of the application profile; poor test scores do not necessarily exclude a student and good scores do not always guarantee admission.

Teacher recommendations discuss classroom performance that is not represented by the grades; the official school recommendation or statement is also an important part of the folder.

Essay Writing Tips

Any essay is an attempt to convince the reader that an idea or opinion is correct. The college application essay should expand on information that the college has received about the student and provide information that does not appear in grades, test scores, and other materials. The student should choose from the list of essay topics, one that will reveal his or her intelligence, talent, sense of humor, enthusiasm, maturity, and creativity, as well as other factors.

Write an individual essay for each college. Make sure you understand the college's topics, directions, and deadlines. Check the catalog for descriptions of the personal qualities the school is looking for and make sure the essay reflects those qualities. For reference, make a list of your civic and school activities, travels, awards, honors, other accomplishments, work experiences, and any academic or personal shortcomings you are trying to overcome. For open-ended essays, develop a one-sentence theme from this list.

Write a first draft and check it for clichés, vagueness, grammatical errors, misspellings, or confusion. Rewrite the essay and check again. Ask someone whose opinion you respect to read the essay for clarity and interest but do not let this person rewrite your essay. Rework the essay yourself, then read it aloud to find rough spots, awkward phrasing, inaccurate usage and/or unnecessary words. Type the essay unless
the college requires a handwritten version, and proofread it carefully. Mail the essay on time.

College Visits

Visiting colleges provides an opportunity to learn about those intangible factors that make each school so different. Prospective students can browse through the bookstore, the student center, the library, the dorms, and the sports facilities. They can eat in a dining hall, read bulletin boards, and talk with students and faculty members. Colleges welcome prospective students, and campus tours are available most of the year, often without any appointment. Most of the larger schools schedule group admissions meetings that give students and parents a chance to ask questions. Tour guides are usually undergraduates, and talking with them can provide important information.

Before visiting, students should call or write the school to find out the tour schedule and to make sure classes are in session—the flavor of a school is very different if there are no students on campus or during summer school when there are fewer students. Many schools will allow a prospective student to spend the night in a dorm, eat in the dining hall, and attend classes if arrangements are made in advance. If the school has no formal arrangement, and you know a student, try to arrange this informally. If you have a special talent or interest and wish to meet with someone who oversees that area, make these arrangements when you call. If possible, avoid scheduling visits during exam weeks or between March 15 and April 15 when Admissions Offices are frantically trying to make decisions on the current high school applicants.

Try not to schedule more than two college visits per day or more than five or six per trip. Impressions will blur and fatigue will make even the most wonderful college pale.

The Interview

A personal interview is the student's opportunity to find out more about the college and to make a favorable impression on those who will review his or her application. However, according to The New York Times, the campus interview has become irrelevant to most students' chances of acceptance. Although many colleges still grant interviews, few require them or use them as a significant part of the evaluation procedure. If you interview well, however, the interviewer's enthusiasm might tip the balance in the school's admission process.

If required, interview appointments must be scheduled in advance (selective colleges are often completely booked by September). Usually, students interview only at those schools to which they plan to apply. Of course, if the student is visiting a college a great distance from home, it makes sense to schedule the interview at the same time as the college visit.

Students should be early for the interview appointment. Fifteen extra minutes allow you to get your bearings and unwind a bit. It is also important to dress appropriately—no socks or too much jewelry can give the wrong impression. Prospective students should dress comfortably but not draw inordinate attention to themselves. Interviews usually last about 45 minutes but sometimes run longer. Afterward, the admissions officer makes a written evaluation which becomes part of the admissions folder.

The student should prepare specific questions in advance about the college's programs, facilities, and any other topic not covered in materials received from school. Broad questions about the college's stand on social issues or its philosophy about career preparation are certainly appropriate. The student should also be prepared to talk about himself or herself and explain why he or she may want to attend this
particular college. After the interview, if there are subsequent questions about the application process or the status of your application, don't hesitate to call or write. Interviewers are always glad to help, and the subsequent contact reminds them of your interest in being admitted to the college.

Most colleges have local alumni representatives who can give interviews and answer questions, overseas as well as in the United States. Alumni interviewers are not paid professionals, but they have a genuine interest in attracting intelligent and worthy young people to their college. When meeting with alumni representatives, the student should ask questions that are analytical rather than descriptive. Remember that the on-campus experience of alumni interviewers may be dated. This interview should be taken as seriously as any other part of the application process.

The Evaluation Process

Once a candidate's folder is complete, it is usually read by at least two staff members and evaluated on a number or letter scale. The admissions committee then makes a preliminary decision. Candidates who are not up to the minimum standards are put in one group and not admitted. The clearly acceptable candidates are placed in another group for admission. The admissions committee then focuses on the third group, either discussing each candidate in turn or dividing into subcommittees to read each folder again. The committee distinguishes between candidates with similar records and recommendations by measuring intangible qualities such as intensity, commitment, awareness, and perceptiveness. This is where a favorable interview may help. They are also looking for creativity, vitality, character, and humor. In some years they may be particularly interested in some special skill or interest, possibly overseas experience. After rank ordering this middle group, the committee fills the available spaces.