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The Secret to a Stress-Free College Process

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Google “college process” and you will come up with more than 650,000 possible links, suggesting that there is no dearth of opinion, advice or analysis these days on the matter of making application to college. This is not even to mention the vast number of cottage industries that have sprung up over time, ranging from standardized test preparation to essay writing workshops to independent counselors. And it seems that not a day goes by when a newspaper, magazine or journal article isn’t written bemoaning the current state of college-going affairs—how complex, inscrutable and competitive it all has become.

Why the Hype?

There is some truth to the college admission process having become more complex and selective. Take, as an example, the acceptance rates of four colleges: Columbia University, the University of Chicago, Washington University in St. Louis and Pomona College in Claremont, California—all known and highly respected institutions. In 1983, their admit rates were:

- Columbia 32%
- Chicago 47%
- Wash U. 83%
- Pomona 49%

Why 1983? If you are a parent of a current high school student, you probably graduated from college in about 1986-1989. This, roughly, was your competitive reality when you applied.

Last year, 2016, the acceptance rates were:

- Columbia 6%
- Chicago 7.6%
- Wash U. 16.2%
- Pomona 9.2%

These are comparative figures sure to make for parental panic. And these institutions are not alone. I could cite similar increases in selectivity at numerous colleges without, I would argue, much change to institutional quality or culture. (Increased selectivity does not necessarily make a college better.)

What are the reasons for this phenomenal shift? There are many culprits, not the least of which is the extraordinary effort of many colleges to pander to the annual college ranking that appears in *U.S. News & World Report*. Colleges drum up applications like crazy. Even the most selective institutions purchase upwards of 100,000 names from the student search services of the College Board (home of the SAT) and American College Testing (ACT) programs in order to launch sophisticated direct-outreach campaigns using the ease of electronic communication. And no corner of the globe goes untouched, judging by the increase in the number of international students enrolling in American colleges and universities. The more candidates a college has, the more selective it can be; the more selective it is, the better its ranking.

Many colleges have also taken to admitting a higher percentage of their entering classes via binding early decision, guaranteeing a 100 percent yield (the percentage of students offered admission who enroll) on anywhere from 40-50 percent of the class. This has the effect of driving down admit rates and driving up overall yield, two measurements of success for a college admissions office. The practice is tantamount to an admissions “steroid” in that it artificially enhances performance. These activities and others create an aura of hyper-selectivity, increasing nervousness among students and causing them to file greater numbers of applications, which in turn makes matters worse. Small wonder that students and parents approach the college process with dread—stressed, anxious and fearful.

Take the Reins

I’ve painted a dark picture of the college admissions landscape. It’s time for me to brighten it.

The process of applying to college is about a great many things, quite apart from where one goes after high school graduation. It is about figuring out what you value, what you want and who you would like your college classmates to be over the next four years. It is about taking responsibility for something important and it’s about making intelligent and informed decisions for yourself. And it also affords students a not-to-be-missed, golden opportunity, one that does not come along often in life. Right when they are on the brink of full maturity and freedom, unfettered by obligations, unencumbered by real world problems, they have the chance to take stock—in essence, to ask themselves where they have been for the last 17 years, and now, where do they want to go and who do they want to be.

This should be a wonderful time of self-reflection, self-examination and self-efficacy—the chance to take the reins of one’s life in an active way ought to be thrilling and energizing. All too often, however, students become paralyzed by fear over outcomes, and they fall prey to the fallacious belief that there is only one college or one group of colleges that can guarantee success and fulfillment. They create a mythical perfect place, the only place where they can be happy. Nothing can be further from the truth.

The Right Place for You

Frank Bruni’s *Where You Go Is Not Who You’ll Be* offers ample evidence that most students can find themselves ideally suited, challenged and prepared for the next stage of their lives in any of a number of different college settings. As I have suggested, there is an unfortunate tendency to equate selectivity with quality, to assume that a college’s rank on whatever scale is meaningful and to blindly follow the crowd. In the current admissions climate, this can be a fatal mistake. How do you avoid it?

I would argue that the most important task in the college process is to make an intelligent, balanced and realistic list of colleges to which to apply, one that fits a student’s needs and wants academically, socially and culturally *and* varies in degree of selectivity. This is not as hard as I might have led you to believe at the start. Of the nearly 3,800 colleges and universities in the College Board’s *BigFuture* search engine, only 61 admit fewer than 25 percent of their candidates. There are hundreds of wonderful post-secondary institutions all across the country, with terrific faculties and facilities that are not nearly so hard to get into as those whose names we hear over and over.

Students and parents alike must resist the temptation to use admissions selectivity as a proxy for prestige and educational quality. If they don’t, when the process is over they will end up, in the words of Julie Lythcott-Haims in her fabulous book, *How to Raise an Adult*, “exhausted, dejected and feeling like failures ... when instead (students) should be incredibly excited about this next phase of their lives.”

My Suggestions for Your College List

Students should start by creating five to ten *anchors*—characteristics or considerations that are so important to them that all the colleges on their list should share them. Some are obvious: what they want to study, the size

of school in which they will thrive, its setting (urban, rural, suburban), its cost and its geographic location. Other factors are less obvious, but not less important: where they want to dedicate their extracurricular energies (sports, music, art, service), what they do for fun (ski, shop, hear live music, explore museums, hike); the social culture and ethos they would most enjoy (spirited athletics, intellectual engagement, artistic pursuits, political activism, fraternities and sororities); and the academic ambience (how demanding or structured the curriculum might be or the nature and number of assessments). These are but a few of the variables they might consider.

They should stake out a hypothesis based on what they know and their experiences to date and then test it out by investigating thoroughly the colleges that match the model their anchors have established. Let's say, for example, that a student decides that she wants a small liberal arts college in a rural or suburban setting located anywhere across the country, where she can study Romance languages, play soccer at the less competitive Division III level and experience a more liberal campus ethos. Some highly selective colleges like Amherst, Middlebury and Pomona come to mind, but so should Hamilton and Skidmore, Sewanee and Kenyon, Occidental and Grinnell, all a bit gentler on the selectivity scale, but sharing the same institutional DNA. Now we have a competitively balanced list of colleges to research and explore.

To do this, students should read the overviews in college guidebooks and investigate the college websites, first by requesting college-generated literature, and then by scrolling through to see if, in fact, the college has what they are looking for: How broad are the language offerings? Do I have a chance to play on the soccer team? What does the student newspaper reveal about important campus issues? They should read what is sent to them, talk with anyone they might know associated with the college (current students, alumni, faculty, coaches) and, finally, there is no better way for students to have their instincts tell them if the college is a good fit than by visiting the campus.

Visiting Colleges

There is some wisdom to visiting when the college is in session, but this is not always practical, so I am a proponent of visiting when students can. I also encourage them to engage in five activities when they are there:

- Take an official tour that usually originates in the admissions office (schedules can be found online). An undergraduate usually leads the tour, so students have the chance to ask questions of a peer who is enrolled. They should make certain to sign in, to register that they've been there.
- Sit in on the Group Information Session, a general presentation given by an admissions officer that will usually precede or follow the tour. Again, ask questions that help fine-tune one's understanding of the place.
- Sit in a public place (lounge, quad, dining hall) and observe the student interactions.
- Explore interests that are particular to them. Athletes should try speaking to a coach; artists might check out the studio space; musicians, perhaps visit the concert hall and seek out the orchestra conductor.
- Get off campus to explore the neighborhood of an urban college or the community of a rural/suburban setting to see what is available to students close by.

A productive college visit usually takes at least half a day. Trying to cram too much into a week of visiting becomes overwhelming and confusing.

Listen to Your Counselor

If everything a student reads and hears about a college is appealing, and if a visit confirms the impression, then the college belongs on the final list. On the competitive spectrum, college lists usually have three categories: Reach (chances for admission are about the institutional admit rate), Target (50-50) and Secure (75 percent or better).

Forecasting outcomes has become a very tricky business, even for experts, and it is nearly impossible for most students and parents. This is where a counselor comes in. Students and parents should listen to the advice they are given about what constitutes competitive balance; be open to suggestions of colleges they might not have heard of; and, above all, trust that their counselor has their best interests at heart. In the end, your counselor is going to want you to have choice—a number of offers of admission from which to choose. That is how we measure success.

The Secret

So, what is the secret to a stress-free college process? It's this: **Love Your List**. Work diligently and carefully to create it. Embrace every college on

it. Convince yourself that if you are applying to ten colleges, you have ten first choices. This is a mind game, of course. But the goal should be to get to a place where you can look at your list in March of senior year and say to yourself, “You know, I have some preferences, but it almost doesn’t matter where I get in, because wherever I go, I am going to be happy and challenged, well-served and prepared to be successful for myself when I graduate.”

Anyone who adopts this frame of mind will have the best college process of all.

Suggested Reading

Bruni, Frank. *Where You Go Is Not Who You’ll Be: An Antidote to the College Admissions Mania*. New York, NY, Grand Central Publishing, 2016.

Delbanco, Andrew. *College: What It Was, Is, and Should Be*. Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 2015.

Deresiewicz, William. *Excellent Sheep: The Miseducation of the American Elite and the Way to a Meaningful Life*. New York, Free Press, 2015.

Lythcott-Haims, Julie. *How to Raise an Adult: Break Free of the Overparenting Trap and Prepare Your Kid for Success*. New York, Saint Martin’s Griffin, 2016.

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