



COLLEGE ADMISSION'S NEW REALITY

IT HAS BECOME ALL TOO CLEAR that we have entered an era of radically increased college entrance difficulty. For the first time, Ivy League schools are taking fewer than 10 percent of their applicants (Yale accepted 9.9 percent this past year and Harvard accepted 9.8 in 2003). That means in the not so distant future, it will be statistically improbable for most students to be admitted to one of these colleges. While top students still can apply to these schools, they too need to consider viable alternatives that will meet their needs not just as students but also as individuals. They must, at a minimum, demonstrate the tangible results of college preparation: good grades, high test scores and strong extracurricular activities. But the score-oriented, quantitative approach to admissions, prevalent in the last decades, needs to be replaced with a more strategic approach to gaining admission to quality schools.

New Approach Required

This strategic approach utilizes a student's good grades and test scores, but goes well beyond to identify and communicate each student's unique profile to college admissions officers. It focuses on each student's distinct qualifications but within a particular college's applicant pool. And it means preparing and delivering college applications that capture each student's unique qualifications.

Good colleges have always wanted diverse student bodies with intellectually curious students (and base their selections on proven academic abilities and intellectual track records, special abilities, including arts and athletics, as well as socio-economic background and legacy status).

Strategic matching or "positioning" is a focused process that unites each student's core values, goals and unique attributes, while at the same time considering what specific colleges need, but aren't getting. (For example, take Stanford where science, engineering and pre-professional type students abound, there's a need for writers, musicians and fine artists). It considers the strengths and weaknesses of the competition in the applicant pool. "Positioning" aligns a student with the stated needs of the college by delivering an application that matches the college's *unmet* needs with what a particular student offers the college.

How is strategic matching different from traditional education consulting? The approach is more data intensive. Counselors track quantitative data such as admit rates, test scores, geographic and minority representation as well as conduct qualitative interviews with current students, administrators and experts to determine the current "unmet" needs of a particular college to get a clearer picture of each institution in a given year.



Students are individuals. But, unfortunately, colleges can't admit everyone who looks worthy. Students have to communicate what it is about them that will be of possible value to a specific college. This means managing effectively not just "hard" data—grades and test scores, but taking time to cultivate depth in particular "soft" area such as a hobby or activity outside of class. Say, for example, that a high school junior volunteers in community soup kitchen and also has penchant for designing and building architectural-model houses. It would be best to begin to unify the disparate and unrelated activities into one symbol, such as the creation of actual homes in the community for low-income residents.

So after articulating what type of skills and education a student needs to reach his or her life's goals, it is necessary to determine which colleges and universities can advance those goals. What are the likely matches? Then students must highlight their strengths on each application for an admissions committee. This includes illustrating talents while neither overselling nor underselling themselves. This often requires a focus on the development of special talents such as music and art or leadership.

Ten Strategic Steps

Here are just a few of the essential steps in this strategic process:

1. Interviews to help define the image of the student; working with the student, parents, coaches, teachers and others we define the student's personality and attributes.
2. Unique identity development process that focuses on the student's vision, values and desired goals. For example, "create something new through science" or to "change our political system to improve people's lives", "make a difference in my community" or "live a comfortable and happy life."
3. Identifying colleges that fit the values of a student and provide the support that the student needs academically to achieve life's vision and goals. This requires performing data analysis. A college needs assessment identifies any potential weaknesses or needs that are not being met by existing applicants; psychographic profiling of current applicant pool; admissions data tracking over 10-year period; outcomes-based assessments of colleges including but not limited to Ph.D. productivity, jobs, graduate school admission rates and qualitative interviews with current students, administrators, alums and experts on particular colleges.
4. Collecting and examining all extra-curricular activities and classifying them in order of importance for getting into one of the selected colleges. For example, athletics, leadership, art or music talents, intellectual projects (research papers and science experiments), community service, academic awards and honors.
5. Advising students on how to use these activities to tell a story about themselves that is unique and will appeal to the unmet needs of each college.
6. Advising students about specific scholarships and research projects as part of the extracurricular mix to signal to colleges that a student is better prepared than other applicants.
7. Identifying and highlighting special talents such as sports or music or storytelling. Making sure that the student "proves" this ability is the key to showcasing these abilities.
8. Developing a market position for the student that is based on his or her general "comparative advantage" versus other students, and based generally on what colleges are looking for, but not getting. Then making sure the application supports the positioning.



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9. Offering a college interview prep, so students are natural and stay "on theme" with their main arguments reflecting their strengths.

10. Writing a letter to those writing recommendations that highlights the student's strengths, key skills and "proof points." Then the recommendations support this theme in their letters to the college. This approach helps concentrate the theme and supports the application overall by adding a consistency to the message about the student.

With a strategic focusing, admissions officers quickly get a picture of who the applicant is, even if it doesn't tell the whole story. And in an age when there are so many applications for admissions offices to read, it helps an individual student stand out.

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