

Some Hints on the Selective College Admissions Process from CollegeSmiths

“The Odds:” We strongly encourage you to reach for the dream school and other similar ones, but regardless of how good you are, the chances of acceptance, especially to any particular college, are not great. For example, Harvard accepts 1 of every 14 applicants and 12 or 13 are qualified in every way, so 11 or 12 well qualified people are not accepted. At the other Ivys and most selective schools, those numbers are slightly smaller but still in the 1:8 or 1:10 range.

The Next Tiers: Unfortunately, backup schools are still very competitive. In fact, students are occasionally accepted at an ‘Ivy’ and turned down at Oberlin, Duke, Chicago, UNC, UVA, Northwestern, Washington U, etc. School’s selectivity and patterns vary from year to year.

A “Real” Backup Plan: Apply to the dream school(s), but you must have a truly safe school where you will be happy. Make sure a knowledgeable person agrees with your assessment of “safe.”

“Your Pool:” Some think colleges are looking for “well-rounded, great students.” In fact, they are looking for well-rounded classes of students who are great in some way and meet one or more of their needs. Thus, recruited athletes, musicians, artists, leaders and others with great talents might be accepted ahead of those with better grades, test scores, or overall abilities. These students still have to “pass muster” with the admissions office, but that is more of a reverse thinking kind of process, in which they are looking to accept them unless there is a reason not to. The key is you must be near the top of your pool, whatever that is, as they are only going to take so many students like you.

A “Level Playing Field:” Since nearly every applicant has assistance from a knowledgeable person, usually a counselor in a private school, a strong public school (like Granville) or a private counselor, you must make sure you utilize the help available. It must still be your own work but reviewed by someone who knows the process and the specifics at that college. We have over 50 years experience and stay very current, but we still verify specifics for every college to which a student applies. Your counselors work very hard at college counseling and do the same.

What “They” Say: You must be very careful about listening to the many “myths” perpetuated by well-meaning students, parents, neighbors, teachers, etc. who are not up-to-date with their information. We’ve even seen bad information passed from young admissions representatives misinterpreting questions (answering something different) or simply not stating their answer precisely enough. You need to rely on written information from their website or an email from the admissions office.

Tests: There is a lot of incorrect information about tests, so please be careful. For example, we know of NO college in the U.S which will not accept either ACT or SAT equally, but there are many other “opinions” about this. Colleges will also accept your best score on either. Some will even “superscore” (using scores from various sections on different dates). They are not required to do so, and more do this for SAT, but more are doing so for both. Some selective colleges ask for all your scores, but most allow you choose which to send. AP/IB scores do not substitute, but good ones (5’s and sometimes 4’s) can help support you.

SAT Subject Tests: Perhaps, most confusing is which Subject Tests to take and send. Again, if you know one college's requirements...you know one college's requirements. Most common is "any 2 tests," but some schools require 3 and some specify which tests. Increasingly common is the statement either ACT with Writing or SAT and 2 Subject Tests; do the research and be certain. Subject Tests use the same test dates as the regular SAT, so you have to choose which you will do on any given date. Most colleges want your scores by December, but occasionally they will allow later Subject Test reporting. Again, check to be sure. If it says "recommended," it usually means required IF you want a good chance of getting in. "Optional" can mean optional if every other criteria is in good shape, but ask.

The Common Application: Most (but not all) use this form. Some use a mix of it and their own; others use it exclusively. (See list at commonapp.org). The trick here is making your application "UN-Common" in this generic format. Your well-done resume can be added to "beef up" the boring list of activities. We recommend resumes based on qualities you present, not the equally boring conventional resume, although opinions vary on this. We especially recommend very well-written essays, again with a clever approach. There are many opinions on what to write about (or not). We recommend YOU (as you have been), YOU (as you will be in college and beyond) and the U (what you will do for them). We have many ideas about what works best in these essays. Remember it is not just a story, but a college essay about YOU! Obey the word limits. Each college's Common App Supplement is the most important piece. Answer the questions! You can send additional material if important to "target market" yourself to each individual school, which the Common App doesn't do well.

FAFSA and CSS Profile: Many colleges require both. The Profile is their way of being "nosier" about the total family resources available for your education. The good news is that selective colleges have large endowments and usually much better Financial Aid packages, with aid even for middle class families and often without loans in the package.

"Fit:" The most important word in college admissions is fit. You must show how you will be an asset to the campus. They are also interested in how much contact you have had with them either by visiting or attending their sessions locally - attend and introduce yourself. Most students benefit from interviews, (even locally with alumni), but prepare for those interviews

When: Early is the best answer: Early Decision IF you are ready to commit if accepted; Early Action is great if available, as you usually have increased chances and you get earlier responses; A just plain early Regular Application (as soon as your application is great, but hopefully by Nov.) is fine as well.

Recommendations: Again, pay attention to what documents are requested but usually a counselor and a teacher. You can do more, but be careful of going overboard with this. Make sure it's someone with a significant, "other" viewpoint. Letters from important people (who barely know you) are usually not great recommendations unless they are VERY influential at that school. Be sure to work closely with the writers, so they know how you are presenting yourself and can support you. Giving them a great, quality-based resume helps.