Early Decision & Early Action

The benefits and drawbacks of applying early

Early decision (ED) and early action (EA) plans can be beneficial to students — but only to those who have thought through their college options carefully and have a clear preference for one institution.

Early decision versus early action

Early decision plans are binding — a student who is accepted as an ED applicant must attend the college. Early action plans are nonbinding — students receive an early response to their application but do not have to commit to the college until the normal reply date of May 1. Counselors need to make sure that students understand this key distinction between the two plans.

Approximately 450 colleges have early decision or early action plans, and some have both. Some colleges offer a nonbinding option called single-choice early action, under which applicants may not apply ED or EA to any other college.

ED plans have come under fire as unfair to students from families with low incomes, since they do not have the opportunity to compare financial aid offers. This may give an unfair advantage to applicants from families who have more financial resources.

ED applicants

- Apply early (usually in November) to first-choice college.
- Receive an admission decision from the college well in advance of the usual notification date (usually by December).
- Agree to attend the college if accepted and offered a financial aid package that is considered adequate by the family.
- Apply to only one college early decision.
- Apply to other colleges under regular admission plans.
- Withdraw all other applications if accepted by ED.
- Send a nonrefundable deposit well in advance of May 1.

EA applicants

- Apply early.
- Receive an admission decision early in the admission cycle (usually in January or February).
- Consider acceptance offer; do not have to commit upon receipt.
- Apply to other colleges under regular admission plans.
- Give the college a decision no later than the May 1 national response date.
Who should apply early?

Applying to an ED or EA plan is most appropriate for a student who:

- Has researched colleges extensively.
- Is absolutely sure that the college is the first choice.
- Has found a college that is a strong match academically, socially and geographically.
- Meets or exceeds the admission profile for the college for SAT® scores, GPA and class rank.
- Has an academic record that has been consistently solid over time.

Applying to an ED or EA plan is not appropriate for a student who:

- Has not thoroughly researched colleges.
- Is applying early just to avoid stress and paperwork.
- Is not fully committed to attending the college.
- Is applying early only because friends are.
- Needs a strong senior fall semester to bring grades up.

Encourage students who want to apply early to fill out NACAC's Early Decision Self-Evaluation Questionnaire, in the Deciding About Early Decision and Early Action handout. You may want to share this with parents as well.

The benefits of applying early

For a student who has a definite first-choice college, applying early has many benefits besides possibly increasing the chance of getting in. Applying early lets the student:

- Reduce stress by cutting the time spent waiting for a decision.
- Save the time and expense of submitting multiple applications.
- Gain more time, once accepted, to look for housing and otherwise prepare for college.
- Reassess options and apply elsewhere if not accepted.

The drawbacks of applying early

Pressure to decide: Committing to one college puts pressure on students to make serious decisions before they've explored all their options.

Reduced financial aid opportunities: Students who apply under ED plans receive offers of admission and financial aid simultaneously and so will not be able to compare financial aid offers from other colleges. For students who absolutely need financial aid, applying early may be a risky option.

Time crunch for other applications: Most colleges do not notify ED and EA applicants of admission until December 15. Because of the usual deadlines for applications, this means that if a student is rejected by the ED college, there are only two weeks left to send in other
applications. Encourage those of your students who are applying early to prepare other applications as they wait to receive admission decisions from their first-choice college.

**Senioritis**: Applicants who learn early that they have been accepted into a college may feel that, their goal accomplished, they have no reason to work hard for the rest of the year. Early-applying students should know that colleges may rescind offers of admission should their senior-year grades drop.

Students and parents can use our [Pros and Cons of Applying to College Early](https://professionals.collegeboard.com/guidance/applications/early), in the Deciding About Early Decision and Early Action handout, to weigh their options.

**Does applying early increase the chance of acceptance?**

Many students believe applying early means competing with fewer applicants and increasing their chances for acceptance. This is not always true. Colleges vary in the proportion of the class admitted early and in the percentage of early applicants they admit.

Higher admission rates for ED applicants may correlate to stronger profiles among candidates choosing ED. Students should ask the admission office whether their institution's admission standards differ between ED and regular applicants, and then assess whether applying early makes sense given their own profile.

**The ethics of applying early decision**

The Common Application and some colleges' application forms require the student applying under early decision, as well as the parent and counselor, to sign an ED agreement form spelling out the plan's conditions.

Make it clear in your school handbook and at college planning events that your policy for early-decision applications is to send the student's final transcript to one college only: anything else is unethical.

**Keep in mind**

- ED and EA program specifics vary, so students should get information as soon as possible directly from the admission staff at their first-choice college.
- ED and EA applicants must take the October SAT or SAT Subject Tests™ in order for these scores to make it to the college in time.

Print out and share the Early Decision and Early Action Calendar with students and parents to be sure they are aware of all the required steps for applying early.

ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES OF EARLY APPLICATIONS

There are advantages and disadvantages for applying through an early application program. In some cases they apply both to Early Action and Early Decision; in other cases they apply to just one.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ADVANTAGES</th>
<th>DISADVANTAGES</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. For both Early Action and Early Decision programs, often there are higher acceptance rates compared with regular admission rates.</td>
<td>1. There is no guarantee of acceptance for early applications.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. You find out much earlier whether or not you have been accepted to a school. You don’t have to wait until March or April to get your college admissions results.</td>
<td>2. If you are deferred in an early application program, the chances of acceptance during regular admission are not high, but aren’t much worse than regular admission.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. If you are accepted to a college, the rest of your senior year is often more relaxed and enjoyable.</td>
<td>3. Early rejection or deferral is difficult for many students to deal with.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Applying early potentially shortens the admissions process and eliminates the necessity for filling out multiple applications and writing a number of essays. Usually, you spend less time and money on multiple applications.</td>
<td>4. A few students develop “senioritis” when they know that they have been admitted to a school early. This can be dangerous because slacking off during second semester might lead to lower grades and the possibility of having your college admission rescinded at the end of the school year.</td>
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<tr>
<td>If you apply early and don’t get accepted, you can probably adapt some of the essays you wrote for the early application to new ones.</td>
<td>5. Your first choice college in November may not be your first choice later in the spring.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Applying early is a strong indication of your interest in a college. It is a form of demonstrated interest.</td>
<td>6. If you are rejected or deferred, unless you have planned ahead for this, you may end up scrambling to get applications out during Christmas vacation.</td>
</tr>
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<td>6. Even negative outcomes from early applications are useful. Among other things, you might decide to apply to less selective colleges, and identify and rectify weaknesses in your application.</td>
<td>7. You might not be ready to make a commitment to one school in the fall.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Applying early can help in clarify your thinking about what you want in a college.</td>
<td>8. Early Decision admits can’t compare financial aid offers from a number of schools.</td>
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</table>
So where does this leave you? Well, it depends. If you have a first-choice college and satisfy the criteria for ED or EA we have noted, you may want to seriously think about applying early. If you would be a competitive applicant, there are clear advantages to doing so. But please remember what we said about the downside of early applications: don’t let your enthusiasm for a college let you succumb to early acceptance syndrome—the belief that there is one, and only one, college where you can truly be happy. That is rarely, if ever, the case.

Is Early Decision Right for You?

☐ I have a clear first-choice college and am completely confident that it is a very good fit for me.

☐ I have done careful research about the college that supports my choice, including most of the following: visited in-person or on the web; studied the catalog, view book, and other material in detail; reviewed the college’s profile in a big college guide; and talked with current or former students in person, through online chat, or e-mail.

☐ I will probably be comfortable with the financial aid that is offered to me and won’t have to compare financial aid offers.

☐ My grades from first-semester senior year will not be significantly better than the rest of my record, and my first-quarter grades will be consistent or better than my previous work.

☐ I will have taken my standardized tests by October so that the scores will reach my early decision college in time for early review.

☐ My overall record places me within the admissible range for this college.

☐ I will be able to prepare and submit my application by the ED deadline, including letters of recommendation from my teachers and counselor.

☐ I know that ED candidates appear to get a boost in acceptance from this college.

☐ I would like to know for sure where I will be going to college as early as possible.

☐ I will do careful research on the rest of my college list and prepare applications to them in case I am deferred or denied in early decision.

☐ Although my early decision college is my clear first choice, I realize that I may not be accepted, and I know I will also be very happy and get a fine education at other colleges.
Demonstrated Interest

The majority of colleges use demonstrated interest as part of their admissions process according to a NACAC report entitled "The State of College Admissions 2006.

So what is demonstrated interest? Demonstrated interest refers to an applicant taking the initiative to reach out to a college—such as visiting campus or contacting the admissions office with questions.

Demonstrated interest may be especially important if your mentee has been placed on the wait list or deferred. Make sure the college gets any new information—did your mentee recently improve his/her GPA or win an award? Also encourage your mentee to call or write to reiterate his/her interest in attending.

Demonstrated interest also comes into play for applicants who require financial aid or candidates who are on the admission bubble.

Why would the admission officers care about demonstrated interest? For one thing, they want to admit students who are excited about going to their school. A cynic might also note that admitting interested students leads to a higher yield (a higher rate of enrollment among admitted students) which can in turn help improve a college's ranking and perceived popularity. As a general rule, the most selective institutions will care less about demonstrated interest—although some care very much! Less selective schools, or schools that are viewed as safety schools, are much more concerned with yield and tend to be very concerned with the how much interest an applicant has shown in their school—especially if an applicant is applying for financial aid.

Advice: As a result, make sure your mentees turn in all “optional essays,” complete “optional interviews,” and sign up for all the mailing lists at the schools that they are applying to—especially their safety schools!
Factors in the Admission Decision

Your high school grades are the #1 factor in the college admission decision.

Other factors count, but the body of work you develop in high school is what matters most—as it should.

Colleges do not choose students by the numbers only—they don’t simply take the students with the highest grades and test scores. Colleges use many other factors to add depth to the numbers, and to compare applicants with each other to build a class that fits the college’s mission. Students who meet or exceed the threshold for admission are, at selective colleges, evaluated based on all of the attributes they bring to campus, including special talents, academic interests, and personal characteristics. Here's a breakdown of what colleges take into account:

Percentage of colleges attributing different levels of importance to factors in the admission decision: 2011

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor</th>
<th>Considerable importance</th>
<th>Moderate importance</th>
<th>Limited importance</th>
<th>No importance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Grades in college prep courses</td>
<td>84.3%</td>
<td>11.9%</td>
<td>2.3%</td>
<td>1.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strength of curriculum</td>
<td>67.7</td>
<td>20.4</td>
<td>5.8</td>
<td>6.2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Admission test scores (SAT, ACT)</td>
<td>59.2</td>
<td>29.6</td>
<td>6.9</td>
<td>4.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grades in all courses</td>
<td>51.9</td>
<td>39.2</td>
<td>6.9</td>
<td>1.9</td>
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<tr>
<td>Essay or writing sample</td>
<td>24.9</td>
<td>37.5</td>
<td>17.2</td>
<td>20.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student's demonstrated interest</td>
<td>20.5</td>
<td>29.7</td>
<td>24.7</td>
<td>25.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Counselor recommendation</td>
<td>19.2</td>
<td>39.8</td>
<td>27.2</td>
<td>13.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class Rank</td>
<td>18.8</td>
<td>31.0</td>
<td>31.4</td>
<td>18.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher recommendation</td>
<td>16.5</td>
<td>41.9</td>
<td>26.5</td>
<td>15.0</td>
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<tr>
<td>Subject test scores (AP, IB)</td>
<td>6.9</td>
<td>31.2</td>
<td>31.5</td>
<td>30.4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Portfolio</td>
<td>6.6</td>
<td>12.8</td>
<td>30.2</td>
<td>50.4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Interview</td>
<td>6.2</td>
<td>25.4</td>
<td>25.8</td>
<td>42.7</td>
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<tr>
<td>SAT II scores</td>
<td>5.4</td>
<td>9.7</td>
<td>22.6</td>
<td>62.3</td>
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<tr>
<td>Extracurricular activities</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>43.1</td>
<td>38.1</td>
<td>13.8</td>
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<tr>
<td>State graduation exam</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>14.9</td>
<td>23.8</td>
<td>57.1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Work</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>17.0</td>
<td>43.2</td>
<td>37.5</td>
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http://www.nacacnet.org/studentinfo/articles/Pages/Factors-in-the-Admission-Decision.aspx
Additional Factors

While colleges, on average, pay attention to the same types of factors, some colleges pay more attention to some factors than others.

- **Small colleges**—Have a more “holistic” application review process, meaning they pay more attention to all of the facets of your application.
- **Large colleges**—Have a more “mechanical” application review process, meaning numbers (GPA, test scores) play a significant role in determining your initial qualification. In the case of open-admission or near-open admission colleges, that may be the extent of the process. At more selective large colleges, the initial qualification may be followed by a more holistic review of qualified applicants.
- **Selective colleges**—Both large and small selective colleges (meaning that the colleges accept fewer than half of students who apply) have a more “holistic” application review process.

**College Size**

**Grades and GPAs**

About two-thirds of high schools weight their GPAs for students who take college preparatory courses. To account for different grading scales among high schools, more than half of colleges *recalculate* applicants’ GPAs to standardize them.

**Class Rank**

Nearly one-third of high schools do not report class rank information to colleges. Accordingly, colleges have de-emphasized class rank as a factor in the admission decision over the past decade.

Do colleges take extra steps to catch cheating or plagiarism on essays? Many colleges that require essays will scrutinize essays that they believe have been forged, borrowed, or heavily edited or influenced by someone other than the applicant. In fact, some colleges have instituted their own verification processes, while others have contracted with businesses that double check essays for plagiarism. Given that many colleges view the essay as an indicator of a student’s interest in attending, it does not pay to have someone else write your essay.

**Essays**

In order to shape their classes, colleges may consider other factors for admission, including a student’s geographic location (especially for public universities), whether a student is the first in their family to go to college (for access purposes), a student’s race or ethnicity (for diversity purposes), a student’s relation to alumni (for the purposes of development and community-sustenance), and gender (for purposes of reflecting the population).

**Other Factors that Colleges May Consider**

Colleges are more likely to rely on standardized test scores (ACT, SAT) for homeschooled students than for students from high schools, due to the lack of consistency across homeschooling environments.

**Homeschooled Students**
How Hooks Influence Your College Acceptance

By Peterson's Staff updated on Wednesday, January 30, 2013

A hook, in admission parlance, is any advantage that makes you attractive to a particular college. This varies from school to school and from year to year. You may try to hide your hooks, preferring to be admitted on only your merit, or you may choose to fight furiously to exploit even your most inconsequential connections.

How hooks impact college acceptance

Having a hook can give you a higher rating from the get-go or even move your application from the deny pile into the admit (or waitlist) stack. They most often come into play when admission officers are judging equally qualified candidates. If a college has to select one of two students who look the same on paper and one is the child of an alumnus and the other is not, the child of the alumnus is probably going to be the one decorating a dorm room in the fall.

However, connections aren't everything, especially if you don't have the grades. In most cases, your connections won't be enough to overcome a poor academic record. One college even turned down its own president's son!

What hooks are important in the admission decision?

Wondering what hooks are most revered among admission officers? It varies, but some are pretty universal.

Alumni connections
Don't assume that you're a shoo-in just because your mom or dad went to your dream school, but you can expect that your folder will be reviewed very carefully. If you're denied for any reason, the decision will be painful for the college.

Athletics
Playing a sport can give you an excellent boost come admissions decision time. If you're a superstar you can earn a full scholarship, but even a less exceptional track record can up the odds for your college acceptance. However, some students (and parents) overestimate the weight that athletic ability carries in the admission process and expect an athletic scholarship to be their financial saving grace. Don't assume you're getting an award until you get one.

Ethnicity
Colleges normally give you the option of describing yourself as a member of one or more of these groups: American Indian or Alaskan Native; Black or African-American; Mexican-American or Chicano; Puerto Rican; Other Hispanic-American or Latin American; Asian American or Pacific Islander; or multiracial.
Many colleges aggressively recruit students from underrepresented minority populations, and financial aid opportunities are great. Most admission offices have a counselor who is in charge of this effort, and this person can serve as a good source of information as well as an advocate in the admission decision process.

**Talent in the arts**
If you're a painter, poet, musician, or perhaps a dancer, you can really make your application stand out — unless you're applying to a specialty school in the arts. In that case, your talent must compete against the talent of all the other applicants. However, if you're applying to a more generalized institution, being an artist may balance any weaknesses in your application and may improve your chances of receiving a college admission letter.

**Geography**
At a public college or university, being an in-state resident is obviously a hook. At many institutions, coming from an underrepresented region can also be an advantage. Southeastern colleges love to see North Dakota and Montana zip codes on applications, while Southwestern schools welcome candidates from Vermont and Maine.

Some high schools are known as "feeder schools," meaning that many students from that school typically apply and many may receive college admission letters. In such cases, your guidance counselor will be familiar with the college in question and can help predict how you may stack up.

The invisible hook
The admissions decision is not always clear. One reason that one student gets admitted to a particular college while a similar-seeming applicant does not can be due to a fuzzy factor known as "institutional needs." These needs are likely to vary from college to college, and from year to year, and could relate to a host of factors — academic, athletic, or otherwise. Ultimately, the best way to prepare for this invisible hook is to apply to colleges to which you're well suited.

How to Get Admissions Officers to Say Yes

From essays to interviews to teacher recs, make sure your authentic voice comes through—loudly and persuasively

By Linda Kulman

Posted: August 21, 2008

Selling yourself to a college is easy. You just have to convince the admissions committee that you're one in 2.5 million.

That's the number of applicants that four-year schools will be sifting through this year. So let go of the notion that the fat envelope would already be in the mail if you could just crack the admissions code. "It would be a lot easier if there was a magic formula," says David duKor-Jackson, associate dean of admissions at Bucknell University, "but there isn't." There's no magic essay topic, either. Says Annalee Nissenholtz, college counselor at Ladue Horton Watkins High School in St. Louis: "If I hear about one more kid who's saving the poor...! The first kid or two who did it—they were really interesting, and then everyone heard that must be the trick. There really is no trick. It's digging deep and trying to figure out what makes you interesting."

That's good news. Instead of trying to decipher what they want, your task is to tell your story—to convey, in today's college app watchwords, a sense of your passion and commitment. Colleges are trying to understand something: "Who is this person, and why would we want him or her to join this community?" says Jennifer Delahunty, dean of admissions and financial aid at Kenyon College. Use each part of the process to accentuate your positives and show how you will contribute to the greater good. "We no longer are just looking to pick up students," says Jed Liston, assistant vice president of enrollment services at the University of Montana-Missoula. "We're looking for citizens."

Making the grade. The first thing colleges look at is your high school transcript. "If you're not in the ballpark, extracurriculars aren't going to get you in," says Jim Jump, academic dean and director of guidance at St. Christopher's School in Richmond, Va.—"unless you've won the Nobel Prize or have your own sitcom." But beyond the A's, B's, and C's, admissions staffs like to see academic risk takers. "Students ask us, 'Is it better to get an A in a regular class or a B in an AP class?'" says Keith Gramling, director of undergraduate admissions at Loyola University New Orleans. "Well, it's better to get an A in an AP class. But we are looking for students who have challenged themselves."

Still, piling on classes to impress your dream college can backfire. "Oftentimes I find myself trying to talk students off the AP ledge," says Rick Bischoff, director of admissions at California Institute of Technology. "I see students who are doing all they can to keep up with the work and don't have time to keep up with the learning. We're not counting APs. Has this student taken a rigorous curriculum? Has it prepared them?...It's that engagement that's central." Adds Stephen
Farmer, assistant provost and director of undergraduate admissions of the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill: "What we want for students is the feeling that everyone is looking for the next great thing they need to know. We like to see a sense of joy and curiosity."

Express yourself. If the goal is helping colleges picture who you are, the essay, as one longtime admissions officer says is, "the peek through the curtain." Applicants often assume that the peek should reveal not a subtle landscape but a dramatic perspective. "Students feel, 'I need to find that exotic thing that sells,' " says Tony Cabasco, dean of admission and financial aid at Whitman College. In truth, he says, what you write about "doesn't have to be a week in Africa. It can be you were a clerk at Safeway for the summer and that changed the way you view race relations or the environment." Adds Ted O'Neill, dean of admissions at the University of Chicago, "Turning points in their lives are kind of premature for kids of this age." Delahunty's idea of a "truly exceptional essay" at Kenyon: one in which "a student travels in a few swift paragraphs from one perspective to another and has seen the deeper meaning, learned the lesson, or found the humor."

"We're looking for a thoughtful, earnest presentation that shows complicated interests and thinking," says O'Neill. This can be achieved in stories reflecting on life's smaller slices—why you like helping your dad fix up old cars on the weekend, being the only boy in a family of seven girls, why you like to write birthday limericks. Liston at Montana-Missoula recalls reading one student's answer to the question "What was the most significant invention of all time?" It was "a very elegant essay on the spork," he says. "You left saying, 'That was quirky, that was funny, but that was well thought out.' "

Make sure your authentic voice comes through, avoiding the appearance of what Ingrid Hayes, associate vice president for enrollment management at Spelman College, calls a "manufactured essay." Adds Delahunty: "Sometimes, we'll say, 'Didn't the mom write a beautiful application?'...When you see the word heretofore, that's a cue." Far worse than parent-assisted essays are the ready-made ones available for roughly the same price as two tickets to the movies, a stratagem that will almost certainly go awry. Loyola New Orleans received the same essay—purchased online—from different applicants; they were, not surprisingly, denied. A variation on the same rule: Don't exaggerate. "Always, always, always be honest," says Missy Sanchez, director of college counseling at Woodward Academy in Atlanta. "Maybe you're going to get lucky, but the real professionals on the other side—they're going to ask questions."

Be sure the inner self you expose is one you're proud to claim. Poorly chosen words can make a bad impression. One applicant "wrote about an argument during which he broke a wall," says UNC's Farmer. "Rather than writing what he learned, he justified his behavior.... He came across as shockingly incurious [and] seemed unteachable. You thought: He's going to spend four years making speeches."

Show a little love. Although most students apply to multiple colleges, showing genuine enthusiasm for each school on your list is such a must that colleges have a name for it: "demonstrated interest." No college wants to play second or fifth—or 15th—fiddle. "We want kids who want us," says Jean Jordan, dean of admission at Emory University. Tailor each application individually, with concrete examples of why you can see yourself there. "If you can take out Rice University and put in Vanderbilt and not make a difference," says Chris Muñoz,
Rice's vice president for enrollment, "that's not going to work." As always, your presentation is crucial. "Writing, 'I sat in Lorch Hall,' doesn't help me feel like that student knows more about us," says Erica Sanders, director of recruitment and operations at the University of Michigan-Ann Arbor. "Saying Professor So-and-so's class helped me become even more interested—or made me realize I really don't know what I want to pursue—can make a difference." And do your homework. Claiming that you want to go to XYZ university for engineering when the school doesn't offer such a program will make your application memorable—but not in a good way.

**Find your fans.** If the application is your chance to talk about what makes you stand out, think of teacher recs as a way to reinforce your themes. The best choice isn't always the teacher whose class you aced, says Sanchez; better to pick the one who can describe what you're like as a person. "Ask if they can write you a strong recommendation," advises Seattle-based educational consultant Judy MacKenzie. "If the teacher hesitates, back off." Once you've got an advocate, type up bullet points summarizing your activities, community service, jobs—and a few pluses the teacher might not know about. And plan ahead. A rushed writer is rarely as persuasive as one who has had mulling time.

**Depth beats breadth.** While it might seem impressive to join six clubs and volunteer at a soup kitchen in your senior year, admissions officers can see through such a ploy. Besides, it's unnecessary, says Steven Roy Goodman, a Washington, D.C., educational consultant and the coauthor of *College Admissions Together: It Takes a Family*. He notes: "It's important to be well lopsided rather than well rounded. That enables you to focus on what you're good at." Adds Cal Tech's Bischoff: "Applicants worry far too much—do they have the service and the leadership, and are they a musician, and, boy, if they could pick up a sport." Like Goodman, he believes in doing less but doing it well. But avoid being one-dimensional. "If your presentation is one-sided," says Liston, "start working on other sides. Show that you're not just that one thing." Anything you're passionate about has merit, including an after-school job.

**The interview.** Some interviews are informational, some are evaluative; some schools encourage them, others don't give them at all. Best advice: Take any face time offered unless you know you'll be putting your worst foot forward. Goodman's examples: If you got into serious trouble in high school and "the details are messy," or you are inclined to demonstrate disinterest because "your parents are making you apply to that college," skip it. Otherwise, one-on-ones are a way to underscore your desire to attend. Before you go, polish with practice: Rehearse your questions and talking points with an adult. Communicate not just your strengths but also your enthusiasm. Say clearly and politely, "This is what I've achieved, and I'm proud of it," says Goodman. If your interview takes place on campus, schedule it toward the end of your visit. "After you've gone on the tour and met some kids," says Sanchez of Woodward Academy, "you've got something to talk about."

**Full disclosure.** Did your stellar academic record nose-dive one semester? Is there an obvious hole in your coursework? A suspension? The temptation is to hope it goes unnoticed. It won't, as *this story* explains. The best approach is full disclosure. Add a letter explaining the situation. But for it to have a mitigating effect, Sanchez says, "you have to have recovered" from whatever tripped you up, accepted the consequences, and done what you could to make amends. Goodman
says: "You've got to show us that you learned something." If you got suspended from school for drinking, for example, "and the punishment is 20 community service hours, do 50." And don't whine. If your grades took a tumble, don't expect admissions staff "to be moved by normal things that happen in life," says Muñoz. " 'My boyfriend broke up with me' is not going to cut it, nor is 'I overextended myself' or 'I got really involved with being the lead person for the prom.' "

My bad... There's you, the serious college applicant. Then there's the other you—the one with the E-mail address and voice mail greeting that your friends find hilarious. Maybe you even put up those sassy beach pictures on Facebook. Admissions staffers—many of them fairly recent graduates themselves—sometimes check out social networking sites. So, if you're Jekyll and Hyde, clean up your split personality. "Students don't always realize the extreme public nature of the Web," says Gramling. "They say, 'Oh no, no, that's my site for me and my friends.' " Before posting on MySpace, ask, " 'Are these photos you would show to your mom?' " If the answer's no, you probably don't want the admissions committee at your No. 1 college to get a peek, either.

A word to the wise. In the spirit of trying to see your child in the round, a small but growing number of schools are asking for recs from the 'rents. To talk about your son or daughter, advises Sanchez, "think about the three or four things people always brag to you about your child." Then, give examples to show how these characteristics come through: "Suzy is a great organizer. She used the whole senior class to help the lower school clean up the playground on Earth Day." And remark on whatever your child's passion may be: "He loves to play his guitar, and we're going to miss music in the house 24-7." Remember, your job is to present your vision by providing the facts, not to sell. So feel free to say, "She has the messiest room I've ever seen." "You can say stuff," Sanchez says. "They know they're not perfect. They're teenagers."

Remember to stay on the sidelines, cheering but not overwhelmingly. And no matter how anxious you get, resist calling the admissions office pretending to be your child, not realizing that your voice sounds more like a 40-year-old than a 17-year-old. Believe us. It happens.

Acing the Essay

To find the right topic and deliver it in a compelling way:

- Brainstorm with family and friends on what to write about. Focus on what matters to you and why. How you spend your free time is a good place to start.
- Show, don't tell. Use examples and anecdotes.
- Be polite (but not too humble).
- Ask a friend to read your essay, and say, "Does this sound like me?" It should.
- Don't do your essay at the last minute. Mastering the art of selling yourself takes practice.
- Reread what you've written with a cold eye. Using humor or sarcasm? Make sure it translates well on paper.
Killer Extracurrics

- Unless social activism is one of the core values of the school you're applying to, "heartfelt cello playing trumps obligatory service work," says J. Leon Washington, dean of admissions and financial aid for Lehigh University. And building latrines in Ghana is not intrinsically more valuable than coaching basketball at the local Y.
- Say what motivated you to get involved and what you learned.
- Put your activities in context by providing a few details. If you were president of the poetry society, say how many members the club had and what you did.
- Be succinct.

TIP

Be genuine. Every student knows an overambitious classmate who picked up an activity (or instrument or sport) to look good on paper. Colleges can spot that sort of thing a mile off.
Wait List

Because colleges can't be sure how many of their admitted students will ultimately enroll, most colleges keep wait lists. If they have not filled their classes by May 1st with accepted students, they may then turn to wait-listed students.

*Wait lists are frequently unrated* because colleges are often trying to maintain a sort of balance in their admitted class. For instance, if their two most promising tuba players choose not to attend, the college may be especially interested in admitting another tuba player off the wait list. Or if more women choose to attend than they may be looking to take men off the wait list.

Among students who choose to stay on the wait list, in general about 30% get accepted. Still, that doesn't mean your mentee's chances are simply 30%. The statistics vary from school to school and year to year. In addition, the kinds of students that a school takes off its wait list vary, as you can see from the tuba player example discussed above.

**What to do if your mentee is waitlisted:**

- **Accept another offer.** Students are required to accept an offer of admission by May 1, but schools don't start taking students off the wait list until after that (or they're not supposed to!). As a result, your mentee must be sure to accept one school's offer by May 1, even if they are still hoping to be accepted off the wait list elsewhere. If they eventually get off the wait list at their preferred school, they can forfeit their previous deposit and go there instead.

- **Follow instructions.** If the school that wait-listed them asks you to fill out a form or submit additional materials—do so.

- **Send a wait list letter.** Your mentee should write a 1 page letter/email that is sincere but not emotional. In it, they should address the following questions:
  - Is he/she a good match for the school? Are there new developments (grades, involvements, awards, etc.) that show your mentee would be a great addition to the community?
  - Is the school a good match for him/her? What about the school is he/she especially excited about? Be specific
  - **Most importantly:** Will your mentee attend if selected? Is this school THE #1 choice? Colleges want to be sure that the students they admit off a wait list will attend.
  - **Reconnect** every 3-4 weeks via email or snail mail if they have any new information to share.