Books about the College Application Process
(Reviewed by Karen Rohde, Gifted Services Coordinator)

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Notes: Books with older copyrights refer to the old SAT. Many of the books published annually with lists of colleges have few, if any, yearly updates. So, a 2008 edition of compilation may only have admissions statistics updated while the narratives remain the same. Most books are available at the public library as well as local bookstores.

Books about the Application Process


Among the college admissions books for selective colleges, this one offers a very different perspective. Allen is a private college counselor who gives, at times, controversial advice in terms of the “do’s” and “don’ts” of college admissions. For example, he suggests that if a student is interested in technical education, s/he should not attend MIT, Caltech or Stanford. Allen claims that "all the dirty little secrets of the college admission world are revealed in this book.” Allen does have a lot of information not contained in other books.


The focus on this book is understanding early admissions (i.e., early action, early decision, single-choice early action). The authors contend that at sine
schools, applying early can have the same effect as adding 100 points to one’s SAT score. There are several tables with valuable statistics in terms of admission rates and test scores. Many colleges have recently modified their early decision programs; so much of the information may be dated.


This is a follow-up book to The Truth about Getting In. There are several case studies presented of students in terms of course choices and grades. There is also a good section on writing the application essay.


This book is an excellent resource for how to put together an outstanding application, particularly for selective colleges. There is a very good section on how to compile supplementary information in a concise manner. Cohen is a private admissions counselor and the founder of IvyWise.


This is a must-read for any parent of a child who is seeking admission to a highly selective college. Golden is a Pulitzer Prize-winning reporter for the Wall Street Journal. In his book, Golden essentially discusses why some students are admitted to schools and why so many middle class and lower income students with comparable qualifications are rejected. Golden testified to the Senate Finance Committee regarding his findings. That testimony may be accessed via this web site: http://www.acenet.edu/AM/Template.cfm?Section=HENA&TEMPLATE=/CM/ContentDisplay.cfm&CONTENTID=19242


This book is written by someone who has been both a college counselor at a private high school as well as Oberlin College. There is a lot of practical knowledge in this book, for example, why some students are wait-listed (academic, political, or financial reasons).

Hernandez is a former Assistant Director of Admissions at Dartmouth College. The focus of this book is more college admissions from the point-of-view of the admissions personnel. There is a good discussion of Academic Index and Converted Rank scores as well as several tables in the Index. The focus of this book is for admission to highly selective colleges.


Hughes is a former Senior Admissions Officer at Harvard. Key points in this book include how colleges “don’t just admit individuals—they build classes” as well as a solid discussion of extracurricular activities and scholarship programs.


This book has ten chapters written with one “expert” in the field for each chapter. For example, the chapter on interviews references “expert coach” Lloyd Peterson, former senior admissions officer at Yale University. This is a must-read with great advice from several people in the field.


This is a good all-around guide to the college application process. There is a nice section on choosing the best college for you. All three authors are Harvard graduates.


The focus of this book is what really matters about choosing and attending a college, rather than searching for schools based on prestige. One example is that of a class valedictorian who was accepted at Duke and some other top schools, but who instead chose to attend Virginia Commonwealth University for his undergraduate education. This person later attended Stanford
medical school. The lesson was that he did not need to attend Harvard or an equally highly selective school in order to do well.


This book is written by a Yale graduate who goes beyond the typical “how to get in” to how to survive once you are attending college. Many people consider this a must read for the college-bound student.


This is a good basic starter book for the college application process. There is a good glossary of college application terms. The author suggests having “eight first choices” for colleges in order to maximize options in April.


This is a comprehensive book about the college admissions process. There is a nice section with many sample essays written by students. This book also explains the pros and cons of the rankings released by various publications. There is a great chapter on marketing special cases (e.g., older applicants).


Paul describes the college search of five high school honor students. As well, he interviewed Fred Hargadon, former Dean of Admissions at Princeton University. This is a good read for insight into the admissions process of highly selective schools from Hargadon’s point-of-view.


This book, which is a staple in most high school guidance offices, is now in its 24th edition (2006). Rugg simply presents lists of schools that are supposed to be strong in various majors. It is a great guide to look at if you are looking for schools that are considered strong in particular areas, such as
archaeology or jazz. The lists do not seem to be updated much from year to year, but Rugg does seem to add new majors with each edition.


This is a solid little guide about just two topics: visits and interviews. This is a good pick-up for the student doing interviews.


This book has a great opening chapter on why the college admissions process has become so competitive during the last decade. This is a solid all-around book. There is an excellent chapter on what selective colleges look for in applicants.


The author follows an admissions rep for Wesleyan College through an entire year. Several case studies are presented with excellent details regarding the entire process.


This is a collection of writings about various college admissions topics. One essay, for example, "Admissions Messages vs. Admissions Realities“ is written by a Dean of Admission at Reed College. The focus of the book is that the college admissions process is mostly about “fit” and not luck in marketing students.


Toor is a former admissions officer at Duke University. This is a first-hand account of a year in the life of an admissions rep. Toor presents solid
information in terms of activities and honors that are considered more notable than others.


Another book by the folks from Octameron. This is a very small book (61 pages) that presents sort of the Spark Notes version of the other guides. This book has not been updated since 2003. Wall was a former Dean of Admission at Amherst College in the 70s and 80s.


This is another must-read in terms of practical advice for the selective college admissions process. Much information that is assumed in other books, is detailed in easy to understand language. There is a “competitive” edge to this book, but the overall goal is to help students with their applications.

Books which are General Guides about Colleges or Specific Types of Colleges:


Although this book is older, it is a valuable resource for lists that may help with finding schools not ordinarily considered. Lists include such groupings as Colleges with Comprehensive Debate Programs, Award-Winning College Television Stations, and Top College Marching Bands. This is a great book for looking at schools with a different eye.

This book is for the student whose high school education “moved along at a glacial pace.” Asher divides the chapters a little differently, such as “schools where scholarship is honored” and “engineering schools.” This book extols the virtues of schools such as Deep Springs and Reed College which often do not make the popular books.


This is a very different book in that it focuses on the topics such curriculum, academic requirements, and little known facts about schools. For example, a swimming test is a requirement at Cornell and Caltech’s women’s basketball team lost every game it played in 2003-04. This is a must-read for students and parents before making final decisions.


This book profiles 65 colleges and universities. There are some comments from students as well sections on academic life, social life, graduates, and general information. This book is one that is updated every two to three years.


This annual guide has a solid section on majors (e.g., there are two colleges in the US that offer the Norwegian major). This particular edition also included a CD-Rom for use as a personal guide to the college search.


This book is a Princeton Review summary of thirty-two top schools as well as practical advice for the admissions process.

If investing in a couple of the guide books, this is probably the other guide to buy along with Princeton Review. All colleges in the US are included. There are separate sections on two-year colleges and four-year schools. At the back of the book is a great section with lists, such as “number on wait list admitted,” “Baseball Division III schools,” and “Undergraduate Enrollment Size.”


The Fiske Guides are solid pick-ups for the student (or parent) looking for good information about schools. At the beginning of the guide is a great list of criteria (e.g., I prefer a college in a cool or cold climate) for students to look at when considering types of schools. The guide also lists “best buys” and lists for top schools in particular professions. Each school also has a little section for college overlaps (i.e., other schools applicants typically apply).


This guide is probably the best buy if you are looking for lists of schools with basic information. It is published annually (new editions come out in the summer for the following year). Humor is used with the lists at the front of the book, such as “Dorms Like Palaces” and “Is It Food?” The book keeps getting bigger each year with more schools insisting on being included.


This is another guide that is annually published, but it is questionable as to how much is changed from year to year. There is a nice list of schools at the beginning sorted by categories such as intellectual fervor and intensity of nightlife that is not found in many of the typical guides. As well, this book is written by students who attend the schools. Each school has at least the opinions of three students listed even though more opinions were typically sought for each college. This is a good read for straight talk about the schools.

This guide is published annually by the staff of the Yale Daily News. 322 colleges and universities are profiled with a fair amount of depth. Editions do not seem to vary much from year to year, so an old 2006 copy of the book will probably work for 2008, other than perhaps admissions statistics.


Many parents and students have used Pope’s books to begin their college search. Pope has personally visited the campuses of all of the schools profiled, sometimes several times. The focus is on the underappreciated gems that are out there for students. This book has several revisions, with the first one published as far back as 1980, I believe.


You will not find George Washington University in this book. The aim of the book is to provide “best buys” in terms of cost. However, Cornell University was included because the cost there depends on which college or school attends. This is a good guide for narratives about smaller colleges that typically do not find their way into the popular compilations.


Although dated, this book is a good guide to many colleges that do not make the other books. The focus is on schools where there are a lot of options in terms of majors and one’s ability to finish in a timely fashion.


This is one of the thickest of the annual guides to colleges (which are released each year in October). The book does have excellent lists in the front such as “schools with the most debt” and “schools that award the most
need-based aid” as well as schools by major. The 2006 edition had 1762 pages.


This book offers a student perspective on Ivy League schools and the admissions process infused with humor and report card ratings (e.g., Harvard received a D+ for campus dining).

Books about Money, Scholarships, Financial Aid


This is a great book for parents to help understand the financial aid process. The information about college costs can be found in most guides, although this book also includes whether or not schools offered merit scholarships (at the time of publication). This book is not published annually.


This annual guide focuses on different scholarships that are available. The organizational lists are good as a starting point for looking at outside scholarships (e.g., students majoring in computer and information sciences). There is also a list of scholarships by state of residence as well as detailed information about scholarships. Be careful about dated information on scholarships since sponsors may change the information each year; often too late for the time of publication.


The author attended Harvard University almost free of charge due to savvy scholarship strategies. However, Kaplan was also a stellar student with terrific credentials. The valuable thing about Kaplan’s books is the insider information that tells you what various scholarships are about (e.g. scholarships that reward extensive community service).

Kaplan’s book includes great details about major scholarships such as Coca-Cola Scholars Program and Discover Card Tribute Awards.


This is another annual guide that contains lots of scholarships. The only problem with many of these scholarship books is that lots of scholarships are listed with very specific criteria (e.g., must be a resident of X county in X state or parents must be members of this organization). The guides are thick because all of these very specific scholarships are listed.


This is a must-read for parents and students looking for scholarships. Although dated (it is updated every two to three years) as soon as it is published, it is an excellent guide for understanding which schools give scholarships and what criteria is needed for them. For example, for the Trustee’s scholarship at Case Western, one used to need at least a 1500 on the old SAT.


This is another U.S. News book that is published every so often. This one discusses financial aid basics and has several lists about most and least debt. I found the information about National Merit Finalists in this edition to be inaccurate (i.e., not all finalists receive $2500 scholarships).
Books about Application Essays


This book is like a lot of the other books of essays: lots of essays and that is it. Oftentimes, the writers of the essays have been accepted at highly selective colleges, but the essay was only one piece of the total application. That being said, it is still valuable to read good essays to get a feel for how a person can come alive through the writing.


This book is revised every so often, but I could not pick up on the differences between the 1991 version and the 2002 edition. The contents appeared to be identical. However, it is a solid paperback with lots of information. The introductions by people such as Fred Hargadon (Princeton) are valuable as well as the dozens of sample essays organized by type.


This book also has a 2003 edition. This book is pretty much like most essay books: a section about how to approach writing the essay and then sample essays. This book does have commentary about the sample essays which is valuable.


Good solid book about writing essays with lots of samples. If you plan to read only one or two books about essays, I would definitely recommend this one.

This is an excellent book for how to write various types of essays for college applications. The focus in this book is on how to write the essays rather than just samples of essays.


This book has an interesting angle in that photos of the student writers are included with their essays as well as a list of schools applied to and the results of those decisions. There is also a nice Q and A section with Admissions Officers.


This book seems to be revised every five years. It is divided into three sections: dos and don’ts about writing essays, sample essays, and advice from several admissions representatives.

Miscellaneous


This book has a nice chapter on "A Matter of Matching" where there are lists for students to self-check. Topics specific to gifted education are included, such as “Early Entrance College Programs” and “Contests and Competitions.” Most of the book involves practical advice about college planning.


This book was written by someone who attended Harvard University. Douthat provides a social critique of Harvard, covering issues such as
entitlement and affirmative action. This is not a “how-to” guide but rather a social commentary.


This is a nifty little book with lots of lists that you won’t find anywhere else. For example, “Schools with great rocking-climbing clubs,” “Schools with great entomology programs” and “Schools with on-campus nuclear reactors.” This book would be a good complement to Rugg’s Recommendations if starting the search.


This extensive guide is updated every other year. What is great about this book is that the majors are not only listed, but defined. As well, general sections are listed, such as “Engineering” and different majors that fall under that section are included (e.g., mining and mineral engineering). The majors also list other possible majors that a student might like if interested in particular subjects (e.g., the person interested in classics might also enjoy linguistics).