

## **Helping Gifted High School Students Navigate the College Experience**

*By Karen Rohde*

Preparing for the college admissions experience for high school students today is quite different from when many parents went through the same process. The landscape for the college admissions process has dramatically changed for many reasons.

First, there are more applicants than ever applying for colleges today. The good news is that the baby boomer “boomlet” will start tapering off by 2015. However, students are applying to more colleges than their parents did. Part of the reason for this is the relative ease of on-line applications such as the Common Application. Another reason is that students have learned over the years that college admissions can be quirky. A student who does not get into one highly selective college may be accepted by another college. Some students who wish to gain admission into an Ivy League school will apply to all eight Ivies, hoping that one will accept them. The problem with that reasoning is that the Ivy League schools are very different from one another. Some are large, some are small, some urban, some more rural and so it appears to be more of an act of desperation in the quest. Another important point about the numbers issue is that college admissions are now global. Students in the United States think nothing of looking at schools in other countries and, in turn, more international students than ever are attending U.S. schools. An important point to remember in this process is that colleges want students to apply. It is flattering for a student to receive colorful

brochures from the big name schools. Colleges do court students to apply. After all, the more students who apply, the more they can reject. The more selective a college appears, the greater its reputation among the highly selective schools. There are colleges today who accept less than seven per cent of their applicant pool. Gaining admission to some colleges today is akin to winning the lottery.

College admissions has become a lucrative business over the years. There are consultants who can command hefty fees for their services which help students with the application process. Many of these same consultants have written books to share their “secrets” of the trade which can be found in the college sections of bookstores and libraries. Additionally, test prep companies offer tutoring, on-line test prep, and their own books to help students improve their ACT, SAT or SAT subject test scores. Along with the consultants and test prep companies, college rankings are now a part of front-page headlines for some media circles. Like most rankings, one should be wary of what the rankings actually mean and look at the fine-print regarding the criteria. A school that is number one in one publication may well be number ten or not even on the radar in another. The rankings have become a part of the frenzy with the college process. As a result, websites are now emerging to help students see what their “chances are” for admission to various schools, by plugging in test scores, class rank, and other variables into programs designed to help them sort through the schools.

As a result of the increased intensity in the process, many students and parents become frustrated with the college admissions process to the point

of having difficulty sorting through all the information. A student might wonder “where do I start?” and the parent may be thinking “how can I pay for *that* school my son or daughter wants to attend?” The entire experience can be overwhelming.

The best advice for trying to bring order out of chaos with this process is to understand that college admissions for highly selective schools can be quirky. If parents and students understand that, it can lessen the stress. So what is the best advice for students (and parents)?

**Be Yourself.** A young man, who recently was accepted by Princeton, offered this advice to some high school students, “you don’t want to go where they don’t want you.” For parents, this means allowing a son or daughter to be honest about his or her dreams and working together to help make those dreams come true.

**Reach, Match, and Safety.** A **reach school** is a school for which it will be difficult to gain admission. Some schools are reach schools *for everyone* despite test scores, class rank and everything else. It is important to understand that rejections from reach schools should not be taken personally. Gaining admission to a reach school is sort of like playing the lottery. You might win, but the odds are against you. A **match school**, on the other hand, is a school that is considered a good match for his or her abilities as well as the student’s interests. Admission to a match school would not be considered guaranteed, but it would be likely. A **safety school** would be a school where the student is virtually guaranteed admission. The student’s test scores are in the top 25%, if not the top 10%. The student knows that he or she has solid

recommendations and an excellent chance for merit aid, if available.

Probably the biggest mistake that students make in the college process is applying to too many reach schools. If the student is rejected by all of the reach schools, then sometimes he or she is scrambling in late April to figure out what options are left. Students need to be honest about what reach schools are as well as what match and safety schools look like. Some schools are reach schools for all students because the applicant pool is so strong and because colleges can select a class ten times over that is equally strong. A child who is the class valedictorian needs to understand that there are as many number one students as there are high schools in the country. Some schools even count several students as number one in class, which makes the competition even greater. Another point to consider is that some schools that were safety schools in the parent’s generation may now no longer be safety schools. At the end of the process, the goal should be to have some choices that are *all* good fits for the student.

It is also important to understand that students select schools for different reasons. Some students may be undecided about a major and may prefer attending a large school where there are several options. Another student who gains admission to a highly selective, may choose instead to take the full scholarship at one of his or her safety/match schools. Some students may wish to be the “top dog” at a school, while others may crave a rigorous environment akin to an academic boot camp. Some top students have several choices and ultimately choose the school that seems to be the best fit. The bottom

line is that students choose schools for different reasons.

Schools, on the other hand, select students for different reasons as well. Most colleges want students who will contribute to their schools and make the most of the resources that are offered. Schools have classes to fill and they may need more students who are humanities students or math/science. As well, colleges must also deal with legacy students, development cases and recruited athletes. Schools handle these issues differently. For example, one need only watch the documentary *Quantum Hoops* to understand that Caltech views academic ability differently than athletic prowess.

**Challenge oneself.** The standard answer to the question, “Is it better to take an IB/AP/Honors class and get a B or take a regular class and get an A?” is “Take the IB/AP/Honors class and get an A.” It is important for gifted students to challenge themselves and maximize their potentials. However, it is also important to have personal balance. One should take as rigorous a curriculum as possible, but not at the expense of one’s health (physical and mental). Life is about balance, both for students as well as adults in their jobs.

If one looks at where famous people attended college, he or she will see that successful people can come from most any college in the country. Students need to understand that a rejection letter from school A is not the end of the world. Those rejection and wait-listed letters can hurt, but sometimes a student will find another avenue to success that he or she would not have otherwise found.

**Test scores.** Yes, they are important. Some colleges do not require test scores, but most do. It is wise for students to

take both the SAT as well as the ACT because some students do much better on one or the other. Many gifted students have taken the ACT or SAT through *Northwestern University’s Academic Talent Search*. Those test scores provide an excellent baseline for the student’s relative strengths and weaknesses. Students should probably not wait until the end of the junior year to take the ACT or SAT. If a student needs to focus on some test prep in an area, it is important to learn what that area is early on in high school. Additionally, participating in the PSAT in the earlier grades can be beneficial to understanding how one may perform on the SAT and make the PSAT test during the junior year less stressful.

Some students are unaware that SAT subject tests may be required by some colleges. Students need to check on college testing requirements well in advance of their senior year.

It is important to understand that test scores are just one piece of the application. Some students are great test takers but they may not be good contributors in classroom discussions. On the other hand, a student may be a natural born leader, but hot and cold on tests. While college admissions officers look at the entire application, sometimes the test scores can be the deciding factor for the “wait list” pile versus the “early admit.”

**Essays.** Sometimes it is the essay that can be the application piece that may push an applicant to the acceptance pile. There are many resources on crafting college application essays. Applicants need to take this piece of the process seriously by talking with English teachers, reading the available resources and finding the local grammarian to help with proofreading.

**Interviews.** Most of the highly selective schools ask applicants to participate in interviews typically conducted by alumni in the area. These interviews can be all over the place, but the bottom line is that the applicant needs to prepare for the interview as if preparing for a job interview. Participating in a mock interview beforehand can help lessen one's nerves and help the applicant prepare for typical questions.

**Money.** Some students do not apply to top schools because of cost. Most highly selective schools are need-blind, in that the ability to pay should not be a factor in admissions. Students should work with parents to look at the financial piece. A student should never be discouraged from applying to a top school because of the concern for financial aid. If a student uses the approach of reach, match and safety in crafting his or her short list, chances are the financial piece will fall in line. One mistake that students sometimes make with the money piece is not involving parents in the process early on. Honest discussions need to occur about how much the parents are able or willing to pay, how much students will contribute as well as whether or not debt will be incurred.

Parents need to be proactive on the financial aid piece and keep folders for the colleges that their child applies to so that financial aid deadlines will not be missed. Most parents have heard of the FAFSA form that needs to be completed, but many may be unfamiliar with the CSS Profile that several top schools require. Parents need to look at the financial aid website for each school his or her child applies to so that no piece of information is missed.

**The List.** Many students, when asked by parents to create a list of possible schools, craft a lengthy list that has no rhyme or reason other than "schools I like." A student could approach this task three different ways. The first method is to list the criteria that he or she is looking for in a school and then look for schools that match the criteria. The second way of approaching this issue is to make a long list and gradually eliminate schools based on various factors. A final way is to use the search engines that are available on many websites to craft automatic lists from the questions posed to the potential applicant. Criteria to think about might include the following:

- Close or far away?
- In-state or out-of-state?
- U.S. or international?
- Urban or rural?
- Small town or metro area?
- Undecided for major v. focused?
- Large student body or small?
- Reach, match or safety?
- Debt or no debt?
- Greek or not?
- Academic rigor or less?
- Professors available or not?
- Lots of TA's or none?
- Class discussions or lectures?
- Beautiful campus or not?
- Beautiful dorms or plain dorms?
- Religious options or none?
- Party school or not?
- Stimulating environment or less?

The cost of applying to colleges continues to rise as well. Application fees may range from nothing to \$75+ per application. Parents and students need to agree on who will pay the application fees and for how many schools.

**Recommendations.** Teacher and guidance counselor recommendations can be easy or hard, depending on the size of the school and the relationships that have been established. Some teachers in large schools will only write recommendations for a stated number of students. As well, a student's favorite teacher may not be the best writer. Another thing to keep in mind is that it is very difficult for teachers to write recommendations for students they barely know. Often, a teacher will offer to write a recommendation for a student. When in doubt, a student should consult with his or her guidance counselor for advice.

**Final thoughts.** As mentioned earlier in this article, college admissions can be quirky. There are years where several students from the same high school gain admission to the top schools and other years where no one gets in. The real bottom line is that applicants can only present themselves in the best possible light and then understand that they have little control over what happens after everything is submitted. If a student is wait-listed, it is important to send in supplementary material. However, it is equally important to take another look at the school who has already said "yes" to the applicant.

Gifted students should plan well in advance for the college admissions process. Early action deadlines may be as early as mid-November or scholarship deadlines may be earlier than regular action deadlines. Procrastinating can result in an applicant trying to balance the busy senior year with the application process. The ultimate goal is for the student to find a school that is a good fit for his or her abilities and personality. If a student starts the process early, chances are he or she will be able to

navigate the process smoothly and find the best fit for him or her.

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