



# TIPS FROM THE DEAN

**HOW TO CHOOSE A COLLEGE,  
GET IN, AND PAY FOR IT**



**College  
Confidential**

By Sally Rubenstone

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# ABOUT THE DEAN

College Confidential's "Dean," Sally Rubenstone, knows the competitive and often convoluted college admission process inside out: from the first time the "C" word comes up at the dinner table, until the last duffel bag is unloaded on a dorm-room floor. She is the co-author of three books: *Panicked Parents' Guide to College Admissions*; *The Transfer Student's Guide to Changing Colleges*; and *The International Student's Guide to Going to College in America*. Sally has appeared on NBC's *Today* show and has been quoted in countless publications, including the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, *USA Weekend*, *USA Today*, *U.S. News & World Report*, *Newsweek*, *People*, and *Seventeen*.

Sally has viewed the admissions process from many angles: as a Smith College admission counselor for 15 years; as co-founder/director of College Karma Consulting, which offers private advising to students and parents worldwide; and—most recently—as the parent of a high school senior.

Sally joined College Confidential in 2002. She is best known to many CC members for her popular ["Ask the Dean"](#) column. Although Sally is quick to concede that she has never officially been the dean of *anything*, she has responded to thousands of questions for more than a decade. Once dubbed the "Dear Abby" of college admissions, Sally gives parents and students the straight scoop (which admission officials and college brochures won't always provide) on topics that range from course selection and test scores to campus tours and toilets, with the aim of making the confusing admissions maze a little saner and less stressful to navigate.

# COLLEGE SEARCH & SELECTION

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## Private vs. Public Colleges

“Can you explain the difference between a private college and a public college? I’m confused about which one I should attend.”

Public colleges are those that are largely supported by state funds. If you attend a public institution in your own state, you will get a break on tuitions costs, and—as a state resident—it’s usually easier for you be admitted, as well. However, if you attend a public college in *another* state, you will probably not get those benefits (though some state institutions do have reciprocal agreements with other nearby states or may offer generous merit scholarships to strong out-of-staters.)

Private colleges, on the other hand, are supported by tuition, endowment, and donations from alumni and friends. Usually they are more expensive than public colleges, but it does depend on the particular school. Also, private colleges often offer the best financial aid (see below). While attending a private school is reputed to translate into less red tape and more personal attention than you’ll find at the public counterparts, it’s important to look carefully at each individual college and to separate rumor from reality.

You may have heard through the grapevine that private colleges are “better” and more desirable than public ones, but this is not true. *Some* private colleges are among the hardest in the world to get into (e.g., Harvard, Stanford, MIT), while others are the easiest. I won’t name names here, but there are *plenty* of private colleges that admit nearly everyone who applies. The majority of four-year *public* colleges have higher admission standards than these less-selective or non-selective private schools, although the standards can vary greatly.

Moreover, some private colleges charge high tuitions (that may require students and their parents to take out big loans) and then don't provide an education that is any better than what is available at a much lower cost at a public school.

Many states have what are known as "flagship" universities. A flagship university is the main public college in the state, and it may be huge (e.g., Ohio State University, Penn State University, University of Texas). But often these states have many smaller public schools as well. Typically, flagship universities draw students from throughout the state as well as from other states and abroad. Flagship universities can be very prestigious, and some, such as the University of Michigan, the University of North Carolina, and the University of Virginia, have been dubbed "public Ivies."

The smaller public colleges and universities tend to draw applicants from their immediate region and are likely to have fewer out-of-state and international students. Often—although not always—the flagship universities are harder to get into than the other public schools in the state. Some states (e.g., New York, California) do not have one main flagship college.

When making your target-college list, you probably don't want to restrict it to EITHER private OR public schools. You should seek out all colleges that offer what you're looking for: academic departments, location, size, extracurricular activities, religious affiliation (or lack thereof), as well as simply the right "feel." The best way to determine if a school has this right "feel" is to visit campus when classes are in session and to try to talk (either in person or via e-mail) with current students and recent grads.

While cost may be an important consideration for you, don't let that entirely govern your college choices ... at least initially. Commonly, the more a college costs, the more money there is to give away. So, while lower tuition may make public colleges and universities attractive to you, don't give up on the pricier private schools that may provide good financial aid. Ultimately, your final decision may have to be based on costs, but at this stage of the college exploration process, you don't need to consider only the dough.

So when it's time to choose your college, do your "homework." Check out average student debt, graduation rates, job placement rates, etc., and keep your mind open to both public and private institutions, at least in the early stages of your search.



## Free Ride Near Home or Pricey Elite Eastern School?

“My son has the opportunity to attend a local state university for free (tuition, room, board, and books) for four years based on his being named a National Merit Commended Scholar. Of course, he scoffs at the notion of going to school so close to home, and instead has his heart set on attending a prestigious East Coast university. We are a family of very limited financial means, and I don't want him to graduate from undergraduate college with a lot of student debt because he plans to go on to med school. We don't know yet what a possible financial aid package to the East Coast school may look like, but I think \$1 in student loans is \$1 too much. What would you advise?”

This question cannot be answered without a resounding (but unsatisfying) “it depends.”

Have you tried the online Net Price Calculators for your son's top-choice East Coast schools? Although I always take NPC results with a block of salt, but they can be a good starting point if you want to get at least a ballpark sense of what your family contribution is likely to be.

If your son is admitted to any of the snazziest of the East Coast colleges, and you are indeed a family of very limited means, he may receive an excellent financial aid “package” which could include very little loan or even no loan at all.

So before losing too much sleep over the decision, I advise you to ...

- a. Do the Net Price Calculators to see if this helps to allay your fears
- b. Wait until your son has his admission verdicts (and I realize this isn't easy)

While I certainly agree that you don't want your son to be burdened by debt when he graduates, especially with med school ahead of him, the opportunity to attend a top college or university with an international student body (and reputation) could justify taking on *some* debt because of the value of the broadening experience and of the lifelong contacts it will provide.

On the other hand, if he attends the local public university, he may be in a better position to stand out in a crowd and snag the juiciest research gigs and internships which, in turn, will fortify his med school applications down the road.

But it's really impossible to provide accurate advice without knowing exactly where your son has been admitted and exactly how much debt he may have to take on.

Keep in mind, too, that it's not too late for your son to consider some *other* colleges where he may be a contender for big merit bucks ... places that would allow him to travel out of state but without accruing debt. These colleges may not offer the prestige of the most sought-after institutions, but they could provide a broadening experience along with the chance for you son to stay on track for med school.

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## Finding Colleges with “High Moral Values”

“Our son is attending what we thought was a good school. It is a heavy party school with open homosexuality. How can we find a school with high moral values?”

I often hear complaints about party schools ... and not just from parents but even from the students themselves. It seems that on many campuses, the situation has gotten out of hand. However, I've also found that it can take a while for those who eschew the drinking and drug scene to find each other, especially at large universities ... but many eventually do. For those who choose not to transfer, joining clubs that promote healthy activities or that focus on issues

such as religious faith and social justice can be a way of creating a community that doesn't revolve around substance abuse, late nights, and loud noise.

However, if your son feels that he's truly a fish out of water and wants to seek calmer seas, you might want to check out The Princeton Review's list of "Most Conservative Colleges." See: <https://www.princetonreview.com/college-rankings?rankings=most-conservative-students> Note, however, that even colleges with strict rules that govern the use of drugs and alcohol may still attract some party animals, although commonly this socializing takes place off campus. So as your son hones in on prospective transfer colleges, he should find out what percentage of students don't live on campus. And, if that number is high, he must dig deeper to see if the policies that govern on-campus behavior tend to go out the window when students are on their own. Your son can also do a Google search for "Christian colleges." Even if he's not a practicing Christian, he is likely to find that such schools offer a welcoming environment and one that is more consistently heterosexual and party-free than at many unaffiliated institutions. But keep in mind that any online college list is just a starting place, and then it's up to students (and parents) to do their own research.

But I would also like to point out that I bristle when I see that you have equated "high moral values" with colleges where there is not "open homosexuality." I live in a small city that is well known for its large openly gay population. Many of my gay neighbors and friends are the most honorable and moral people you might ever meet. The story of one lesbian couple who took in a homeless 8-year-old after her single (heterosexual) mother committed suicide would bring tears to your eyes. These parents already had two daughters of their own, but they found room in their house and their hearts for this child who had nowhere else to go. And there is the gay father who lives around the corner from me who volunteered to travel to China during the SARS epidemic so that a group of adoptive families could bring their new babies home from orphanages. (This dad is a pediatrician, and due to the medical crisis in China, the prospective parents were not permitted to make the trip unless a physician was willing to accompany them. So the doctor agreed to go, and his own partner agreed to be a single dad to their two children for two weeks to contribute to the adoption effort.) I could tell you many more stories of gay men and women I know personally who have served on school boards, headed charitable committees, and who have contributed to our city in countless ways. So you can see why it concerns me when homosexuality is linked to questionable morality.

On the other hand, I fully understand that some people—college students included—are not comfortable in an environment where they are surrounded by

openly gay peers, and certainly everyone has the right to make this choice. I used to work at a college with a very visible gay presence. Some students who were bothered by this did transfer out. Others, however, became increasingly less ill-at-ease as they got to know their gay schoolmates. One young Mormon woman I recall found the campus environment to be very stressful at first. But now, years later, although she is married and still devoted to her Mormon faith, she says she is grateful for the diversity she experienced during college.

Whatever your son decides, I wish him—and you—well as he reenters the admissions maze. As a parent myself, I know how stressful it can be when a child is unhappy. So I hope that your son will be able to seek out soul mates by joining appropriate clubs at his current college while he considers his other options.

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## Choosing a Combined Bachelor's/MD Program

“My daughter, who is in middle school, is already interested in accelerated medical programs. What colleges do you support?”

“The Dean” supports *any* combined medical program that will admit your daughter. It's a sellers' market out there!

Seriously, these programs are so competitive that they typically admit only Ivy-caliber students and can be as selective as the Ivies (or more so!) and also as unpredictable. Even colleges that are not terribly picky when it comes to the rest of their applicant pool will turn away all but the strongest combo-med candidates. For instance, several years ago I visited Drew University in New Jersey. There, the typical admitted freshman has combined SAT scores (Math and Critical Reading only) of just under 1200, but the combo-med candidates must have a 1500 minimum (or 34 ACT) simply to *apply*. So, just because a college or university seems well within your daughter's reach, keep in mind that the

combo-med candidates are held to a far higher standard. One year, for instance, I had an advisee who was denied by Boston University's combined medical program and ended up instead at Yale!

In addition to having near-perfect grades and test scores, your daughter must also demonstrate significant interest in the medical profession and be able to speak convincingly in at least one interview—and sometimes several—about her reasons for choosing this profession at an early age. Admission officials at combo med programs carefully scrutinize all applicants' reasons for hopping on this fast track as teenagers.

Note also that, although you use the term "Accelerated Medical Program," I am actually addressing *any* type of combined bachelor's/MD program. All of these typically enable students to be accepted to both undergraduate school and medical school at the same time, when they are still just in the senior year of high school. In fact, some combo programs are seven (or even six) years in duration, while others are eight, which is the normal amount of time that most students spend in undergraduate college plus med school. (However, the eight-year combo-program students do not go through a full med school search and application process. So their medical career is also "accelerated" in that way.)

There are obviously pros and cons to combined programs. The pluses are that they enable motivated pre-med students to get a jump start on their medical education and to be able to forge ahead without going through yet another college search in just four years. To me, that's the best part—the fact that students don't have to go through this whole application song and dance before they've recovered from the first time around. The biggest *down* side is that students tend to get locked into both an institution and a career path when they are very young and may not be fully prepared to choose either. Just as one college can be markedly different from another, so too can medical schools vary widely. An 18-year-old might be fairly certain that he or she wants to be a doctor but rarely has a sense of whether to choose a research-oriented medical college or a very technical curriculum versus one that may emphasize alternative medicine.

Also (and very unofficially) I've heard directors of medical residency programs admit that they can be suspect of combo-program grads who may lag a couple years behind in maturity than their counterparts who are somewhat older and more seasoned.

I generally recommend that students who are applying to combined programs also apply to colleges or universities without them and then wait until April to make a decision. The combined programs tend to be highly competitive, as I've told you, so all applicants should have other, safer options anyway. (If your daughter is a member of an underrepresented minority group, there are a handful of programs that target these populations specifically and may have slightly less stringent admission requirements, especially when it comes to test-score cut-offs. Conversely, if she is Asian, she may expect the bar to be set higher. I see so many amazing Asian students—Indians and Chinese in particular—who are denied by combo-med programs that I have to wonder if the admission officials are worried that these applicants have been railroaded onto the doctor track by their parents but actually need more time to pick a career path.)

When looking for program options, check out [this list](#) (it may not be complete, but it is pretty close).

As you investigate the combined med programs, contact admission offices and ask these questions:

1. Are the standards of admission to this program far higher than to the university at large? If so, if I am not admitted to the program, might I still be admitted to the university? If there is a minimum SAT score to be admitted, is it at all flexible? Must the score I submit be from a single testing? Will you consider comparable ACT scores if they are better than my SAT? Do most of the admitted applicants actually score well above this minimum?
2. If admitted to the combined program, will I have to maintain a certain GPA (or meet other requirements) to stay in it?
3. If I meet these requirements, are there any further requirements to move from being an undergraduate medical student to a "real" medical student? Will I be required to take MCATs to stay in the medical program? If so, what is your cut-off score?
4. If I decide that I do not wish to remain in the program while still an undergraduate, is it fairly easy for me to stay in the university and pursue another major or course of study?
5. Do students in this program ever earn their undergraduate degrees and then

enroll in other medical schools instead of yours or the one(s) affiliated with your combo program?

6. Is it an eight-year program or an accelerated one?
7. How do I apply to this program? Do you have a separate application, or do I indicate on the university application that I wish to apply to the combined program?
8. Is an interview required? If so, will ALL applicants be interviewed or just those who pass a preliminary level of screening?

Since your daughter is not yet in high school, you're wise to look down the road ahead, to make certain that she is selecting the most challenging classes—especially in math and science—that she can handle and also seeking out other medical-field enrichment opportunities (e.g., volunteering in a hospital or clinic, taking summer courses in the sciences or related areas). However, because she is so young, she also needs to recognize that she has time to change her mind. If she doesn't seem 100% certain that a medical career is right for her, then "The Dean" prescribes a broader undergraduate degree. Your daughter can always aim for med school once she is surer of her goals and has a couple years of college under her belt.

For more information on combo med admission and programs, check out the College Confidential [discussion forum](#) on this topic.

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## Will 26 ACT (and Financial Need) Keep Me Out of College?

“I’m so frustrated and overwhelmed with college applications, and my brother is scaring me by saying that I won’t be able to go to any colleges with a 26 ACT score, since he thinks I won’t receive any scholarship money. I feel like I can get accepted to lots of places, but the money part is holding me back. I have no idea what to do about financial aid or where to start, I am miserably overwhelmed. Please, please help me!”

You probably figured out long ago that sometimes you have to ignore your brother ... and this is definitely one of those times. For starters, a 26 is a very respectable ACT score. It may not make admission folks at the most hyper-competitive colleges turn cartwheels on top of their desks, but it’s going to be at—or even above—the median at many fine colleges. Moreover, since you took the test as a junior, you might want to try it one more time this fall. Your score will probably go up.

As for the financial aid process ... it can be so complex that even professionals often struggle to understand it. But here’s a brief crash course:

There are three main types of financial aid:

1. **MERIT SCHOLARSHIPS** are scholarships that are awarded to students directly by colleges. Typically, merit aid is designed to lure the most desirable students to enroll. Merit scholarships usually range from a couple thousand dollars up to full tuition + room & board for four years. If your ACT score is at the high end of a college’s median range or above it, this will improve your chances of receiving a merit scholarship, although other factors (e.g., grades, leadership, special talents) are usually considered too. Sometimes only students who qualify for need-based aid (see below) are eligible for merit scholarships,

but usually a family's income is not considered when making these awards. And, as noted above, there are many colleges where a 26 will put you at or near the top of the applicant pool.

2. **NEED-BASED AID** is determined by a family's income and assets, not by grades or test scores. So, if two students are admitted to the same college and one has a 36 on the ACT and the other has a 26, the student with the lower score may get a lot more aid than the one with the higher score if her family has greater financial need. Once you and your parent(s) have completed the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), you will find out your EFC ("Expected Family Contribution").

In theory, the EFC is the amount that your family should pay each year for your college costs (tuition, room, board, and all other fees). And that figure shouldn't change, whether you are attending a college that costs \$50,000/year or one that costs only \$5,000/year.

Also in theory, when your EFC is low, then the colleges should make up the difference.

Example:

College A costs \$42,000. If your EFC is \$10,000, this college should give you \$32,000 in scholarships and loans to make sure you can attend.

If College B costs \$25,000, your EFC is still \$10,000. It won't change from school to school. So College B then should give you \$15,000 in scholarships or loans.

You dig?

Whenever your EFC is higher than the total cost of attendance, you won't qualify for need-based aid at that school. But if it's lower than the cost of attendance, then you will qualify for need-based aid ... although you don't always get it.

Why not? In reality, many colleges practice what is known as "Need Gapping." They say, "Okay, we see you require \$32,000, but we're going to give you only \$12,000. You'll have to make up the difference on your own. We don't care how you do it. Take out extra loans. Hit up Grams and Grampy; sell the family heirlooms. It's not our problem."

Most of the highly competitive colleges promise to "meet full need". That is, they will give you enough aid to cover the difference between your EFC and their total costs. But commonly some of the money they give you is made up of loans, which must eventually be repaid. So even if a college claims to meet full need, it doesn't necessarily mean that your financial worries are over. (Only a handful of elite colleges meet full need without requiring loans.)

If you're not sure whether or not your family will qualify for need-based aid, you can play around with this online calculator to get a very rough sense of your EFC. <https://bigfuture.collegeboard.org/pay-for-college/paying-your-share/expected-family-contribution-calculator> You will need to have your family's most current income tax forms in front of you in order to use the EFC calculator. (Note, however, that the FAFSA is only for U.S. citizens or Permanent Residents.)

Shortly after you start the online calculator, you will be asked to choose a "formula"—"Federal Methodology" or "Institutional Methodology" or "Both." Select "Both." Once it's time to actually apply to college, you'll find that all colleges on your list will require the FAFSA those seeking aid, and some will also require the CSS Profile form.

Colleges that ask for only the FAFSA will compute your aid award based on Federal Methodology.

Colleges that also require the CSS Profile, too, will use Institutional Methodology (well, more or less ... their final figures may not be exactly the same as the results you get from the calculator).

In addition, all colleges in the U.S. are now required to put a "Net Price Calculator" on their Web sites. The NPC is usually similar to the College Board's EFC calculator. However, most of them are more specific and may consider factors that are especially important to that particular college. Some even estimate if you will be in the running for merit aid.

It can be very time-consuming to fool around with the NPC's for every college on your list. But, once you've done the College Board's generic version, you might want to try one or two of them, just to see if the figures you get are different.

- 3. OUTSIDE SCHOLARSHIPS** usually come from businesses, religious groups, civic organizations, etc. Some are national awards; some are local. As with merit aid, the amounts of these scholarships will vary tremendously but usually they are much lower than the merit aid that colleges give out. You may qualify for outside scholarships because of your grades and test scores. In addition, you may qualify based on your ethnicity, the place where a parent works, your prospective major or career goal, or perhaps because you submitted a winning essay, art project, etc. There are a number of online search engines to help you find the outside scholarships that are good fits for you. I like FastWeb ([www.fastweb.com](http://www.fastweb.com)) Some scholarships may require a lot of work for little gain, but others may look like they're actually fun to go after. So take a shot at the ones that seem like your best bets.

**BOTTOM LINE:** Despite whatever scary stuff your brother is feeding you, you will indeed have college options. Many students attend college using a combination of merit aid, need-based aid, and outside scholarships. So here are your "action items"...

1. Do the online EFC calculator to get a sense of how much your family should expect to pay for college each year. If you think that this number is much higher than what you family can really afford, look for colleges that are likely to offer you merit scholarships.
2. Identify colleges that meet your preferences but where your GPA and ACT score put you at the top of the heap so that you may be a strong contender for merit aid.
3. Do the FastWeb questionnaire and hone in on outside scholarships that fit your profile and that you think may be fun and worthwhile to apply for.
4. Sign up to take the ACT one more time. A slightly higher score might increase acceptance odds and, especially, merit aid chances.

And, finally see if you can enlist your brother to be helpful rather than hurtful. The college application process can require a lot of secretarial and research duties, so perhaps he's just the man for those jobs!



## Athletic Scholarship for Division III Athlete?

“I’m about to start my senior year in high school, and my coach said that I am good enough to play Division III softball in college. What does this mean and how do I get a scholarship?”

Colleges and universities that belong to the National Collegiate Athletic Association (better known as the NCAA) typically offer sports at either the Division 1, Division 2, or Division 3 level. Division 1 is the most competitive and Division 3 the least ... but, nonetheless, there’s a giant leap between being a good high school athlete and being qualified to play at college on any level, even Div. 3.

NCAA rules prohibit athletic scholarships at Division 3 colleges. You’ll have to go to Div. 1 or 2 for softball dough (more on that in a minute). But, if you qualify for need-based financial aid or some other form of merit scholarship (e.g., for academics, arts, etc.) then you may indeed receive \$\$ to attend a Div. 3 school ... you just can’t get the money specifically for softball.

Note, however, that some Div. 3 colleges do tend to “sweeten the pot” for athletic prospects. For instance, let’s say your family qualifies for need-based financial aid. Instead of giving you an aid “package” that is mostly loan and some grant (the good stuff that you don’t need to pay back), you may find that, as a sought-after softball player, your aid package turns out to be all-or mostly-grant money. “The Dean” has also seen what I call “Back-Door Athletic Scholarships” at Div. 3 colleges. That’s when merit money is awarded for some other achievement (academics, arts, community service), but the athletes seem to conveniently land at the front of the line.

If you’re an especially strong Div. 3 player, then you might even be a contender at some Div. 1 or 2 institutions, too, where athletic scholarships are permissible. If so, you’ll have to register with the NCAA and make sure that your course selection, grades, and standardized test scores meet certain minimal standards. For more information about these standards, read about NCAA eligibility here: <https://web3.ncaa.org/ecwr3/>

Note, however, that scholarship money for sports is hard to come by. Not all colleges that are allowed to give softball scholarships will do so. (The Ivy League, for instance, is Div. 1 but offers no athletic scholarships.) And, where there is funding for softball available, only the most talented athletes will qualify. Moreover, even when a coach is considering you for an athletic scholarship, most of these scholarships are not the “free rides” that we all hear about on TV or through the rumor mill. Many coaches are given a fixed amount of scholarships but then may divide them among several recruits, so the result is that no single player receives more than a few thousand dollars. Thus, if a coach expresses an interest in you and mentions the possibility of scholarship help, don’t hesitate to ask whether you’re looking at serious bucks or just pizza money.

To find a list of colleges with NCAA softball teams, go to: <http://web1.ncaa.org/onlineDir/exec/sponsorship> Note that this list indicates if the program is in Division 1, 2 or 3.

Keep in mind that, even if the Division 3 colleges can’t offer scholarships for athletic prowess, what they may be able to provide is a boost in your admissions odds, if you’re a promising recruit. In other words, if you find that you’re a borderline candidate at a top-choice school, the coach’s clout may make a difference in your admissions verdict. So, as soon as you discover any colleges—at any level—that interest you, feel free to contact the coach to express your interest. At the Div. 1 and Div. 2 levels, the NCAA has strict rules that govern the sort of exchanges that coaches can have with recruits, but at Div. 3 colleges, those rules are laxer.

A final thing to keep in mind is this: Some Division 3 coaches are straight shooters and some are not. At Div. 1 and 2 colleges, prospective students often sign a “Letter of Intent” which helps the coaches know which athletes are sure to matriculate. At Div. 3 schools, however, it’s hard for a coach to assess which players will eventually enroll. So, it’s common for coaches to suck up to all potential athletes with the hope that at least a couple will show up in September. So be wary of promises made by Division 3 coaches. The nice guy who tells you that you’re a “likely four-year starter” in December may forget about you entirely by the following fall, if his recruiting season has been successful. So be sure to query coaches about team size, returning players (and their positions), how many players will be cut after try-outs, etc. This will help you to determine if the coach is serious about you or maybe leading you on.

Good luck with your senior year and your college search. I hope you find a lot of colleges that are in the ballpark for you and at least one that may even be a homerun.

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## Aid for International Early Action Applicant?

“I am an international student from Myanmar who has decided to apply for universities using Early Action. I am confused because I don't know what financial aid is available for international students. If you could tell me the financial aids available for international students, you'd be helping me with a major headache! Thanks for your help in advance!”

There is little consistency in the U.S. admission and financial aid process. You have to go on each institution's website and search for financial aid information that is specific to international students and often it can be a “major headache” indeed to find the right pages. Here are some examples:

[Georgetown University](#)

[Stanford University](#)

I don't know which schools currently interest you, but there are some that have no aid at all for international students and there are some (e.g., MIT, Cal Tech) that do have aid for internationals but don't permit international students to apply in the Early Action round if financial aid is required. So, as noted above, you must read each website carefully to see what the policy is at the colleges that interest you.

If you do an Internet search for “aid for international students+doug thompson.pdf” you will get a link to a list (now several years old) that includes many—but not all—of the U.S. institutions that provide financial aid to international students. From this document you can also get a general idea of which colleges offer a lot of aid and which offer very little.

You can also seek this information on a college-by-college basis by using the [College Board](#) website. Type in the name of the school that interests you in the “college search” box; from that school’s listing, click on “For International Students” on the left-hand menu. You will see the annual amount that the university spends on aid to international students and the number of students who receive it. If there are no figures listed, it *could* mean that the college offers no aid to international applicants, but you should check that school’s website to confirm. Of course, when you see the total amount of aid awarded and the number of students who receive it, it’s impossible to tell whether some students receive a lot of that aid while others receive only a small amount. But at least this will give you an approximate sense of whether the college seems to be fairly generous to international applicants.

No matter where you are applying, please be aware that it is very difficult for international students to get financial aid. Your best bet is to apply to colleges and universities where your grades and standardized test scores put you well above the typical admitted freshman. If you are aiming for the most selective colleges in the United States (e.g., Ivy League schools, MIT, Stanford, etc.), you should have not only outstanding grades and test scores but also something *else* that sets you apart. This “something else” could be a unique talent in science, arts, sports, and so on or it could be an unusual background. (Perhaps you grew up very poor and overcame significant obstacles or, conversely, maybe you grew up very rich and had extraordinary experiences because of it.)

Many international students seem focused on only the short list of U.S. colleges and universities that are most well known. But because financial aid is so competitive, it would be wise to keep an open mind and explore broader options, too.

Finally, keep in mind that Early Action is not “binding,” meaning that a student who is accepted via EA is not obligated to enroll. Thus, admission officials usually admit only the strongest candidates in the Early Action round because they don’t want to save a space for a solid but not stellar student who may not show up anyway. So if you are deferred but not denied in the Early Action process, don’t be discouraged. Be sure to notify admission officials that you are still eager to attend and send an update with new grades, accomplishments, etc., before your application is reviewed again. Admission officials can be especially wary of accepting international students who need aid via Early Action, before they have a chance to view the *entire* applicant pool.



## When to Explain Extenuating Circumstances to Financial Aid Offices?

“If we have a high EFC and extenuating financial circumstances should we send a letter to the financial aid office asking for special consideration before we receive their financial aid award or wait until we receive it?”

You should definitely send an explanatory letter to colleges at the time that you apply for aid—or as soon thereafter as possible. Do not wait until you receive your aid award, when college financial aid budgets are already finalized, unless you will allow your child to enroll even without the aid you feel you need. (In that case, the higher EFC may make your child a more desirable candidate, unless the college is “need-blind,” but this will also increase the likelihood that your special circumstances won’t be honored once you explain them later.)

If you have documentation that backs up your explanation (e.g., the nursing home bills you pay for Grandma), send copies with your letter.

Financial aid officials (and many admission officials, too) are a lot like doctors. That is, no matter how personal and embarrassing your situation may feel to you, they’ve probably heard it all before, and they are accustomed to dealing with such matters professionally and discreetly.

However, like most things in the admissions world, the responses to your situation may be inconsistent. One college might take your extenuating circumstances into account; the next school might not.

So, once your child has received all aid awards, you should contact the financial aid offices that were *not* responsive to your needs and try to appeal ... unless, of course, these are not colleges that your child wants to attend.

If a college—let’s call it “College A”—does not seem to consider your special needs but another school (“College B”) does, you may be able to leverage one aid award against the other, if you prefer A over B. However, this rarely works unless the admission standards at both schools are comparable, and—even then—

you have to keep in mind that similar schools can have dissimilar financial aid policies ... or budgets. Nonetheless, it can't hurt to give it the old college try!

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## Will Divorced Dad's Income Affect EFC?

“My parents are divorced, and I live with my mom. It's just her and me in our house. Once I turn 18, my dad is not legally required by the state of Florida to support me financially (i.e., pay for my postsecondary education). Since this is the case, will my family's expected contribution be based on just my mother's income? I don't work. My mom is the sole provider in our household.”

Even if your father's divorce decree does not *require* him to support you past age 18, colleges that require financial information from *both* parents will still use his income and assets to determine your financial aid. Well, that's the BAD news. But there is also some GOOD news:

1. Many colleges require *just* the FAFSA (Free Application for Federal Student Aid). The FAFSA asks for financial information from the custodial parent alone. So, at these schools, your EFC will be based on **ONLY** your mother's information.
2. Many private colleges (especially the more selective ones), as well as some public colleges, also require the CSS Profile Form (or their own similar form). The Profile seeks information from **BOTH** parents, even when they are divorced. Here is a list of colleges that require [this form](#).

That may not sound like good news ... and perhaps it isn't. BUT ... if your parents' divorce isn't recent, you can write a letter to financial aid officers and explain this. College officials may be lenient and will discount your father's income when they assess your financial need.

In general, a parent's ABILITY to pay and not the WILLINGNESS to pay will determine a financial aid award. So if your dad refuses to contribute to your college costs, it might hurt you at some institutions. However, the FAFSA-only colleges will not look at his data at all.

>>> [Get more helpful tips on how to pay for college by accessing this section on College Confidential.](#)



## What Essay Topics Do Admission Deans Hate?

“What essay topics do admission deans hate to read about?”

Admission officials like to read any essay that’s well crafted, so there’s rarely a topic that requires a huge “Keep Out!” warning. But ... there are certainly those that could use at least a small “Caution” sign. These tend to fall under three headings. The first is **Overused Ideas**—the ones that would actually be pretty decent topics if most admission folks hadn’t seen them a gazillion times already. This list includes:

**The Big Game** and/or learning all my important life lessons from athletics.

**The Big Orchestra Recital** (or Drama Debut, etc.): “I was nervous but rose above my fear and the applause at the end was deafening.”

**Pet Death:** “I lost my best friend and thought I couldn’t go on, but now I have a new pet I will love just as much.”

**Religious Epiphanies:** Often used in tandem with one of the other topics above, as in “It was as if God had given me the power and determination to cross the finish line ahead of Joel Fassbinder ...” or “Just when I thought I would die myself from the pain of losing Fluffy, a brilliant white light blazed down on me and I could feel a strong force take my hand ...”

**Trials and Tribulations of Travel:** The Outward Bound/Experiment in International Living/Month on a Kibbutz (etc.) Experience. “I discovered that people everywhere are the same at heart and/or I learned to value the advantages I have at home and now I don’t mind sharing my room with my brother so much since I only have one and not seven.”

**My Grandfather or Grandmother:** Their old-fashioned values (that I don't personally share but respect—to some extent—as long as they don't keep trying to impose them on me) or How hard Meemaw and Peepaw worked to make a good life for their family after they came here from the old country (but I just wish they'd remember that they're not *still* in the old country and stop telling me how to dress).

**Achieving World Peace through Mutual Understanding** (and other oversimplified solutions to complex problems).

**The Kindly Homeless Man at the Soup Kitchen Where I Just Started Volunteering Last Week** (who actually gave me more than I gave him).

Personally, I hate to suggest that such ideas should be avoided entirely because they often represent what is important in many teenagers' lives. Unless you've grown up in a homeless shelter or endured chemotherapy, you may feel that your biggest challenge to date really *was* defeating the Palisades Panthers in the divisional soccer final or spending a week in Salamanca with the school Spanish Club. I've actually read great essays on several of these subjects, but only the very best ones stand out in a crowd, so you might want to head in a more original direction.

The second area to avoid is the **Overcoming Obstacles** essay. Your "I'm making do with a Subaru" diatribe is going to sound pretty lame to the admission folks who have been up all night reading about the aforementioned homeless shelters and chemo treatments. So, unless you've surmounted something pretty daunting—or can write with uncommon wit and at least a dash of self-deprecation—then steer clear.

The final Caution category is the **TMI (Too Much Information)** essay. If you think you're going to impress admission committees by being the first applicant ever to tackle the joys of barfing or belching, think again. Not only have these topics been done (a lot), but also rarely will your fourth-grade humor make the impression that you're aiming for.

Sometimes an entire topic falls in TMI turf ("How Herpes Simplex 2 has made me a more careful person") and sometimes the topic itself is sound, but admission folks don't *really* need every detail of your cage-cleaning rotation the summer you interned at the zoo.

Also under the TMI rubric, don't use your college essay as a confessional. If you were suspended for sharing a beer under the basketball bleachers or busting

into the biology teacher's file cabinet, then colleges will need an explanation of the incident and what you learned from it. But your *primary* essay is often not the best place for that. Write a *supplementary* essay or letter instead, and use the main one to point out that you actually have *other* interests and skills besides booze and burglary. And, by all means, don't use your essay to reveal a guilty conscience. If you never got caught for some lapse in judgment, this isn't the time to get it off your chest.

Finally, while it's sensible to ask about what admission deans might like to read—or not—do keep in mind that the best essays are usually those that aren't overly conscious of their audience. You shouldn't write merely what you think the admission committees should see or use those 50-cent words you found in the thesaurus. Read your essay draft to others who know you well (parents, siblings, friends, etc.) and ask them if your *own* voice is coming through loud and clear.

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## Tips for Answering “Why THIS College?” Essay Questions

“I have to write several essays explaining why I have chosen particular colleges on my list. I haven't been able to visit any of these schools or attend fairs or meet college reps, and I can't think of anything to say that would sound genuine and show that I clearly have a believable reason for my attraction. Even after thinking long and hard, I haven't been able to come up with any decent reason for wanting to go to specific colleges. I don't want my essays to sound as if they came straight from the website or brochure. I really hate writing these essays and need some suggestions on how to approach them.”

I hate those “Why this College?” assignments, too. I've seen students write the same essay for totally disparate schools, plugging in new adjectives as needed, almost as if they were doing a “Mad Lib.” For instance, “I've always wanted to

attend a LARGE UNIVERSITY” quickly turns into, “I’ve always wanted to attend a SMALL COLLEGE.” Or “I prefer a COLD climate” is transformed into “I prefer a WARM climate.”

In a perfect world, I think colleges should make this essay optional. The prompt should say something like this: **If you have a truly compelling reason for selecting our institution, please explain. However 99% of our applicants should not respond to this question, and if you write a bunch of B.S., it will be held against you.**

Of course, it’s hard enough to compose these essays when you *do* know why you’re interested in your target schools, and harder still if your reasons for applying are as vague as yours are.

Here are some suggestions of ways to personalize the process of writing these nasty things. Hopefully, at the same time this little exercise will force you to look more closely at the choices you’ve made to see if they’re really the right ones for you.

1. Check out the comments about your target colleges on College Confidential. Feel free to quote CC members in your “Why This College Essay.” For instance, “Penn caught my eye when I spotted a comment on the College Confidential discussion forum by a member who called himself, ‘Ilovebagels.’ I love bagels, too (but that’s probably not a wise reason to choose a college!) and also I was interested when he said, ‘I’ve found Penn to be a remarkably centrist institution. Which as a right-of-center person, I felt put it ahead of the other Ivies with their legions of hippies.’ This made me think that Penn might be a good fit for me, so I started to dig deeper ...”
2. Make e-mail contact with a “real” student. Many admission we sites have links that allow you to connect with a current student. You can also do this though a friend or acquaintance who attends your target schools, by using college website directories to find students who share common interests (e.g., the president of the outing club or captain of the squash team), or by writing to the admission office and asking if they might be able to refer you to a classics major or pre-med student or anyone who shares your interests, your home state or country, etc. Then, after corresponding with this student pen-pal, you can cite his or her words of wisdom in your essay.
3. Comb through college catalogs—either hard copies, if you have them, or online—to find classes or academic programs that seem special and appealing then discuss your findings in your essays. Obviously, these offerings should be

pretty unusual. Admission committees won't be impressed if you say, "I want to go to Princeton because I found that I can take classes in Shakespeare and organic chemistry." If you peruse entire catalogs and can't find something that excites you, you really should be rethinking your college choices.

Finally, check out this thread on ["Why This College Essays"](#) on CC if you haven't already to get some additional tips on those ornery essays.

I'm not sure why you haven't been able to go on visits, attend fairs, meet with college reps, etc. Perhaps it's geography and/or finances. But, if at all possible, in the months ahead, I do urge you to take a closer look at the schools that interest you. And if possible, visit some that don't interest you—just so you'll have options to compare.

**>>> Get more helpful tips on how to write your essays by accessing [this section](#) on College Confidential.**

# TESTS & TEST SCORES

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## Will Sub-Par SATs Keep My Daughter Out of Top-Choice Colleges?

“My daughter has a 3.81 GPA in all honors courses, but after two attempts at the SAT, her best score is 1760. The schools she likes list average SAT scores of 1900 and up. Does she stand a chance with her scores?”

Most college admission officials are quick to insist that, “Course selection and grades are far more important than test scores,” and in a perfect world this is true. In *our* world, however, applicants can look strikingly similar on paper (not that anyone uses paper anymore). Many students take roughly the same courses, earn roughly the same grades, and participate in an all-too-familiar roster of activities (Key Club, yearbook, Model UN, orchestra, dance team, etc.). Thus test scores can become a tie-breaker, even if the admission folks don’t say so.

But will your daughter’s test results keep her out of her top-choice colleges? Maybe not. For starters, if her application includes *other* components that her target colleges “need,” this will help to take the spotlight off of her scores. Some of these “distractions” from the test scores could include:

- **GPA** (Is a 3.81 higher than the median at your daughter’s colleges? If so, this will help.)
- **Athletic prowess.** (Is your daughter being recruited by a coach or, if not, might she at least fill out a roster and warm a bench?)
- **Unusual or exceptional extracurriculars.** (Can your daughter play the piccolo in the marching band or will the college boast that she was a national chess champ or *Teen Jeopardy* finalist?)

- **Geographic diversity.** (Do you live in a state, country, or town that is underrepresented in the college's student body?)
- **Minority, Legacy, or VIP Status.** (A "VIP" can be someone with a strong connection to the college itself ... like the provost's nephew ... or it can mean a link to a big-wig in the world at large.)
- **Full-pay.** (Will your daughter attend without needing financial aid or do you require only a little?)

If your daughter can say "Yes" to one or more of the options on this list, it will improve her admission odds. Other factors like a memorable essay or slam-dunk recommendations can help as well. And if her test scores are skewed—higher in the area that she claims as her strong suit and lower elsewhere—then admission folks will take this into account, too.

A couple other thoughts: Has your daughter tried the ACT? Some students do better on the ACT than on the SAT for a variety of reasons. For instance, if vocab is your child's weakness, she'll be delighted to discover that there aren't any vocab questions on the ACT. And how about Subject Tests? Even if a college doesn't require them, most schools will consider them anyway, and this can be a good way to show off abilities in areas not tested by the main SAT. For example, if your daughter does her best work in biology, American history, or Spanish, good scores in those areas won't completely offset low SATs but can still be a plus.

In addition, you mention that the median scores at your daughter's colleges are in the 1900 range. So that tells "The Dean" that she's not aiming for the Ivies or any other hyper-competitive colleges. And that's good news. It's typically at the most sought-after colleges that test results can play the biggest tie-breaker role because so many applicants have near-perfect grades in a slew of AP, honors, and IB classes. So once you look beyond that exalted level, test scores can still affect outcomes, but they may not loom quite as large.

Finally, if any of your daughter's top-choice colleges offer Early Decision, this might be a smart move. Admission officials are more likely to accept borderline candidates in the Early round than in the Regular Decision round. If you need financial aid and your daughter applies to a "binding" Early Decision college, she can bail out of the ED commitment without penalty if her aid award isn't adequate. (YOU, not the college, get to determine how much aid is "adequate," but you do have to decide promptly.)

**Bottom line:** Although SATs are often more important than students and parents are told, your daughter won't be completely out of luck at her target colleges, especially if there are other mitigating factors that she can emphasize in her applications.

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## Are the ACT and SAT Viewed Equally?

“My daughter is preparing for college by studying for the ACT. Do top schools like the Ivy League or Stanford prefer the SAT over the ACT? Even though the school might say either one is OK, in your opinion does one or the other have more advantage?”

Back when “The Dean” applied to college, the SAT was the top-dog test, especially at the “elite” Eastern colleges. The ACT, which was then more common in the South, West, and Midwest, was seen by some as a poor relation. But that was many moons ago (as my teenage son is quick to remind me). And, today, both tests are viewed—and accepted—equally.

And, lest you worry that “The Dean” is receiving a kick-back from the ACT folks for saying this, I assure you that I’m not. In fact, my aforementioned son took *only* the ACT and not the SAT. (Well, he did take a couple SAT Subject Tests, which I’ll get to in a minute.)

Having watched other students (and their parents) suffer through standardized-testing stress, expense, and early-morning Saturday wake-ups, I chose a “minimalist” testing approach for my own child. I said that he should select a test, take it just once in the spring of his 11th-grade year, and if his scores were decent, he’d be done. If not, we agreed that he might have to try the other test.

We picked the ACT because it has a Science section (his strong suit) while the SAT doesn’t. Conversely, the ACT does *not* include vocabulary questions (my son’s potential Achilles Heel) and the SAT *does*. So that’s why I directed him to the ACT. His results were strong, and so I said he didn’t need to do a re-test or to take the

SAT at all. (And when I pointed to his perfect score on the Science section, I reminded him of his mother's genius.)

Several students who favored the ACT over the SAT have told me that it's because the ACT imposes no penalty for guessing. "There was a lot less pressure on me when I took that test," conceded one girl who took both, "because I didn't spend any time or energy worrying about whether or not I should guess." But conversely, although the ACT Science section is more about interpreting charts and graphs rather than about knowing that neon is chemically inert and forms no uncharged chemical compounds, another high school junior admitted to me that, "Just seeing the word 'Science' in the test booklet nearly brought on a panic attack!" Thus, with test prejudice truly a thing of the past, students should feel free to take the test that fits their strengths ... or even their schedules ... and many may wish to try *both* to see where they're most successful.

But, as noted above, although my own son was definitely an ACT guy, and I don't have any concerns that a single college ... no matter how snooty ... will hold it against him, he did take a couple of SAT Subject tests, too. Some colleges that require two Subject Tests will waive the requirement for applicants who take the ACT with Writing, as my son did. But others will not. It can be confusing to keep track of which schools demand which tests. Also, students who insist that all the colleges they're considering will accept the ACT in lieu of Subject Tests may be shooting themselves in the foot if they decide to add new schools to the list in the fall of senior year. Moreover, Subject Tests, even when not required, can help students to show off strengths in areas that the SAT and ACT don't cover, such as history and foreign language. In addition, students aiming for the most selective colleges often submit more than the requisite scores. So an applicant who sends in *only* an ACT score and no Subject Test results might be at a *slight* disadvantage when "competitor applicants" have submitted stellar scores in *multiple* subjects.

**Bottom line:** The SAT and the ACT really *are* equally respected by all colleges, including the Ivies and Stanford, regardless of who might suggest otherwise. So as your daughter makes her college preparations, she can focus on the test that she feels will best showcase her strengths and meet her scheduling needs. I assure you that, if she doesn't get the news she wants from her top-choice colleges, it won't be because she took the wrong test.

>>> [Get more helpful tips on how to prep for college by accessing this section on College Confidential.](#)

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## Little Volunteer Work = Admissions Deal-Breaker?

“My daughter has worked hard throughout high school. She is at the top of her class, with almost a perfect SAT and ACT. She plays the piano and does cross-country. However, because of our financial difficulties, she has had to babysit and tutor, and she works summers at a farm to pay for her own clothes, etc. Her counselor said she will not get into a decent college because she has only done a little volunteer work (working on Obama’s campaign). I explained that she has had to work three days a week, and this combined with taking four APs and helping me out with her little brother has given her little time to do much else. I feel so discouraged for my daughter. After all that she has done, it seems this is going to limit her chances. I don’t know what to think.”

Your counselor sounds like an idiot. Well, OK, maybe that’s a little strong, but “The Dean” just had a second cup of coffee and probably should have stopped at one.

For starters, I don’t know what the counselor means by a “decent” college. But, regardless, the minimal volunteer work on your daughter’s résumé won’t be a deal-breaker *anywhere*. Her paid work experiences (plus helping you at home) will look every bit as meaningful to admission committees as a volunteer job, especially when she points out that the money she earned was for necessities, not for luxuries. The summer farm gig sounds especially interesting (far less common than tutoring and babysitting) and might even be fodder for an essay.

In any case, your daughter should make sure that admission officials know about her work experiences and the reasons behind them. The “Additional Information” section of her applications provides a place for this explanation, if she needs it. I also encourage students to submit an “Annotated Activities List” to the colleges that will accept unsolicited materials (and almost all will). This “résumé on steroids” provides not only a list of a student’s activities and achievements, but also offers a brief explanation of those that aren’t immediately obvious. So this is a spot where she can explain her assorted jobs and *why* she does them.

Since you’ve told me that your daughter is a top student who will need significant financial aid, she may want to consider an Early Decision application. Because your counselor has already proved to be ill-informed, he or she might also tell you that “ED” is only for students who aren’t worried about cost. But, conversely, the most selective colleges that offer ED also have excellent financial aid, so your daughter might benefit from giving herself the admissions-odd boost that ED provides. If she is admitted via Early Decision but the aid award is not sufficient, she can back out of the “binding” Early Decision commitment without penalty as long as she does it promptly. (Some of the most sought-after universities offer “Single Choice Early Action” instead of Early Decision. This gives *some* admissions-odds boost but not as much as ED. So if your daughter prefers one of the SCEA colleges, this is a route she might consider as well.)

Moreover, there are hundreds of colleges that I would call *very* “decent” that would practically send a limo for applicants with top grades and near-perfect tests ... even those who barely leave their bedrooms outside of school hours. So your daughter will have many options, even if she never does a lick of volunteer work again.

But, finally, you must keep in mind that the Ivies and other “elite” colleges turn down roughly nine qualified applicants for each one they admit. Strong grades and test scores will get a candidate to the outer gate, but then the admission folks have tough choices to make as they decide who goes beyond it. So if your daughter is not accepted by her favorite colleges, I promise you that it won’t be because of the paucity of volunteer work on her application, despite what her school counselor claims.



## School Band vs. Higher Class Rank

“My daughter is finishing her freshman year in high school. She is active in her high school marching band. In order to participate in the band you must be enrolled in “band” as a class. This class is classified as a “general study” and doesn’t have an AP or Honors level. We decided she could participate as a freshman and revisit the scenario for her sophomore year schedule because all the students are required to take a general study art class for graduation. The reason this class now becomes an issue is that it will affect her weighted GPA as a senior, essentially eliminating her from being valedictorian or perhaps even top 10 (she was valedictorian in 8th grade). On the admission side do they prefer a top 5 (class of ~550) or a top 20 with the marching band activity? I should note that, although she excels in music, it is not something she wishes to pursue. At this time she is set on engineering.”

College admission officials will usually *tell* you that a student should pursue interests outside of academics and that it’s fine for an applicant to stick with band, even though it’s not a “weighted” class and will probably have a negative impact on GPA and class rank.

BUT ... I’ve found that these admission folks often speak with forked tongues and don’t always practice what they preach. In other words, they are likely to be more impressed by the candidate with the higher rank and grades than they are with the student who marched with her euphonium at graduation. While every admission official on the planet will tell you that band is a very worthwhile activity, there is certainly nothing unique or “sexy” about it that will jump off the page at decision time. Sure, plenty of band students are admitted to “elite”

colleges every year, but, in your daughter's particular case, it sounds like band isn't the right choice.

If this were *my* child, and if she were *passionate* about band, then I would say, "Stick with it anyway." But if she's equally willing to take more challenging classes and leave band behind, then that's probably the wiser route when it comes to admission options down the road. Your daughter can, of course, continue with her instrument, if she's so inclined, once her band days are behind her. (However, I tried that plan with my own son, and his saxophone hasn't left its case since eighth grade. )

Keep in mind, however, that band can be more than just music. At many schools, it's a way for the stronger students to share in an activity that they all appreciate and which may even be a cornerstone in their social life outside of school. Taking a band class during an otherwise rigorous school day can also provide a much-needed break.

So if you do feel that band could play an important role in your daughter's life—even if she isn't aiming for a future in music—another option you can pursue (although it may be tilting at windmills) is to get together with other parents from your school (especially, although not exclusively, the band parents) and try to make a change in the curriculum and in the way that GPAs are calculated.

Right now the school requires one "general study" course for graduation. But what if you could get the school to require FOUR general study courses? That way, each student would be given a mental-health break in the day as well as the opportunity to explore new and worthwhile areas that honors students are commonly discouraged from including in their schedules. (At my son's high school, these areas include woodshop, cooking, multimedia, personal finance, etc.) If all students were REQUIRED to take one class like these each year, I think that the upshot would be less stressed and more well-prepared young adults.

Granted, if you keep your daughter in band and decide to take up this cause, you may be defeated, and then her valedictory status would be at risk. But I still think it's a cause worth fighting for. However, if this is not *your* battle, and a top-of-the-class finish for your daughter is a priority, then I suggest that she turns in her plumed hat and music stand at the end of this semester.



## College Admissions for Non-Athletes

“My son is a rising high school sophomore. He gets great grades, has won awards for his photos and films, plays concert piano and glockenspiel, and volunteers at a local history museum. Recently a friend of mine with older children said that college admission officers will frown on the fact that my son hasn’t been involved in any sports since middle school soccer. He really isn’t interested in continuing organized athletics, and I’m not even sure where these could fit into his schedule. But is he hurting his college chances?”

We all can recite tales of football quarterbacks or hockey goalies who, despite nary an honors course on their transcripts, jogged off to big-name colleges while the class valedictorian carted thin envelopes to the recycling center—probably on a peanut-oil-powered scooter he engineered in eighth grade. Yes, sports *can* be a huge boost in the admissions process, and athletic prowess has shunted many an application from the “deny” pile into the “admit” stack. BUT ... that’s only when the student-athlete is good enough to catch a coach’s eye, and most *won’t* be.

It’s usually a quantum leap from being a high school athlete to being strong enough in one’s sport to continue in college. Many students and parents mistakenly believe that anyone who is reasonably good at a high school sport can play on at least a Division III college team. But that’s far from true. Granted, depending on the sport and the school, some teams do find a place—at least on the bench—for all aspiring participants. But that still doesn’t mean that a candidate’s athletic accomplishments will provide any sort of “hook” at admissions-verdict time. These are usually reserved for only the finest athletes, especially in the more common sports.

So, when parents in my purview ask about the role of their child’s athletic endeavors in the college-admissions process, my first question is always,

“How good is he (or she)?” And then if the answer is “Outstanding” “Excellent,” “Extraordinary,” or “Did you see the latest issue of *Water Polo Weekly*?” then I’ll probably launch into a discussion of how athletic recruiting works. If the response is “good” or a more measured “pretty good,” then I’ll probe further.

But, for those parents who describe their progeny as “enthusiastic,” “spirited,” or “just OK,” I’ll point out that the pursuit of the sport is a terrific idea if the student *wants* to do it. On the other hand, if the student is staying involved in sports only because he or she (or mom or dad) believes that it’s an application imperative, then that’s a big mistake.

When admission officials see various varsity teams on an application, they definitely deem it “time well spent” but it won’t automatically make them dance on the ceiling. They’ll note, too, if the candidate has been elected captain or holds some other leadership role. This will be a plus, of course. Nonetheless, unless the student has the potential to help the athletic program at the college in question, then all those predawn work-outs, 50-mile bus rides, or weekends spent in dank, unfamiliar YMCAs will mean next to nothing from an admissions-hook perspective. From *that* point of view, these kids might have been better off engaged in other, more atypical activities—as your son is—where they might stand out in a crowd.

So, it sounds as if your son is right where he should be. If he ever decides to dust off his old cleats, that’s fine, but certainly don’t feel that he *has to* in order to get into the college of his choice.

Share this eBook:



## Is Pricy Summer Program Worth the Dough?

“We live in the Midwest and our high school junior is looking at a four-week residential program at a private university in California with a focus on college-level writing. Fees plus transportation costs will top \$8,000. Is this worth the money?”

There's an old joke about a tourist who is lost in rural Maine. When he comes to a fork in the road he spots an old codger, clearly a local. So the tourist calls out, "Does it matter which of these roads I take to get to Portland?" and the codger replies, "Not to me, it don't."

Your question somehow evoked that same thought. *I* would never spend \$8K for a summer writing program for my *own* son. But this is a very personal decision, one that should be based on your family finances and also on what you feel would most benefit your child.

If you have unlimited resources and your child seems especially excited about this opportunity, you may find that you get sufficient bang for your buck. If your child has always been an indifferent student but suddenly seems passionate about writing—and about this program in particular—you may decide that this is the time to stoke the fire.

But there are many more cost-effective ways to study writing, and if you're hoping that this Left Coast program will give your child a boost at admissions time, it probably will *not*. (It *MIGHT* help at the host college but it depends on the school. Generally, the more selective the college, the less attending their own summer program will matter at admission-verdict time.)

In terms of admissions "currency," admission folks can be pretty jaded when it comes to seeing yet another on-campus summer gig on an application or résumé. In my *own* high school days, many decades ago, students who chose to spend their vacation weeks in a classroom and not on a beach blanket were unusual. But now, with so many families viewing a studious summer as an elite-college necessity, the admission folks are often *more* impressed by the kid who's spent the summer flipping burgers at Mickey D's than by the one whose parents wrote out a whopping check for an on-campus endeavor. And there are probably *free* writers' groups in your community ... or a cheap class at the local college ... that could fuel a budding Anne Tyler or Ernest Hemingway.

Thus, while expensive summer endeavors can be a great way for students to pursue an area of interest in depth or to explore a potential new one, I urge teenagers and their parents to do these things because they *want* to (and won't be straining household budgets because of it) and not because it seems like a fast-track to a fat envelope.

# NON-TRADITIONAL STUDENTS

Share this eBook:



## Should Non-Traditional Students Disclose Shaky Start When Reapplying?

“I am a non-traditional college student trying to continue on for my four-year degree. Between 1994 and 1996 I attended a four-year school and basically flunked out with a 1.9 GPA. Since then I have a cumulative 3.48 GPA with two associate degrees. I have applied to different schools with the aforementioned four-year school listed on there and I have been denied three times, mainly because they take the credits from the four-year schools but not the two-year schools. So, when applying to my next school, should I leave that four-year off the application? I feel bad doing it, but I also feel I am being judged on grades that are no longer indicative of what kind of student I am.”

Unfortunately, you cannot omit any part of your academic history from your applications. I know that it seems unfair to be penalized for youthful follies because you've clearly gotten back on track since then. However, should you apply to another school now, without revealing your record, you run the risk of having your acceptance overturned, if your past were to come to light. In fact, I've even heard the sad story of one student in your shoes who concealed a false start, applied to a new college, got accepted and did well there, but was expelled just weeks before graduation when his dishonesty was discovered.

If you continued to be denied admission in spite of your recent successes, my guess is that you are applying to the wrong colleges or are making some other error in your applications. There are many four-year schools that would happily accept a mature student with a 3.48 GPA and two associate degrees, even someone with long-ago blemishes on their transcript.

Have you already worked with a transfer counselor from your two-year schools to help you with placement? Most community colleges have “articulation agreements” with several four-year colleges. These agreements guarantee ... or at least facilitate ... transferring into the participating four-year colleges as long as you’ve met certain standards at the two-year school. Have you looked into such agreements at your two-year college(s)?

One other strategy you might try is that, before you apply elsewhere again, make an appointment to meet in person with the college’s admission officer who oversees transfer applicants. Explain your situation to him or her and then ask how to proceed. You may get some helpful advice this way and you’ll also potentially make a “friend” in the admission office.

A few four-year colleges even offer “academic forgiveness” programs that allow students who were once enrolled and did poorly to return to redeem themselves. In these cases, the original grades remain a part of the student’s record, but the college also computes a second “clean-slate” grade-point average that allows the student a second chance at a good GPA. Perhaps you should check with the transfer official at your old four-year school to see if they have such an option.

In any case, your early college record is certainly not indicative of your strength as a student, so I hope you persist and find a four-year college that will welcome you ... as many should.



## College Admission Advice for Homeschoolers

“What specific advice can you give homeschooling parents about college admissions? (My child is middle-school age now.)”

There is already a lot of advice for homeschoolers in the “Ask the Dean” archives (see the links at the end of my response). We also have a very active [homeschoolers forum](#) on College Confidential.

Since you say that you’re the parent of a pre-high school student, it sounds like you’re looking down the road, which is wise. You might find [this blog](#) from the MIT website helpful because it discusses the types of experiences that homeschooled MIT candidates often put on their applications. It’s definitely not something you want to read when your child is already filling out those forms!

Once it’s time to actually apply, homeschooled students and/or their parents should:

1. Look for and respond to the homeschool questions on the Common Application School Report, if your child is applying to any Common Application member colleges. And, if not, you can use these questions as a guideline for applying to non-member colleges that don’t have their own form (or specific instructions) for homeschoolers. (TIP: Check out these questions *now* because they will help you to better understand what colleges will expect from homeschoolers.)
2. Take as many SAT Subject Tests or AP exams as possible to provide objective information about what the student has learned. This is especially important when applying to the more competitive colleges where the majority of traditional applicants will be submitting high scores on multiple tests. Remember that SAT Subject Tests can be taken on many dates throughout the school year, but AP exams are only administered in May (with scores available in July) so homeschoolers must plan ahead to take these tests by the spring of 11th grade. (Contact your local public high school well in advance to order

tests.) Good results from a later administration (i.e., May of senior year) can earn college credits but won't offer any oomph in the admissions-verdict department.

3. Highlight research, writing, or arts projects; museum and field trips; and diverse reading assignments that the homeschool experience may have provided. Standardized test results, as noted above, can help show that a student is as good as competitor applicants from traditional schools. So use essays, additional information, résumés, etc., to show how you are *different* and how you took advantage of the unique opportunities that homeschooling can offer.

Here are other *Ask the Deans* with more details:

[IVY LEAGUE APPLICATIONS](#)

[EXTRACURRICULARS](#)

[NO SAT SCORES/LAST-MINUTE APPLICATIONS](#)

[CYBER-SCHOOLING](#)

[AP EXAMS](#)

There is really too much to this topic to cover within the scope of a Q&A column, but I hope I've given you some information that will be useful. As A parent myself, I wish you all the best as you engage with your teenager all day long.

**>>> [Learn more about the college admissions process by accessing this section on College Confidential.](#)**

# WAITLISTS

Share this eBook:



## Tips for Getting Off the Yale (or Any) Waitlist

“Our son is waitlisted at Yale. What can he do to improve his chance to get admitted?”

Below are some generic tips for students who are in waitlist limbo. Note, however, that the more sought-after the school, the less likely that waitlisted students will get good news. And those who *do* often fill enrollment “niches” based on race, residence, special talents, etc.

Yale, of course is one of those places where the odds of acceptance from the waitlist are very slim. So, as your son forges ahead with his waitlist campaign, he should also try to get excited about a college that has *already* said yes.

But here are some thoughts to pass along to your son as he proceeds:

First of all, be aware that, from year to year, there can be huge discrepancies in the number of students who are taken off a waitlist. This can range from zero to a couple hundred. Sometimes colleges begin to take students from the waitlist even before the May 1 Candidates’ Reply Date. More commonly, waitlist activity heats up at the end of the first week of May and continues for the rest of that month and into early June. Usually, colleges release the majority of their waitlisted students somewhere around the end of June but will allow others to linger through the summer, just in case there are unexpected last-minute vacancies in the class.

Typically, colleges do not rank their waitlisted candidates and then pluck them off the list one at a time, starting at the top. Instead, they are likely to use the waitlist to meet “institutional needs” –i.e., to make up for deficiencies in the class that has enrolled so far. In other words, if the class seems short on males or females, on members of particular minority groups, on students from the

Northwest or Southeast, on science majors, on swimmers or soccer goalies, etc., then those students may be the first to be selected from the waitlist. Priority may also be given to children of prominent alumni or other VIPs (who have been creating a stir with friends in high places since the decision letters went out). So, if you're on a waitlist but don't think you fill a particular niche (i.e., if you're a middle- or upper-middle-class white kid from an overrepresented part of the country with a common choice of major and no unique talents), then you may not be one of the first selected. But if you're not applying for financial aid, that can be a plus ... especially at colleges that are not as "rich" as the Ivies and other elite schools. Conversely, if you need a lot of financial aid, that might hurt you. (Even colleges that claim to be need blind may *not* be when it's time to choose from the waitlist.)

Keep in mind that some colleges put more than 1,000 students on their waitlists, so don't get your hopes too high.

Also be aware that, although admission folks may insist otherwise, some practice what is known as "Courtesy Waitlisting." This is when students who ordinarily would be denied are added to the waitlist instead for a variety of reasons. Typically, these are the children of alumni and VIPs. Sometimes they are applicants who have overcome great obstacles in life, and admission officials want to soften the blow of a denial. Courtesy waitlisting may also be used to show respect for a high school counselor who has advocated vigorously for a particular candidate who, nonetheless, never made the final cut. So ask yourself if you might be a courtesy kid. If you suspect that you might be, you're not entirely out of luck, but your odds of success may be even steeper.

### **If you decide you do want to stay on a college's waitlist, you should ...**

- Notify the college (or colleges) ASAP that you plan to wait. Pay attention to the way they've asked you to this (via return postcard, online response form, etc.) and respond accordingly.
- Write a letter to the office of admission explaining why it's the right place for you. Be as specific as possible. Avoid generic phrases like, "From the moment I stepped onto the campus, I knew it was a perfect school for me" or "You have a history major." (Duh ... who doesn't?) Your letter can include details about new awards, activities, or achievements, but only if they're fairly significant. If your grades are the best they've ever been, or you're particularly pleased with your success in a hard class, you can mention that, too.

- Also include the ways that you will contribute to the campus community. One boy I knew of, for instance, pointed out that he is a trained first responder who has already saved lives.
- It's a plus if you can get the name of the admissions rep who oversees applicants from your high school and write directly to him or her, but that's not an imperative. If you already have a "relationship" with a different staff member (e.g., the person who interviewed you), you can write to that individual instead.
- If you are CERTAIN that you will enroll if admitted from the waitlist, be sure to mention this clearly in your letter. Once admission officials determine that they will need to use the waitlist to fill their class, then obviously, they want the process to be as swift and painless as possible. Thus, to avoid doing some waiting on their *own* end, it makes sense to admit a sure-thing student rather than one who may respond two weeks later with "Sorry, never mind."
- Ask your school counselor to contact admission officials and lobby on your behalf. Phone calls can be most effective, but some colleges won't accept them. Letters and e-mail are okay, too, but push for the phone call first. Ideally, your counselor will call to check in once every week or so, but busy counselors may not have the time or inclination to do this.
- Do NOT ask your parents to call or write. This could work against you. (Exception: Alumni parents who have maintained some ties to the college can rattle some cages in the alumni office and even phone or write the admission office rep who serves as alumni liaison.)
- Consider something "cute." (But don't necessarily do it.) Once in a (very) great while an appropriate "gimmick" might help. For instance, I once had an advisee whose application touted his talents as a photographer. He took a photo of himself standing in front of the sign for the competitor college that had admitted him, and he made it into a postcard with a funny caption. He was admitted off the waitlist at his first-choice school. Was it the postcard? I'll never know. Similarly, budding poets might write a verse about the college in question; an artist could paint a picture of a campus landmark to demonstrate enthusiasm. A singer might compose a little song. ("Ode to Oberlin"? "The Ballad of Bard"?) Again, don't push this gimmick thing unless you're really inspired, because it's a long-shot. At the elite-college level, these cutesy things will have less impact than they might elsewhere because

few students are likely to come off those lists and those who do will often be special cases cited above. But, at this stage of the game, it can never hurt.

GOOD LUCK! And, indeed, luck can play a starring role here. If your son *does* get off the waitlist at Yale, you may want to run out and buy a lottery ticket the same day!

Share this eBook:



## How Did I Get Waitlisted by My Safety School?

“I can’t understand how I got waitlisted by my safety school. My SAT scores and GPA are way higher than the school’s average. Even more puzzling is that a classmate, with a lower school ranking and a much lower SAT score, got accepted. What could be the reason? And what should I do now? After this all of my schools are more selective. What if I don’t get into any of them? This school is Case Western Reserve University.”

Sometimes admission officials work in mysterious ways. The admission committee at Case may have decided that, despite your strong grades and test scores, you hadn’t given any indication that you were truly interested in enrolling, or perhaps you were sloppy with deadlines.

Another thought is that you may require a lot of financial aid. Even if you are a strong applicant, if your financial need is very high, the college officials might have decided to put you on the waitlist until they see how much money is left in their budget after making financial aid offers to more desirable candidates. Some colleges that are “need-sensitive,” as Case is, can decide to take two decent but not stellar applicants who don’t require a lot of aid rather than one somewhat stronger student who does. So sometimes when an applicant is waitlisted or denied and sees that a weaker classmate has been accepted, it could be that money is at the root of the decision. If you are an international student (not a U.S. citizen) and you applied for financial aid, then money is very likely to be behind your Case outcome. Most colleges set the admissions bar far higher for international applicants who need aid than they do for U.S. citizens and permanent residents (who qualify for U.S. Federal funds).

If none of the above potential reasons applies to you, it's also possible that the school made a mistake. This doesn't happen often, but it *can* happen. For example, I recall a time when one college's new software went haywire, and so the test scores of some applicants showed up in the admission office computers as several hundred points below what they really were!

The college might not have caught the error except that an experienced guidance counselor called the admission office to ask why one of his top advisees had been denied. Her profile was far stronger than the typical admitted student at that college, and she'd even applied Early Decision, so the college knew that her interest was genuine.

His call caused the admission staff to take a closer look, and they found the mistake that had affected not just this one applicant but a number of others, too.

So I think you should talk to your school guidance counselor. If your counselor agrees that your waitlisting is odd, then perhaps the counselor will call Case on your behalf to find out why you were turned down ... or if, indeed, a mistake was made.

In the meantime, if your school uses Naviance, you should be able to access Naviance data to see if other students from your high school with your profile were accepted or denied by Case in the past. If you discover that students with your profile have always been accepted, there *still* may be some reason why you were not, but it will certainly give you and your counselor more "ammunition" to question your waitlist status, if you contact Case to find out what went wrong.

Just because you received this unexpected news from Case doesn't mean that you're going to be denied by the more competitive colleges on your list. It's possible, of course, but hardly a certainty. If indeed Case waitlisted you because the admission officials didn't get a sense of commitment from you, perhaps you did show more interest to your other schools.

Once you receive all of your verdicts, if it turns out that you were not accepted by any of your other colleges, then you can lobby Case to admit you. There is a lot of information on [College Confidential](#) about what to do to get off of a waitlist.

But before you start with that, first try to enlist your counselor to help you find out what, if any, were the deficiencies in your application.

**>>> [Get more helpful tips on how to deal with being wait listed by accessing this section on College Confidential.](#)**

# DISCIPLINARY ACTION

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## How Will Suspension for Drinking on School Trip Affect Accepted Student?

“My son has already been accepted to his college of choice. However, very recently on a school trip, he and 11 others were nailed for alcohol use and consequently suspended for three days. In his particular case, he admits to drinking a little, but then distanced himself from the situation. Must his high school report this? Will his college withdraw the acceptance? Thank you. We are agonizing about this.”

It seems that “The Dean” has answered this question many times over ... especially lately. I don’t know if there’s a new epidemic of teenage misbehavior in progress or if there are simply more crackdowns than there used to be.

So, if it gives you any consolation, you are not alone. And perhaps the very epidemic nature of these infractions could work in your favor because colleges must be accustomed to them by now and certainly don’t want to rescind multiple offers of admission in the same month.

Unfortunately, however, all I can tell you at this point is that you need to speak to your son’s school officials to ask them how they will handle the situation. Although such suspensions are usually reported on the final school transcript, which your son’s college will receive, not all high schools choose to disclose disciplinary actions, even though the colleges do expect to receive such information. And some high schools will report it immediately .... not waiting for the end-of-year transcript.

So, first, you have to talk to your son’s guidance counselor or principal (or whatever other administrator is the point person here) and ask if this will be disclosed to colleges. If the answer is yes, then you should also ask for specifics.

Will the high school report say something like, “This is a good kid who got caught up in the excitement of a school trip and used poor judgment for the first time we’ve ever seen him do so,” or will it be more like, “These students were told clearly that we have a zero-tolerance policy, which they flagrantly chose to ignore. Then they lied to cover-up their violation.”

The spin that the school puts on the report could have an impact on how the college decides to proceed. Moreover, some colleges are more liberal when it comes to these sorts of things than others. So the outcome depends not only on the high school’s reporting policy—which varies from school to school—but also on the *college’s* policy, which also varies.

I imagine it’s tempting to *not* talk to school officials about how—or *if*—they will report this to colleges, for fear that you may be “reminding” them to do so. But, trust me, that won’t be the case. And, should you stick your head in the sand, then your son won’t take the next important step.

If the school *is* reporting the suspension, your son must write a letter to the college explaining what he did. His letter should be contrite, accepting blame for his actions—not shifting it to classmates—and it should emphasize what he learned from the episode. He should also emphasize that he isn’t a habitual user of alcohol (if this is indeed true. If not, then he should seek help for a problem that will only get worse in college if it exists already). If his record is clean until now and if his apology is convincing, he may be off the hook, but it really depends on the college in question.

I do empathize with your agony. The only silver lining is that it could be worse. Most colleges put senior drinking under the “Youthful Foibles” rubric (especially when a large group was involved, as happened here) while other offenses (e.g., cheating, bullying) cast aspersions on the applicant’s character and are usually treated more harshly.



## When Do Colleges Rescind Admissions?

“Under what conditions would a college take back an acceptance?”

Colleges do not like to renege on admission decisions but will do so on occasion. This most typically happens when a student's grades drop *significantly* after the student is admitted. In other words, if an A student suffers a bout of senioritis and drops to a B average, it's not a deal-breaker. But if the grades plummet to *all* C's and D's (or worse), it can be.

If there are extenuating circumstances behind this change in GPA (e.g., an illness or family crisis), they should be explained by you and also by your school counselor. The college will probably be sympathetic and stand by their original acceptance, but perhaps will put you on academic probation when the school year starts.

Some colleges (most notably the University of California system) have very specific rules about which grades or GPA will mean a rescinded acceptance. But at the vast majority of colleges, the process is more subjective and thus a student who can offer a reasonable explanation for the downturn may be able to fend off bad news.

Keep in mind that this bad news—when it does come—typically arrives at a very inconvenient time. Colleges usually won't know about plummeting senior grades until they review the final transcript that guidance counselors submit at the end of the school year. By the time an acceptance is revoked, it could be well into July while you're combing through Bed Bath & Beyond for a beanbag chair for your dorm room. Thus The Dean suggests that you be pro-active. If you *know* your senior grades are lousy, contact the college to explain or to propose a better solution than a rescinded acceptance (e.g., you might offer to retake a class in the summer or to start the first semester on probation.)

Colleges may also revoke an acceptance if the student is suspended from school or arrested outside of school. Again, because the college does not want to do

this, the case will be carefully evaluated and the verdict will most likely depend on the nature of the infraction and the circumstances surrounding it.

Finally, if a college should discover that an applicant was dishonest on the application, this is likely to lead to a rescinded admission, too.

Each year *many* students worry about rescinded acceptances although *few* actually get bad news. But never assume that, by warning your college about a pending bad final report, you will alert them to a problem that they might otherwise overlook ... because they *won't*. So if you fear that your acceptance is in jeopardy, you would be wise to contact your college sooner rather than later .... while there's time to campaign to keep your spot in the class or to make other plans for the fall if you can't.

Share this eBook:



## Early Decision or Early Action? How Do We Choose?

“My daughter has a well balanced list of 10 colleges. How do we decide if she applies Early Action or Early Decision? I keep reading that we must have a strategy. But what does that mean, and how do we decide between EA and ED?”

Yes, unfortunately, there does seem to be a lot of “strategizing” going on these days when making application plans, and the advice that “The Dean” doles out to students and parents varies greatly depending on their assorted goals, finances, etc.

The key point to keep in mind is that applying Early DECISION usually provides a boost in admission odds—sometimes a significant one. Colleges tend to operate on the old “bird in hand vs. two in the bush” theory. That is, they will often admit a strong but not extraordinary applicant whom they know will enroll for sure rather than holding out for *Teen Jeopardy* winners and published novelists who may not matriculate if admitted ... or who may not apply at all. When I worked in a college admission office, we rated our applicants on a 1 to 10 scale (with 1 at the top). During the Early Decision round, we often admitted 7’s. During the Regular round, some 5’s and most 6’s didn’t make it.

Students who are applying for financial aid may be warned away from Early Decision applications, but I staunchly disagree. An applicant who is admitted in the ED round but without adequate aid can bail out from the “binding” commitment without penalty. Moreover, at “need-conscious” colleges (the majority of schools, which consider a student’s ability to pay when determining who gets in), a borderline student who requires financial assistance is more likely to be admitted in the Early Decision round than in the Regular Decision round because the admission folks realized that this student is likely to enroll.

Early Action, on the other hand, rarely provides that same advantage. After all, why should the college save space for an applicant who may not show up in September unless that applicant is extremely strong and the school wants to curry favor with good news in December? (“Single Choice” Early Action, on the other hand, muddies the already swampy waters. The handful of colleges that offer this option restrict applicants from pursuing any other “Early” application approach. While Single-Choice Early Action won’t carry the same admissions clout that Early *Decision* usually provides, it can mean at least a *slight* boost in acceptance odds.)

But it can be a cat and mouse game for sure. For instance, should a student apply to a long-shot dream college via Early Decision with the hope that the ED boost will make a difference, or is that student “wasting” the ED chit on an *impossible* dream? I’ve often seen kids apply to a long-shot school in November and then, if denied ... or even *deferred*, to try the Early Decision 2 round (which many schools now offer, typically with a Jan. 1 deadline) at a somewhat less competitive second-choice college rather than waiting for better news from the first-choice college in April.

Despite the somewhat annoying level of gamesmanship involved, this can be a good plan for students who are wavering between two colleges, with one clearly more selective than the next.

I also have had advisees who applied to *both* an EA school (or several) plus one ED college. They understand that, if admitted to the ED school, they must commit (unless the financial aid offer precludes it). Read website instructions carefully. A handful of colleges forbid concurrent EA and ED applications, such as “Single-Choice Early Action” colleges mentioned above.

Moreover, *any* type of early application can be a bad bet for a student who had an uncharacteristically weak junior year or whose junior test scores are likely to improve in their senior year. Students who have to compare financial aid options (typically middle-class kids hoping for merit awards ... not the well-heeled or truly disadvantaged) should often give up the pluses of ED in favor of the chance to choose among a range of scholarship offers.

In addition, some students are simply not ready to pick one college by November and to say, “For this school I will forsake all others.” This is why EA programs are increasingly more popular—they don’t require a commitment (but, of course, they don’t provide any real admissions advantage either, except for, perhaps, some peace of mind by December, which is an advantage indeed).

So, unfortunately, there are no easy answers to your question. I counsel families about early application options on a case-by-case basis, depending on their top college choices, my assessment of their admission chances at those schools, their finances, and other factors.

You and your daughter will have to review her list and decide if she wants to make an ED commitment to a school on that list that offers it. If one of her top choices is something of a reach, but not a *high* reach, if your finances don't require a careful weighing of options in April, and if you feel that your daughter's junior grades are representative of her abilities, then ED might be a good bet for her.

Unlike the conventional wisdom that suggests that a student should only apply ED if she has a clear-cut first-choice college, I tend to feel that if a student has *several* schools where she knows she can be happy and engaged, it might make sense to roll the dice, select one of these colleges, and get the whole mess over before Santa hits the skyways. But some admission officials are horrified that any student would be counseled to say "I do" without true love.

Share this eBook:



## What Are "Likely Letters" Like?

“What are Likely Letters? Are they limited to the Ivies? When are they sent? Do they require an answer? Do most strong applicants get them?”

A Likely Letter is good news for the handful of students who receive them but is yet another example of what's wrong with the college admission process for almost everyone else.

Typically, Likely Letters are sent to applicants several weeks before official admission verdicts are slated to go out. This usually means some time in October for Early Decision/Action applicants and late-February or March for Regular Decision students. The gist of these missives is: "We fully plan to accept you so

you can breathe a sigh of relief, but don't screw up between now and when you get your acceptance letter because this one isn't quite official."

Most commonly, the term Likely Letter is associated with the Ivy League and with athletes ... and with good reason. These letters are one tool that the Ivy League schools use to encourage their recruited athletes to put other options on the back burner. Although coaches tell admission officials which prospective players should get these letters, it is the admission folks themselves who make the final determination and send the letters out.

However, it is not only athletes who may get the thumbs up ahead of schedule, and it's not only Ivy applicants either. Other strong candidates at a range of colleges who are not involved in sports at all may find Likely Letters in their mailboxes, too. This usually happens when a candidate is so strong that admission folks want him or her to know right away that an acceptance is pending. The idea is to "stroke" these sought-after applicants and to help them to think fondly of the college in question before they receive decisions from competitor schools.

However, it's also something of a random process, and that's the most annoying part. There may be plenty of very strong candidates whose applications have not yet been evaluated when it's time for the Likely Letters to hit the mail bags. So, even though these top students will eventually get good news, it can be frustrating and demoralizing to *not* get a Likely Letter when classmates or friends (or all of those high-achieving, Ivy-angsting posters on the College Confidential discussion forum) are receiving theirs. In most cases, this is just luck of the draw, but the wait can be agonizing when others in one's orbit have already received a letter.

Some colleges—not the Ivies—put their own spin on the Likely Letter. Their early missives may not address the acceptance issue at all but might, instead, include an invitation to attend a campus event that seems geared to accepted applicants or to join a special (and clearly elite) academic program in the fall. This sort of more obtuse Likely Letter can be heartening but also confusing, leaving students to wonder, "Well, am I in or not yet?"

You do not have to respond to a Likely Letter unless the letter clearly entreats you to do so. However, if you are excited about the school that has sent it, you certainly should feel free to communicate your joy. Likewise, you do not have to commit to the college until the official reply date—probably May 1—unless you have applied Early Decision.

So the bottom line is this: I'd like to like the Likely Letters but they are largely unlikable, and most candidates whom admission officials like are, nonetheless, UNlikely to get them.

>>> [Learn more about the Early Decision by accessing this section on College Confidential.](#)



# College Confidential

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