



Putting Your Application Together: A Tactical Approach

In April 2016, shortly after high school seniors received their admissions decisions, I guided a discussion on Reddit's Applying to College, "Admissions Post-Mortem: Seniors, what would you have done differently? What advice would you give to juniors?"¹

Their answers were illuminating and frighteningly consistent.

"Inherentdestroyer," a current student at Boston College, articulates better than I a few key points. "Start everything EARLY. Start your essays right now, in fact, even get a rough draft formulated so you can do some editing with teachers later on . . . Do NOT, I repeat do NOT get fixated on a single school and call it your 'dream school . . .' Don't feel bad if you are rejected . . . you're in good company. Most people don't get in, even if they are qualified. Try your best, and say to yourself that no matter what, you put your best foot forward."

"Telegraph-road" shares the same feelings and mirrors a point I stress. "MOST IMPORTANT: Please don't define your self-worth based on where you've been accepted or rejected or even your academic success. I know, that's cheesy and cliché, but it really is important that you don't let your rejections get you down."

One of my favorite reflections comes from a student who gets it: pursue your passions and, as an unintended consequence, your college applications will be more

¹ Accessed April 13, 2017:
[https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/4fm9fu/admissions_postmortem_seniors_what_would_you_have/](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/4fm9fu/admissions_postmortem_seniors_whatever_you_would_have/)

authentic and thus competitive. “Rippingthefattest” shares invaluable advice not just for college admissions, but living a purposeful life and getting the most out of college.

I would’ve stopped doing everything I didn’t absolutely love and had a passion for. These were the activities on my resume that helped me get into the colleges I got into. Writing about some of these activities was what made admissions officers interested in me . . . Don’t waste your time on stuff you aren’t passionate about! It won’t make you happier, nor help you get into a better school!

Like others in the thread, he echoed the same advice about the importance of safety schools. Every applicant should have at least one university where they are 100 percent guaranteed admission. UT is a safety school only for Texas residents who qualify for automatic admission. Even then, nobody is guaranteed their major. I recommend applying to between six and eight universities: your state’s top-tier university, one safety where you are guaranteed admission, a strong regional university, and a few reaches or private school. Any more than twelve seems overkill, though I understand the “shotgun” strategy of submitting in excess of twenty applications to highly selective universities in the hope that one pellet hits the target.

Nearly every user stressed the importance of starting early. One user began four applications on the January 1 Common Application deadline. Others broke down with full-blown panic attacks as deadlines loomed. Don’t do that.

Every year, like clockwork, students submit their applications at the last minute. They don’t take the editing and revision process seriously; they apply to way too many

reach schools and don't allow for any safeties; they fixate so strongly on one university that their hearts are broken when things don't work out. Parents worry. Students complain.

College applications create a negative feedback loop where pressure from their schools, communities, and families reinforces anxieties and uncertainty about the future. College admissions doesn't have to be difficult; however, by focusing on factors outside of your control rather than your efforts, you are guaranteeing a path of most resistance. A few younger users wisely took the senior's advice and had a relatively stress-free application process. It is your responsibility to manage your stress in healthy ways.

Starting in July 2012, I started eating the admissions cake that I was serving to prospective applicants. I was more than five years removed from my college application, but I was beginning the application process for a Fulbright fellowship teaching English in Malaysia. Administered by the U.S. Department of State, Fulbright grants are highly competitive and prestigious. It is America's flagship cultural diplomacy program facilitating the exchange of students, scholars, and instructors between the United States and its allies. Applicants compete with top graduates from elite universities nationwide. If the funnel for high school seniors applying to most selective universities is wide, only top performers following high school have a chance of securing a Fulbright grant.

The application process isn't much different from undergraduate admissions. You must submit a lengthy online application, provide three references, and produce two one-page, single-spaced essays. All year, I stressed to students and families the importance of starting early and taking the editing process seriously. Every day for two

months I worked on my essays. I enlisted a half-dozen trusted people, including my former honors academic advisor and a Fulbright alumna, to provide feedback and revisions. My first drafts bore little resemblance to my final submission. By the end, they were two of the best writing samples I had ever crafted although, looking at them today, I see a lot of room for improvement.

Nevertheless, my essays complemented and worked dynamically with one another; they read like one long essay rather than two separate parts. I provided context to some of my resume information, and, forecasting what my recommenders would write, I alluded to things they would likely elaborate on. The best applications, and this is true for undergraduate, graduate, law, medical, and fellowship programs, are those that tell a consistent narrative of who you are, why you are applying, and what assets you bring to your program.

I talked with our program director about the average quality of their Fulbright applications. He confirmed something I noticed with high school seniors: they weren't very good. Even highly credentialed students at elite American universities aren't good at writing about themselves.

From beginning my application in July 2012, being named a finalist in January 2013, receiving my invitation in early April, until I left for Malaysia on January 1, 2014, I occupied the dual role of admissions counselor and applicant. In some ways, I could empathize with the stress of writing, fighting through writer's block, accepting when "enough is enough" and it is time to submit, and the period of uncertainty inherent in receiving my decision at any time between February and June 2013.

Even though I discouraged UT applicants from refreshing their email and reading College Confidential, I found myself hovering around my computer seeking any crumb

of application information on places like The Grad Café. I was probably less stressed than most because I trusted in my efforts. But it still isn't easy waiting for the gatekeepers to bestow their largesse.

One issue with discussing college admissions is not adequately dividing up college search from college applications. Militaries distinguish between the words strategy and tactic. Strategy is what armies do in preparation before battle. Tactics are implemented during the fight.

College admissions strategy recommends, for example, studying for and taking your standardized exams multiple times, enrolling in rigorous courses, and being active outside of the classroom. Students visit campuses during their sophomore and junior year and stay busy during the summer holidays.

Tactics, on the other hand, begin the moment you start writing your essays and create logins for Apply Texas or the Common App. Another way to think of it is your entire high school career was practice before the big game. As an independent consultant, I specialize in admissions tactics rather than strategy. Although important, I am less concerned about how you study for your SAT or what you do during the summer. My clients typically come to me at the end of their junior year asking how they can best package their accomplishments. My goal is to push them as hard as possible to get the most out of their applications. We waste little space. Admissions is war. We play to win.

When should admission strategy shift to application tactics? For UT, begin your applications in July or August before your senior year and try to have everything submitted no later than early October. Submitting early doesn't confer any admissions

advantage, but it does minimize the stress of college applications before senior year kicks into fifth gear.

Think of your application components like pieces on a chessboard. A single chess piece rarely achieves victory, but one weak link can expose you to trouble. Every piece serves a purpose. Chess strategy requires each player to consolidate their resources and maximize their chances at winning. Like troops and machinery deployed on a battlefield where waste and inefficiency decrease chances of survival and victory, each sentence, paragraph, bullet point, recommendation letter, volunteer activity, and essay should contribute to your overall approach at getting into UT and your first-choice major.