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Tips to Stay Sane

Breathe

This year is going to go by quickly so take the time to enjoy it rather than stress over it. Take control of the college process rather than letting it control you. Stay organized and keep track of all the different deadlines for each school. Find time to reflect on the past few years and to imagine the next four. Get to know yourself; discover the reasons behind all of your interests and activities. Don't forget your family throughout the process; they will be your support and your personal cheering squad during the whole journey. Remember that your friends are probably going through the same thing, so don't let the anxiety of the process ruin your friendships; instead, find ways to de-stress together by going to the movies or out to dinner or by simply not mentioning college applications for an entire day. Breathe.

Make the most of campus visits

Don't spend all of your time visiting a campus at the admissions office or on a tour. Explore the library (since you'll probably be spending a lot of time there). Talk to random students and ask them why they decided to attend the college. Pick up a copy of the college newspaper and discover what issues are on students' minds. Sit in on a class or two and observe the interaction between professors and students. When leaving campus, make notes in the car about your impressions of the campus, both the good and bad aspects of the institution; after seeing several campuses, they may begin to blur so it will be helpful to pen your reactions while they are fresh in your mind (or gut).

Plunge in and explore at college fairs

When you go to college fairs, don't just grab every piece of literature on the table or simply fill out a card. Show interest by asking questions, questions to which you can't find the answer in brochures or on the Web. Listen to the rep when he or she responds to other students, because those other students may have asked something of interest to you or even something that you have never thought of during your college search. If there is a huge crowd of students around a table, use your time efficiently by visiting other tables to learn about other schools, and then go back later. Don't dismiss a college just because you have never heard of it or it's located in an area that you are not familiar with. After talking to the rep behind the table, you may discover someplace that has everything that you are looking for in your ideal college!

There's more than one "perfect match"

The "perfect match." A "good fit." You've heard these phrases before, but what do they really mean? "Fit" or "match" is about more than simply being comfortable when you walk onto a campus. A good fit is about finding a college that provides the appropriate level of challenge, that offers the programs in which you're interested, that has an ethos or culture which you appreciate, and that strikes you as a place where you'll be both happy and engaged.

Sometimes students use these phrases as a shortcut for explaining that gut feeling they have about a particular school—and that gut feeling is important. But when used incorrectly, these phrases can prevent you from digging deeper to see if the college will suit you on many levels and offer what you need as your curiosity and aspirations expand. The end result of the so-called "perfect match" (is anything really ever perfect?) is not only that you graduate in four years, but also that you value how you grew, both personally and intellectually, as a result of your experience. And the fact of the matter is that there are dozens, if not more, colleges that will fit you—not just one.

On recommendations: start early, choose wisely

Don't wait until a few days before the application deadline to ask your teachers for a letter of recommendation. Figure out who you want to write your recommendations and ask them early on in the process. Remember, you are not the only student in your class who is applying to college, and your teachers will probably have many letters to write on top of all the work they have to do for their classes.

If possible, ask teachers from junior year who taught you in one of the five major academic areas (English, mathematics, science, history, and foreign language). The teachers you choose should be able to write about your academic ability first and foremost, hopefully differentiating you from other students in the class. If your recommenders know you in other

capacities outside of class, then they will help us understand your role within the school community, but the letters should still focus primarily on your performance in the classroom.

If your teachers cannot submit the recommendations online, then provide stamped envelopes addressed to each college to which you are applying. Two or three weeks later, send them a note, thanking them for writing on your behalf. (This can also serve as a reminder for them to write and send the letter if they have not done so already.) If you want to send extra letters of recommendation—say, from a coach or a club advisor—make sure that these supplementary letters actually add something new. They should tell us about aspects of your high-school career that the main recommenders don't cover. No need to send eight or ten recommendations. The number that each school requires will be sufficient; one or two additional letters is more than enough. There is a joke in the admissions world that goes, "The thicker the file, the thicker the kid." Don't be that kid!

Your essay doesn't have to be bizarre

The college essay is your moment to distinguish yourself from everyone else in the applicant pool. This doesn't mean that you have to find a bizarre topic, or that the best essays come from students who have led tragic lives or performed superhuman feats. Many superb essays are about simple moments or ordinary events. Think of the essay as an opportunity for you to show us how you think and how you write, in 500 words or less. We want to understand how you look at the world. What are you passionate about? What questions do you struggle with? We're also looking for indications of self-awareness, self-reflection, maturity, inquisitiveness, insight, and creative thought.

We'd advise against reporting on your extracurricular activities or awards in the essay—application forms always include separate sections for this information. Instead, use the essay as a chance to share a story about yourself that we won't be able to read about anywhere else in your application. Feel free to be as personal as you want to be, but just remember that you have no idea who will be at the other end, reading your application. If you are writing about something that you wouldn't want to tell your parents, then you might want to reconsider your topic. Don't feel obligated to tell us your entire life story. Find a focus.

Finally, you don't have to be funny, fill your essay with arcane words, or use gimmicks. If you're not normally not a comic writer, now isn't the time to experiment with humor. If you find yourself continually turning to the thesaurus, you might be trying too hard to impress us. As for gimmicks (like writing in crayon, formatting your text as a circle, talking about yourself in the third person, or presenting the essay backwards), they can backfire by making you stand out for the wrong reasons.

Ask someone who knows you, but does not know you too well (e.g., a counselor, teacher, or classmate), to read your essay. Are the tone, voice, and personality that you want to convey coming through in your essay? Don't try to be someone else in your application. Just be yourself.

Interviews: give us yourself, not some (illusory) "right" answer

In an age when students are more comfortable communicating via Facebook rather than face to face, the college interview seems to be a daunting prospect for many applicants. Don't worry, though, since the topic of conversation will be all about you! The interview is not an inquisition; it is simply another chance for you to figure out whether the institution is the right match for you and for us to gain a better understanding of why you do the things you do. Like speed dating, however, we have only a short amount of time to get to know each another, so don't feel obligated to tell us everything. Don't be shy, but don't be arrogant either. It doesn't really help to list all your accomplishments. We are more impressed by students who exhibit a high level of maturity, self-awareness, and intellectual curiosity.

Be ready to talk about your high school experience and classes as well as your plans for college and even after graduation. Interviewers sometimes like to ask odd questions that don't seem to be connected to anything in particular. Don't be thrown. Take a moment to think before answering a question; silence is not necessarily a bad thing during an interview. These unpredictable questions are less about the "right" answer than about how you think on your feet, your creativity, and your personality.

The best way to prepare for an interview is to do some research about the institution beforehand. Don't simply regurgitate information or pander; explain how our mission, curriculum, resources, and community can best serve you and your

interests. Come with questions, but don't ask about things you can find the answers to online or in any brochures. The best advice for any interview is "know thyself."

Make time to enjoy the holidays

The college application process is stressful—that's unavoidable—but it shouldn't ruin your winter break. That's where the "make time" part comes in. With a little extra effort, you can get your applications done early in December. That way, you'll spend your holidays feasting and frolicking instead of fretting or, even worse, fending off feverish pleas from your parents. It's worth repeating: try to finish your applications early enough that you can RELAX during the holidays. Movies, parties, family gatherings, and plain old lolling: all are best enjoyed when you don't have any deadlines hanging over your head.

We also urge you to resist the temptation to send in "impulse applications"—that is, last-minute applications based on anxiety or whim rather than actual interest. We know what sometimes happens. Even though you've done your research and carefully chosen colleges, you're nervous. Maybe you even start to worry that you won't get in anywhere. So, at the last minute, you cast about for another school to apply to. Or some friends have been talking about a particular college, and even though you know hardly anything about it, you figure, "Why not?" In any event, the Common Application makes it fairly easy to add another school to your list. So you're tempted to shoot off another application.

Resist that temptation. If you haven't researched the school or visited campus, applying there isn't wise. Impulse applications are usually a waste of everyone's time—yours, and also the admission staff's at the school in question. Take it from us: these applications stick out like a sore thumb. Yes, we'll admit that, from time to time, a very late application will come in from a wonderful student (whom we may in fact accept). But, far more often, the last-minute impulse application just makes us wonder, "Why?" So do yourself (and us) a favor. If you feel the panicky need to apply to another school for no good reason at all, take your finger away from the "Send" button and—see above—relax.

Proofread! Proofread! Proofread!

This one's pretty simple. Proofread everything you send us. And don't make the mistake of relying exclusively on a spell-check program to catch mistakes. Even the best programs will let some embarrassing errors slip through. Your application is important; give it some focused attention. Sloppiness makes us wonder: If you didn't take the time to look over your application carefully, why should we?

Regarding extracurricular activities: focus on quality, not quantity

It seems that students today are brainwashed at a young age to pursue as many extracurricular activities as possible. Sports, music, community service, summer internships, science research, and on and on. They're all worthwhile. But when we read an application, we don't tally the total number of activities you've pursued over the years. Admission is based on quality, not quantity. Moreover, we're not looking for a specific activity or leadership position; there are no "winning" or "sure-fire" extracurriculars. We simply want to know what you are passionate about and how you spend your time outside of the classroom.

The Common Application does not provide a lot of room to describe everything you do, so if you need more space, feel free to attach either a list or a resume of your activities. But don't feel obligated to explain every single club and organization that you've joined. Describe only clubs or awards that are specific to your high school or that you founded. If you have been in a leadership position and have significantly influenced the organization in some way, by all means tell us about your contributions. And, incidentally: your elementary school and middle school activities will seldom be relevant in your college application; nor will high-school activities that you tried for just a day.

We understand that some students attend schools which do not have the resources to offer a multitude of activities. High school counselors and written profiles usually keep us informed about the nature of various schools. We're also aware that some students don't have time to pursue extracurricular activities because they work part-time or have to help take care of siblings. Let us know if situations like this apply to you. We want to get a clear picture of your responsibilities beyond school work.

Seniors: now that your applications are in . . .

Although you may be done with your college applications, your work is not over yet. It is more important now than ever before to maintain a strong performance in your classes. For those who were deferred during early decision (ED) or early

action, your mid-year grades will play an important role during regular decision. Don't succumb to senioritis, especially if you have already been admitted ED to your first-choice school. Some colleges will rescind an offer of admission if your grades drop drastically from when you applied.

Juniors: time to take an old adage to heart

The adage is: Know thyself. It's a good one to remember as you embark on the process of thinking about colleges. Don't begin your college search with rankings and reputations. Start with yourself: your priorities, preferences, and personal style. Take some time to do some informal assessing. Here's what we suggest:

Personal assessment. What aspects of high school have you enjoyed the most? How do you learn best? What are your passions, academic interests, favorite activities, career goals? What kinds of teachers inspire you? What kinds of people do you associate with and admire? How do you respond to people who think and act differently from you? How important are approval, rewards, and recognition to you? How do you respond to pressure, competition, or challenge? How much do you rely on direction, guidance, or advice from others? How much structure do you need?

Environmental assessment. Would you be happiest in a big or small college—and how do you define big and small? Are you more comfortable with lecture classes or discussion-based seminars? Would you prefer an urban, suburban, or rural area? Somewhere close to home or far away? An array of core requirements or an open curriculum? Public, private, or religiously affiliated? Research oriented or teaching oriented? Exclusively undergraduate or multi-purposed? Coeducational or single sex? Liberal or conservative? Do you want to be surrounded by students who are academically curious, career driven, or socially-oriented?

Institutional assessment. Assess each institution in light of your priorities. Does the school have the majors and activities you're looking for? Does the student body match what you want in a college environment? Who teaches the classes, professors or teaching assistants? What about other features that may be important to you, like research opportunities or study abroad? What kind of financial aid is offered?

It's called the college **search** for a reason. It's a chance for you to look into yourself, then look for schools that match your interests and priorities. Embark on your journey of self-assessment now rather than waiting until senior year!

Junk Mail 101: put all that college propaganda to good use

Starting this month, your college search will begin, ready or not. You'll be bombarded by mail from colleges and universities, all of them trying to get you to sign up to be on their mailing list so that they can send you even more material. The way you sort through all the propaganda can set the tone for the rest of your college search. Don't dismiss an institution just because you have never heard of it or because it's not ranked high in some magazine. Many students find "their" college through an unsolicited mailing. Don't be quick to judge or to categorize schools as "good" or "bad." Every school is "good" and will provide a quality education . . . for the right person.

Before signing up to be on mailing lists, create a new e-mail account for all communication to and from all of the schools. Make it simple, like firstname.lastname@gmail.com rather than harrypotterismyhero@yahoo.com or studmuffin10@aol.com.

If you're interested in a college, make sure the college knows it. Some selective colleges take your interest into account. So send in those reply cards, call the 800 numbers, or go online and make sure you're on the mailing list of every college that intrigues you. If you don't respond to any of the initial mailings, a college may drop your name from its list.

A strategy for campus visits: don't start with your top choice

When planning to visit colleges, don't visit your top choice school first. Explore other colleges with an open mind and figure out what aspects you like and don't like. You may be surprised to fall in love with a school that was not high on your list originally. If you are doing interviews while visiting colleges, visiting other colleges first will provide some practice and experience in interviewing before you interview at your top choice school.

Finish up your junior year with a bang!

Tired of the winter grind? Spring not coming fast enough? Itching to be outside rather than stuck inside doing school work? By all means, when the warm weather comes and the days get longer, welcome the new season with open arms. But don't

let spring fever distract you too much from your studies. A lot happens at the end of junior year that admissions offices consider in the application process, such as standardized tests and Advance Placement exams. If you had a rough transition to high school back in ninth grade but you've improved over the last few years, then it is really important to maintain an upward trend in your classes. Also, keep in mind that next year, when you're a senior, you may well be asking some of your junior-year teachers for letters of recommendation. So stay focused and keep working hard; next year, those teachers will find it easy to lavish praise on you in their letters. Don't let junioritis disrupt your momentum.

Choose your senior-year courses with care

Let's say you intend to major in English or theater and figure that in college you'll totally avoid ambitious math and science courses. Does that mean you should avoid such courses now? On the contrary. If you want to get into a selective college, you should take challenging courses in high school, particularly during senior year. The most selective institutions in the country prefer to see four years of the following: English, social sciences, a foreign language, science (biology, chemistry, physics, and another year of a lab science), and math (at least up to precalculus but ideally through calculus). Sure, we have admitted students without calculus or physics or a fourth year of a foreign language, but the most competitive students in our applicant pool are the ones who have a solid academic foundation that includes the five core subjects every year. They've demonstrated that they are ready for college-level work and for the freedom and flexibility of a liberal arts education.

We also want to see if you are taking the most challenging courses offered at your high school—for example, honors courses, Advance Placement (AP) courses, International Baccalaureate (IB) courses, or even courses at a nearby college. Obviously, we do not expect you to take every single high-powered class available, but we hope that you will challenge yourself in several subjects. (And just to be clear, we don't expect you to take AP or IB courses if your school does not offer them.)

In short, senior year is not the time to take a less rigorous course load. If anything, it's the year to step up your game. So, before you choose three history electives for next year, you should figure out how to include another year of science or foreign language into your schedule.

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