

Published September 25th, 2013

Expert Tips for High School Students Applying to College

By Elizabeth LaScala



Elizabeth LaScala Ph.D. guides college, transfer and graduate school applicants through the complex world of admissions. She develops best match college lists, offers personalized interview and essay coaching, and tools and strategies to help students tackle each step of the admissions process with confidence and success. Elizabeth helps students from all backgrounds to maximize merit and financial aid awards. Visit www.doingcollege.com; Call (925) 891-4491 or email at elizabeth@doingcollege.com.

Each year high school students make serious college application mistakes that are both heartbreaking and avoidable. Here is my best advice condensed into seven tips to help you demonstrate sincere, strong and consistent interest with a shorter, more cohesive set of schools.

1. **Balance Your College List.** Many students apply to many highly selective schools and risk rejection from all of them. The trick is to create a list that is balanced by admission probability. I call the three college categories Low, Medium and High Probability to emphasize admission chances as a critical factor in building a list. Your list should include no more than 2-3 low probability or reach schools - these are competitive schools where many talented students are denied admission. Next, your list should be anchored by a solid core of schools where your GPA and test scores fall squarely within the mid 50 percent of applicants who were accepted last cycle. Then your list should include 2-3 colleges where you have a high probability of admission - these are colleges where your academic profile places you in the top 25 percent of last year's admitted applicants. Each college on your list should be one you would be delighted to attend. To get information about your admission chances, go to collegedata.com and click on College Chances.

2. **Apply in Moderation.** Colleges may improve their rankings with record-setting numbers of applications, but applying to too many colleges does not help students at all. It's tough to write well-conceived and thoughtful applications for too many different colleges. Looking at the bigger picture, you are adding to the frenzy of college admission by making it harder for colleges to predict who will accept offers of admission. Many colleges react to their success at recruiting record numbers of applications by creating longer waitlists. Some colleges respond by trying to assess student interest by adding more essay questions; many ask students to list all colleges they are applying to. A smart student will build a short college list with common threads that reflect the careful research you have done to find colleges that are a good match for you. About eight well-researched schools is a good number. In California, a

student who applies to the UC system can count the UC just once, since the same application applies to all campuses.

3. **Take Time to Complete Each Application.** Colleges take your applications seriously and so should you. Be sure to set aside enough time to complete each application to the best of your ability. Avoid procrastination and do some work on your applications each week through fall cycle. It helps to set up an application timeline. Get your EA and ED (if you are applying early) school applications completed first, then move on to the next set of applications, those due on or before Dec. 1 for example. The final set of applications may be completed after winter break, or whenever the regular decision deadline indicates. Remember, you can submit your application when the application cycle opens; there is no need to wait until the last minute!

4. **Follow Instructions.** Read everything carefully and be sure you follow instructions to the letter. If you are uncertain, use the help email or call center to ask questions. It can take up to 24 hours for someone to respond and sometimes the response does not clear up your uncertainty. Leave enough time to ask another question or call the college or call center directly for assistance. This is another reason why it is so important to leave sufficient time to prepare your applications.

5. **Preview Your Application.** This step ensures that your carefully constructed written work gets sent to the admission staff the way you intended. When you have completed an application be sure to preview it. Then ask a trusted advisor, parent or teacher to review it one last time to catch errors, and make sure everything is order.

6. **Demonstrate Early Interest.** Stealth applicants are those who do not show interest early on and then apply to a college. Among students with similar credentials, the ones who demonstrate early interest are far more likely to be offered admission. There are dozens of ways to show sincere, strong and consistent interest - for example, visit, write, interview, attend college rep sessions at your high school, and attend regional presentations.

7. Ask Promptly for Letters of Recommendation. Ask your favorite teacher(s) early if s/he will write you a letter of recommendation. Give your teacher enough time and support to write a complete and thoughtful recommendation letter. Ask to meet and discuss the activities you are involved in outside of the classroom, share your college aspirations and tell your teacher how his or her class inspired you.

Applying to a UC?

More specific information from Elizabeth LaScala about how to tackle the University of California application is available on our website. To read the full column, visit www.lamorindaweekly.com, and search "How to Tackle the UC Application."

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