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Applying to College

By Elizabeth LaScala, Ph.D.

As the Class of 2009 works its way toward graduation, and transforms itself into next year's fall freshmen at institutions around the country, these seniors are tackling their college applications. This effort adds an additional layer of stress to an already jammed senior calendar. I want to offer some tips and strategies I give my own clients for preparing their applications. By now I assume that the college list is virtually complete. It is important to keep in mind that preparing a college application is a lot of work; there is no getting around that. Follow these guidelines and your task will be easier.

Do not procrastinate! First, figure out exactly what each college's application process is (deadlines, number of letters of recommendation, essay requirements). Next, make a time line for precisely what needs to be done and by when. Plan to meet all deadlines well ahead of time. Procrastination can result in missed opportunities, such as when a favorite teacher turns down your request to write your letter of recommendation because you asked too late.

File electronically. The actual process of filing an application is quite simple now that most colleges accept electronic submissions. Word processing has made revising essays and applications far easier than in your parents' day; you can update and edit your application right up until the time of submission.

Be neat and complete! It is difficult to condense yourself into the small boxes on an application, and it is easy to make errors. Before you hit the "submit" key, be sure to double check everything for completeness and accuracy. Careless errors tarnish an otherwise strong application, and can reflect poorly on the applicant. Remember, the electronic world can make things less complex, but cut and paste features also make it easier to make mistakes. It is not a good idea for an admissions officer at Carleton College to read that you are excited about attending Reed!

Write an effective essay. This topic was covered in October (to read, visit the Lamorinda archives at www.lamorindaweekly.com); here I will add just a few guidelines. Never let anyone, however well-intentioned, write any part of your essay. First, it is unethical and, second, those who read applications are skilled at distinguishing a student's voice. Some colleges, if they are in doubt, will request a writing sample that has been graded at high school. Remember the SAT and ACT essays you wrote are also available to admissions officers. Finally, and most importantly, you deserve to know you are accepted at a college on your own merits.

Take advantage of appropriate help to support your essay writing. You can brainstorm ideas with others and get comments about rough drafts. It is best to ask someone who can be objective, like your English teacher or school counselor. Help with final editing and proofreading is also fine, and I strongly recommend it. Admissions officers know you have time to polish your essays and expect you will do so; it is a sign that you are taking your application to the school seriously.

Consider the Common Application. First, check to see if the schools you are applying to accept the common application. Hundreds of colleges now do. It was designed to simplify the admissions process. Go to www.commonapp.org for the latest information. Students sometimes ask me whether a college that maintains its own application, but gives students a choice about which to use, might prefer its own forms. Colleges pledge to treat all applications equally, and they keep that

pledge. So the choice is entirely up to you.

Elizabeth LaScala, Ph.D. works as an independent college advisor in Lafayette. Dr. LaScala draws on 20 years of experience in higher education and research to customize the college search and admission process for students and their families. She has 3 daughters-one a graduate of Cal Poly (San Luis Obispo), one a sophomore at MIT and the youngest, a junior in high school.

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