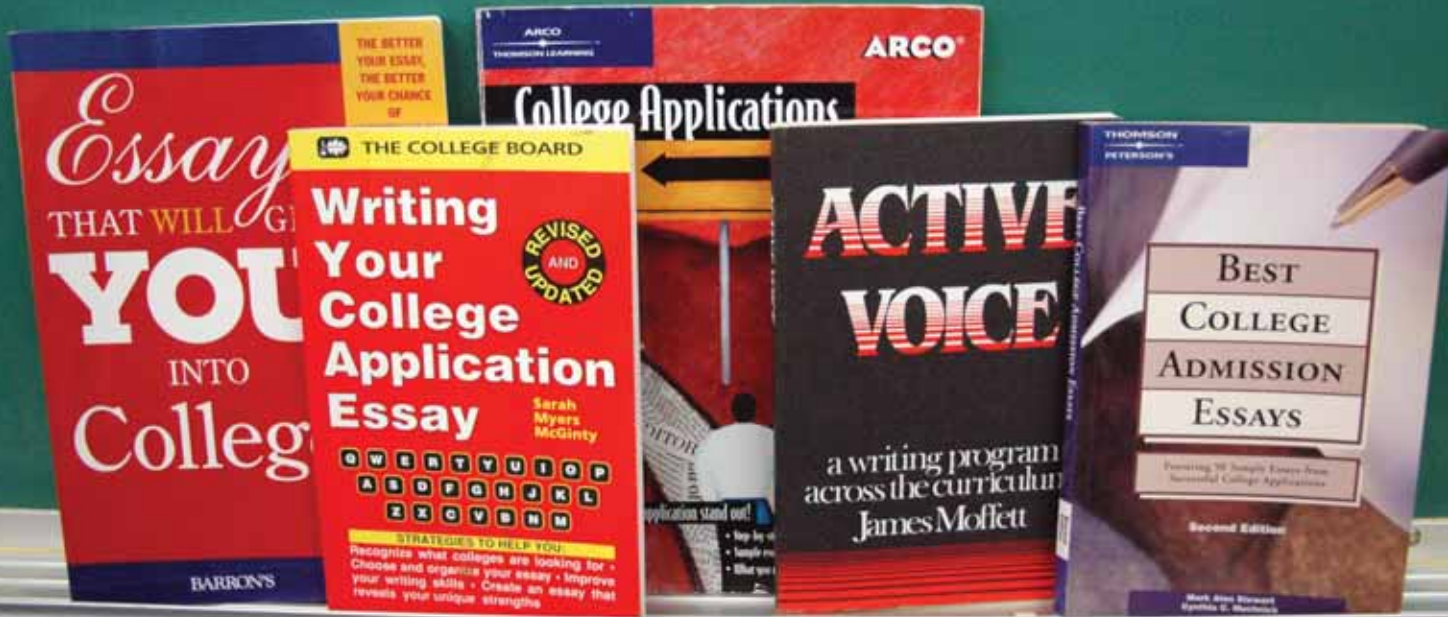


How to apply to college

A guide for high school students

By Paula Steers Brown



College acceptance has become so competitive that parents and students worry simply about the thought of applying. It's really not that bad. Students can do it themselves. Parents are a key support system, but the student must be the one to get excited about following his or her chosen goals. Teenagers may balk at the amount of work required, but they have to do it for the application to ring true.

Start now

Even if you have never demonstrated much organizational ability, have never been a strong participant in class discussion, have never shown much academic focus, *it is not too late*. Turn over a new leaf. Show your guidance counselor, teacher, coach—and especially your parents or guardian—that you care deeply about going to college. If you have never scheduled one meeting with your guidance counselor, schedule it now. Then consider these tips.

Meet your match

Reflect on your own interests and learning styles, then set about finding the best college fit for you. Do not force the fit. It is important to keep an open mind, but be realistic and discuss finances and college location with your parents, because they can limit your choices.

On the Internet the facts are at your fingertips, so do your research. Your high school guidance department has lists of Web sites for every phase of the search and application process. Testing services offer Web sites such as www.collegeboard.com that provide current information on more than 3,600 colleges and compare profiles for similarities. You also should visit the 378-section of your public library to find college guide books that can fill you in on percentages,

demographics, social life and programs. “Fiske” and “The Insider’s Guide” describe living and social arrangements.

If your school has a college fair, talk to the college representatives. It is a great advantage to make contact with an individual from the admissions department who recognizes your name and has some concept of you as a real person.

What do they have to offer you?

Set aside time during your junior year for college visits. Go when the regular students are there so you will get a true picture of campus life.

Prepare questions and talk with admissions representatives or university guides. Tour the buildings and grounds. Are they old, new, renovated, wired or WiFi capable? See a dorm room. Visit the library, the part of campus that will be your major concentration (if you know that already), the recreational facilities, and any other areas you might frequent. Read a copy of the student newspaper. Check out bulletin boards. Eat the food. Allow plenty of time to stroll through the bookstore, looking also at the student textbook section to get excited about the courses being taught. Sit in on a class.

Breeze-through visits will not give you the true flavor. Look carefully at the school’s academic programs. It’s fine to be “undecided,” but if you can research a certain major, do so.

What do you have to offer them?

Colleges want to see that you have taken the most challenging courses you are capable of handling and that your course of study is beyond the state’s minimum requirements for graduation. If you have a particular talent that supports your personal passion, devote time to it in your school schedule. The most competitive schools would prefer to see an elective, rather than a study hall. Colleges look for consistency in

grades. Improvement from 9th grade to 12th grade reflects maturity.

Consider taking AP (advanced placement) classes in your areas of greatest interest or expertise where your performance is likely to be highest. AP classes can provide a wonderful opportunity to get a jump start on college. There is a fee (about \$80) to take each AP exam, although more and more schools are covering that fee for the student. Having AP credit upon matriculation can allow you crucial advantages: early registration, exemptions from certain requirements, and accumulation of college credit (which can help you save on tuition).

Colleges want to see how you have spent your time on extracurricular activities, school events, employment, community service. On your home computer, devise a simple chart to designate categories for your various activities and the approximate time spent on them throughout your high school career. Expand upon any positions held or honors won and the criteria by which they were awarded.

Standardized test savvy

The SAT I measures verbal and math reasoning. Taking the SAT twice is usually a good thing. It is longer than the PSAT and can have an experimental section. Most juniors take the SAT in May and perhaps retake the test in October or November. There are classes that teach test-taking skills. Must-visit sites: www.act.org (for ACT takers) and www.collegeboard.com (for the SAT). You need to prepare but do it in your own style. That could mean spending an evening reading tips online, buying a book and taking practice tests, making vocabulary flash cards, scheduling one or more conferences with a tutor, or taking an entire preparatory course.

The application: narrow the focus

Don't apply to a long list of schools. Apply to five or six, and treat each college individually.

Customize your application. Show them that you are their match. This takes time but yields positive results. If a faculty member has written a book that

has captured your interest, discuss it in your application. Show them you care enough to delve beneath the surface.

Use this rule of thumb for the five to six applications: one or two "safety" schools, two "reality" schools, and one or two "reach" schools. Timetables for applications vary, so check the options and formulate a checklist of deadlines. "Early Decision" is binding, so be absolutely certain of your choice if you apply early. Have a viable Plan B in case your first choice does not work out.

Your essay: extract the unique

Free yourself of others' expectations and try to get in touch with what it is you love—your passion. What might have made you appear "weird" in the conformist middle-school years now makes you very appealing as a candidate to an admissions committee.

One gifted young man from the University of Virginia remembers being ridiculed for his early passion for musical theater. That perceived eccentricity, however, gave him the edge in college and, only a few months after graduation, at the age of 23, he landed a job with a Broadway show.

If you have ever had an experience that made a big impression on you and you could describe it in vivid detail, include it on your brainstorm list—an unstructured list of words, phrases or slice-of-life moments you slap down in stream-of-consciousness fashion to get your best material. If you can connect these experiences to qualities colleges value—intellectual curiosity, creativity, compassion, leadership ability, an optimistic outlook or initiative—you have hit upon a great formula.


If asked "what is unique about you," most high school students draw a blank, but each person has something to offer. To loosen yourself up, tell a story aloud and get someone to take dictation. If you simply cannot think of anything, ask someone who knows you well to think back to an instance that captures the way you react to situations. What can seem to be the most ridiculous story or the most insignificant detail can be the nucleus of an entire admissions essay. Try to tell it in your own voice with vivid, sensing

words that put you back at the scene in as specific a way as possible. Be yourself. Your right match will love you.

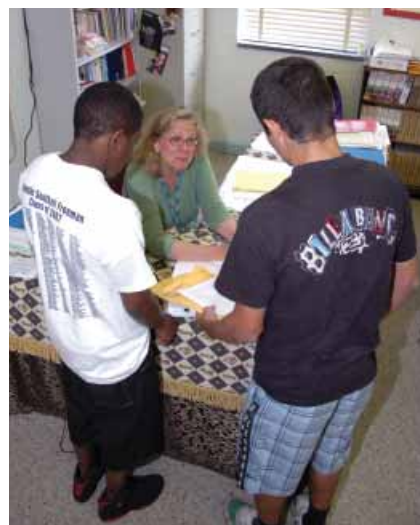
Show your passion

Participate in an internship, an interesting or productive program, or work at a summer job and save your money for college. Volunteering for community service is important to show your civic awareness, but again, this needs to be authentic. Don't just volunteer because you should to get into college. Find something you care about and get involved with that worthwhile cause.

Finding funding

Most guidance departments keep a notebook on all available scholarships. The path to many scholarships requires that you are the only nominee from your school, so you need to make it clear early on (in September) to your guidance counselor or scholarship liaison that you are on the prowl for funding. It cannot be a private pursuit if you wish to be considered for as many financial supplements as possible. The Internet can also be a very valuable tool. Fastweb.com allows any student to set up a profile and will send you notices about applying for scholarships that fit your profile. 

©2007 by Paula Brown. Paula Brown teaches honors and college-bound English at Douglas Freeman High School in Richmond, Va. where she also has a college-counseling business.



Guidance counselors have financial aid forms. Parents will have to complete part of the form which must be filed after January 1.