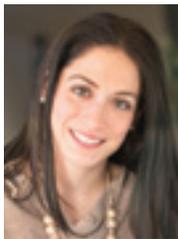


Getting Ahead in the Undergraduate Admissions Game



By Nikkee Porcaro

The clock strikes midnight. You careen down the stairs, your slipper sliding off your foot, your (night) gown fluttering behind you, as you race to the velvet-upholstered seat. You have to make it in time! *Click-clack, click-clack*, and you're off — and the race is on.

But you won't turn into a pumpkin, you aren't in an actual carriage, and you aren't Cinderella. The click clacks are the sound of furious typing, and you are, of course, racing to be one of the first to sign up for the Common App. Or the Coalition App. Or a university's specific app...

Applying for admission to college is, in general, a holistic process, with most schools ranking a student's characteristics in the following order of importance: GPA, strength of schedule, standardized test scores, leadership, extracurriculars, essay, recommendations, and, finally, other factors, such as race, hardship, legacy, and intangibles. Each school is different, and some place more emphasis on standardized test scores (this group of colleges often comprises large state universities, who need a specific metric to effectively cull up to 60,000 applications) than on your GPA. However, those two metrics are often used symbiotically: A school may see a red flag with a high GPA and low test scores, or vice versa. Is the student smart but lazy? Or is the student perhaps not as bright but benefited from a lax grading policy or courses

that were not as dependent on exams?

According to Jessica Jennings, spokesperson at the University of Maryland, "The university has a holistic approach to the admissions process, considering 26 unique qualitative and quantitative factors to select students who will enrich and benefit from the campus learning environment. While test scores and grades are important, the admissions process also considers interests, background, and what makes each student unique."



It's never too early to start the college process, which sounds like something a too-perky teacher with a cloying and condescending accent might say, but it's true. Putting your student in the best position come application time, which starts the summer after junior year, can relieve stress, allow for strategic decisions, and perhaps make the difference between a "You're accepted!" and a "We had a strong pool of applicants this year — we're sorry..."

It's vital to help your student develop his or her interests in middle school.

While what a student does in middle school is irrelevant to the application, ensuring your student is set up to excel in high school at whatever academic or extracurricular activities he or she chooses will provide a solid foundation to help your student build accolades and leadership opportunities, two ways to distinguish a student in the rarefied air of the Washington, D.C., area. Gymnastics, the clarinet, blowing glass, whatever — explore now!

The biggest piece of easy advice I give: Starting freshman year, keep a living, changing document of student accomplishments. The biggest stressor I see is students forgetting what they've achieved by junior year. Keep a list of the title/accolade/accomplishment/participation, the number of hours per week, weeks per year, and a short description. Come application time, you'll be set!

While some schools do not require standardized tests, most still do, and even schools that do not require them may still use them to help make a de-

cision about admission. Reading is the single easiest (and cheapest!) way to improve skills seen on these tests. Encourage students to choose one article a day to challenge themselves. It could be *The Economist* or *Politico*, or even *ESPN Magazine*. Test prep is great (we'll get to that in a minute), but no number of tips or tricks can remedy reading skills that should have been developed years ago. Free websites like Khan Academy also offer excellent prep options — including videos, games, quizzes, and step-by-step explanations — that can save money down the road.

Starting test prep early is becoming more popular, because students are realizing that prepping gradually can serve two purposes: reducing stress and learning strategies that also help with school. It also allows time to prep with a friend in a small-group setting, or figure out a plan to work on strengths and areas of opportunity at their own pace.

I could talk about this all day, but, like Cinderella, I'm out of time. Next time, I'll touch on the graduate admissions process and all the fun that is the LSAT, GRE, GMAT, TEAS, and other wonderful ways to fill in bubbles to achieve your higher-education dreams!

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