

Stand Up, Stand Out, and Control Your Own College Destiny



By Nikkee Porcaro

Michael Brown, a student in Houston, was recently accepted to all 20 colleges to which he applied. Not only that, but he received full rides. To Every. Single. One.

How did he do it? Well, Brown has an impressive profile: a 4.68 GPA, an SAT score of 1540, and an ACT score of 34. He was involved in the varsity debate team, the Key Club, and 100 Black Men of Houston, among others.

What was equally impressive, however, was his attitude since freshman year: “I got very serious about finding ways to get extra-involved in my community and be prepared for college admissions,” he told *The Washington Post*.

Brown comes from an area hit hard by Hurricane Harvey, not to mention an area with serious socioeconomic issues — the *Washington Post* reported that more than half of his school is at risk for dropping out. We can look at Brown as

an inspiration in the college application journey, with the most important lesson being this: Control what you can, and don't waste precious time worrying over what you cannot.

I work with students of all different races, religions, ethnicities, and socioeconomic classes, and see both the pluses and minuses of affirmative action policies. This column is not to debate those, but rather to teach students to focus their attention on aspects that they can control as they build their academic profile: strength of schedule, grades, SAT/ACT scores, involvement in leadership, demonstrated school interest, and service hours. You cannot control your background, nor is it appropriate to lament that so-and-so was accepted because of his or her race — something I hear a lot, by the way — and while I understand it can be tempting to say such things out of frustration, it is often offensive, not to mention unprovable. Brown, for instance, may well have had his race considered in the admissions process, but

judging by his accolades and accomplishments, it would be foolish to assert he was accepted and given scholarship money solely because of it.

When applying to college, you are competing with truly exceptional students, and while many may have a great test score, a stellar GPA, or amazing extra-curriculars, it's rare to find someone who stands out in all three. You don't need to develop the next Snapchat app or cure a terminal disease to polish up your college application (but if you can, do it), but it's imperative younger high school students start to develop interests and leadership opportunities before junior year, both for longevity and optics reasons. Start a club about the Settlers of Catan board game. Spearhead a *tzniut* (modest) prom-dress drive. Help organize a workshop on basketball basics for underprivileged kids.

Some examples of standout extra-curriculars and leadership roles I've seen among students I've worked with include:

An international student who founded her own NGO to help Syrian refugees,

for which she raised \$120,000 and developed into an 80-volunteer, multi-country organization.

A local student who worked on developing a laundry-service phone app for college students.

A Texas student who interned with a medical supply company and was eventually hired in sales.

A local student who turned an internship at a law firm into a full-time position as a high school junior.

I include these ideas, not for you to copy, but to show the breadth of opportunities these students are choosing to make for themselves. Of course, it should go without saying that your primary goal should be a strong course load and stellar grades; but if you want to truly stand out, you need to take the initiative. No one is going to, nor should be, doing it for you. Instead, take whatever passion you have and start exploring ways it can help you stand out in an ever-increasing pool of competitive applicants.

Nikkee Porcaro is the founder and president of No Anxiety Prep International, a Greater Washington area based educational consulting firm that assists students with their educational goals. Email Nikkee at nikkee@noanxietyprep.com.