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10 ways to make your college applications stand out

Make an impression that will get them to say yes!

By Liz Funk
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Everyone knows a student who sees college application deadlines approaching and immediately joins every club that he or she can fit into a day. Rather than suddenly spreading yourself too thin, send stronger applications and increase your overall acceptance rate by making your applications more personal, more unique and more specific to each school you are applying to. In order to catch the eye of the admissions office, you need be creative. Here's how:

Make your essays vivid. Judith Hodara was the associate director of admissions for the University of Pennsylvania (www.upenn.edu) and the director of admissions for the Wharton School of Business, who now coaches high school students and MBA hopefuls through the application process. She says, "Students should really capture a moment in their lives; a chess tournament when they have their hand on a pawn and are going to move it, getting out the door when the volunteer fire department alarm goes off, or the shock of cold water when they hit the pool for swim practice. All very small instances, but they give the reader a real idea of who the student is."

Manage your online presence. It's important to delete inappropriate Facebook photos or tweets, but you should also use your online presence to boost the strength of your applications. Jessica Givens, author of "Get Your Summer Strategy On," encourages students to build a website as a showcase for their talents. "Every college admissions official today sits only a few feet from a computer... A website is a powerful record of time spent and interests explored. Applicants want to make sure they put the web address on their applications, both in the activities section and on their personal resums."

Buddy up with your regional admissions rep. "Usually admissions will have representatives who cover certain areas of a state," says Amy Macy, a former admissions counselor at the University of Colorado (www.colorado.edu) who is now director of college counseling at the Denver Academy. "Introduce yourself and keep in touch with that person. I had one student who was on the cusp of being accepted to CU-Boulder, but her grades weren't quite high enough to immediately accept her. She sent me a handwritten card every month updating me on what she was up to, what skills she'd recently acquired, and how she still felt CU-Boulder was her first choice. When we were at the point where we could accept the next batch of applicants, I immediately pulled her file and accepted her."

Check in regularly with admissions — it works in your favor! "Many colleges track how many times a student makes contact with the college, whether it's stopping by at college fairs, visiting campus or calling the admissions office," says Macy. "You don't want nagging, but we're impressed when students make themselves a presence in the admissions office."

Show that you've done your research. "Students should know the school's mission statement and values, goals for the students, university, the community and names of the department chairs and faculty," says Elizabeth Venturini, a college admissions coach in southern California. You should also make relationships on campus before you apply. Then, you can engage in a bit of healthy namedropping in your application and essays. Says Hodara, "I encourage students to mention faculty they may want to do research with [and reach out to that faculty member in advance so that they can really use great information]."

If you can't visit, reach out to student leaders. "[Students] should find specific clubs or organizations that they are excited about and reach out to the student leaders. They should try to imagine themselves on that campus going through a usual Wednesday," says Hodara. If you can't make a trip to campus, she recommends doing some research and reaching out to "have that interest come through with details and great color."

Include supplemental materials that demonstrate your hobbies and passions. "My clients have submitted examples of their websites, musical performances and writings," says Venturini. You can even take a multimedia approach to your supplemental materials and submit DVDs with video files, music clips or photography portfolios. Says Mandee Adler, a college admissions coach in southern Florida, "I almost always recommend it when a student has a particular talent or interest that needs more 'room' or an additional medium to explain."



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If possible, back up your activities resumé with newspaper clippings. Maxine Frenzel, a freshman at the University of Chicago (www.uchicago.edu), started freelance writing when she was a sophomore in high school and she's also an avid skier. She says, "I sent a packet of my newspaper/magazine articles as well as articles that have been written about my freestyle skiing accomplishments to the admissions representatives."

Before you send any supplemental materials, make sure the college accepts them. "At CU-Boulder, it was policy that we didn't see or consider supplemental materials," says Macy.


Don't go too far. "We had a student ship extra information for their application glued to large flat rocks," says Sandra Starke, vice provost for enrollment at Binghamton University (www.binghamton.edu). "It cost the student a great deal of money to ship them and it was inconvenient for us since the rocks could not be scanned or easily handled. We treated this application no differently than any other — once we got rid of the rocks."

Adler is quick to clarify an extremely important factor in sending in an exceptional college application: "My students don't do things to have unique applications...they do things to make themselves unique that then come across in the application."

Use these tips to make your passions and hobbies shine through in your applications so colleges understand what an asset the real you will be on their campuses.

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