

## Making the Most of High School Or How to Get into the School of your Dreams

**“Colleges want to see that you've focused from the start on getting the best possible education your high school has to offer.”<sup>1</sup>**

When you apply to a top of the line school like Bowdoin, Colby, or Harvard, the admissions officers know that not all schools have the same resources – they know for instance, that a person going to a very selective and very expensive private school in NYC will have more opportunities for a wider variety of classes, tutoring programs, internships and extracurriculars (as well as more financial family support) than someone from a rural community. They don't expect you to have the same resume – or SAT scores – but they do expect to hear a story about how you got everything that you could out of your high school experience.

Here are some of the things that colleges look for:

1. Take a full and challenging course load. If an honors or AP course is offered in a subject, challenge yourself with it. (“In the National Association for College Admission Counseling's most recent "State of College Admission" survey, 66 percent of staffers said they assign considerable weight to degree of challenge.”)<sup>2</sup>
2. Take a language for four years, and try to take if you can, take AP Calculus.
3. Diversify your schedule with things that you are passionate about. This means taking interesting electives you can really be engaged in, creating your own course with an independent study, or finding alternative options like taking an evening course at Bowdoin or UMA (there are often state funds to pay for these courses).
4. Pick one or two extracurriculars (or alternative activities like volunteering at a specific organization) that you are really passionate about, and follow through with them. These can make great examples in interviews for college as well as scholarship essays, and they can also be immensely rewarding.

If you are already a sophomore or junior and feel behind, taking a summer school course (see summer opportunities) or doubling up on a math, science or foreign language can really help you. Colleges like to see a compelling story of a student who has become more focused and academically turned things around.

Remember: no one has a perfect application. The best applicants are those who create a compelling story and explain the blips in his or her resume.

**Apply strategically to three tiers of schools.**

In eighth grade, a teacher gave me a bookmark that said, “Shoot for the moon. Even if you miss, you'll land among the stars.” This is true with college as well. Aim high but make sure that you have a back up that you will be satisfied with.

In order to do this, it is generally a good idea to apply to one “safety” program – somewhere that you know that you will get in – two or more schools that you are fairly certain of your acceptance to, and one or two “reach” schools. Depending on your grades and extracurriculars, what programs fall into each of these categories will be different for each of you. Talk to your guidance counselor to find out what would be a good fit for each of these.

## **Make the most of your background.**

A couple of years ago I was talking with a Harvard Law graduate now holding public office, and one thing that she told me was that she regretted not using her background to her advantage sooner. This woman was from Maine and had a unique story about her upbringing that was far from the typical nuclear family situation. She feels that owning up to this in her Harvard Law admissions process helped to give the admissions committee a better understanding of her character, and the strength that she had to overcome these obstacles.

What some of you may not know is that you all already have a background that aids you in the admissions process. Maine is underrepresented nationally in top tier colleges and universities. The admissions officers at these schools work hard to create bodies of students that are socially, economically and geographically diverse. Being from a small Maine community actually gives you an advantage over other students and can lend itself to the story you unfold to your admissions officer.

## **Ask for advice.**

Earlier this year I was sitting down with an accomplished author and National Geographic photographer over coffee, and he gave me some great advice. He said that one of the most important things to do is to learn how to ask for advice from people who have gotten where you want to go – “What is the best advice you can give me?” Most accomplished people he said, are flattered that someone wants advice, particularly when you let them know first that you look up to them or admire they way they have handled their careers. These people have tread the path you want to go down, and a conversation them can not only lend great do’s and don’ts but when followed up on, can also forge lasting connections that can turn into job opportunities or recommendations.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.usnews.com/education/best-colleges/articles/2012/09/25/focus-on-7-strategies-to-get-into-college>

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