PLANNING REALITIES FOR YOUR COLLEGE APPLICATIONS

Todd prided himself on being a sane, balanced guy who got everything done with a minimum of drama. He was expecting to manage all his college applications with his usual combination of organization, planning, and hard work. And he was already off to a good start. He had made his big decisions: he was applying to ten colleges total, and he was applying Early Action to his top-choice college, MIT.

Like many applicants, Todd was already pretty savvy when it came to college applications. He knew that they were more than just a fill-in-the-blank forms, and he had already been warned about the essays (as a science-math type, Todd was dreading those). He also knew that he needed teacher recommendations and that his school counselor had to send in some forms along with his grades. Todd had even heard of the Common Application, and he knew that although nine of the colleges on his list accepted it, MIT did not.

Todd came up with what he thought was a pretty solid plan for completing his applications. He would get his applications under way as soon as school started in the fall. He would allot most of his time to completing his MIT application (because it was his first choice and did not use the Common Application), and then he would knock out the applications to the Common Application colleges in one intense weekend. He did not anticipate having any trouble getting his MIT application in by the early admissions deadline of November 1, and he knew he could get his other applications in by the end of November, no sweat.

But when Todd talked to us, we explained that his plan was not going to work, despite his good intentions. There were two big problems.

First, he had dramatically underestimated the time he would need to devote to his college applications. He was not going to be able to knock out nine of his applications in one weekend, even if all of those nine colleges used the Common Application, because he, like many applicants, fundamentally misunderstood how the Common Application works. And even though he knew that there were parts of his application that he had to request from other people (like his teacher recommendations) and that it was going to take some time for him to finalize and submit the applications, he hadn't allotted any time for getting those additional tasks done.

Second, Todd was starting work on his applications too late. In order to get his applications done with minimal drama, Todd needed to start working on them in the summer before his senior year rather than waiting until school started.

Todd is not particularly unusual. Many, many applicants fall victim to poor planning (or its evil cousin: no planning). But you don't have to be one of them. Even though applying to college is a big and complicated undertaking, you *can* apply to college without driving yourself or your family crazy, and you *can* do it all in a way that will maximize your admissions results. It requires some more work up-front, but it will save you so much stress and time in the longer term.

That's the philosophy behind our first strategy:

Ivey Strategy #1: Work smarter, not harder.

In order to work smarter, not harder, you first need a good plan. That's what you'll have by the end of this chapter.

SOME PLANNING REALITIES

Much of the reason Todd came up with a bad plan was that he didn't really understand the planning realities of applying to college. We don't want you to be in the same position; we want you to have a firm grasp on these realities, so you can avoid magical thinking and make a good plan.

Planning Reality #1: Each College Has Its Own Application

What every applicant needs to understand from the outset is that every college has its own application. If you are applying to ten colleges, you will have to complete ten applications. Todd didn't understand this. He assumed that the nine colleges on his list that accepted the Common Application all used the same application. It is an understandable mistake (the application is called *common*, after all), but that's not the way it works.

The Common Application is *not* a common application. It's true that the Common Application (also called the *Common App* for short) and other similar cooperative ventures (such as the Universal College Application or ApplyTexas) were created to standardize forms and minimize the amount of time you have to spend completing your applications. But the standardized components form only the *core* of each application, not the *whole* application for each college. Every college can (and usually does) customize these applications. For example, on the Common App, colleges routinely use one or more of these customizations:

- They add their own questions to the Common App itself or to a separate writing supplement. More than three-fourths of the Common App colleges add college-specific questions.

- They request that certain information from the Common Application be "suppressed" or "undisclosed." For example, many colleges choose not to receive the information you share about your religion in the Demographic section of your application. So although you might enter that information on the Common Application, some schools might see it and others won't.

- They can require different kinds of additional materials and also refuse to consider certain additional materials. For example, each college has its own particular requirements for teacher recommendations, and each college can decide whether or not to accept arts supplements.

So although the Common App and other similar "common" applications are definitely time-savers, they are not miracle shortcuts through the application process.

We know that this can be a particularly hard concept to grasp, especially if you come from another country that does use a truly common application, such as the UCAS application in the United Kingdom. But in the United

States, admissions policies and requirements are *not* standardized across colleges, and US college applications are *not* the same, even among schools that use the Common Application.

So if your copy of this book gets washed away by a flood and you retain nothing else, remember this: *If you have ten colleges on your list, you have ten applications to complete, even if all of ten colleges on your list accept the Common App.*

Planning Reality #2: Applying to College Takes a Lot of Time

Applying to college takes a lot of time for three reasons. First, as we have just explained, every college has its own application, so you have to allot a certain amount of time for every application you have to complete. Because most of you will have ten or so applications to complete, there is simply no way to avoid spending a fair amount of time on your applications.

Second, college applications consist of more than just the forms that *you* have to complete. As we explain in the next section of the book, your "application" is actually a set of materials that include supporting materials that you must request from others. You must budget time for requesting those additional materials.

Finally, applying to college involves a lot of administrative tasks, including entering information into online forms and following up on different parts of the application. Those tasks are not particularly hard, but they do take time.

You should assume that you will devote about *one hundred hours total* to complete eight to twelve applications. We know that sounds crazy, and you're thinking that it couldn't possibly take that much time. But trust us, it will. If you budget one hundred hours, what's the worst that can happen? You find yourself in the happy situation of having more free time than expected. Compare that to what happens if you fail to budget enough time for your college applications. You'll have to scramble to make time when you are under serious pressure, and it won't be pretty.

How do you make room for one hundred hours of application work? The hard truth is that you may have to let go of some activities in order to make time for your college applications. That's just the way it is. There are no shortcuts, and living on three hours of sleep each night is not a good solution. You can't perform well if you are relying on Red Bull, coffee, and sugar to get you through the application season. Lack of sleep is the number one contributor to seismic senior year meltdowns, so make room for those one hundred hours, and sacrifice activities if need be so that you can still get enough sleep.

PARENT TIP: Adjust the Family Schedule

Your child needs time to apply to college, and unfortunately the time that's needed often falls during the time that ' s usually set aside for family vacations and holidays. You can be a huge help to your child if you adjust the family schedule to give your child the time he or she needs to focus properly on the college application process. Consider taking the family vacation earlier or later than usual. Plan to be at home from August 1 to December 31 (or, if traveling, make sure your child has access to the Internet and quiet time to work). Avoid scheduling big events at or near the submission deadlines or notification deadlines. In other words, make your family schedule fit the college admissions timeline rather than trying to make the college admissions timeline fit your family schedule.

The timeline for applying to college is driven by two things: the application submission deadlines and the application release dates. Both are set by the colleges.

Most top US colleges have application submission deadlines between November 1 and November 15 for the first round of early admissions and deadlines between January 1 and January 15 for both the second round of early admissions as well as regular admissions. When it comes to the application submission deadlines, the colleges do not negotiate them with individual applicants, and they are not soft deadlines. There are no extensions or incompletes. (This comes as a surprise to some non-US-based applicants, who might be used to softer application deadlines in their home countries.) The deadlines are not suggestions. They are firm. That means that at many colleges, if you fail to submit your application by the deadline, your chances of acceptance are reduced to *zero* because the application will not be considered, no matter how much you beg and plead (or worse, have your mom call up to beg and plead).

Most top US colleges also release their applications between mid-July and mid-August. The Common Application releases a preview in March, along with the essay topics for the year, but does not go live until August 1. Although applications often remain much the same from year to year, colleges can and do change them, and it is generally unwise to begin working on college applications before they have been released.

So there is no way around a timeline that has a crunch time from August 1 to December 31 of the year before you start college. That is just the way it is. Make sure to plan for it and clear your schedule accordingly.

YOUR PLAN

Your plan should be a plan that is based on the essential realities. It should be a plan that plots all of your major activities and gives you an overview of what you will be doing when. Over the years, we've developed a sample master plan that we use as the starting point with all the applicants we work with, and that's what we have provided to you in the following section. You will need to adjust the plan to suit your particular situation, and we'll give you some tips on how to do that right after the plan.

Sample Master Plan

Start: June 1 before senior year (fifteen months before start of college)

End: July 31 after senior year (one month before start of college)

June

• Shift gears: Stop building credentials and start presenting them.

• Make big decisions about where to apply and where to apply early. (chapter 1)

July

• Make your plan. (this chapter)

• Write your story. (chapter 3)

• Create your résumé. (chapter 4)

August

• Complete your applications for two colleges on your list. (chapters 5–15 and chapter 21)

• Get started on supplementary materials. (chapter 16)

September

• Complete your applications for three colleges on your list. (chapters 5–15 and chapter 21)

• Arrange for supporting materials. (chapters 17–20)

• Continue preparing your supplementary materials. (chapter 16)

October

• Complete your applications for two colleges on your list. (chapters 5–15 and chapter 21)

• Finish your supplementary materials. (chapter 16)

• Submit any applications with deadlines in early November. (chapter 22)

November

• Complete your applications for three colleges on your list. (chapters 5–15 and chapter 21)

• Do the necessary follow-up on submitted applications. (chapter 22)

December

• Receive any decisions from early admissions applications and follow up if necessary. (chapters 22–23)

• Submit all applications that have not been previously submitted if continuing in process. (chapter 22)

January

• Follow up on applications submitted in December. (chapter 22)

February

• Submit required supporting materials. (chapter 18)

March–April

• Receive decisions from colleges.

• Choose which college to attend.

• If accepting a place on a wait list, follow wait-list procedures. (chapter 23)

May–June

• Follow up on wait lists.

July

• Shift gears: End the process of *getting into college* and begin the process of *going to college*!

Planning Tip #1: If June 1 before Your Senior Year Has Already Passed, Compress Your Timeline

The most important thing is to follow the basic path we have laid out; if you try to skip steps, you will only have to circle back around. If you are really late to the party, we suggest that you focus on producing standout applications to your *top three* colleges. Do everything we suggest, in the order we suggest, for those applications *only*, and then do as much of it as you can with the others.

Planning Tip #2: Add or Subtract Colleges from Your Master Plan

This master plan assumes that you are applying to ten colleges. If you are applying to more than ten or fewer than ten, then you need to add or subtract them from the sample master plan.

Planning Tip #3: Add Any Activities Related to Standardized Tests

This master plan does not include any activities related to standardized tests because it is focused solely on the applications themselves. Many of you will be preparing for and taking standardized tests during the same time period. To ensure that you allow yourself sufficient time for those, we suggest you add all those test-related activities to your master plan as well.

Planning Tip #4: Add Any Activities Related to Financial Aid, Including Scholarships

Applying for financial aid is its own process with its own timeline, and it will overlap with the application process. To ensure that you do not lose track of the financial aid process, add all of those activities to your master plan.

Planning Tip #5: Add Your Deadlines and Notification Dates and Tweak if Necessary

This master plan does not show any application submission deadlines or notification dates, because they will depend on where you are applying to college and where, if anywhere, you are applying early. But in order to sequence all your activities, the master plan incorporates some assumptions. It assumes that the early admissions deadline is November 1 and that the early notification date is early December. It also assumes that the regular deadline is January 1 and that the regular notification date is April 1. The master plan has you submit your applications at least two weeks before each deadline. But in order to save you time and expense, it does not have you submit your regular applications until you have received news about your early applications. The dates set for follow-up in response to decisions are aligned to the assumed notification dates. Once you add your own deadlines and notification dates, you may need or want to tweak the plan. As you make adjustments,

we suggest that you follow the structure we've described. For example, if your deadlines are later than the assumed deadlines, then you can shift your submission dates, but we encourage you to stick with the plan's structure that has you submit at least two weeks before the deadline.

At this point, you have made your plan. That's a huge step. The only thing left to do is to work the plan you've created. Good plans only lead to smarter work and better results *if you actually follow them*, and that's what the rest of this book is about.