

Application Madness

For many parents, the college admissions process leads to panic

By Anne C. Roark

IKNEW we were in trouble when I started rearranging the furniture in our family room.

At first, the changes were inconsequential—a couch pushed aside, a library table installed in front of the television. But then things grew more complicated. I dragged in a round table from the garden, and chairs from the kitchen, and scavenged a bunker-sized bulletin board from my office. We needed a place to post deadlines, keep track of names, and record other intelligence gathered.

The mail had already begun to pile up, sending me on a frantic search for storage files. I improvised with a set of large wooden crates, which my friend Gracie had left in my care after her fiancé found out they were a gift from one of her old boyfriends.

Then came the most drastic step of all: I began emptying book shelves (fiction stayed, but philosophy and poetry were wiped out altogether) to make room for our new collection of 600- and 700-page guidebooks. They were mostly filled with propaganda, but some offered strategy options and collected data that might be useful, and even practice drills.

All this may sound like someone on a compulsive reorganization rampage. But I was dealing with a much more serious problem: Our first-born child, Kate, now a senior in high school, was preparing to apply to college. Our family room was about to become command central for an uncertain campaign that lay ahead.

My husband Marshall and I had always assumed our children would go to college, but we had no particular place in mind. He graduated from a college everyone in the world knew about, while I went to a college almost no one had even heard of. Yet we both ended up in pretty much the same place: living in a crazy city, making less money than we wanted (but more than we needed), doing work we loved to hate and hated to love, and raising children we idolized but who felt about us much the way we felt about our careers (loved to hate,

etc.). Out of that experience, we became what you might call college admissions pacifists.

I swore never to be one of those hysterical parents who are convinced their children's fates—their careers and lives—are



Prospective college students are deluged with booklets, brochures and guidebooks; some run to 600 pages or more.

determined by where they go to college. My children's acceptance (or rejection) by a particular institution would not be the ultimate test of my mettle as a parent. I was especially offended by the feverish slogans tossed about by so many parents: Berkeley or Bust, Princeton or Perish, Harvard or Hang (Yourself). These struck me as the worst kind of academic xenophobia.

A few years earlier, poolside during a family vacation in Hawaii, my resolve had been momentarily tested. I was cornered by a talkative father who bragged about how he was gaming the college admissions system on his daughter's behalf. He had been driven to it, he said, by the frightful competition to enroll.

I expressed surprise: "It seems to me that it's easier to get into college today than it has ever been."

That set him off. "Let me tell you," he said. "These places are so swamped with applications that they can now afford to wait-list students with 1500 SATs and A-minus averages."

Worried that his daughter would be shut out, he had sought the advice of a consultant who specialized in college admissions. "This woman," he said, "takes one look at our daughter's application—which is pretty impressive, I've got to tell you—and she is ready to toss it in the trash. 'They see a million of these,' she tells me. 'Good grades, good test scores, good athlete, good recommendations, good prep school. We've got to do something to make her stand out.'

"So here's what this woman does," he went on. "She creates a new profile for our daughter—a whole new persona. No more talk about loving math and science and wanting to be a doctor. She doesn't care if the kid's already a doctor. Brown

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and Yale are overloaded with them already. She notices our daughter has taken some Latin, so she tells her to downplay the math and science, and announce her intention of majoring in classics. That should impress them!”

Evidently, it didn't. Marshall and I found out much later that the big guns turned the daughter down. So did most of the medium-sized guns. We didn't hear it from the father, but

friends of friends told us that the girl was fine with the outcome and eventually loved where she ended up. The father was said to still be recovering.

I found his story vaguely amusing and a little tawdry, but also mildly troubling. If the competition had become that fierce, perhaps my husband and I should reexamine our serene attitude about which college to attend and how to get in. Sure, neither of our two daughters was in high school yet, but maybe it was time to do something.

When I broached the subject with Marshall, he became enraged. The only way I could calm him down was to promise never to reinvent our children as classics majors, not even if they begged us.

I swore never to be one of those hysterical parents who are convinced their children's fates are determined by where they go to college.

Our stack of college guides

Once the family room was reasonably well organized, I settled down with our stack of college guides. There were insider's guides and outsider's guides; compilations of the best colleges and compendiums of even better colleges; testimonials on colleges that made a difference in lives, and exposes of colleges that had no impact.

The more I read them, the more I began to think our boorish friend in Hawaii hadn't been as alarmist as he seemed. Colleges I'd never heard of, some more obscure than my own alma mater, were turning down 40, 50, 60 percent of their applicants. Competition at the brand-name schools had gone beyond the ridiculous.

Then I recalled hearing an administrator at Harvard trying to explain to a group of alumni why so many of their brilliant little legacies were being turned away by the university. In one year alone, he said, the undergraduate admissions office rejects enough valedictorians to fill the freshman class four times over. Or was it the entire undergraduate college? I couldn't remember, although with that kind of competition, I wasn't sure it made any difference.

Stanford administrators were telling their alumni virtually the same thing. Not only were they turning away students who had been first in their classes, they were turning away valedictorians who had perfect 1600 scores on their SATs. There just wasn't room for all of them.

I began to feel uneasy. I should have had a better fix on the situation. After all, I had written extensively about colleges and universities as a journalist in Washington and Los Angeles some years earlier, and had even done a stint as a college admissions officer. Clearly, I had been away from it too long. I needed to know more.

That is how I found myself packing to attend the annual meeting of the National Association for College Admission

Counseling in Long Beach, California. I had covered the organization from time to time in the mid-1970s. Maybe, I thought, I can get some inside tips, or at least some perspective.

“You're not going to talk to any of the colleges I'm interested in, are you?” my daughter asked with alarm.

“No, this is purely professional,” I said, trying to be the cool, inquisitive reporter rather than the frantic mother. “I'm just going to poke around and see if there are any trends worth writing about.”

“There are some sessions about problem parents that look interesting,” I told my husband. “If I pick up any tips, I'll let you know.”

“You'll fit right in,” he assured me.

In search of answers

The Long Beach Convention Center is a large, glassy structure overlooking the city's harbor. Despite the warm and sunny Southern California day, people were milling about in tweed jackets and sweater vests, looking very east coast. I didn't know when I had seen so many men in bow ties—or, for that matter, any kind of ties. It was similarly odd to see so many women walking around with fully covered midriffs.

I went in search of someone who could answer my questions, and managed to snag the director of college counseling at a high-powered New York prep school. “There's been a sea change,” he said as we sat outside on some steps. When he started in the business in 1985, he talked to students about “good choices, colleges that matched their interests, were the right size, in the right location. Now it's all about strategy. They want to know, ‘What's the best place I can get in, and how do I go about doing it?’”

There are plenty of colleges and universities in the country, he said, about 2,000 in all. The problem is with the 75 that are really competitive, meaning fewer than half of the applicants get in. There are more and more 18-year-olds applying to those 75 colleges today than ever before. Moreover, there is a higher percentage of smart 18-year-olds applying.

“Let me give you the history behind this,” my New York expert said.

In the 1960s, as the post-war Baby Boom generation crowded into the system, colleges and universities built new facilities and enlarged their faculties. By the mid-1970s, the boom had collapsed, brought down by a deepening population trough. Private colleges and universities struggled to attract students. Top colleges hired publicists and mounted recruiting and advertising campaigns. Prestigious universities in the northeast began reaching into public schools in the south and midwest and plucking out the best graduates. Soon, the smartest student in a high school in Arizona no longer settled for an honors program in a state university. That same kid was now applying to Yale.

Colleges and universities that had long had excellent reputations in their own regions but were largely unknown elsewhere also began national recruiting campaigns. Institutions no one had heard of one year became hot tickets the next; their applications doubled and tripled. Small colleges and medium-sized universities that had once been open to strong students suddenly found themselves wait-

listing superb ones.

That was when students began to panic. Seeing colleges turn down fully qualified applicants for no apparent reason except that there were too many fully qualified applicants, students began to see the admissions process as a game of luck. To increase their odds of winning, they started doubling or tripling the number of applications they submitted. This made college admissions committees crazy because the more applications they got, the less sure they were about whom to admit.

“Which brings us,” the New York counselor said, “to where we are today, which is that everyone, almost, is pretty much consistently hysterical.”

No one more so than parents. In fact, the conference program listed three panel discussions on how to deal with anxious parents. I picked “Parents: the Good, the Bad and the Hysterical.” By the time I got there, they had evidently finished with the “good” part and were jumping back and forth between “bad” and “hysterical.” One admissions director recounted a conversation he had had with an applicant. When asked how many colleges he was applying to, the student replied, “I’m applying to three colleges; my dad’s applying to six.”

Next there was a recounting of e-mails from parents to directors of admissions: One mother expressed anxiety about what her daughter will eat; another sent in her laundry list of questions about the laundry service; a third mother wanted a rating of the air quality in dormitories; a fourth inquired about the availability of a single room for her son who had suffered a football injury.

A high school counselor, standing to ask a question of the panel, sheepishly admitted to being a parent herself. I began to wonder why only mothers were being singled out. Was

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there some gender stereotyping going on here? Or were female parents more obnoxious than their male counterparts? While I was cogitating on this, a woman in the back of the room told a father story. She was a college counselor in a high school and described a particularly pesky father who was

stalking her. He managed to track her down in a hospital an hour after she was wheeled out of a delivery room. “He wanted to talk about his daughter’s SAT scores,” she said.

The audience guffawed, but I got up and left. I wasn’t offended so much as worried. There I was in Long Beach, doing nothing. I hadn’t sent e-mails to admissions directors or stalked a single high school counselor. I didn’t even know the name of my daughter’s counselor.

I had allowed myself to think that helping my daughter apply to college was going to be a smooth and quick



Next fall, Kate, the writer’s daughter, will enter Connecticut College, where she expects to major in studio arts and international relations.

operation. In fact, it was beginning to seem a bit like the war in Iraq: a protracted mission with no clear plan.

Who needs experts?

Back in the family room, daughter Kate was online investigating colleges. She was very clear about her academic priorities: a great international relations program (she loved history and had become a political junkie) and an even better studio arts program (she was an accomplished artist). Having spent two and a half years in a huge public, highly diverse, urban high school in Los Angeles, she wanted to chuck large and public but was determined to hang on to urban and diverse. She liked the idea of old buildings nestled in beautiful surroundings, walking distance from swank shops, magnificent museums, renowned restaurants. The emerging profile was that of a small, private liberal arts college located in a city, preferably on the east coast. Middlebury in Manhattan, maybe? Williams in Washington?

While Kate took virtual tours of classrooms and dormitories, I was doing my best to remain calm, having just discovered that she didn’t know her college counselor either. She was a senior and an honors student taking a slew of Advanced Placement classes, which would suggest she was eligible for college counseling. But two counselors in a school with 3,800 students didn’t have time to do much counseling. They had sent home with each senior a package of college-application materials and instructions on how to fill them out. One assignment was to write a recommendation about yourself “from the point of view of your counselor.” This did not bode well.

“You need a professional,” my husband’s friend David told me. He had a friend who had talked her way into college and, realizing she had a marketable talent, had since become a private admissions counselor. Now she helped other

determined applicants talk, test, write, play, paint—whatever it took—their way into the college of their dreams.

I was mildly skeptical. In my experience, the first thing a college counselor will tell you is to stop saying “we” when talking about your child’s college applications. “These are not our applications; they are hers. We are not applying to college; she is.” Right. Just like she’s paying the \$40,000 it costs to attend a private college for one year, or—if we were to be so lucky—the \$10,000 to \$15,000 it would cost to stay in-state.

Setting aside my doubts, I called David’s friend in New York. Her receptionist said the woman was too swamped to get on the phone and say hello—business was that good. But not to worry. They would send me to their new Los Angeles office where I could customize a program for Kate. And the cost? Not to worry.

I don’t know why I wasn’t more surprised when the list arrived and I saw the prices. I just assumed \$28,000 was a typographical error. When I called the receptionist back, she said not to worry; we didn’t need all the services in the \$28,000 package. We could probably get by with something more modest, say, in the \$17,000 or \$18,000 range.

I told her I thought \$1,700 was too much, that \$170 was closer to what I was thinking. This time she didn’t tell me not to worry. “You get what you pay for,” she said.

I tried again with a college counselor who made house calls for \$170 an hour. Her first suggestion was a college on board a ship. We reminded her of my daughter’s desires—a small liberal arts college on the east coast. The woman moved on land, but she wasn’t any more helpful. She came up with a list of 75 or so colleges that would be “perfect” for Kate, forgot to leave it with us, and that was the end of her.

We were on our own again. Kate was interviewing with college representatives who were visiting her school from all over the country. Marshall and I were organizing trips with our daughter to prospective campuses in the east and midwest. Who needs experts?

By now, I was well versed in the admissions strategy most often touted by private counselors. It went like this:

First, pick three target schools. Those are the ones that should accept your child because her grades and test scores match those of the students who are already there. (The operative word is “should.” Remember, there are no guarantees in this business.)

Next, pick three “reach” schools, where your child’s test scores and grades look competitive but really aren’t because there are so many applicants with similar qualifications. Usually reach schools aren’t any better than target schools but for some reason have more cache.

(Note: Don’t confuse reach schools with beyond-reach schools. Most beyond-reach schools come with full bragging rights, which makes them difficult to evaluate, but not necessarily the right choice even if your child got in, which odds are she won’t.)

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UPDATE **The College of Her Choice** **August 2007**

THE COLLEGE ADMISSIONS process would have been well worth all the trouble if our daughter had ended up happy with her choice, but she wasn’t. She liked the professors at Connecticut College, and her classes were interesting, but a small college in a small New England town was far too provincial for a public school graduate

A small college in a small New England town proved far too provincial for a public school graduate from Los Angeles who had spent her summers studying art and languages in Paris and Madrid.

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The admissions brochures she had gotten, and the campus tour with the charming student from Thailand, had made her think she would be living with students from around the world. Instead, she was assigned a dorm room next to a bunch of boisterous, inebriated New England party boys. Officials offered to move her to a quieter floor in another dorm.

Instead she decided to move to another college altogether.

Given how onerous the admissions process is, it’s hard to imagine someone going through it voluntarily a second time. Yet one out of five college students do just that, either because they are homesick or don’t have enough money or want a more prestigious degree or become interested in a program that isn’t available where they are.

The second time around, our daughter did everything on her own. Without any help or even any encouragement from her parents, she filled out applications, arranged interviews and got test scores and recommendations sent. She did all of this as a full-time student and without any of her mother’s meddling. She was accepted at Brown University, and is about to begin her senior year there as an honors major in art.

Our other daughter is beginning her junior year at Northwestern. Her mother had nothing to do with her applications.

—Anne C. Roark

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Next, settle on three safety schools. These are colleges that will probably accept your child whether she wants to be accepted or not. Unless, of course, they, too, are suddenly deluged with applications.

If that should happen, go immediately to Plan LD. Late Decision is essentially a behind-the-scenes triage system that matches overlooked students with one of the country's 1,925 schools which still have room even after the admissions process has officially ended. The good news is that some of those are sleepers, good colleges that have yet to be discovered. Until that happens, they will probably be happy to take a look at an overlooked student or two.

"That's not the way to do it!" Henry said, pounding his fist on the table. Henry, a friend for over 20 years, normally was not a fist pounder. But his daughter was also applying to college and he was showing the strain.

He had just finished reading a study published by Harvard University which provided incontrovertible evidence that applying via Early Decision greatly improved an applicant's chances of being admitted to a highly selective college. It was the equivalent of boosting SAT scores by 100 points. It could double—sometimes triple—the odds favoring admission to a prestigious college or university. The study, published in a book entitled "The Early Decision Game," was based on analysis of 500,000 applications at 14 schools.

I'd heard some of this before, but assumed it was just one of the many theories parents pass around but have no evidence to support. Henry, however, was a statistics stud (he knew, for example, the career batting average of every important Los Angeles Dodger for the last 40 years). When it came to college admissions stats, I figured if Henry said it was true, it had to be true.

My husband was skeptical. Our daughter had so much going for her, he argued. She had done her SAT prep classes and brought her scores up 300 points. She had As in her AP classes and was passing all her AP exams. She'd spent the summer at the Rhode Island School of Design, painting. The summer before, she'd been in Paris, drawing. She was bright and talented—this was her father talking—and shouldn't be asked to limit herself to one school as required by Early Decision. She should play the field for as long as she can.

It was true that Kate was in love with a dozen schools, all different from one another: Barnard, Bowdoin, Brown, Colby, Connecticut College, Carnegie Mellon, the University of Chicago, the University of Pennsylvania, Haverford, Vassar, Wesleyan, Washington University in St. Louis—to name a few.

But when the blush wore off, I knew she'd dump some of them because they had baggage she couldn't handle. She could deal with St. Louis, Providence, even Pittsburgh. But Poughkeepsie? No way. Bowdoin was too cold; Barnard was cold in a different way. The tour guide at Wesleyan had an attitude.

Let's face it, I ventured, there are problems with all of them. Why not pick one now, and get it over with?

But most of the schools use a common application form, so why not give lots of schools a chance? asked Marshall.

Because she'll have less of a chance.

But she'll be devastated if she goes Early Decision and doesn't get in.

She'll be more devastated if she gets 12 rejections.

Why do you always have to worry so much? She's going to get in everywhere she applies.

Kate ended the debate by announcing that she would apply Early Decision.

The application

They say the essay is the single most important part of the application. It is the one thing that is truly unique, where the applicant reveals a bit of who she is, how she reacts to the world and what matters to her.

Since I was a writer, I was only too happy to offer my assistance in this endeavor. She should write about Iraq and Afghanistan to show her knowledge of current affairs. She should do more than send a portfolio of her art; she should write about it and turn her art into words.

She rejected everything I suggested. Instead, she wrote about herself—why she practiced yoga for two hours a day seven days a week, how it felt to drink a cappuccino at a sidewalk cafe in Paris. She explained how she had come to choose this place, Connecticut College in New London, a former women's college most people in California had never heard of. She wrote about how impressed she was with the college's new center for art and technology, and how she liked the large number of foreign students on campus and the even larger number of domestic students who went abroad to study. New London may not have been the sophisticated urban center of her dreams, but it was only a short train ride to New York, Boston or Providence.

What really won her heart, she admitted, was the view from campus of Long Island Sound. Without it, New England would be just too claustrophobic for a girl from California who needed a large body of water and a big horizon stretched out before her.

Oh great, I thought, she's going to come off as the quintessential California girl. They'll be making LA jokes around the admissions table all winter. But when I finally sat down and read the entire application, I was astonished. I had no idea how fascinating and engaging this daughter of mine had become. This was a young woman who had everything going for her; she was a force to contend with. There was no way any college admissions committee would pass on this one, not even Connecticut College, which turned down 67 percent of its applicants this year.

Naturally, I didn't bother to organize applications to other colleges so she could get them out quickly in the event she was deferred or turned down by Connecticut College. I told her not to worry about getting additional recommendation forms to her teachers. She'd hear from Connecticut on December 15; her high school didn't close for Christmas vacation until December 19. Even if the worst happened, she would still have four days to get everything together.

The letter was late. We had expected it before the weekend, a little ahead of schedule. Some colleges send out acceptances

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and rejections online, but this was coming the old-fashioned way, by post. The weekend dragged by, then Monday's mail came: nothing. It would definitely be in Tuesday's mail, only it wasn't.

I finally called. There'd been a computer glitch. We'd probably get it Wednesday. We didn't. I called again. Could they tell us on the phone? No, it was on its way. It would be there. When it wasn't, I panicked. One day left. Everyone would be gone from the high school. If Connecticut had decided to say no, we'd miss the January 1 deadline to apply most everywhere else.

An admissions officer kindly said she would extend a professional courtesy if Kate's college counselor would give her a call. We still hadn't met the college counselor. My daughter had managed to enlist the help of the assistant principal, who had graciously agreed to fill out her forms, write a glowing personal recommendation and forward a transcript. Now we needed him to call Connecticut College to learn Kate's fate.

Sorry, said his secretary, he'd already gone. He'd left for vacation a day early. Awful thoughts raced through my head. I had surely destroyed any chance my daughter had of ever getting into college. I frantically tried to think of alternatives. How about taking a year off? Go to Afghanistan and build hospitals.

I phoned the school secretary again, and she reluctantly agreed to call Connecticut herself. Five minutes later she called back and said she couldn't do it.

"You didn't call?" I cried.

"I did call. I just can't tell you what they said."

"What do you mean, you can't tell me? You have to tell me."

"I can't. They told me not to tell anyone. The answers come in the mail."

"So what am I supposed to do about getting the recommendation forms to all the teachers and figuring out who can fill out all the official school forms?"

There was a pause.

"Throw them away," she advised.

"That means she is in? Is she? Are you sure?" I was on the verge of tears.

There was another pause. Then, choosing her words carefully, she said: "I'm sure you don't have to do anything with those forms."

The family room looked bare

A few weeks later, I took the round table back to the garden, moved the library table back where it belonged, and stripped everything off the bulletin board before returning it to my office. I stuffed all the old brochures into shopping bags and stowed them in some mildewed cabinets. The family room looked bare so I went to Crate and Barrel and bought a new chair. I realized afterwards it was a peculiar acquisition for a family that was about to have one less person around.

I talk to Gracie now and again. Sometimes she makes noises about wanting the crates back. I guess she figures her husband is getting old enough that he doesn't remember where they came from. They live all the way across the

country, so I assume she won't collect them anytime soon. The truth is, I still need the crates because the mail hasn't stopped. In fact, it's starting to pick up again. But now some of the envelopes are addressed to a different person.

I told you, didn't I, that we have another daughter? Rachel will be a senior in the fall. She's more the scientific type. These marketing people the colleges use are really good because they've already picked up on that. She's getting mailers from very different places than her sister did. One came from MIT just the other day. "We helped get a man on the moon," it read. "We should be able to help you finance your education." Now wouldn't that be nice? ♦

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