

# College admissions in competitive times

## An expert answers some frequently asked questions

By **HEATHER RICKER-GILBERT**  
www.collegegateways.com

Choosing a college is an important decision! With more than 3,500 colleges in the United States and Canada, and more students graduating from high school and applying to college than ever, the application process can be complex and competitive.

As John Mahoney, dean of admissions at Boston College states on the BC website: "...the college admission process is today more unpredictable, more intimidating, more costly and more time-consuming than ever before."

At the same time, the selection and application process can be exciting, rewarding and an interesting adventure in self-discovery.

It is important for students and their families to be well-informed about the process as they approach the world of higher education.

I am often asked about how to begin a college search, what do colleges really want in an applicant, how to find an affordable college, which schools don't require SAT scores, how does the essay influence an admissions decision, how important are athletics, how to evaluate "honors programs," which colleges welcome home-schooled children, how many colleges should an applicant apply to, what to do for a theater audition and how to decide on a major.

Here are some more questions applicants need to bear in mind, from my experience as an educator and college admissions consultant:

### **1. In how many extra-curricular activities should I be involved?**

Admissions officers are not interested in a laundry list of clubs and activities. They are more likely to favorably consider your application if you show a commitment to one or two interests. For example: achievement in a sport, playing the violin, focusing on a unique hobby such as coin collecting, or continued participation in a work or volunteer activity.

### **2. What is the Common Application and how should I know when to use it?**

The Common Application, which is available online at [www.commonapp.org](http://www.commonapp.org), is now accepted by approximately 275 colleges and universities nationwide. Some institutions

use it exclusively, but many schools require a supplemental application in addition to the Common Application.

### **3. Should I consider a community college – and will my credits transfer?**

For the student who wants to explore a variety of majors or who wants to improve his math and English skills before transferring to another institution, a community college is a good option. They are great places to earn an associate degree or to complete general education requirements because classes are small, most credits transfer, and the cost is very reasonable.

### **4. A recent New York Times article talked about kids doing so many summer activities that they have no**

### **fun in the summer. Does my child really need to be over-scheduled this summer to get into a good college?**

Frantic activity during the summer does not mean automatic acceptance to college and can create stressed-out kids! However, summer is a good time to work part time; to focus on a volunteer or learning experience; or to acquire a skill such as certification in lifeguarding or CPR. It is also a great time to read for pleasure because reading is one of the best and most relaxing ways to prepare for the SAT critical reading test.

### **5. I want my child to go to an Ivy League college or one of the little ivies. How can this be accomplished?**

First of all, does your child want to go to one these schools, and are you aware how competitive they are? Last spring Brown accepted 13.8 percent of its applicants, Stanford accepted 11 percent and Dartmouth 15 percent.

There are many fine colleges and universities in this country to explore. Finding the right match rather than the right name is important. But if your child fits the profile for a top-ranked school, then, by all means, he/she should work hard and apply.

### **6. We probably won't qualify for financial aid and I have heard that the FAFSA form is hard to complete. Should I just forget about it?**

No, everyone should fill out the FAFSA because at the very least you could be eligible for a loan from the federal government. The Free Application for Federal Student Aid is how the government calculates need-based aid. Many colleges require the FAFSA for a student to be considered for institutional aid.

*Dr. Heather Ricker-Gilbert is a consultant with a commitment to helping young people identify the best college or university to meet their unique interests, talents, learning style and career objectives. You can e-mail her at [collegegateways@comcast.net](mailto:collegegateways@comcast.net).*