

Red Bank Writing Co.

Below are paraphrased notes I took during a speech given by Dartmouth's Director of Admissions Operations, Mr. Paul Sunde, to rising seniors participating in St. Paul's School Advanced Studies Program, about the admissions process at Dartmouth (July 22, 2008). Although based on Mr. Sunde's presentation, these notes are necessarily re-presented here based on my interpretations of his statements and are intended to be used only as part of a prospective applicant's college research. For elaboration on the points below, I suggest visiting Mr. Sunde's admissions blog (<http://dartmouthquestions.blogspot.com/>) and conducting your own research about admissions at the schools you are considering. —Justin Nevin

There are approximately 4,000 colleges and universities in the U.S. A student might initially consider 40 of these schools when beginning the application process, or about 1 percent of these institutions. Students are, in fact, more selective about admissions than are the schools they apply to.

A prospective applicant should weigh selectivity and quality, and apply to six to eight schools that would be a good fit.

Schools want students who are:

- intellectually engaged.*
- active in their own interests.
- reaching beyond their own circumstances.**

The college/university's lens (questions admissions officers ask themselves in reviewing a candidate):

- What matters most to this student?
- Why does it matter?
- What choices has this student made based on his/her circumstances?
- Given these circumstances, how has this student succeeded?

*Intellectual engagement clarified as:

- grades and level of courses taken (AP, honors)
- standardized testing
- awards
- recommendations in which applicant is gauged next to peers
- contributions to intellectual dialogue at school
- application essays are written well and offer perspective (short answers "tie student's issues together")
- extracurricular activities (if intellectual in nature)
- admissions interview: the candidate speaks well and confirms what has been seen in his/her application

Red Bank Writing Co.

**Reaching beyond current circumstances clarified as:

- sense of personal achievement
- a shift in admissions competition in the last five years puts emphasis on:
 - what the candidate has done in a leadership position to change his/her high school (e.g. class president)
 - transcripts that show evidence of independent study
 - awards outside of school context
 - extracurricular activities
 - activities not involved with school context (e.g. involvement with a community environmental group)

The applicant should think like admissions personnel:

- How can applicant link recommendations?
- The application review is “analogue,” not “digital.”

On Standardized Testing

- Testing numbers don’t tell the whole story. Rather, admissions personnel focus on the entire application.
- Advice on standardized tests: “Do your best.”
- SAT II scores are often higher because they reflect a particular area of the candidate’s interest.

On Teacher Recommendations

- Choose recommendations wisely.
- Candidate should tell teacher what he or she is enthusiastic about—there is a chance it will end up in the recommendation letter, further solidifying the larger picture that the candidate is trying to present.
- Schools value teacher recommendations more and more with the growing applicant pool.
- Ask a teacher who *likes* you and who would be the most excited to write a recommendation for you.
- The most enthusiastic teacher recommendation could look like the exception next to less enthusiastic ones.
- Recommendations written by teachers of noncore classes should emphasize an intellectual endeavor on the applicant’s part. But the applicant should use caution: selective schools have a bias toward recommendations that come from teachers of core classes.

On the Candidate Interview

Kissinger once asked the press, “Are there any questions for my answers?”

Red Bank Writing Co.

- In the interview, the candidate should ask questions about the school that matters to him or her. Get data from the interviewer that will inform *your* decision.
- Candidate should invest energies and emotions wisely.
- At some schools, the admissions personnel are asking, “How interested is this student in my school?” However, some schools don’t necessarily care about the candidate’s level of interest in the school.

Application Don’ts

- Don’t include supplementary material in application that is not expressly requested.
- Don’t invest too much emotion in the prospect of being accepted to a selective school.
- Don’t pester the admissions office to find out about your application status or to send unnecessary materials and materials that don’t provide new and critical academic information for your application.
- Don’t misrepresent yourself in your application materials. Such mistakes have caught up with applicants in unexpected ways.

Early Decision

- Applicant needs to understand his or her own circumstances and financial aid.
- Some schools favor early-decision applicants.

Essays

- Essays rarely make or break odds for an applicant’s acceptance.
- Most essays are “fine” but not great.
- Advice to college applicant: write a good essay (not a “college essay”).
- In application essay, candidate’s enthusiasm for the chosen topic will show, so “write about something that comes easily to you. You will be yourself in your essay.”

Audience Question: Is there an advantage in having a career plan when applying?

There are no rules about this. The boxes checked by the applicant for subject interests are used for advising purposes.