



UNIVERSITY CONSULTANTS OF AMERICA INSIDE THE ADMISSIONS OFFICE

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As independent educational consultants, we help our clients convince admissions committees to select them. Our job is sales and marketing, not editing. Although some circles consider our work to give an unfair advantage, we consider ourselves to be mentors for young people and their families during a process that is highly stressful and poorly understood.

Despite the politics, we have a lot of friends who work in college admissions offices. In our industry, we all want the best for the next generation. Regardless of anything else you may hear, there is one universal truth about admissions:

When subjective information is involved, human beings make human decisions.

Wanting as many people as possible to understand the mood, attitude and feel within the admissions offices, I interviewed current and former deans, admissions representatives, readers and even volunteers to ask “what does it feel like?” We obtained information from a wide array of schools, including 9 of the top 40 nationally ranked schools (Harvard, Yale, MIT, the University of Chicago, Northwestern, Vanderbilt, Rochester, Tulane and Brandeis), nine top small liberal arts colleges, two large public universities, and three of our favorite

regional schools. By virtue of the sensitive nature of this information (as well as the legal documents that could destroy careers forever), the names of those who graciously contributed their thoughts and experiences will never be divulged.

However, I can tell you this: despite their different environments and different situations, everyone spoke with the same voice.

The Culture of Admissions

To understand the selection process, you must first understand how much work admissions professionals do. On busy days, they may read and evaluate up to 60 applicants each, but theirs is a labor of love. “It’s a culture of investment, and you want these young people to succeed. It’s never ‘Ugh, I gotta go read these’ or ‘I gotta do this.’”

Admissions professionals are generally “people persons” who really enjoy their jobs (at least most of the time). They see their effort as an opportunity to find the good in young people and place them in the best possible situations. They are community builders, part of a four-year college mentoring that has lifelong value. “It may sound cheesy, and it feels like a platitude, but we really do love kids and we

really are trying our best. I find it humbling to open an application. It feels like you are important to them, maybe not important, but just privileged or honored to be part of their lives.”

Recognizing their own transformative experiences, admissions professionals want to pay it forward. “Higher education changed my life. I know what it did for me, so the joy that comes from finding that kind of a match is really unparalleled.”

From the outside, students and parents may see these hard working people as filtering out, not fitting in. That sometimes bothers the humans who invest their lives to develop the best-possible communities. One dean of admissions complained, “People think we don’t have emotions!” Another bemoaned the misconception. “They think we’re a bunch of hard-asses sitting around the room judging them. It’s not that way at all.”

Yes, admissions officers are people, too, and they are looking for the good in you. Despite limited time – sometimes just five minutes per file – they try hard to find the positive qualities in every applicant. “In admissions, if you were trained correctly, you are taught to look at applications with the disposition of ‘I am rooting for you.’ I am looking for all the good things in your application. I am not looking for the bad things.”

What Makes A Reader Want You?

Our prospective clients invariably ask, “I don’t understand how it works. What are they looking for?” The better question is “How do they know they have found the right student?”

More than one admissions representative used an emotional term to describe the moment when they embrace a candidate: “Reader Love.”

“Reader love is that magic that perks you up, the inexplicable, elusive quality or element that is a mystifying part of the student, and also a part of how you’ve read that student.”

Another explained the spark-like imperative of the connection. “That feeling is pretty instant. So when students actually tell me about who they are and how they’ve come to be, that’s when I’m hooked, that’s when I’m in.”

What was striking in our interviews was how little anyone spoke of grades, test scores or resume items in describing what causes them to embrace an applicant. When I asked about numbers and achievements, most said words like “that’s not it.” Although each school has different criteria, for the most selective colleges, grades and test scores are not nearly as important as most people think.

“If I were to assign percentages to the impact of academics versus the other choices,



especially for those schools who have the luxury of choosing whom they want, academics is at best 10% of the consideration. Check the academic box, then move on. What's the weight of that other 90%?"

Putting his index finger and thumb very close together, another said, "You spend like this much time talking about test scores and grades."

For schools that use a holistic type of evaluation (usually private colleges), readers are not merely evaluating data sets. They look at everything. They are seeking the ethereal, looking past the words, investigating between the lines, and digging beneath the surface. One even said that reading a file is "half detective, half voyeur."

They are selecting a person, not a resume or an essay.

Reader Love can happen in the Personal Statement, in supplemental essays (especially a school's "why" essay), and in recommendation letters. "It has to resonate and resound loudly throughout the file." Yet what students write about themselves is undeniably the most influential factor in the process.

The first rule is "be real." Admissions professionals crave authenticity and genuine stories, not superheroes or packaged uber-achievers. They prefer self-reflection, self-awareness and thoughtfulness over prosaic

verbiage and world-changing content. "Trying to be someone you're not because you think that's what I want? It's not good. I'm going to be intrigued by an interesting person who probably is not perfect. In fact, I'd be very skeptical of the perfect 17 or 18-year old. I've never met that person."

As one dean explained succinctly, "Don't do it all right. Just do it all you."

Try to keep a balance between confidence and humility. The pursuit of greatness often leaves readers with a bad taste. What turns them off? More than one professional had a quick answer for that. "Arrogance. Not a fan. It's not gonna fly with me."

And, of course, do not over-share. Avoid TMI. Please, nothing "cringe-worthy."

Subjectivity and Committee Dynamics

By its nature, the holistic process does not lead to "linear" results. Unlike in a race, the best time does not necessarily win. The evaluation of essays, recommendations and interview reports is subjective, and statistically, subjective information leads to bimodal distributions, not bell curves. They either like you, or they don't care.

Subjectivity is not a game of chance. It is preference, not randomness. The only real randomness in the process is who might read your file. In the old days of paper files,



application folders were sometimes placed on a shelf for second readers to grab as they pleased. Today, admissions offices employ systems like “team reading” to avoid bias in evaluating their applicants. The party line is “we are professionals, but we try to honor our fatigue, our biases and our lenses, and we try to hold each other accountable and leave our egos at the door.” It works, most of the time.

Humans are human, and subjectivity is unavoidable and sometimes welcomed to ensure diversity. “An essay that I love, a colleague may be ambivalent about or even dislike, and vice versa. It is a very human process.”

Universally, they are trying to do the right thing. That means advocating vigorously on behalf of preferred students before the entire committee. “I joke that I go into ‘lawyer mode.’ I’m going to take this kid and defend them and fight for them.”

Rejection is Hard on Them, Too

Everyone in the admissions office takes their jobs to heart, sometimes too hard.

“You have an office, you do your work, but you go to bed with this stuff, and you wake up with it, too. I’m not necessarily a spiritual or ecumenical type, but the night before I go to committee to present my cases for my territory, I always say a prayer for my students, and especially for those students whom I know are

going to have a tougher road for me to make a case.”

Shaping a class involves tough decisions at every stage. “I could like 200 kids out of my thousands, but I have to whittle my list down. That’s just the reality.”

An admissions decision may not always work out the way you want, and it doesn’t always work out the way THEY want, either. There are realities about the job of developing a well-balanced class.

“A fundamental conflict is when our idealism and sense of morality and sense of being ethical and equitable goes up against the reality of institutional priorities and pressures coming from the Board of Trustees and the President.”

Put more bluntly, “Most offices tangle with what I call the Big Three: revenue, diversity, and excellence. All are critically important.”

It is the norm, not an exception or anomaly, that students end up being taken out of the admit pile even though they were enthusiastically selected by the committee. “When we get down to the bone, when we’re a couple of weeks before we release decisions, institutional priorities can become a pretty heavy thumb on the scale, ending up overcoming our personal preferences.”

Suffice to say that admissions professionals do not like this part of the numbers game. Most of



our interviewees wanted us to emphasize that your results are not a judgment on your value, nor are they parental final exams, and they most definitely are not a prediction of your future.

“If you are rejected, that’s not a statement on your self-worth, it’s not even a statement on whether the reader liked you or not. I could have liked you, and you could have been denied for reasons that have nothing at all to do with you. I have colleagues who are still absolutely steaming three and four years after a kid they thought should have gotten in did not.”

We Really Do Care

Despite the incredible workload, long hours, stress and frustration, it is fun for admissions professionals to get to know you and put all the pieces together. Most of the time, they actually want to talk with prospective students. “Really take the opportunity to be engaged with your admissions counselors. It’s our job, 9 to 5 and often beyond that, to be a resource to you. The amount of people who don’t utilize us shocks me.”

To them, you are not just a number (or a resume of numbers). They will remember you. Student tour guides who volunteer in the offices encounter this daily. “Tons of times while we’re talking about our classmates, we’ll say a name and someone will come up and ask where they are and how they are doing

because they remembered an essay or a story.”

Education at our best universities is a lifelong connection. Alumni networks, clubs, magazines, newsletters, reunions, class Facebook pages, traveling lecture series ... your college experience will evolve, but the relationship that starts during application season will continue.

I graduated from Harvard in 1983. Every year since then, I have served in admissions in one form or another, including working professionally with over 1,000 students as an educational consultant. Based upon my experience, I can tell you with absolute confidence that admissions professionals are not looking to reject you. They are looking to select you. All of us who work in education do so because, honestly, it’s pretty darn cool to connect with young people and help you develop into amazing people.

Although our job is admissions, your success is our goal.

Let’s do this, together.

