



REVISED
AND UPDATED



A STUDENT'S GUIDE TO COLLEGE ADMISSIONS



Everything

Your Guidance Counselor

Has No Time To Tell You

Harlow G. Unger



A Student's Guide to College Admissions

*Revised
and Updated*

Everything Your Guidance
Counselor Has No Time
to Tell You

Harlow G. Unger

 **Facts On File**
New York • Oxford

A Student's Guide to College Admissions

Copyright © 1990 by Harlow G Unger

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or utilized in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage or retrieval systems, without permission in writing from the publisher. For information contact

Facts On File, Inc
460 Park Avenue South
New York NY 10016
USA

Facts On File Limited
Collins Street
Oxford OX4 1XJ
United Kingdom

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Unger, Harlow G , 1931–

A students guide to college admissions . everything your guidance counselor has no time to tell you / Harlow G Unger — Rev. ed.

p. cm.

ISBN 0-8160-2304-2 (hc) — ISBN 0-8160-2306-9 (pbk.)

1 Universities and colleges—United States—

Admission—Handbooks, manuals, etc. 2. Universities and colleges—United States—Entrance requirements—Handbooks, manuals, etc I Title

LB2351 2 U55 1990

378.1'056'0973—dc20

90-32633

A British CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Facts On File books are available at special discounts when purchased in bulk quantities for businesses, associations, institutions or sales promotions. Please call our Special Sales Department in New York at 212/683-2244 (dial 800/322-8755 except in NY, AK or HI) or in Oxford at 865/728399

Jacket design by Ellie Nigretto

Composition by Facts On File, Inc

Manufactured by the Maple-Vail Book Manufacturing Group

Printed in the United States of America

10987654321

This book is printed on acid-free paper

To My Son
RICHARD

The author wishes to express his deep gratitude to Mr. Ronald D. Potier, former dean of admissions and financial aid at Franklin & Marshall College, whose wisdom and counsel has made this a reference guide that all college-bound students (and their parents and guidance counselors) can rely on and trust. Mr. Potier is now director of admissions at Elizabethtown College, Elizabethtown, Pa.

Also instrumental in making this book possible were Ms. Paula Diamond, The Paula Diamond Agency; Ms. Deborah Brody, Facts On File Publications; Mr. Douglas Schulkind, Prentice-Hall Press; and Mr. Henry Solazzo, admissions counselor, Alfred University, and former guidance counselor, Fox Lane High School, Bedford, New York.

CONTENTS

Acknowledgments	iv
1. Getting Started	1
2. How to Pick the Right College—for You	6
3. College Admission Requirements: Putting Together the Right “Package”	30
4. The Application Process	63
5. Financing Your College Education	120
6. A Final Word (and A Note to Parents)	137
Appendix A Timetable for College Admissions Process	145
Appendix B Checklist for College Admissions Process	150
Appendix C Sample College Applications Essays	152
Appendix D College Entrance Examinations (<i>PSAT</i> , <i>SAT</i> , <i>Achievement</i> , <i>ACT</i>): An Explanation	164
Index	169

GETTING STARTED | 1

Getting into the college that's right for you can be a long, complex and frustrating process—especially if the right college is one of America's top-ranked universities. But if you follow all the steps in this guide exactly, I promise you'll succeed.

That may seem like a difficult promise to keep, but it's not, because I won't have to keep it. You will—in the end. You'll have to do the careful planning and studying, and you'll have to get the grades. You'll have to take the SATs, and you'll have to fill in all the applications neatly and accurately, and write the all-important essays. I can tell you the necessary steps, point you in the right direction, teach you all the little tricks, warn you of the pitfalls, and tell you exactly what the top colleges are looking for. But after I've done all that, you are going to have to do all the work—and you'll have to do it perfectly to succeed.

Naturally, it would help if you happen to have a sparkling personality, are a team captain, editor of your school newspa-

per or yearbook, and president of your class—and if you also have a grade point average (GPA) of 4.0. But don't worry if you don't have all or even any of those qualities. Most of us don't—which is why, every year, America's highest-ranked colleges accept some students who never even participated in high school sports or extracurricular activities. They also accept some students not ranked in the top 10 percent or even 20 percent of their high school classes—students with averages below 3.0, as well as students with combined SAT scores of less than 1,000. In other words, all the best colleges accept some average students and many admit a few below-average students.

"But," you're probably thinking (understandably), "*Barron's* says you need combined SAT scores of 1,250 or more to get into the most competitive colleges." Look again. *Barron's* does not really say that. Read a little more carefully, and you'll see that the SAT scores and class rankings listed in *Barron's Profiles of American Colleges* and in most college viewbooks represent *average* or *median* scores and GPAs of matriculated students—not the scores and GPAs of each individual student in those colleges. Remember, median is the middle, which means that only half the student SAT scores for the most selective colleges were above 1,250. The other half of the SAT scores were *below* 1,250—many far below that level.

As I said before, some students attending the most selective colleges are below average in many ways. Indeed, such colleges have accepted students with combined SAT scores of under 1,000 and students who did not even rank in the top 20 percent of their high school classes, let alone the top 10 percent. Let's take a closer look.

About 15 percent of a recent Harvard University freshman class of more than 1,600 scored below 600 on their verbal and math SATs. About two percent of a recent Yale freshman class of more than 1,300 scored below 500 on their verbal SATs and 19 percent scored below 600; one percent scored below 500 on their math SATs and 10 percent scored below 600. At Wesleyan University, in Middletown, Connecticut, 12 percent of a recent freshman class of nearly 700 students did not rank in the top 20 percent of their graduating high school classes, and two percent didn't even rank in the top 40 percent! Wesleyan is in *Barron's* top category of the 36 most competitive colleges in America.

UNIQUENESS

Obviously, such students must have had other outstanding qualities to earn them admission to such prestigious colleges. But you have such qualities too. We all do, because each of us is unique. There is no other person in the world exactly like you. It's difficult for most of us to recognize what it is that makes each of us unique, because we all tend to want to be like our friends, the people we most admire, and we tend to hide or ignore those characteristics that make us unique or different. Later on, I'll try to show you how to recognize what makes you unique, because, if you want to get into a truly superior college or university, you're going to have to discover and display those qualities. Remember, most top colleges are searching for unique applicants, and, believe it or not, a team captaincy, class presidency and many other high school achievements most of us admire do not necessarily make individuals unique or different. Nor does being a so-called well-rounded student.

There are tens of thousands of well-rounded high school students who dabble in everything in their high school careers and achieve nothing of lasting value for themselves or for others. The most competitive colleges are not looking for well-rounded students. They are looking for unique students who, together, will make up a well-rounded student body. And just as there is a surplus of well-rounded students, there are also many team captains in thousands of schools across the United States—and just as many thousands of class officers—and they don't necessarily have an edge over their classmates when it comes to getting into the most selective colleges.

Where they do have an edge is in getting attention from high school guidance counselors. Almost all college advisers and guidance counselors are dedicated, caring individuals, but they seldom have the time they'd like to give to each of their students. So, they often tend to concentrate on the school's most outstanding college prospects—the so-called stars. It's simply impossible for most guidance counselors to give even 50 students, let alone 100 or 200 or 400, the kind of advice required to help them all get into the colleges of their choice. You'll see why after you've learned how complex the college application process is for just one person—you. Between now and the time you mail your last application, you (and your parents, if they help

you) will have to spend several hours a week on the college application process. Multiply the time and effort you spend on yourself by 50 or 100 or more, and you'll understand why guidance counselors and college advisers seldom can give any one student as much undivided attention as he or she may want. And, in most cases, it would be unrealistic of you or your parents to expect that. Remember: The *average* public high school guidance counselor in the U.S. has more than 400 students to advise!

Your college adviser can easily guide you into a two-year community college or a four-year college with an open-enrollment policy that guarantees admission to virtually every applicant. He or she can also probably guide you successfully into a so-called safety school, where your high school record will more than meet the college's entrance requirements.

But most advisers do not have the time to devote to an intensive, 18-month project to help you gain admission to a top-ranked college—a "dream school" or "reach school" whose entrance requirements may, on the surface, seem to rule you out, and, indeed, seem to rule out anyone who is not an athletic, academic or artistic superstar. Nor do most guidance counselors have the time to get to know each of the more than 1,500 colleges and universities intimately enough to know instinctively which ones would be best for each student.

And that's why I've written this book—not to bypass your guidance counselor or college adviser, but to provide you with additional, personalized, in-depth guidance to help you win admittance to the college that's right for you and best for you. I hope the following pages will help qualified students who are not athletic, academic or artistic superstars handle, on their own, the process of applying successfully to a top-ranked college or university. The process may seem complex to you now, but it's actually quite straightforward—long and tedious and filled with hundreds of boring little details, but nevertheless relatively simple for any student and his or her family to handle pretty much by themselves.

Basically, there are three key elements to handling the process: painstaking attention to details; an intimate knowledge of yourself; and an intimate knowledge of six to 10 colleges that will best suit you. It will be your job (and your parents' job if they help you) to handle those details and develop that knowl-

edge. If you rely entirely on your guidance counselor to do the job for you, you may be inviting disappointment.

By all means get all the help you can from your guidance counselor or college adviser. Most guidance counselors do all they possibly can to help in the college admissions process. They usually write the all-important school recommendations. They arrange for excused absences for students to go on college visits and interviews. They have easy access to forms, catalogs, documents and computer programs, and can save you a lot of time and effort obtaining such things. And they arrange for college representatives to visit your school and talk with students. That kind of help will be very valuable, along with any help you can get from your teachers and other school officials. But remember: Ultimately, the responsibility for getting into college rests with you; and even the most dedicated guidance counselor or college adviser will leave most of the work to you. That's as it should be, because most of the college admissions process and decision making has to be handled by the person who knows you best—you yourself.

I hope this book will show you how to handle that work easily, successfully, and with a minimum of tension and worry. Use the handy timetable and checklist in Appendixes A and B to keep track of all the steps you'll have to take to get into college. Appendix C has some application essays to guide you in handling your correspondence and essay writing. (There's a sample filled-in application in Chapter 4.) Appendix D has a brief explanation of the four standard college entrance exams: PSAT (Preliminary Scholastic Aptitude Test), SAT (Scholastic Aptitude Test), Achievement Tests and ACT (American College Testing) program. There's also a special note to your parents in Chapter 6 if, as I hope, you and they want to work on the college admissions process as a family team. Most parents are as confused and anxious about the college admissions process as students, and I hope this book will help them too.

Now let's get started getting you into college. And good luck!

HOW TO PICK THE RIGHT | 2 COLLEGE—FOR YOU |

Anybody can get into college. That I promise you. But not everybody should go. There are, in my opinion, only two good reasons for occupying the much-sought-after seats in a fine college or university: love of learning and preprofessional training.

Although the four years you spend at college will, if you select the right one, be the most wonderful four years of your life, they will also be the most intellectually demanding. College-level work is hard work—and it's work you must do on your own. No one will be there to tell you to do your homework or get busy studying for exams. Fall behind, and you'll flunk out. It's as simple as that. All you'll get from college authorities, in most cases, will be a computer printout telling you you've failed and that you're out.

So, college demands a sense of commitment to self-discipline and hard work, and there's little point going if you don't have a sincere desire to learn or a deep commitment to a particular career goal. If you're only going to college "so I can get a good job," make certain your career choice requires four years of college. Perhaps all you need to succeed is the appropriate technical-school training or two years at a community college, or a good company training program. But don't waste the time and money at a four-year college if you don't have to and really

don't want to. College is too long, too hard and too costly to attend simply "because all my friends are going."

EARLY PLANNING

If, however, you really want to go—or indeed have to go—to a four-year college, then one way of improving your chances of getting into the college of your choice is to begin planning early, the earlier the better. And it's here that your guidance counselor and parents can and should help you.

Ideally, you and your family should begin making your first tentative college plans no later than the beginning of freshman year in high school, because that's when you begin selecting the high school curriculum that colleges and universities might require and on which they'll judge your application.

Entrance Requirements

It's important to buy a college directory even before beginning high school so you can see what various colleges will require of you during your high school years. There are many directories available at almost any bookstore, but be certain to select a seriously written one rather than one designed to entertain you. Some of the latter are terribly misleading and often contain inaccurate information. For purposes of college selection, I recommend any of the following: *Barron's Profiles of American Colleges*; the College Board's *College Handbook*; Cass and Birnbaum's *Comparative Guide to American Colleges*; or *Peterson's Annual Guide to Undergraduate Study—Four-Year Colleges*. Buy one or two of these guides (more than two is unnecessary and confusing), then study the high school courses each college that interests you requires for admission. Some require three years of math, others four. Some require one, two or three years of science, modern languages, English, history, etc. And almost all the most competitive colleges require honors-level work in these courses and comparably difficult work in elective courses. Elementary-level and nonacademic electives count for little on your record if you plan to aim for the most competitive colleges. So it's a good idea to find out early what high school courses you'll be required to take to gain admission to the type of college that interests you. If you don't, you may shut the

door to the college of your choice when you're only 14—and that's not fair to yourself. Also, use your electives to take interesting and challenging courses—for example, astronomy, art or word processing.

If, however, you did make some mistakes in course selection, it probably still is not too late to do something about it—even if you're a high school junior or senior. The first thing to find out is what courses you're lacking to meet the requirements of the college of your choice. Then see if you can make these up by adding them to your regular schedule or by attending summer school—or, if necessary, by repeating a year of high school. That last choice sounds awful but, before you reject it, ask yourself how badly you want to go to the college of your choice. It's usually never too late to decide you want to go there and to do something about it.

But obviously, it's easier if you make the decision as early in your high school career as possible and determine your high school curriculum accordingly.

College Curriculum

Once you decide you want to go to college, the next decision to make is what kind of college to attend, and that should be determined by whether or not you want preprofessional training or are going to seek an education in one or more areas of the arts and sciences. You may not be able to major in journalism or accounting at some liberal arts schools, and an agricultural college could prove a poor choice if you plan on majoring in Renaissance art or literature. In other words, be certain the colleges and universities that you plan to apply to offer a wide selection of courses in areas that most interest you.

If your primary motive for going to college is to study history, literature, biology, or other liberal arts or sciences, then select schools whose professors and departments are renowned in the areas you want to study—schools that attract other students like you, with similar interests. If, on the other hand, your primary motive for going to college is preprofessional training, be certain in advance that the schools of your choice offer *majors* and a *degree* in your particular field of interest.

Of course, there's no reason you can't combine both preprofessional training and studies in the liberal arts and sciences. Many superior colleges offer fine opportunities in both areas. In

other words, you can take a wide range of liberal arts and science courses and major in a preprofessional course at the same time.

Still another way to combine study in both areas is to major in arts or sciences as an undergraduate and afterward go to graduate school for professional training.

If you're not sure what you want to get out of college—and many students aren't—the best choices may be colleges that offer a broad range of opportunities. Then you can switch easily from one area to another as you become more certain what area of study most interests you. Remember, a good college or university is like a cafeteria of knowledge, offering an almost endless opportunity for learning about virtually every subject you can imagine—and many that you haven't imagined. College will give you an opportunity to “taste” as many of these subjects as you'd like; and the more subjects you taste, the easier you'll find it to decide what you want to do later on. It's perfectly all right to be undecided and unsure of how you're going to spend the rest of your life, now, when you're 16, 17 or 18. When you're 35, you'd better have made up your mind. But few of us know what we want to do with our lives when we're still in our teens, and it's unfair of others to try to force you to make up your mind now. Your college years will help you make such choices.

The Liberal Arts

Many students and their parents wonder about the “value” of a liberal arts education. “What kind of job can I get as an English, history or philosophy major?” is a question that's asked all the time, because so many entry-level jobs in business require skills that are not learned in English literature classes.

The answer is complex. Here's what the University of Michigan says about the value of a liberal arts education:

For more than two thousand years, our civilization has valued the idea of a liberal [arts] education. The assumption behind this idea is that knowledge and the search for knowledge are in themselves humanizing; that the exploration of the unknown both engages and reflects upon the exploring self. The end of a liberal education is the creation of knowledgeable, wise, just,

and happy men and women, prepared to live productively and meaningfully in society. To achieve such an education, students must learn to analyze, classify, and evaluate the experiences which life offers; then they must learn to use these faculties both to develop the values and principles by which they will live and to master the knowledge, skills, and techniques appropriate to their most particular ambitions.

What that great university is saying is that the liberal arts and sciences are the story of our—of your—society, your country, your world, your entire civilization and culture, and how they developed. The study of the liberal arts and sciences teaches free people how to remain free—how to lead and govern themselves, how to pursue truth and wisdom, and, above all, how to learn. Once you have learned how to learn, you'll find it easy to pick up any skill you need for any particular job later on—either in graduate school or on the job itself. Virtually every major corporation, postgraduate professional school and government agency recognizes the value of a liberal arts or science degree; and those with such degrees are now in great demand.

CHOOSING A COLLEGE ENVIRONMENT

In addition to the academic decisions (preprofessional, liberal arts, etc.) you must make in selecting your list of colleges, another decision that's important to make is environmental. College will be your *home* as well as your *place of work* for four years. To succeed in your work, it's important that you live in a comfortable environment. You must decide whether you want to live in a large college community or a small one; in the city, suburbs or country; in a coed or single-sex college; in a religiously, ethnically or racially oriented school, or in a secular college; in a state-run or private college; far from home or near—or even at home, where you can attend a “commuter” college; in a single room or with roommates; on campus or off; in dormitories or apartments.

All these environmental factors will affect your life for the next four years in every way—socially, academically, emotionally and even physically. For different individuals there are advantages and disadvantages to every collegiate environment.

A large college will give you far less chance than a small one to know your teachers and college administrators. You could find yourself socially isolated unless you're able to reach out aggressively to make friends and participate in extracurricular activities.

A small college, where everyone gets to know everyone else, can prove stifling for some students while providing warmth and comfort for others. City colleges offer a wide range of cultural opportunities—but far more danger of crime, both on and off campus. Off-campus living quarters incur housekeeping responsibilities and can isolate you from on-campus activities. But dormitories can be noisy and can interfere with your work and sleep. Living at home and commuting to college will mean big financial savings, but could mean missing much of the social and extracurricular activities that make the college experience unique.

Coeducational institutions provide a more “normal” male-female social environment that makes dating easier, but can prove distracting for many students—even embarrassing for some, who simply do not want to share personal living quarters with members of the opposite sex. And that's all right. The point is, you must choose the environment that you believe is right for *you*—not what others say is right for you. For many students, a single-sex college offers a far better environment for the serious pursuit of learning during the week—with plenty of time for dating at nearby colleges on weekends.

There are more than 90 women's colleges, several of which are among the most selective, prestigious colleges in the United States. Statistics show that women's colleges accelerate the movement of women into traditionally “male” fields such as science, politics or business, because they provide role models, a supportive environment and a chance for women to exercise the leadership that all but the most talented might be denied elsewhere, in coeducational institutions. The U.S. Department of Education found that women attending women's colleges are three times as likely to earn bachelor's degrees in economics as those at coeducational colleges, and 1.5 times as likely to major in science and mathematics. The atmosphere at a single-sex school is far different from a coed school. The tens of thousands of students and alumni who flock into a stadium for a big event at a coeducational institution are usually not there to cheer women. They come to cheer men.

Another environmental factor to consider, depending on its importance to you, is whether you want to attend a religiously affiliated or an ethnically or racially oriented school. These are personal choices you alone can make. Every secular college has organizations and adequate facilities for every student to associate with people of similar interests and religious beliefs, and ample on-campus and off-campus places of worship. And such secular schools also offer a wide variety of courses dealing with religious and cultural history of all kinds. Parochial and ethnically or racially oriented schools, on the other hand, usually offer far more specialized courses related to the particular group of students attending those schools. Moreover, the student body will be far more homogeneous, and you'll probably meet fewer students who are different from you and hold different ideas, beliefs and opinions; and that might prove less stimulating intellectually.

Distance from home is another important consideration. Many high school students sincerely believe they'd be happier a million miles from home and parents—until they get there. Other students feel they cannot bear to leave their family and friends at home, and they miss out on the college experience by attending a commuter school and returning home after classes each day—just as they did at high school.

One mistake to avoid in selecting a college environment is to pick a school simply because some or many of your high school friends will be going there. It's sad to part with old friends, but you must pick your college on the basis of what's best for *your* future, not theirs.

Another environmental consideration is the extent of the college's extracurricular activities. Many schools have their own radio and television stations, owned and operated by students, along with daily newspapers; literary, scientific and humor magazines; a variety of yearbooks; complete professional theater facilities for student drama societies; ballet troupes; glee clubs, choruses, orchestras and bands that not only perform on campus but travel around the country and sometimes the world during vacations to perform elsewhere. Some schools have varsity sports only; others offer a wide variety of sports at both the varsity and intramural levels. It's