



## **Composing a List of Colleges & Universities**

### *...Avoiding the Heartbreak of the Thin Envelope*

When letters of acceptance or rejection arrive, students may face some very disappointing news if they have not balanced the competitiveness of their selected colleges. The news comes in many forms, including not getting into the most competitive college(s), not having enough money to go to the most-wanted school, or having an unexpected change in a family situation (such as needing to stay closer to home or find a less expensive college). Some of the ensuing distress can be prevented by a more objective composition of the list of colleges and universities to which students apply.

Students often are so enamored with popular college names that they fill their list with too many highly competitive colleges. Here is one example of a list that is likely to lead to **disappointment and upset**:

- Stanford
- Harvard
- Princeton
- Yale
- Columbia
- Duke
- Pomona
- University of Colorado at Boulder

There are roughly 1,750 four-year colleges in the U.S., yet one might think that there were only 50, because every year students are attracted to the same 50 names. The problem with this tendency to focus on the most-popular colleges is that it distracts us from finding other colleges that do an excellent job with the things we are most interested in.

#### **Getting to College Tip –**

There is nothing wrong with applying to a couple of the most-named colleges. What is missing in the above example is the middle ground. To fill the gap between safe schools and reach schools, add to the list some colleges that are a little more comfortable to get into and that do an excellent job in an area of interest. These schools will afford the student a reasonable chance of being accepted and a fair to good chance of receiving some merit scholarship money.

You might think that because Fairview is an excellent high school and a student is taking demanding courses, it is only reasonable to assume that he or she can gain entry to a very competitive school, if the student just applies to enough of them. It is true that Fairview is well known around the country and, because of the rigorous program, FHS students get into all ranges of colleges. However, due to the tremendous growth in college applicants and the relatively static number of seats at the most competitive colleges, there is much more demand than supply. The consequence is that highly competitive schools must turn down most of their applicants, even though they are fully qualified to do the work.

Applying to the most-competitive colleges has become akin to playing the lottery. Consider for a moment what makes a college highly competitive. It is strictly a comparison of the number of applicants to the number of available seats. It is not necessarily equal to having the best philosophy department or (fill in the blank with an area you love) department. A well-known college may garner over 20,000 applications for 1,000 slots. As the college becomes more and more widely recognized as a highly competitive college, even more students decide to apply. Thus, there is an ever-widening gap between the number of

qualified applicants and the openings. Applying to several highly competitive colleges is like buying several lottery tickets, instead of just one; it is still a lottery.

An example of a list that is likely to lead to a **satisfying result** is one that includes the full spectrum of schools:

- A small, reasonable number of reach schools. These are schools at which the student has about a 10% to 30% chance of being accepted and little likelihood of receiving merit scholarship aid.
- Two to four more comfortable schools. These are schools that give a reasonable chance of being accepted and a fair to good chance of receiving some merit scholarship money
- One to two safe schools. These are schools that are affordable and at which the student is highly likely to be accepted.

There are several ways to find more comfortable schools. You can search by admissions department or by the quality of individual departments. Descriptions of majors and their quality are available in the Post-Grad center at Fairview High School.<sup>1[1]</sup> Specific strategies for finding these schools or comparing department subject areas of interest are also available in the Post-Grad Center.

#### **Getting to College Tip --**

**Students** – Do yourself a favor by expanding your college list to include some of the more comfortable schools. *Come to the Post-Grad Center for information that is tailored to you.*

#### **Getting to College Tip –**

**Parents** – Do your student a favor by helping them find a way to reduce the stress and distress of applying to college. For some tips on finding useful college guides, use this link to ["Which College Review Publications are Credible?"](#)

Also, for an in-depth discussion of college admissions, read [Harvard Schmarvard \(Getting Beyond the Ivy League to the College That is Best for You\)](#) by Jay Mathews.<sup>2[2]</sup> It is available in the Post-Grad Center and in local bookstores.

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<sup>1[1]</sup> Note, too, that some of the schools may well be ones with outstanding Honors programs, which serve as a competitive college within a college. Use this link to see more information about [Honors programs](#)

<sup>2[2]</sup> Prima Publishing, 2003, ISBN 0-7615-3695-7.

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