

# How to Make Colleges Want You

Insider Secrets  
for Tipping the  
Admissions Odds  
in Your Favor

**Mike Moyer**

Foreword by Michael Behnke,  
Vice President and Dean of Enrollment,  
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*This book is dedicated to Anson and Merrily—  
I hope it helps them in 2023.*



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# FOREWORD

The director of my community choral group sometimes runs out of concrete suggestions for how to learn or shape a musical passage. Then he resorts to telling us, “Just sing better!” In this book, Mike Moyer actually offers many concrete suggestions on how to improve your chances of admission to a great college. But they can all be summarized in a phrase as general as “Sing better.” The phrase is: “Be more interesting!”

Admissions deans are usually not overly fond of books like this. We are always looking for students who are “genuine”—students who excel in class because they love learning and are curious, or students who are championship debaters because they love to debate. Students who get good grades or win debate tournaments only because it will look good on a transcript often come across as packaged and uninteresting. Books like this can be seen as helping the latter kind of student look more like the former.

In this book, however, Mike Moyer urges the long view, not the short-term tricks approach, and he gives valuable and novel ideas on how young people can “be more interesting.” You have to start somewhere on the road to a more fulfilling life. Robert Frost was not born a great poet. As he said, “You are always believing

ahead of your evidence. What was the evidence that I could write a poem? I just believed it.”

The college search process can be stressful and unrewarding. But many students find that it can be a valuable time for self-reflection. What do you like about yourself? What do you like about your peers? Do your friends reinforce or undermine the characteristics about yourself that you like and want to develop? “Being more interesting” can mean risking alienation from some peers who value conformity. Are you ready to risk that?

Raising homing pigeons is a rather weird thing to do. (Read the book to understand the reference.) The author risked ridicule when he did that. But maybe the ridicule was from conformist people whose opinions shouldn’t have counted for much. The singer/composer Beatle Paul McCartney, in one of his less eloquent but insightful moments, said, “I used to think that anyone doing anything weird was weird. I suddenly realized that anyone doing anything weird wasn’t weird at all and that it was the people saying they were weird that were weird.”

This book encourages you to be a little bit weird and to develop things that distinguish you from others. Doing that cannot help but make you a more interesting and fulfilled person. And admissions officers are likely to notice.

I have a closing suggestion for how to distinguish yourself not only from other teenagers, but also from most everybody else: read good books, including this one.

MICHAEL BEHNKE

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THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

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# INTRODUCTION

In the spring of 1990, I graduated from my high school, Thayer Academy, in Braintree, Massachusetts. The then Chief Justice of the United States, William Rehnquist, was the keynote speaker. His appearance was a very big deal, shrouded in secrecy and security. I can't remember a word he said. I was way too busy thinking about how excited I was to be going to college in the fall.

Thayer Academy was, and still is, a well-regarded college prep school on the south shore of Boston. The reputation is good, the teachers are good, and the facilities are good. I remember being especially impressed with the new multi-million-dollar science building, complete with a state-of-the-art set of weather instruments in the lobby and a huge mainframe computer with spinning discs, not unlike those in the background of Dr. Evil's underground lair from *Austin Powers*. I had dreams of becoming a doctor or a veterinarian and fancied myself as a science whiz. There was one problem—I wasn't a science whiz. In fact, I wasn't a whiz at anything.

I was shy and covered with zits. I wasn't very good at sports, I didn't do very many extracurricular activities, and I didn't have a steady job. I had kissed *one girl one time*.<sup>1</sup> My SAT scores were okay at 1140, but my grades were terrible; I graduated with a 2.04 weighted GPA.

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1. It was on my graduation day. She kissed *everyone* that day.

All my life I had terrible grades. I can remember constantly being told that I was a “smart kid who didn’t apply himself.” My teachers always took me aside to tell me to “get serious” about my schoolwork, and to “stop sleeping” in class. My parents warned me time and time again that doors would be slammed in my face if I didn’t improve my grades. I could tell they were frustrated, and so was I. I felt like I *was* working as hard as I possibly could.

During my senior year in high school I applied to colleges, just like everyone else. My guidance counselor gave me a long list of schools because she feared the chances that I would be accepted at any of them were slim. I picked the most competitive colleges on the list because I was delusional. (Remember, I thought I was a science whiz. Even after my biology teacher refused to write me a recommendation, I *still* thought I was a science whiz.)

However, when I applied to a lot of competitive colleges, I got accepted to *all* of them. The headmaster, teachers, and coaches were openly amazed. Nobody could figure out how I got in; were the colleges blind?

It happened again five years later. With a mere 2.6 college GPA, I applied to two highly competitive graduate schools. I didn’t have many good relationships with professors, so I had to ask a virtual *stranger* to write my recommendation. I was accepted to both schools. My friends were in shock. I knew other students with a much better academic record who got rejected from less competitive graduate programs.

I went to Northwestern for a master’s degree, and I did quite well. Several years later I was accepted to business school at the University of Chicago; it was recently ranked number one.<sup>2</sup>

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2. Rankings don’t matter (unless you’re number one).

I am the cofounder of Cappex.com, a company that helps kids find the right college, and I'm also the founder of College Peas ([www.CollegePeas.com](http://www.CollegePeas.com)), a company that helps kids learn how to get into college. I live and breathe college admissions, and I've spoken to hundreds of high school counselors, college admissions deans, and college admissions counselors. They are the Gatekeepers, and they hold all the keys. They will let the right kids through, and quite often the right kids don't even know they're the right kids (like me). The people who work in admissions all have a common characteristic—they value education, and they want to share it with the world. They are on your side.

I have spent countless hours with admissions professionals learning about the admissions process and what they look for in prospective students. Their messages are consistent. Most people think colleges seek “high-quality students,” and to most people this means good grades, high test scores, a laundry list of extracurricular activities, recommendations written by important people, and clever essays written with just the right mix of humor and profound insight. While this is technically true, and these things are nice, at the end of the day colleges will opt for diversity and authenticity. That means that as long as you can convince them that you can handle the work, they will move past the typical application elements in favor of someone who brings a new perspective to their campus and someone who shows a real passion.

It is now clear to me why I fared so well in the admissions game. To the world, I was a mild-mannered teenager. To the admissions counselor, I was a superhero. My willingness to travel far from home helped provide important geographic diversity. My selection of and commitment to a quirky hobby positioned me as a man with passion and sensitivity. The people I engaged in the process helped convince

the colleges that I could keep up with the work even though my past performance said otherwise.

This book is an explanation of the actions I took that enabled me to win the admissions game against the odds, and you can apply these tips to your college search. The things I did made my GPA and test scores much less important to the admissions department. Today, with the benefit of hindsight, research, and experience, I can now share these ideas with you so that you, too, can get the edge you will need regardless of your academic record. The things I did enabled me to successfully compete against other students who had much more solid academic credentials and much more active extracurricular schedules.

When I applied to college, I did these things by *accident*. I had no idea I was doing things that gave me a serious edge over other applicants. You can do these things on purpose and achieve even greater results than I did.

Common wisdom tells us that in order to succeed, you must work harder and do better than the competition. All my life, people told me to work harder or be more organized or develop better study habits. This just isn't so. It's more important to be different, and lucky for you, being different doesn't necessarily require you to work harder or do better than the competition.

In admissions, too much attention is focused on the details of the application itself. Former Chief Justice of the United States William Rehnquist once said, "I used to worry about every little footnote... Now I realize you just need five votes."

Such is the way of college admissions. It's not about how well-written your essay is or how good your grades are. Don't get me wrong—grades and good essays are really important. (They are

especially important if that's all you have to offer.) But what you really need are a few people who believe in you<sup>3</sup> and who are willing to cast their vote in your favor. Do that and you have it made. Those people are out there. They are looking for you, and they *do* want to help you. You just have to make sure they find you.

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3. It may sound corny, but it's true!



# Chapter 1

## UNDERSTANDING ADMISSIONS

Up until now, there have been few events in your life that have been as significant as your passage from high school to college. The fact that you even made the decision to pursue a college career is a big step in the right direction. Most people in this world lack the opportunity, let alone the choice, to pursue a college education. And if you are serious about your decision to go to college, you *will* go to college, it *will* be great, you *will* be able to pay for it, and you *will* reap the benefits of a college education.

Virtually all people who really want to go to college *can* go to college. There are no real barriers. Many people think they can't afford college. They look at the fat tuition price tag and freak out. Don't worry—fat price tags are misleading. If you need money for college, it is available. In fact, the more you need, the more you will probably get, and often, the more will be in the form of

scholarships and grants that you won't have to pay off. But even if you can afford it, many people feel like colleges are just too hard to get into. The truth is that most colleges aren't very hard to get into. In fact, the vast majority of colleges, even famous and big-name colleges, aren't very competitive at all.

In spite of the fact that most colleges are fairly easy to get into, many people feel a sense of accomplishment when they get accepted to a college that doesn't take "just anybody." Getting accepted to a competitive college feels good. It makes you feel like all your work up to now has been worth it. If that is you, then I say, "Go for it." Setting a standard and goals for yourself is a fine idea. But there is a more important reason that positioning yourself to be accepted at a competitive college is important.

## Fit

People worry so much about how they are going to get into college that few of them put much thought into how they are going to get out of college. When it comes to getting into college, your chances are quite high. However, when it comes to getting out, it's a different story. Many students who start college never finish at the place they started, and many never finish at all. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, 23 percent of students entering college will wind up transferring, and only 54 percent of students will actually graduate within *six* years. We put a lot of emphasis on getting in, but the real issue isn't getting in, it's finding the right fit.

When it comes to getting the most out of college, fit is everything. Fit will determine your happiness, your success, and even whether

you will graduate. A bad fit is a bad thing. Finding the right fit, however, can be tricky. Because of this, it's important to have choices. The more choices you have, the better your chances of finding the right fit. The best students, those who are real contenders for highly competitive colleges like Harvard, Stanford, Northwestern, and University of Chicago, have lots of choices. They can pretty much pick any school they want. And, as a result, many of them pick a college that is a good fit. Granted, these kids are good students anyway, but don't underestimate fit. I personally know many top students who transferred out of their original choice or dropped out completely. Students who get admitted to competitive colleges tend to graduate at much higher rates than other students.

So, the moral of the story is that the more choices you have, the better your chances of finding the right fit. And, if you can make yourself a contender for competitive colleges, the number of choices you have will grow substantially.

When I applied to colleges, I wanted to get accepted to a competitive college. I had the odds stacked against me because I was a terrible student, but I had to prove to myself that I could get into a place that didn't take everybody. Based on my academic record, I shouldn't have been accepted at any competitive colleges. Some might argue that my academic record made me a questionable choice for even non-competitive colleges. But somehow I stumbled upon the techniques in this book and wound up getting accepted to competitive colleges.

Despite getting accepted at competitive colleges, I decided to attend the University of Kansas (KU). (At the time, University of Kansas was not very competitive.) I chose KU because when I went to visit, it felt like the right place for me. All the competitive colleges

I visited just didn't seem like a place where I'd be happy. KU was great. I went to lots of parties, made lots of friends, and learned lots of things (both inside and outside of class). I changed so much after a couple of years at KU that my prep-school friends no longer recognized me. I was a changed man, and I have never regretted rejecting the colleges to which I had so dearly wanted to be accepted. KU was the right fit for me, and you should search for the right fit for you, regardless of how "competitive" the college may be.

## Colleges Want You

Popular media would have you believe that colleges are awash with quality applications and are becoming more competitive than ever. The hype tells you that colleges can have their pick of the litter when it comes to students and unless you're a hotshot with a resume a mile long, you will never get in. There are thousands of colleges that can provide an extremely solid education. They want you; they are looking for you every day. Colleges actively reach out to students and try to entice them to attend. They spend millions of dollars on marketing and hire armies of people to figure out who and where you are. They set up huge scholarship funds to help you pay your way. They hold networking events across the country in an attempt to stimulate referrals. Colleges are after you this very minute. Colleges don't go through this effort just to reject you. They want you to show up ready to learn and ready to participate in all they have to offer.

The colleges that are actively looking for you aren't bottom-feeders. They are great colleges. Even Stanford has admissions counselors who are combing the globe for the right students.

Competitive colleges, especially highly competitive colleges, are among the most aggressive marketers. In fact, that's a big part of what makes them competitive. It's not just the quality of education that makes them competitive; it's also the quality of their marketing efforts. Better marketing leads to more applications, which leads to competitive admissions. Rest assured, they want you—they really want you! In fact, it's quite strange that so much of college admissions has been built up to seem like a big test. It's as if getting into college is some kind of rite of passage. It isn't. *Going* to college may be, but getting in doesn't have to be.

As you get closer and closer to applying to college, it gets harder and harder to change your academic and extracurricular record. When you're a senior, you can't say, "Oops! I need to play a freshman sport!" It is for this reason that people freak out so much about essays, recommendations, and the dreaded standardized tests. With application due dates crashing down upon them, they begin to fear that they didn't do all they could do to be good college candidates. You may think that essays, recommendations, and standardized tests can make or break you in the college admissions process. If you think this, then you are reading the right book, because while essays, recommendations, and standardized tests are important, there are much more important things you can do to make the difference.

If you are one of the hundreds of thousands of students hankering for a shot at a competitive college, you are reading the right book. The ideas in this book will *dramatically* increase your chances of getting into the college of your choice, just like they did for me. No matter where you are in your high school career,