

The National College Planning Summit

How to Make Your Common Application Stand out!

Dee Blackman

The Ivy Dean College Counseling

www.theivydean.com

Dee Blackman is the founder of the Ivy Dean College Counseling. She is a Former Dean of Undergraduate Admissions at Columbia University and a Former Dean of Graduate Admissions at Harvard.

1. Can you tell us about the Common Application? What is it?

- a. The Common Application is used by over 400 Colleges. This one application streamlines the application process. Many of the most selective schools in the country use the Common Application. It consists of:
- b. Basic info about the student
- c. 1 Main Essay
- d. Additional Information
- e. Supplements for each college that you are applying to (required by some colleges)
- f. Letters of Recommendation from Counselors
- g. High School Transcripts
- h. Standardized Tests scores must be sent officially from the ACT or College Board to the Colleges you are applying to.
- i. Apply at www.commonapp.org.

2. We've all heard that Grades, Standardized Test Scores and the Strength of High School Curriculum are the first things Admissions Officers are looking at when reviewing applications. What are the other important qualities that Admission Officers are looking for in applicants?

- a. Selective Colleges do not use academics as the only basis of admitting the student to college. Instead, they ask the question, "Can you handle the college work at our college?"
- b. Once the Admissions Office has determined that the student can handle college course work, they move on to the more personal aspect of the application.
- c. Selecting students based solely on academics does not lead to an interesting, vibrant and diverse Student Body.
- d. The Essays, Additional Information and Supplements improve the likelihood of being admitted.
 - i. Additionally, what I call Positioning – which is "What skill, background or experience will this student bring to the college that the school will find valuable and desirable to have in their Freshman Class?"

The National College Planning Summit

- ii. This is what you want to emphasize in the Common Application.
- e. Student must ask themselves:
 - i. “What have I done?”
 - ii. “What am I interested in?”
 - iii. “What am I passionate about?”
 - iv. “What do I do during the summer?”
 - v. “How am I unique from my friends and other people around me?”
- f. Answering these questions can help you determine what to write about for your essay.
- g. Ask a Teacher or Guidance Counselor for their input about the specific qualities you have. They may see something different than you.
- h. This does not always have to be the in the academic area that you are strongest in.
 - i. For example - A Student who wants to major in Math and Science and also enjoys writing.
 - ii. This sets him/her apart from other Math/Science applicants.
 - iii. For your essay, write about what you have written as opposed to your strong math or science grades.

3. What makes one applicant stand out over other applicants?

- a. Let’s look at the point of view of the college and why positioning is so important.
- b. The major mission of the college is to have a diverse student body in which everyone brings something different. Students who are interesting to each other and to the faculty.
- c. Colleges build a class, similar to building a house – where each student is a distinctive and unique “brick” in the building.
- d. Colleges want diversity - not just ethnic, but geographic, academic (students majoring in classics and chemistry), activities (quarterback and marching band) and the varied interests of each student.

4. How important is the Essay in the Common Application?

- a. The more selective the school, the more important the essay becomes.
- b. The main essay is one of the few places where you can truly show what differentiates you from all the other applicants.
- c. Write the main essay around the thing that is unique to you – write your own story. The Common Application has 5 prompts that you can choose from, and one of them is “write your own story.”

5. How important are the Letters of Recommendation from teachers and counselors?

- a. Letters of Recommendation are very important because this is one of the few aspects of the application that provides a view of you from the outside.

The National College Planning Summit

- b. These provide a different prospective and can reinforce what you are saying in the application.
- c. Some schools may allow additional Letters of Recommendation, such as someone you worked for.

6. How important are extracurricular activities, honors, etc.?

- a. It depends on the college. Each application is individually evaluated – there is no formula. They are very important if they support what the rest of the application is saying about you.
 - i. For example – If you are interested in Journalism and you have worked on the School Newspaper or written for your local paper that adds a foundation to what you are saying about yourself and what you are interested in.
- b. Anything that takes place outside of the classroom is an extracurricular – make sure they support your interests, passions and what is unique about you.
- c. You should have several extracurricular activities, because you want to show that you have a rich personality.

7. Is leadership Important?

- a. Each student is different - no school has an entire student body of leaders.
- b. It really comes back to “What are you passionate about?”

8. What should 9th and 10th graders be doing for extracurricular activities?

- a. Explore – there are a myriad of choices. Don’t pick & choose with the idea that this will impress the college.
- b. Any activities need to resonate with the college as authentic.
 - i. “What do I like to do?”
 - ii. “What subjects am I good at?”
 - iii. If you don’t know – then explore. There are opportunities to explore - online classes, summer camps and community activities.

9. What should 11th graders be doing for extracurricular activities?

- a. 11th Graders should know what they enjoy participating in.
 - i. “How will I present myself to the college?”
 - ii. “What do I enjoy and what kinds of activities demonstrate my enjoyment in those fields?”
 - iii. It can be a wide range of things, For Example – anything from robotics to chess to participating in beauty pageants.
- b. Colleges are looking for a well-rounded class, not well-rounded students.

The National College Planning Summit

- i. That is what makes the admissions process so unpredictable because the applicant pool shifts every year.
- ii. There is no formula and no guarantee that you will be accepted into any particular college.
- c. Position yourself with your unique talent so the school can see how you can fit into the class that they are building.

10. Do you recommend students submit anything in the “Additional Information” section of the Common Application?

- a. Always!! – You get to give the college information about an additional side of you or provide information that you are not asked about.
- b. If there is a glaring weakness in your application you can talk about it. For example, if you were sick and your grades dropped one semester, you could tell about some of the challenges you faced that semester.
- c. The more information or explanations you can provide, the more this enhances your likelihood of being admitted.

11. What final thoughts do you have for our listeners today?

- a. You are a unique person with unique experiences. Write them down as they happen, how you feel, what was the experience like? As time passes your memory fades, but those experiences may help you with your college application.
- b. The sooner you start planning, the greater your chances are of having those college dreams become reality.

12. Can you tell us more about your business and the best way for people to contact you?

- a. I've been an Independent Counselor for 6 years. The Ivy Dean is a Boutique College Counseling Business –I work personally with each student.
- b. Visit the www.theivydean.com for more information. My direct office phone number and contact sheet are on the website.