


SEPTEMBER

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we  nicole richie

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# apply yourself

SCHOOL  
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STUDENTS ARE  
CURRENTLY  
ENROLLED IN  
COLLEGE  
IN THE U.S.

The first step to college success? Getting in. Here are some expert-approved tips to help you through the application process.

## #1 FOLLOW DIRECTIONS

"The number one mistake I see is not paying attention to instructions," says Katherine Cohen, Ph.D., an admissions counselor and the author of *Rock Hard Apps: How to Write a Killer College Application* (Hyperion). "It's important to show you are taking this seriously." Make your application memorable for what's in it—not for what's missing, incomplete, or filled out incorrectly.

## #2 TURN NEGATIVES INTO POSITIVES

If there is something in your application that you are worried about—a C in algebra, a semester with very few extracurriculars—explain it, and take the opportunity to show how you dealt with adversity. "The way a student deals with a setback is a big factor that the more selective colleges look at," says Cohen.

## #3 DON'T LOSE SLEEP OVER A "B" OR TWO

The old adage that it's better to get a B in a hard class than an A in an easy one is absolutely



true (although getting an A in a hard class is best of all). "Colleges want students who want to learn," says Cohen. "They may be more interested in the kid who has a few A-minuses and B-pluses but who has a great attitude."

## #4 BE ACTIVE—BUT NOT OVERACTIVE

The brag sheet, or activities page, is often overlooked by students, says Marlyn McGrath Lewis, director of admissions for Harvard College—and that's not good. "Tell us what we need to know in order to appreciate how excellent you are," she says. Be wary of going too far in the other direction, though. Lewis ►

says that "a common mistake is providing too much or redundant information, on the theory that if the folder is fatter, it looks better. Something like that can raise questions about a candidate."

## #5 ESSAYS CAN'T WORK MIRACLES

The essay is where you give context to the rest of the factual info. It's not going to make up for low test scores, but it could be a deciding factor if a school is on the fence about you. Use your essay to set yourself apart from the crowd.

## #6 APPLY EARLY DECISION ONLY IF YOU'RE ABSOLUTELY SURE

Early decision (guaranteeing you'll attend the one school you apply to) benefits schools more than students, according to Cohen. They love early decision because it helps give them a high "yield"—the number of students who accept their offer of enrollment. A high yield gives them a better ranking in *U.S. News and World Report*, which is what many students look at when thinking about colleges. If financial aid is going to be an issue, skip early admission altogether—you don't want to get locked into one offer. But if you're set on a school, early decision gives you a slight edge because you're competing against a smaller pool, and you'll know where you're headed that much sooner.

## THE GRAND TOUR

Don't let your first impression of campus be on move-in day—start planning your college visits now.

Every year, thousands of high school juniors and seniors travel to college campuses, hoping the visit will help them decide where to spend the next four years. Getting to know a school by looking at its Web site and reading brochures is important, but to be comfortable with your choice, it's key to go there, says Kevin Quinn, a high school counselor and vice president of the American School Counselor Association. "There are times when you'll drive onto a campus and get the feel right away that this may—or may not—be the place for you."

### WHO SHOULD GO

High school juniors and seniors who are preparing for, or in the midst of, applying to colleges should make visits. At this point, you'll have narrowed down your list of schools, and your basic knowledge of what each one has to offer will help you know what questions to ask. Guess who else should go? That's right, your parents. It's important for them to be as comfortable with your choice as you are. But feel free to set some boundaries. "Your parents shouldn't be with you every step of the way," cautions Robert Franek, vice president of *The Princeton Review*.

### HOW TO SET IT UP

After you've chosen a date, look at your list of schools and pick out geographic clusters so >

## KEY DATES

SPECIFIC TIME FRAMES VARY BY SCHOOL, SO BE SURE TO CHECK EACH COLLEGE'S APPLICATION OR WEB SITE FOR MORE INFO.

### NOVEMBER 2005:

Early decision applications due

### DECEMBER 2005:

Notification for early decision

### JANUARY 2006:

Deadline for regular applications

### APRIL 2006:

Notification for regular applications

you can try to hit a few schools at once (including your safety schools). You don't have to do one huge trip—several weekend trips might work better. Once you have a basic itinerary, it's time to get on the phone. Call the school's admissions office (you can get the phone number from your application form or the Web site) and tell them you're coming and would like their help in arranging the visit. But don't stop there. "Take a bit more initiative and make arrangements with the department you think you may want to study with," says Quinn. "Find out who the chairman is and contact his or her office." That way, if you're interested in, say, music, you can possibly talk to a student who shares your major and get a tour of the rehearsal rooms.

### CAMPUS CRAWL

Tours can vary from giant groups led by a scripted guide to one-on-one, free-form walk-throughs. The trick in every situation is to make sure the tour gives you the information you want. Ask questions about what you're seeing—is this dorm room typical? Tours often emphasize glitzy new buildings such as fitness centers, but try not to be too dazzled by them. The cafeteria is important, but so are things like how late the library stays open, and whether it's safe to walk home alone afterward.

### AFTER THE TRIP

Post-visit, try to write down your impressions while they're still fresh in your mind. Trust your gut and look past the sell—can you see yourself at this school? "Act like a consumer," says Quinn. "Read through the marketing devices to find your perfect match." While curriculum and other factors are important, your feelings should be your top indicator. —MIKKI HALPIN

## EXTRACURRICULARS

**Y**ou can't rely on grades and test scores alone to make your application acceptance-worthy. "Seeing that you contribute to your community is key in selective college admissions," says Cohen. "Extracurriculars are where you can showcase your impact." Lewis agrees. "We're looking for talent," she says. "We want someone who will, in all likelihood, contribute to society in some significant way. Ninety-nine percent of the people who apply to Harvard are strong academic performers, so we look for students who have another strength, be it football, music, or public service."

In other words, don't skimp on the schoolwork—but have involvements outside of school as well. Cohen suggests you start with something you're already interested in and then take it further. "If I had a student who plays sports," she says, "I would have her start writing for the sports section of her school newspaper—turn it into a whole set of amazing accomplishments." Here are some other things to

keep in mind when you get involved:

### FOLLOW YOUR HEART

If you pick an activity you love, you're more likely to excel at it.

### SPECIALIZE

Joining a few different organizations and really focusing on them is better than being Miss Sign-Up-for-Everything—you'll get more out of the clubs and have less conflicts in your schedule.

### AMPLIFY

Always try to take your extracurriculars to the next level—start a newsletter, organize a trip or fund-raiser—so you can make a greater impact. ➤

**“Always take your extracurriculars to the next level so you can make a greater impact”**

## → EXTRACURRICULARS

## START EARLY

Sticking with something for three years or more demonstrates your commitment. Plus, it shows you can balance school and activities for the long haul.

## BUILD RELATIONSHIPS

As you get involved in whatever you do, you'll be meeting lots of people. Stay in touch—they

may be able to write you a strong letter of recommendation one day.

## BE A LEADER

Don't just show up for meetings. Colleges want students who can make things happen. If you don't want to be a general member, volunteer to do the club's Web site. —M.H.

## POINT BREAK

More U.S. students are considering a "gap year" before college to travel or volunteer. Can some time off keep you from burning out?

**b**y the end of her senior year in high school, Katie Weiner, a 20-year-old now living in Secane, Pennsylvania, knew that she was not ready for another four years in the classroom. "I wanted to go to college, eventually, but I knew that it wasn't the right time for me," she recalls. "I needed a break. I needed to rejuvenate." A guidance counselor suggested she take a "gap year" (or interim year) and pointed her to some Internet resources for research.

While the gap year is practically an institution in countries like England and Australia, it's only just gaining momentum as a viable alternative here in the U.S., according to Ron Lieber, co-author of *Taking Time Off* (Princeton Review). "Most students who take a gap year not only go on to a traditional four-

year college, but they excel once there," Lieber says. And, like Katie, they may be bringing valuable experience to their studies that they could not have gotten in school.

Katie ended up spending much of her gap year in India, traveling and then working at an orphanage.

"It was the best thing I could have done for myself," she says.

"Now I have a confidence and faith in myself that I never could have gotten in school." This fall, she will be starting at the University of Montana and applying the credits she earned on her year off. —M.H.

