

Christopher's College Selection and Application Strategies and Mistakes

College Selection Criteria

After praying, the first step in selecting a college is to determine one's ultimate academic and career goals, and to then build backward from there. When applying for undergraduate admission, Christopher's ultimate academic goal was to earn a degree from one of the top-rated law schools in the country, and his ultimate career goal was to become a judge or to influence society in a significant way through a different career path.

Part of Chris' criteria in selecting an undergraduate college, therefore, was the admittance rates to top law schools from various undergraduate colleges and universities. Chris applied to schools whose students were quite successful in gaining admission to the top law schools. He also noted that a much higher percentage of people who had attended highly-selective undergraduate schools went on to affect significant change in society in some recognizable way. (This is not to say that the saint who is praying and influencing his local community is not actually affecting society in a greater way than those who affect society in a way that the 'world' recognizes as being great or significant.)

Other criteria for selecting undergraduate schools to which he would apply included scholarship availability, the level of academic freedom (not being graded down or socially shunned for expressing conservative or other non-conformist views), social atmosphere (how party-crazy or studious students are), college location and climate, academic rigor (setting reputation aside), and name-recognition (reputation) of the college.

Application Strategy

Based on the above listed criteria, Chris applied to 13 colleges, all of which offered either merit or need-based full-ride scholarships. He applied to the most selective schools in the country that met his criteria.

Conventional wisdom says to apply to just one school in each of three categories: A Reach School (one to which you are unlikely to gain acceptance), an Expected Schools (one to which you will likely be accepted, but might be rejected), and a Fall-Back Schools (one to which you have a very high likelihood of being accepted). If you are not accepted by your Reach or Expected schools, attend your Fall-Back school; do not wait another year and re-apply.

We ignored this strategy. Instead, Chris applied exclusively to Reach colleges, and he applied to many of them, with the hopes of being accepted by at least one of them. Our plan, if he were not accepted to any Reach colleges, was to wait another year, gain more experience and course-work, and repeat the same strategy. Because his ultimate goal was to gain admittance into a top-tier law school, whose students are taken predominantly from highly-selective undergraduate schools, he would be best off attending a highly selective undergraduate school.

In the end, Chris was accepted to three colleges, two Reach colleges, and one Expected college (but it was a Reach college in terms of earning a full-ride scholarship: Chris earned the sole full-ride scholarship that this college offered) in his first try at applying to colleges.

Application Strategy Details

Chris opted to apply for 'regular decision' admission, and not to apply for 'early decision' or 'early acceptance' to any of the colleges. He did this in part, because he was not sure which school he most wanted to attend. But, he also only applied regular decision, because he believed that he would face stiffer competition in an early decision applicant pool than in a regular decision applicant pool. Furthermore, his opportunities for scholarships might be reduced if he were accepted 'early decision', because Chris would then be locked in to that school, even if the school did not offer as favorable of a scholarship as other schools.

Mistakes that We Made

Though Chris' application strategy worked well for him, in hind-sight, we have become aware that some of the most selective colleges have a much higher rate of acceptance of 'early decision' applicants than of 'regular decision' applicants, and that these same colleges still offer full-ride scholarships on the same basis, even after a student has been 'locked-in' due to an 'early decision' acceptance. Next time one of our children applies to college, we will try to do a better job of choosing one school for 'early decision' and apply to it in that way.

Of the several mistakes that we made in applying to colleges, perhaps the most egregious was to combination of typos on Chris' official homeschool high school transcript. As his dad, I created his transcript and got several dates wrong, the overall credits-earned wrong, and even some of his course titles wrong. We only caught these mistakes after the applications had been made. So, we had to re-create and re-print the transcript with the corrections. Sadly, we had to re-print it twice, because we did not catch all of the mistakes until after we had sent the second transcript to all of the schools. We had to send three iterations of the transcript to all of his colleges. This was embarrassing, but more importantly, I believe these simple mistakes cost Christopher admission to some of the colleges to which he had applied.

We also would have had Chris take more outside courses (not at home), and especially local college courses, so as to better validate his preparedness to excel in a challenging academic environment. We would have done better to have had Chris take Advanced Placement tests and more SAT Subject Area tests earlier on in his high school years. Had he done so, his application would have been stronger.

Additionally, we were able to obtain a letter of reference from a famous alumnus of Stanford University, and we used that as part of Chris' application there. It is possible that this letter worked against Chris, instead of for him, because some admissions boards look unfavorably on reference letters that seem to be trying to use unfair advantage.

Conclusion

God's hand led us through the entire application process and we could see, in the end, how He provided Chris with the optimal college acceptances and, then, enrollment. We praise Him!