

A Letter to Prospective Applicants

from Fred Hargadon, former Dean of Admission, Princeton University

To All Prospective Applicants:

In a favorite book of mine, *The Phantom Tollbooth*, one of the delightful characters the reader meets up with is the Dodecahedron (named after a mathematical shape with twelve sides). He introduces himself in the following manner: "My angles are many. My sides are not few." Those words have always struck me as a pretty good description of the admissions process not only at Princeton, but at many similar colleges and universities as well. In any event, as *you* approach the college admissions process, with its 'many angles' and 'not a few sides,' I've been thinking about what sort of advice it might be useful to share with you were we able to have a conversation about your applying to colleges and, in particular, to Princeton. While a printed letter may be a poor substitute for a conversation, I've simply jotted down a few of the observations I'd most likely make if I had the opportunity to talk with you in person.

First of all, I'd tell you that I don't envy you the task of trying to determine to which colleges you should apply, or trying to estimate your chances of admission at any particular college, or, ultimately, having to make a choice about where to enroll from among those to which you are offered admission. I *can* tell you that I don't think there are any shortcuts (not even Harry Potter's "Sorting Hat"), to finding good answers to these questions, and that since this is one of the more significant decisions you will make in your life, it's worth as much time and effort and homework as you can put into it.

Following the old adage, "well-begun is half-done," I'd like to suggest that you begin your college search by taking some time to think hard about why it is you want to go to college in the first place and about what, once you get there, you hope to gain from those four years. The more thought you give now to what it is you think you want to learn and experience in college, the better informed will be your choice of colleges to which to apply. Otherwise, you're likely to find yourself in the situation akin to that of trying to decide whether to drive, fly, or take a train without first deciding where you want to get to.

Set aside some quiet time in order to reflect frankly on your strengths and weaknesses: think about what it is that you now know, are especially interested in, do well, or just plain enjoy and therefore would like an opportunity to continue to pursue in college; and about what it is, on the other hand, that you don't know (but think you should) or don't do particularly well (but hope to learn to do better) and therefore also want to pursue in college.

I'd even go so far as to recommend that you sketch out a tentative plan of what it is you wish to accomplish in college (not a plan of what you want to do *after* college, but *in* college), keeping in mind that you're likely to alter it as you go along. You probably will find yourself making some changes in it even between now and next year. It just seems to me that the better the handle you try to get now on at least some of the ways in which you hope to change and grow as a result of your college experience, the better you will be able to identify those colleges that appear most likely to meet your needs. (*For example, whether your goal right now happens to be becoming a doctor, or an engineer, or a writer, you might decide that you also want to leave college having become bilingual, or having mastered a musical instrument, or having gained more than a superficial appreciation of art, or having taken up the sport of rowing. I regret, for instance, that I didn't spend some of my time in college learning to play the piano, however thankful my friends may be that I didn't. As someone once wisely pointed out, the person you will spend most of your life with is yourself, and therefore you owe it to yourself to become as interesting as possible.*)

While it's not unusual for students to talk of their "first choice" college, I think it's a rare individual for whom it can be said that there exists but a single, best college. Even if, as the result of the homework you do on colleges, you arrive at a point where you accord enough preference to one college to consider it your "first choice," your final list ought to include a number of colleges, any one of which you'd be happy to

attend if admitted. Keep in mind that most students end up very much liking the college they attend, regardless of whether it had been their "first choice" when they applied.

It's also a good idea to focus at least as much attention on the *overall* quality of a college as on the quality of the particular department or academic area in which you may now be especially interested. Experience indicates that a fair number of students ultimately major in an academic area other than the one they had in mind when entering. This happens for any number of reasons. Some students simply find that the more they learn about what is involved in studying a particular subject, the less satisfying it becomes. Some find a different, but closely related, field more to their liking. More often, it happens that it is only after they get to college that students become familiar with one or another field of study, and subsequently find themselves more attracted by it than by their initial interests as freshmen. The point is that you will want to take into account the possibility of a change in your own interests while you are going through college, and therefore you ought to feel reasonably confident that the colleges to which you are applying are ones which will offer you an excellent education across the board. You should also try to imagine how well a given college will meet your needs and interests as a junior or senior, not just what it offers you as a freshman.

You need to be realistic, too. There are no absolutely perfect colleges. I've never met a student for whom *every* classroom experience, *every* faculty member, or *every* out-of-class experience turned out to be ideal. A good way to approach the colleges you are looking into is to think of each of them as a set of *probabilities*. And, depending upon your interests and the kinds of experiences you hope to have, you should try to get some sense of the probabilities of satisfying those interests or of having those experiences at one or another of them. For instance, what are the probabilities of being in classes of one size or another, or of getting to know at least some faculty members well, or of undertaking independent research, or of participating in one or another extracurricular activity? These are the sorts of questions you ought to be asking.

There isn't any quick or easy way that I know of in which to fully know what a particular college is like, despite the proliferation of commercial publications that purport to give you capsule summaries or the "inside" story. Colleges and universities are dynamic and complex institutions, if for no other reason than the fact that one-quarter of the student body is new each year. While some information is relatively easy to come by (size, costs, course offerings, and the like), many of the factors you may wish to weigh and compare are simply not so easily measured and assessed. For instance, I'd be surprised if on any given day, let alone over the course of four years, any two students at Princeton experience this place in quite the same way. There are many paths, both academic and non-academic, through any *single* college, and almost every student travels more than one of those paths during the course of his or her four years.

In any event, try to avoid falling into the trap of thinking about one or another college solely in terms of a few descriptive adjectives or traits. And remember that any college is going to be at least slightly different than it now is simply by virtue of your enrolling there. If at all possible, you should visit the campuses of the colleges in which you are most interested, attend classes, and talk with some currently enrolled students. Rather than rely on any single source of information, seek out a number of different sources, always keeping in mind the fable about the seven blind philosophers, each of whom, upon touching a different part of an elephant, described the seven quite different animals they thought it to be. So, too, is the same university likely to be perceived, at least in part, quite differently by its various members.

Neither you nor your parents will be able to ignore the fact that some colleges (including Princeton) are more expensive than others. Even if I were not representing one of those institutions, I'd still be telling you that I don't think it wise to cross *any* college off your list just because it appears to cost a small fortune to attend. In the first place, while we all know that cost is not a perfect indicator of quality, it is also true that a first-rate college education does not come cheaply. Secondly, a number of colleges and universities (including Princeton) make their admission decisions completely without regard to whether an applicant will need financial aid. When students we admit to Princeton need financial aid, that need, however substantial, is met in full by a combination of university grant and campus job. Students are no longer required to take out loans. (See our publication *Undergraduate Financial Aid Information and Application*

Instructions for specific examples of how our financial aid system works for families at various income levels. More information about Princeton's financial aid program is available at www.princeton.edu)

Moreover, I think you are likely to find that, as a general rule, it is precisely the places like Princeton that have some of the most comprehensive and best-funded financial aid programs. In any event, keep in mind the following: first, you can always turn down a college's offer of admission should the amount of financial aid it awards you appear inadequate; second, the one sure way *not* to gain admission or *not* to receive financial aid is by deciding not to apply in the first place.

Now, about applying for admission. What you will quickly learn over the next few months is that with regard to many of the questions you are likely to have about various aspects of the admission process, there is no single set of answers that apply for all colleges. Do colleges require personal interviews? Some do and some don't. (We strongly recommend them, but don't require them.) Do colleges treat your SAT results as a combined score or treat the Verbal and Math scores separately? Some do the former, some the latter. (We do the latter.) And so on. (For answers to other specific questions of this sort relating specifically to Princeton admission, see our Most Frequently Asked Questions about Applying for Admission to Princeton.)

You will find these differences frustrating in at least two respects. First, you will have to treat each institution (and therefore each application) individually. That's not so bad when you think of it, given that we assume you want the colleges to treat your application individually. Second, a particular college's practice with regard to how it treats your high school transcript or your test scores, and so forth, may not be in accord with your preference in such matters. After all, it's only human nature for an applicant to want colleges to place the greatest weight on those factors he or she shows up best on and the least amount of weight on those factors he or she shows up less well on. My advice is simply to roll with these differences, especially since there is not much you'll be able to do about them anyway. A good rule of thumb here is simply to make sure that you meet each college halfway in completing its application.

I think it helps to understand from the outset that the context within which a college views an applicant (say, as one of a large number of similarly qualified applicants from across the country) is bound to be different from the context within which that applicant is viewed locally. Moreover, the context within which an applicant is viewed by one college is also bound to be different from the context within which that same applicant is viewed by another college, given not only that applicant groups are not completely identical from one college to another but also that the sizes of their respective freshman classes may vary considerably. Lots of times this explains why an applicant is offered admission by one college and not another.

Nor is there a single scale (or at least none that makes sense to us) against which colleges are able to precisely rank-order applicants from one to whatever number of thousands it is who apply. There are simply too many variables. For instance, similar grade point averages may represent quite different levels of achievement across thousands of high schools or even across different departments within the same school. And think of the number of possible combinations of Verbal and Math SAT scores as well as the various SAT II scores. That is why we treat each application individually, and why we make every effort to take into account the enormous variation in academic and extracurricular opportunities from one school to the next, from one community to the next, from one state to the next, and from one country to the next. Experience suggests that excellence does not always and everywhere come in uniform dimensions.

While it is true that, all other things being equal, the better one's academic credentials, the better one's chances for admission, it is not the case that every student we admit will have higher test scores or a higher grade point average or a higher rank-in-class than those who are not offered admission. Colleges like Princeton are "selective" in two ways: first, every year, more well-qualified students apply than it is possible for us to admit to a freshman class as relatively small as ours (1,160), and therefore we have to make a lot of difficult choices; second, in setting out to enroll a freshman class that is characterized by a variety of academic and non-academic interests, exceptional skills and talents, experiences, aspirations, and backgrounds, we exercise judgments relating to factors other than just quantitative ones. Princeton is a

relatively small, residential university, and we are aware that an important part of a student's education here is derived from the mix of students he or she will live with, study and play with, and come to know.

In other words, you should realize that in applying to a college with more qualified applicants than there are places available in the freshman class, there will be some factors affecting the ultimate decision on your application (primarily, the number and nature of all the *other* applications) over which you have no control and for which you should not feel responsible. Too often, applicants not offered admission automatically assume that there are specific deficiencies or faults in their applications when in fact that simply isn't the case. No college enjoys the prospect of disappointing qualified applicants, but applicants who are not in some measure prepared for the *possibility* of being disappointed are being unrealistic. *(When all is said and done, I happen to believe that the saving grace of college admissions as a whole in this country is the fact we don't all agree on precisely the same students to admit in a given year.)*

Elsewhere in the application materials, I have suggested that in completing your application, you should just be yourself, rather than attempting to match some imagined ideal candidate you think we have in mind. And I confess that every time I offer that advice, I remember the comment Mark Twain made: *"Telling a person to be himself is the worst advice you can give to some people!"* Still, that's my advice.

In thinking about what you hope to gain from college, you might also want to consider the possibility of taking a break between school and college -- deferring your entrance to college, in other words. Every year, about two dozen or so of the students to whom we offer admission choose to defer their entrance to Princeton for a year, some just to work, some to travel abroad on an American Field Service or similar program, some to continue private music study, and so forth. I mention it here just so you are aware that it is an option.

Not one of us who annually reads and rereads the thousands of applications for admission to Princeton believes either the process or our ultimate decisions to be perfect, whatever criteria for perfection are used. Ultimately, however, to the best of our limited abilities we make those decisions. While I can't guarantee you admission should you apply, what I can do is to assure you that we will evaluate your application with an open mind, respect for you as an individual, and no small measure of humility.

As you go through this year, try to retain a sense of perspective and even a sense of humor. I know how important where you attend college is to you, but I also know that students often see as critical those differences between attending one college and another which, in many cases, are very slight. Whatever you do, don't let the college application process so preoccupy you that you miss out on all that your school has to offer you during your senior year. Okay, that's not all of the advice I'd like to give you, but it's about the limit of one letter and I hope that some of it is useful.

Happy trails.

Sincerely,

Fred A. Hargadon