

## **TOP 10 MOST ASKED ADMISSION QUESTIONS**

By Martha Allman, Dean of Admissions at Wake Forest University

With many high school students and their parents in the thick of the college application process, I am now finding myself frequently cornered in the produce aisle at the grocery store, the dentist's office and the hair salon. My voice and e-mailboxes alike are filled with urgent questions from prospective students and parents. So, in the spirit of the "Top 10 List," I have compiled my own "Top 10 Most Asked Admissions Questions." Here they are (in no particular order):

### **1.) How important are extracurricular activities?**

As a general rule, the academic record is much more important than extracurricular activities. However, substantial talent and accomplishment in the fine arts, athletics or other areas sought by a particular college can become significant in the admissions decision. In general, colleges seek depth of involvement rather than breadth; therefore, we advise students to focus time and attention on a few activities in which they excel.

### **2.) How do you differentiate among high schools?**

Through school visits, written profiles and past experience with students from particular high schools, admissions officers gather data to assist them in assessing different schools. We evaluate students in the context of where their education is taking place, the rigor of the curriculum, the competition in the classroom and the opportunities afforded them. In the end, however, the evaluation is an individual one. There are great students at not-so-good schools and there are marginal students at superb schools. The students we seek are those who have "bloomed where they are planted" by taking the most challenging curricula afforded them, by going beyond expectations and by exhibiting real motivation and intellectual curiosity.

### **3.) Do IB and AP courses matter?**

Selective colleges expect students to pursue successfully the most challenging curricula offered to them. In some high schools, that is the International Baccalaureate Diploma Program. In others, it is Advanced Placement. Other schools offer a different curriculum for their most advanced students. Pursuing the most rigorous curriculum signals academic motivation; excelling in that curriculum suggests that the student is well prepared for academically strenuous college classes.

#### **4.) What do you look for in admissions essays?**

I look for beautiful, clear writing that comes to life on the page and offers insight into the character and personality of the student. The essay and short-answer prompts give the student the opportunity to put meat on the bone of transcripts and test scores and to introduce themselves to the admissions committee. Beware of being someone you are not in the essay. Beware of outside influence. Editing by adults or professionals often removes the very elements that admissions officers seek.

#### **5.) Who should write my letter(s) of recommendation?**

An academic teacher from the junior or senior year of high school who knows the applicant well and can speak to his or her strengths, weaknesses and the qualities that differentiate him or her from the other students in the classroom should write the recommendation. If applicants have special talents they wish to be considered in the admissions process, a letter from, for example, a music teacher or debate coach is also helpful. People who do not know the applicant are not good references regardless of how fond they are of the applicant's parents.

#### **6.) Are college visits really necessary?**

They are very helpful in differentiating one college from another and in assessing the appropriate "match." Never underestimate "gut feeling" and campus personality. Campus visits can be expensive and time-consuming, however. Websites and virtual tours are helpful, but when it comes down to the end, when the choices have been narrowed and the enrollment decision looms, you might just want to meet some professors and eat in the cafeteria.

#### **7.) To how many schools should I apply?**

Working with your parents, your school counselor, college guides and websites, narrow your choices. Applying to multitudes of colleges is costly and time-consuming. Don't apply to a college unless you are genuinely interested in attending and don't apply to colleges that are unrealistic for you.

#### **8.) Should I send supplementary materials with my application?**

Scrapbooks demonstrating your love for college X? No. DVDs of your student body president campaign speech? No. Tapes of your garage band? Probably not. Slides of art work for which you have received awards? Yes. Newspaper clipping showing you as Boys Nation President? Yes. If you have significant accomplishments that have been recognized outside your own family and circle of friends and you believe those accomplishments should be considered in your

admissions decision, submit supplementary material. But be prudent. Admissions officers have a lot to read.

### **9.) How important are standardized tests?**

Many colleges, including Wake Forest, are now test-optional, which means each applicant may decide whether or not she would like her standardized tests considered in the admissions decision. Regardless of whether or not scores are submitted, the high school record remains the most important factor in the admissions process. Even the highest standardized test scores fail to compensate for mediocre academic achievement.

### **10.) How do colleges really choose their students?**

Colleges choose students based on their own institutional needs. Will this student bring something to our campus community that we value and need in greater degrees?

Will this student contribute to an academic or extracurricular program that is important to the college? Will the student add energy and perhaps a different perspective to our community?

First and foremost, colleges must select students who are academically qualified, but from that point, the process is about class-building and adding a variety of individuals who will further the college's mission and enrich its campus.