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## The Ivy League and other elite schools- can you get in?

**Author: Rachel Edelstein**

There is no obvious, fail-safe method to being accepted into a school in the Ivy League, but there are some definite patterns exploited and strategies adopted by top performing, successful candidates. The admissions process of these elite colleges is a mystery to many applicants and thus the result is several myths and misconceptions.

In order to better understand the acceptance process, it is useful to break down the resumé into its three critical components: academic performance, extra curriculars and the essay.

Being a top academic performer is indisputably a significant part of the acceptance process. According to Doctor Fred Zhang, Co-founder of Prep Scholar and Harvard alumnus, a SAT score of 1580 (out of 1600) would place you right in the top 25% for most Ivy League schools, while a 1450 would land you a position in the bottom 25%, where admission is most likely unattainable. Frankly, having good grades is not optional for most applicants.

However, there is a potential loophole - Ivy League schools love sports. Ed Boland, former assistant director for admissions at Yale, wrote in the New York Post, "After fierce pressure from the athletic department, I had to admit a highly sought-after French-Canadian hockey recruit. He had crappy grades, dismal scores, and his essay consisted of one sentence scribbled hastily in pencil: "I want to be a great hockey player." Of course, this would only apply to the outstanding (even world-ranking) sportsmen and sportswomen, however the opportunity does exist. Out of the six South African students currently studying at Princeton University, four were accepted on the basis of their sporting abilities.

If this is not possible for you, though, it is still not the end of the road. If your academic record does not reflect your capabilities favourably, a good place to start is by making some effort to improve. Universities are impressed by some noticeable improvement in grades over the course of an applicant's school career and Ivy League schools are no exception. Of course, consistency is a relatively sound indicator of a good candidate, however there is something to be said for steady improvement too. Universities like to see students taking difficult classes and pushing themselves even if this decision means improvement is slow.

But the more mediocre an applicant's grades, the more extraordinary the other aspects of the application must be in order to be considered in the pile of between approximately 20 000 and 45 000 applications for colleges in the Ivy League. Therefore, another crucial part of the application is one's extra curriculars.

A central debate regarding how to be accepted is whether it is more valuable to be a well-rounded candidate or to be outstanding and passionate in a specialised field. Although candidates on both ends of the spectrum have historically been accepted into prestigious schools, a unique story or exceptional talent is more likely to set one apart from the rest. The flaw with being well rounded is the potential for mediocrity in one's endeavors. By spreading yourself thin and trying to get involved in too many projects, you are potentially doing yourself a disservice.

Former admissions officer at the University of Pennsylvania, Elizabeth Heaton, says that there is no right or wrong answer in choosing specific extra-curricular activities. As long as one's involvement is "quantifiable", the applicant is on the right track. Heaton uses reading as an example. She says that although you might love to read in your downtime, this hobby will only become impactful in your application if you do something meaningful with it.

"If you've taken that love and used it to create a high school book club with other like-minded students, you now have an endeavor that is much easier for admissions officers to measure and discuss in selection committee". In other words, dive deep into an interest or hobby and become devoted to it.

Harvard and MIT alumnus, Allen Cheng, says that Ivy League universities want to produce world-class leaders, go-getters and thinkers, and that they can only produce this high calibre of alumni by admitting those with great potential. The only way to prove that you have great potential is to show how and what you have achieved in the past. Lastly, while one's academic performance and extra-curricular routine is a foot in the door to being considered for acceptance, universities look for some deeper aspects of one's personality when deciding if the student will fit in with their culture and ultimately be accepted.

This is why the essay or interview is so crucial. Oxford University alumna, Jade Weiner, says that there are three essential questions to ask and answer for yourself when applying.

1. Do you know yourself?
2. Do you know why you want to do this specific course?
3. What will you, one day, do with the course should the institution admit you?

If you want to be among the approximate 5-10% of accepted students in top universities, you have to show why you belong. Thousands of students want to be engineers and have known this since early childhood. Thus, it is not sufficient to be good at math and science. More important is why you are so passionate about this career trajectory and how you intend to impact the world with it in the future.

Ultimately, the admissions board must like you as a person, or at least the version of you that is portrayed on paper in your application. Be authentic in your essay. Elevated language is not the focus - your intelligence has already been demonstrated. Rather, write simply about something that is significant to you and be clear in your focus. If you don't seem to fit in with the college ethos, despite your impressive grades and pursuits, you will get nowhere.

College applications and admissions can be a particularly stressful process. It is a complex progression of hard work, consistency, organisation and perspective. Adopting a measured, methodical approach to the process will reflect well in the end. Do not be discouraged if acceptance into your dream school does not happen for you. In general, if you can find your passion, work hard and pace yourself, you have started with a solid foundation not only for the purpose of university admissions but also for life itself