

January 17, 2008

To the Parents and Class of 2009:

As we move into the New Year it is important to start thinking ahead to the future and begin preparing for the next step after high school. We are writing now to formally initiate a process through which we can work with you to facilitate good decision-making.

Within the next few weeks we will be talking with all juniors in one of their classes, covering important information about upcoming SAT and ACT test dates, how to use guidance resources and other details about the college search and application process. The next step is to meet with a counselor to formulate a working list, which at this point, will most likely be large and cover a broad range of your priorities and levels of selectivity. We will be speaking with the juniors on the importance of completing the Chapter One * Beginning the process, which is a self-study and reflective survey. We ask that students complete the survey and bring it with them as they meet with their counselor, as this will be our starting point for discussion. Parents will also receive a parent information form that we ask you to fill out and return to us. The more information we know about your child the more we can assist them in their college search and finally their college recommendation.

From that list you may wish to select a region of the country to visit during April vacation or plan a day trip or two to colleges of different types in our area. As you may be aware, each student is allowed to take two days for college visits. They may be taken during the junior or senior years by using a form provided by the guidance office. We cannot emphasize too much the importance of visiting; each college provides valuable insights and helps to narrow the search. College admissions offices schedule general information sessions followed by student-led tours; reservations are not usually required, but be sure to call ahead for specific directions. Interviews are not recommended at this early stage unless you are traveling a great distance and are sure you will not be able to return. Obviously, the summer can be used for such visits; however, most schools are not in session so a view of campus life will be limited.

By the end of the summer it is recommended that you narrow your working list to the colleges to which you will most likely apply. Such advance work allows you to better consider the options of Early Action or Early Decision at your top choice college. Though there is much in the media which appears to advocate such plans, they are not appropriate for students who really need more time to evaluate their choices and for students who cannot stand on their junior year records. All of these decisions are ones that we will be happy to help you make as appropriate.

We will be covering the topic of testing with the students directly; we would like to briefly address it here to facilitate your planning. We recommend that juniors take the SAT/ACT once this spring and then again in the fall. The SAT's are scheduled this spring on March 1st, May 3rd and June 7th. The ACT will be given on April 12th and June 14th. Online registration is the quickest way to register. A credit card must be used. Though important, we urge that you do not overemphasize the role standardized testing plays in the admissions committees' decision-making process. There are many other factors that count - the most important of which is the academic record.

We invite you to call us whenever convenient to set up a family appointment with one of us to begin wherever it would be helpful. Please do not hesitate to call 526-7641 to arrange a time.

Sincerely,

The Guidance Staff

Chapter One

CRITERIA FOR SELECTING COLLEGES

Researching Yourself...

Perhaps the single most important step in beginning the college process is to know yourself.

First, before you do anything else, you must take a good look at yourself in the mirror and ask, “Just who am I anyway?” The key to a successful college application is the ability to reflect, gain important self-knowledge and then project a clear distinct voice in all aspects of the process from personal essays to interviews. There is no “right” voice or magic combination of traits or accomplishments that will guarantee admission. It is most important to be **genuine**. College admissions counselors can spot a fraud a mile a way. Don’t be afraid to be **you**. The rest will fall into place. The following is a series of activities designed to help you define who you are and what your priorities should be in choosing a college that would be a good match.

Self-Evaluation

What follows is a lengthy set of questions that will assist in this reflective process. The answers are for your eyes only; however, it would be helpful to share some aspects of your answers/conclusions with your guidance counselor to assist him/her in getting to know you better. Your counselor will work closely with you over the next year as an important resource and coach. It is to your benefit to help him/her to get to know you well.

These questions are intended to help you focus college selection and admission where it belongs – **on you as an individual**. You may want to revisit all or some of them as you go along to test your original responses, looking for adjustments or a reordering of priorities as you visit colleges and further your research. Writing the answers on separate paper may be helpful, as you will not feel constricted to the spaces provided. An honest and thoughtful effort at self-evaluation can:

- Help you find the colleges that are right for you.
- Prepare you for topics you will be covering in essays and interviews.
- Help you present yourself clearly and effectively to the colleges of your choice.
- Bring the college process into a manageable and less stressful context.

NAME:

STUDENT QUESTIONNAIRE

Your Personality and Relationships with Others:

1. How would someone who knows you well describe you: your best qualities, your most conspicuous shortcomings, reasons to value your friendship?
2. Which relationships are most important to you and why?
3. How are you influenced by others who are important to you?
4. How important to you are approval, rewards and recognition?
5. How do you respond to pressure, competition or challenge...failure or criticism?
6. Who are your heroes.... what specifically about them do you admire?

The World Around You.....

7. How would you describe your family and home? In what ways have they influenced your thinking and shaped your abilities/interests?

8. What do your parents or others expect of you? How have their expectations influenced your goals for the future?

9. Have you encountered people who think and act differently from you? What viewpoints challenged you the most; what did you learn about yourself through these relationships?

10. What concerns you most about the world around you? If you could bring about change in one area, what would that be?

Your Education...

11. What are your academic interests...which courses have you enjoyed most.... where are Strengths/weaknesses?

12. How do you learn best? Which teaching methods have most fully engaged you?

13. If left to your own devices what do you choose to learn...and in what context (could be a job, a summer volunteer project, a hobby, etc.). What do your choices show about your interests and the way you like to learn?

14. How well do you believe MERHS has prepared you for college? In what areas do you feel confident/weak? Have you been challenged by your program here? Do you wish you had done anything differently?

15. Do you think that your performance correctly reflects your ability? Are there any factors that have interfered with your progress in school?

16. Is there anything that you would like to change about your academic program or goals during the coming year?

Your Activities and Interests....

17. What activities in and out of school have been most important to you and why? Of what accomplishments/contributions are you most proud? Have there been any limitations on what time you were able to commit to these activities?

18. What employment opportunities have impacted your development....personal skills, possible career avenues, etc?

19. What community service experiences have been particularly rewarding?

20. Have you assumed any leadership roles in the school or community...if so, describe. What do you see as your leadership style?

21. If you had a free afternoon with nothing on your agenda (rare occasion!), how would you spend it?

Your Goals and Values....

22. How do you define “success?” Are you satisfied with your accomplishments to date? What do you most want to accomplish in the near and distant future?

23. What personal values are most important to you right now; how do you wish to integrate them with your view of college life?

24. Of your gifts and talents which would you most like to develop further? What would you like to change about yourself?

25. Is there anything you have ever secretly or passionately wanted to do or be? Does that goal seem to be within your reach? What would you need to do or learn about to have a clearer view of that option?

Use the Remainder of the Space to Add other Important Thoughts.....

Researching the Colleges..... part two

As you begin the college search, don't expect any startling or quick revelations. The answers will come in due time; this is a process that will unfold, but not entirely on its own. The comfort you will feel when the final decision is made will be directly linked to the thoroughness with which you have done your work – both through the self-reflection process we have just outlined and through careful, step-by-step research into the colleges themselves. There are in excess of 3,300 colleges and universities in this country, approximately 2,200 of which are four-year institutions. Since an average of 90% of MERHS graduates choose four year schools each year, much of the information we will cover applies to that category.

There are many ways to classify and start to organize the colleges you will consider. Selectivity is always one of the first factors considered. In general, schools are identified as ***Highly Selective, Selective, and Less Selective***. It is important to arrive at what we call a ***Vertical List*** - one that includes one or two in the top category for you (a reach), three or four in the middle (probables), and at least one safety. But that is really the last step after a much broader and more open-ended list is considered. Some of the other factors involved in determining where to start are:

- **Size**.... typically colleges are grouped as small - under 2,000, then mid range – roughly 2000 – 70000. Small to medium universities fall between 7,000 and 15,000 and very large universities up to 40,000+.
- **Type**.... there are liberal arts colleges, universities, special emphasis schools such as business, technical, teaching, women's colleges, military academies, etc.
- **Location**.... this region, East Coast, South, West Coast, Mid-Atlantic, no preference.
- **Setting**..... urban, rural, suburban.
- **Diversity**. ...percentages of students who are international, are of other races and religions.
- **Specialized programs**....services for learning disabled, physically challenged, or who have English as a second language.
- **Extracurricular activities**.... specific sports, music, cultural opportunities, etc.
- **Cost**...includes tuition, room and board, books, fees, travel.... compare records for financial aid....consider financial back up.
- **Housing**.... on/off campus, guaranteed or not, coed, single sex, theme houses, apartments, overall quality of accommodations.
- **Facilities**....architecture, libraries, student unions, classrooms, lecture halls, labs, recreational facilities/athletic offerings, stores, laundry, handicapped access.

Once you have determined your priorities by using the above criteria, then it will be easier to bring the actual research process into a manageable realm. Remember, you are the consumer. You are seeking a good match as much as the colleges are. The ball is in your court as long as you frame it that way. There are three phases of research you should consider:

- Learn everything there is to know about the college **before** you visit.
- Ask the right questions and gain information **during** your visit.
- Follow up on information or instincts that you acquire **after** your visit.

Of these, the first phase is the most important and, at the same time, the most difficult. It is crucial for you to do your homework before you visit a school so that when you get there, you can apply the information you already know and ask pertinent questions. There are a myriad of resources available to you that range from purely objective descriptions and data to highly subjective opinions about a school's programs, philosophies and social climate. As with any research project, it is important to draw upon a variety of sources from all angles so that you may ultimately form your own opinion and make an informed decision about whether or not it is a good match for you.

As you consider options it may be helpful to review the following definitions:

- **College**...a term loosely used to refer to a program that leads to a bachelor's degree. All students are referred to as *undergraduates*...that is students who are working toward this degree in one of many majors. Some colleges are devoted to liberal arts; while others specialize in a preprofessional field such as business, education, architecture, nursing, technology, the arts, etc. Colleges tend to be small, ranging from 500 to 5,000 students. They may be free-standing or part of a university.
- **University**...an institution that combines one or more undergraduate colleges, including one for liberal arts, with graduate programs that award Ph.D.'s, M.D.'s, Ed.D.'s and other post-graduate degrees. Most private universities range from 5,000 to 20,000. Public universities are usually much larger.
- **Public school**...one supported by the state where it is located...subsidized by taxpayer money and accountable to state board of education. Public schools traditionally offer much lower tuition than private, but have no endowment (funds generated by alumni giving and used for scholarships). They are reliant on federal and state financial aid programs. Class sizes tend to be larger than private school counterparts. They tend to be strong in professional programs such as business, engineering and education and offer Honors programs with smaller classes and special advising.
- **Private school**... run by a board of trustees and supported by private funds. The country's oldest colleges are private, founded when the US consisted of the East Coast. To this day the Northeast and East Coast, in general, host the greatest number and the most prestigious of the nation's private schools. They tend to focus on liberal arts education with some preprofessional emphasis. Tuition costs are very high but, for those who qualify for financial aid, the bottom line, out of pocket cost of attending may parallel a public school or even come out ahead.

One last note before you begin.... all colleges and universities have unique **personalities**. After all the research, visits and deliberation, it often comes down to a gut level decision among final options. Where did you feel a connection, where did you feel comfortable and optimistic about your opportunities to grow as a person and as a student over the next four years? This factor is an intangible; however, you can look at some helpful comparisons as you go along. For example, some colleges are decidedly liberal, others conservative; some are laid back, others

project an environment of intense competition; some have school spirit, others are blasé; some have a social life that is focused upon fraternities and sororities, others do not support a Greek system. Keep your antennae out as you visit and talk with students currently enrolled in the schools on your list. It would be helpful to record your observations in a journal that you take with you on visits and have by your side as you read and research. Remember, **you are the consumer**. It is you who must be satisfied that you have used all tools available to make the right decision.

RESOURCES.....

1. The Printed Word:

- a. There are many **comprehensive guides** to colleges with all kinds of themes and areas of emphasis. One good way to get an idea of the variety is to go to a Borders or Barnes and Nobles and look in the reference section. It isn't necessary to purchase one of the huge general guides, produced by the College Board, Peterson's, etc., as they provide only factual information that can be easily accessed on the Internet. More helpful would be one of the resources that give in-depth profiles of a more limited number of schools. Favorites on our list include: *The Fiske Guide to Colleges*, *The Princeton Review: Top 351 Colleges*, *Choosing the Right College*, *Barron's Guide to the Most Competitive Colleges*, and *Colleges that Change Lives*. There are also a number of "how to get into college" guides, essay-writing guides, books on the financial aid process and much more.
- b. **College viewbooks and catalogs** can be found in the Guidance Office for a number of schools frequently attended by MERHS students. You can also write to the colleges directly to have them mailed to your home. Keep in mind that these materials are part of advertising campaigns to attract students and do not present material in an unbiased way. College catalogs can also be access on line from the individual colleges. Catalogs give an excellent look at the actual courses a student will be required to take during their four years.
- c. **Magazine and newspaper articles** are particularly available in the spring as decisions come out for seniors and in the fall when the college search is in full swing for you. Well known is the *U.S. News and World Report* annual issue that ranks colleges; read but beware of bias and a narrow approach in the way these ratings are determined.

2. Cyber-Sources:

- a. The **Internet** is an essential tool in the college search. Not only is it usually the quickest and most accurate path to information in the early stages of research, but it will also prove to be the best method of filing applications, registering for standardized testing, and completing financial aid forms at a later stage in the college process. It is great for sifting through objective information, but is less apt to provide evaluative points of view. Beware of

Websites that are trying to sell you services; they are in most cases not legitimate and furthermore not necessary. Each college has its own website, some with virtual tours. Then there are comprehensive sites that help you refine your search and that provide many more services. Some excellent sources to start with are www.collegeboard.org, www.petersons.com, www.review.com (The Princeton Review), www.collegeview.com, and www.collegenet.com.

- b. **Naviance**...a web-based program which has been contracted by MERHS to help guidance counselors, parents and students compare current applicants' profiles to the results of our previous applicants to specific schools. Students establish individual files that can be accessed with a pin number at home or at school. They complete questionnaires that help to generate potential matches and then can look at the odds of their acceptance within the context of MERHS students only. Once students have received their pin number they can log on at their convenience. Others may also go into Naviance as a guest; Naviance can be accessed through our district web site. www.mersd.org

3. College Outreach Programs:

- a. **College fairs** are held in the area, sponsored by other high schools and professional organizations, usually in the spring. Postings will be on the Guidance bulletin board. Many colleges from all over the country send admissions representatives to one location. It is a good way to gather a great deal of information in one spot and to have a chance to ask questions as you move from booth to booth.
North Reading High School College Fair, April 11, 2007 6:30-8:30.
Boston College Fair, April 11 (afternoon and evening times)
- b. **College forums** are organized by small groups of schools with similar selectivity or focus...usually held at hotels in the Boston area. You can find out about these from the school Websites. This is a good way to get more in depth information than you would get at a fair and to see, at the same time, some comparisons within a given group.
- c. **Admissions counselors' visits to MERHS** take place with upwards of 40 admissions representatives who come for scheduled visits in the fall. They meet in small groups or even individually if there is only one student interested. Not only is this a great time to ask as many questions as you have, but it is also an informal way that you can be interviewed, acknowledged and remembered when the counselor – who is usually in charge of this region – reads your application later.

- 4. **Guidance Department:** The guidance staff will work with you every step of the way. We ask that students submit the self-reflection questionnaire to guidance at the time you request your first college meeting. Some preliminary research and thinking to establish your priorities and some parameters for the search before your initial meeting should also be completed. Then schedule a meeting with one or more parents, you and your counselor to start the planning. The outcome of the first

meeting may be a list of 20 + schools or it may be focused on one region that you plan to visit. Several follow up meetings will take place, at least one later in the spring to plan summer visits, and one in the early fall to finalize your list. We will continue to work with you as you do the applications, advising you on all aspects of the process. Your counselor will then write a comprehensive letter of recommendation, covering your progress, personally and academically over the four-year period, attach it to your transcript, secondary school report and other related forms. Clear communication among all parties is critical in ensuring a smooth road to meeting deadlines comfortably.

COLLEGE VISITS AND INTERVIEWS...

Once you have completed stage one of your research and had a meeting with your guidance counselor, it is time to begin the next step of the process.... **the visits**. Visiting college campuses is important for two reasons: 1) you are able to gain a feel for the campus, students, academic departments, and areas that specifically appeal to you, rather the points of view represented by others and by print materials. 2) you can demonstrate your interest in the school (always sign in at admissions or find a way to let them know you were there). Your goal should be to integrate the information you have gathered with your own personal observations and instincts. Generally, allow a **half a day** for each college and do two in a day that are within a two-hour drive. If necessary, add a third, less important school, as a drive through at the end of the day. Check on-line for times of **student led tours and information sessions** conducted by a counselor. It is usually not necessary to make a reservation, but check each school to be sure. Smaller colleges may not have information sessions. In that case, take the tour and do what you can to get as much out of the visit as possible. You should be able to do both back to back in a 2 ½ hour period. If time, stop by the library or have a meal at the student center. If you are looking at a specific major or program, it may be possible to arrange in advance a tour of that facility or a meeting with someone on the faculty in that department.

In the best of worlds you will be able to visit all the colleges you are considering. However, sometimes time and money limit you. Our suggestion is to start locally and visit a sample of different types, sizes and locations of schools in your immediate area. Right away you will have some valuable information that may help focus your list and make the visits you do make more meaningful. If necessary, apply to a few colleges that you don't see if you are sure they meet your important criteria and then, once accepted, set aside time for a visit to your top choices before the **decision date of May 1st**.

To interview or not We strongly recommend that you do not interview on your first few visits. It takes some time to feel comfortable visiting – sizing yourself up in relation to each new context can be overwhelming at first. After you have seen several from your broad initial list, you will begin to develop clearer priorities that could be articulated in an interview if asked what you are looking for in a school and why X school fits that description. If, however, you are traveling a great distance and know you will not be able to return, then, by all means, do the interview if offered. Just be sure that you have done sufficient research about the school so you can sound knowledgeable about why it is on your list. Many students return for a second visit

after choices have been narrowed and interview at that time. Some schools do not even offer interviews. Others arrange alumni interviews in your home area after an application has been submitted.

To prepare for an interview, read as much as you can about the school, talk to students who attend if possible. Come up with a few “talking points” ...topics you feel competent to discuss regarding yourself and your goals, questions you have about the school that you couldn’t have obviously found on the website or in written materials. Once in the interview, be sure to maintain eye contact, shake the person’s hand and thank him/her at the conclusion and ask for a card so that you can write a thank you note (yes this is very important – another way of positively calling attention to yourself after the fact). Remember, you are the consumer. The interview is your opportunity to find out information that might be critical in finding a match. Rarely does an interview hurt a candidate’s chances for admission. It is most often a help. Dress casually – no coat and tie or special dress necessary – just be neat...collared shirt, skirt, nice pants, etc.

Keep a journal – This may sound silly, but if you don’t the schools will start to run together, and your memory for important details and impressions will fail you. It is also helpful to use a chart, such as the sample we have included for you. Sometimes other family members write their impressions independently and then compare notes. You’d be surprised how often the notes are similar!

One caution – Though it may be convenient and fun to visit colleges with your peers who are also searching for the college of their dreams, it isn’t always the best idea. It is easy to be swayed by someone else’s first impression, clouding your own judgment. If you do, make a pact to enter some honest comments in your individual journals first before discussing the visit. Or choose a category of school to visit in common without thinking of those choices as being on your priority list.

Chapter Two

THE APPLICATION PROCESS

You, the applicant of today, have no idea how good you've got it! Just a few short years ago, applicants spent hours on each application with only a typewriter and a bottle of correction fluid as tools. Each school had its own version, including several short answer questions and an essay or two – with no concern for how many separate pieces of writing the student had to do in order to complete applications for six to eight colleges. Today, the computer has revolutionized this process, along with the very handy Common Application. By and large, the application (particularly the essay) is what admissions readers remember about a candidate. Though there are supplemental materials, your application is the piece of the puzzle with the potential to influence the decision on its own. Before we start to break down the process into specific steps, it is important first to discuss the criteria colleges will be considering in the evaluation of your applications.

Criteria....

Academic Performance: your transcript is arguably the single most important piece of the puzzle. This one piece of paper records your grades and courses for all four years of high school. It reflects academic ability, interest and achievement over time...*rigor, depth, performance, consistency*... hopefully moving in a positive direction from ninth to twelfth grades. It is important that you have taken the most demanding courses appropriate for you and within the context of what our high school has to offer.

Standardized Testing: there are two options for standardized tests that are considered by most colleges as another important predictor of performance: the SAT's and the ACT's. Some highly selective colleges also require SAT II's. Though your transcript is clearly the most important factor, these tests play a significant role in decisions made, especially by the most selective colleges. Recently, more colleges are looking at the whole student and test scores have become optional or not required.

Teacher and Counselor Recommendations: with few exceptions, colleges require recommendations. Your counselor will write a comprehensive letter covering your academic, extracurricular and personal growth over four years that will accompany all applications. Most schools want one or two teacher recommendations in addition. Your recommenders should know you well and have taught you in the junior or senior years. It would be a bonus if they knew you outside the classroom in another capacity such as an athletic team or club.

Activities and Interests: Students should consider developing a resume that would include details about your interests and extracurricular accomplishments. Employments, summer experiences, volunteer work, scouting, hobbies could be highlighted. Colleges want to know you as a whole person, not just as a student. What is most important is that you are *engaged* – genuinely involved in using your time productively. It doesn't matter how many activities you

have as much as the level of interest over time you have shown in each. Leadership roles you have played are of particular importance. Think of ways you have shown leadership even if you have not held elected office; it is easy to overlook the more subtle examples of good role modeling.

Special Talents: colleges are looking for a well-rounded student body. That does not mean each individual has to be “well-rounded” (whatever that means!). Instead they want people who have specific talents or strong suits to add to the class. The athletic arena is the most heavily emphasized. Many Division I schools not only offer coaches a great deal of influence in the application process, but some also give substantial scholarships. Division II and III schools have varying degrees of influence but usually no money attached. If you think you would like to play a sport in college, check first with your current coach to generate some guidelines as to where you would fit, then check school websites to find contact information and write a letter of introduction to the coaches at all schools where you may have a realistic chance of being recruited. Students should go to the NCAA website at www.ncaaclearinghouse.net for information. Guidance also has a booklet containing helpful hints for those students. Other talents can be handled in a similar manner: music, drama, debate to name a few. A resume should be prepared that can be forwarded to the coach or advisor either with the initial contact or at a meeting on campus that you prearrange during a visit.

Legacies: legacy is a term used to describe an applicant who is the son or daughter, grandson or granddaughter of a graduate of the college in question. The graduate must have received a degree from the undergraduate program (not law school, a masters degree, etc.) Sibling relationships should be mentioned but do not constitute legacy lineage. Legacies still must fall within the general parameters of qualification the college has put forth; but once in that pool, they have a tremendous advantage. For example, well known Ivy League schools take up to 40% of their legacy pools, while only 10 – 20 % of the regular pool. Some colleges offer special interviews for children of alumni and/or designate someone on the admissions staff to serve as a liaison for alumni children. Parents, don’t hesitate to contact the admissions office or the alumni association of your colleges to research these resources.

College Admissions Plans...

After your research and visits are behind you, the next decision to be made is what is your strategy for applying...what “plan” will you use. The following is a list of the options:

- **Open Enrollment:** acceptance to these colleges is based simply upon the candidate’s completion of high school or success on the GED examination. The only limiting factor may be space in a particular major. Public junior colleges offer open enrollment and also joint admissions plans to the higher tier of the state and university system after a predetermined number of courses at a certain grade point average is achieved.
- **Rolling Admission:** candidates applications are reviewed in the order that they are received and decisions are made within a short amount of time – sometimes as soon as one to three weeks. In general, the more academically successful students are, the

quicker the turnaround period. In some cases there are early priority dates that allow students to have their junior year credentials carry the decision; this is particularly true for state schools. Though some schools using this plan are not as selective as others, they may have specific majors (such as nursing, physical therapy) that have limited space and fill early in the year. Although students may be accepted in the fall of senior year, they have until the May 1st deadline to respond and may continue to apply to other schools without penalty.

- **Regular Admission:** most colleges have a definite deadline for either mailing or receiving applications....ranging from December 1st onward. In this type of plan there is a longer wait period for a response. The outside date for notification is around April 15th, as there has to be adequate time to consider all your options and respond in writing to your first choice by May 1st. You can apply to as many or as few regular decision schools as desired.
- **Early Decision (I or II):** this is an option to be used only after very careful thought and early completion of all your research and visits. It is a contractual agreement between student and college (signed also by the guidance counselor) that if the student is accepted, he or she will attend and will apply to no other schools (or will withdraw any applications already in progress). Early Decision I plans generally have deadlines of November 1st, November 15th, or December 1st and notification is usually before the end of December. Some schools offer an Early Decision II plan with a deadline in January or February. It is still binding but allows for more time to make that first choice. You may only apply to one school with an early plan. **Do not apply ED unless you are a solid candidate for that school and you are certain that is where you want to go!**
- **Early Action:** this option allows a student to apply with early deadlines similar to Early Decision plans; however, the student is not bound to attend if accepted and may continue to apply to other schools.

Many students use a combination of these plans. For example, you may apply to one state school in November on a Rolling plan, one Early Action school and, depending on the results, continue to apply to five or six Regular Decision schools that have deadlines ranging from January 1st to March 1st. The response deadline will be May 1st for all.

Methods of applying...

- ***Applications On-Line...***

More and more, colleges are encouraging the electronic submission of applications. It's faster, more convenient and more accurate. Application fee waivers are often another incentive to use this method.

- Via download or CD ROM. Software that comes from a website allows students to generate applications on their own computers, print them and send through the mail or submit directly on line.
- In some cases students access a website that houses the software (rather than downloading). A password will be provided that allows work to be saved from multiple sessions. The final copy can be transmitted through the Web or by mail.
- Another option is to access the sites of companies that allow students to complete all applications through one site. A few of the leading sites are:
 - ✓ www.collegelink.com...one of the oldest providers of electronic applications, almost 1,000 schools included.
 - ✓ www.commonapp.org...accesses over 200 schools frequently applied to by our students with one application...can be downloaded or done through the Web.
 - ✓ www.petersons.com...this site also accesses 1,000 colleges via the Web or by mail.
 - ✓ www.collegeboard.com...the College Board's site that includes over 500 colleges and universities.
 - ✓ www.embark.com....formerly called CollegeEdge..one of the first to get into this business.
 - ✓ www.review.com.....formerly Apply, The Princeton Review's site offers applications to 500 + schools.

- ***Paper Applications...***

Application forms from individual colleges are still available in some cases, though many offer only the Common Application. You can request an application to be mailed to your home or check with the Guidance Office to see if they have copies. Admissions counselors who visit the school always bring them as well. If you choose this method, be sure to fill them out in black pen, print clearly and **proofread** everything. Make copies before you send the applications. If you are including additional sheets for essays, activities resumes, newspaper articles, etc., put your name and social security number on each page in case it gets separated from your application. Also include this information in the memo section of each check. This may be the most comfortable method for you, but do not think that a college will be more impressed if you take the trouble to do it this way. It makes no difference!

- ***The Common Application...***

As mentioned before, this is the preferred application used by over 300 colleges and universities. A great time-saver, it is available in paper form in the Guidance Office or on-line at www.commonapp.org. You can either download software or transmit through the Web. You complete the application once,

including one of the essay questions (which are broad in choices), make copies in the case of the paper form, and send to each school that accepts it. The application comes with forms for the teacher recommendations and the guidance counselor which again are completed and then copied, saving them time as well. Their portions must be mailed, though their forms could be printed from the computer and given to them with the “Applicant’s” portion completed by you first. It is important if you use the Common Application that you check to see what supplements are required by the individual schools involved. Some supplements can be done online. Others must be mailed even if you submit the core application online.

- ***Choosing a Major...***

Depending on the college, the major you choose may influence your chances of getting in. There can be a tremendous range that is related to both demand for the program and the number of slots available. If you are sure about the major and that is the determining factor in which college you attend, then, by all means, apply for that major. However, if you are not sure then apply “undecided.” A college will definitely not hold it against you if you don’t know. Read carefully the materials provided by each school regarding this decision. It would be helpful to ask the admissions office directly about how hard it is to transfer into a specific major once you have begun as an “undecided.” In some cases it is easier to get in, in others almost impossible.

- ***Application Extras????***

If you have a special talent in which you have invested a great deal of time and which you might pursue in college, you may want to send supporting material with your application. Some examples are a portfolio of your art work (in slides), a music CD, or an awarding winning piece of writing. Before sending such material it would be wise to call the admissions office to ask about their preferences. Some want such materials to be sent directly to a department; others have limits as to size and format. If you are an athlete, your athletic resume, newspaper articles, recommendations from coaches, etc. should go to the college coach directly.

- ***Essays & Short Answers...***

The essays and short answers together are the most important way for you to present yourself as the unique person you are. Think of your application as a puzzle, the many pieces of which come together to paint a complete picture of you, bringing you to life in the eyes of the reader. Hopefully, what you say about yourself, what your transcript and recommendations say about you will have common themes...will be genuine and consistent. Each part should, however,

focus on a different aspect of your personality, talents, interests...so that there is not a lot of repetition. The essay is most effective if it presents a part of you that would not otherwise be seen...a value, a life-changing experience, a goal, or a tiny look at you from the inside out.

Unless applications call for handwritten versions, do them on the computer and paste printouts neatly in the space provided or attach extra pages. Stay as close to the word limit as possible. Short answers of one to three paragraphs are just as important as the essay; they add other puzzle pieces that should be written with the same care and attention to theme, detail and grammatical correctness. The short answer on the Common Application provides an opportunity to expand on your most important interest, job, activity; it is fine to write a few paragraphs or a mini essay – using a separate sheet if you need it.

Do all essays and short answers with plenty of time to spare for editing, reflecting and, in some cases, starting all over again. We cannot emphasize enough the weight this part of the application carries.

- ***Get Them in Early!!!!***

Make a chart of all of your application deadlines...and priority dates for schools that have rolling admissions. Try to complete all applications as far ahead of those deadlines as possible, especially for large universities that face huge numbers coming in at the last minute. As soon as your application is complete, it will be read. Your response will be much faster in those cases and, to some degree, you will have an advantage with a reader who is fresh to the process and not looking at you in the midst of the total pool that may provide more competition. Early applications are also regarded as evidence to the admissions office that you are really interested in their school.

Chapter Three

STANDARDIZED TESTING

Standardized testing is an important factor in the admissions decisions at most **highly selective** colleges and universities. There are **a very few** who do not require scores, but they can be counted pretty much on one hand. There are many other schools, however, in a wide range of selectivity that weigh other factors much more heavily. In selecting your list of colleges it is important to at least place yourself within the **middle 50% band** of scores held by accepted students.

We have found that students who take the time to plan for testing fare best. Planning includes mapping out in advance the schedule for all tests involved, beginning in the winter of junior year and concluding with the December tests of senior year. Familiarizing yourself with the format of the test is key. Taking a practice test or two is definitely advised in advance, and getting a good night's sleep the night before the test is another must.

We urge you to approach this part of the application process calmly and confidently. Remember this is only one aspect of the total picture you will present as a candidate and definitely not the most important!

College Board Testing (SAT I and II)

- **PSAT/NMSQT** – Preliminary Scholastic Aptitude Test and National Merit Scholarship Qualifying Test (20 – 80 score scale). It takes approximately 3 hours and is administered the third Saturday in October at the high school. It can be taken as a sophomore, but is definitely recommended for all juniors. This is a practice test that will provide a rough projection of what your SAT I scores will be. By taking this test students become familiar with the format and pace of the test; in December results are returned to students in the classroom. The test, with incorrect and corrected answers, is a **valuable tool** to help focus on areas that need improvement. If a certain cutoff in scores is achieved students may qualify as a Merit Semi-Finalist or a Commended Student. These notifications are not made until the fall of the following year.
- **SAT I - Reasoning Test** (200 – 800 scale). This is a three hour and forty-five minute exam that measures ability to reason verbally and mathematically. Most four year and some two-year colleges require it or the ACT. This test has just been changed substantially to include a new test and to make alterations to the existing two tests. There will be three sections: Critical Reading (formerly Verbal), Math, and Writing. Each will be scored on the above scale with a potential total of between 600 and 2,400. For those familiar with the old version, the important differences are: analogies have been eliminated and additional short reading passages have been added in the Critical Reading test; quantitative elimination questions have been dropped from the Math and new topics from Algebra II have been added; the new Writing test will include multiple choice questions and an open-ended essay that asks students to discuss an issue persuasively,

supporting his/her position with details from one's experience or education...no advance preparation possible. The first date for this new version is March 12, 2005. Registration may be done on-line or with packets available in the Guidance Office. The fee for the coming year, for registrations on time, is \$41.50. There are seven test dates a year.

- **SAT II Subject Tests** – These tests (formerly called Achievement Tests) are taken in twenty-two individual subject areas. Three may be taken at one test date... one hour each. The SAT II's are only required by the most elite colleges in this country (approximately 150 of the 3,500 + colleges and universities). Some schools ask for specific tests, often the Writing, one of the Math tests and one in your area of choice. Because of the Writing test that has been added to the SAT I the SAT II Writing test will be dropped after the January 22, 2005 test date. It is important to talk with your guidance counselor and the appropriate teachers to determine which tests to take. It is also best to take a test just after completing the course... i.e. take the Biology test at the end of junior year if you have just finished AP Biology and the AP exam. Foreign language exams come in the written form only and once a year (in November) with a listening portion. The same seven test dates and sites are available for the SAT II's as the SAT I. The fee is \$8 per test or \$18 for the language listening test.
- **Score reports** for the SAT I and II can be requested in writing, by phone or on-line. You cannot ask for separate test dates to be sent, nor can you separate SAT I from SAT II scores. All scores will be sent all the way back to the first test you took. Colleges do choose the top score in each area that you have earned, even if they came from different test dates. You will receive scores approximately five weeks after the test date; for a fee you can access them on-line two weeks later.

ACT

- Fast becoming a popular alternative to the SAT, the ACT relates more directly to what a student has learned in school, rather than one's ability to reason. It is more "content based" and, in that regard, more similar to the SAT II subject tests. It is administered by the American College Testing Service located in Iowa City, Iowa. The ACT is composed of four 35 to 50 minute sections in English usage, mathematics, usage, social studies reading, and natural science reading. Because of its focus on achievement, the ACT is accepted by many colleges in place of both the SAT I and II's. The ACT is adding a 30-minute optional Writing test to begin in February of 2005. The fee without the Writing is \$28 and the fee with it is \$42. There are five test dates a year in Massachusetts. Because the Writing test is optional, it is important to check each college's requirements...if it is "recommended" though not required, then definitely take it.
- **Score reports** for the ACT can also be requested in writing, on-line or by phone. The advantage you have with this test is that you can choose the test date or dates you want to be released – no other scores will go.

Recommendation re testing...plan to take the SAT I and the ACT in the winter/spring of the junior year. Review with your guidance counselor and then decide which one to retake. If you are considering taking a test prep course, this is particularly important, as the results may direct you toward one or the other before you waste valuable time and money. Look ahead at all

of the test dates available to you from March through June, check your personal and school obligations, and then map out a plan for SAT I, ACT and possible SAT II's.

Test Prep Classes

We have included a list of individuals and organizations that provide, for a fee, SAT and ACT prep classes. We do not recommend one over another, but suggest that you research several before making a choice. There are also many other options available on websites and in test prep books and software at local bookstores. We do not take a position on whether or not scores will always go up as a result of your investment of time and money. There are so many variables. The College Board expresses confidence that using the test prep book provided by them is sufficient to do well. If you do take a course, it is important to finish it as close to the test date as possible so all of the strategies and review are fresh in your mind.

FINANCIAL AID & SCHOLARSHIPS

For most families, financial aid is a key piece of the college admissions process. With the costs of college rising faster than inflation, it is critical to plan ahead and understand the resources available to fund your education. Financial aid comes from several different sources: federal and state governments, colleges and universities, local private organizations and scholarship programs, and banks.

In general, aid is based on need; however, there is another category of aid in the form of merit scholarships for scholastic excellence, athletics or other special talents. Criteria for merit awards must be obtained from each college you are considering. Most aid given in this country is need-based. Your family's "need" will not be a fixed amount. There is an attempt to quantify it through federal and institutional methodology; however, the bottom line is that each college will determine your need according to its own interpretation of all the financial information you provide. In formulating your final college list, then, it is wise to be as well informed about the financial aid policies and history of giving aid, as it is to know about academic strengths. And – it is **critical** to have a financial back up school – perhaps a state college or one where your credentials definitely place you in a merit-awarding category.

Because financial aid policies vary so much from school to school, we urge you to read all of the materials provided by each college and encourage you to contact the financial aid (not admissions) offices if you have questions. You could also make an appointment if you are visiting campus and have unusual circumstances or questions you would prefer to discuss in person.

General Definitions:

- **EFC**.... estimated family contribution.... the total amount the family (including parents and student) are expected to pay toward the total cost of attending. This amount is determined by a formula established by Congress and calculated through information you provide on the FAFSA.
- **COA**.... total cost of attending the college, which includes tuition, fees, room and board, books, estimated personal expenses and travel. This is the figure colleges use when determining need. The EFC is subtracted from the COA to establish the amount of money that financial aid should cover.
- **Need Blind**.... a policy where the admission decision is separate (blind) from the financial aid process. **After** a decision is made to accept, the application is then forwarded to the financial aid office for review. A growing number of schools that are need blind, however, do not have all the resources to completely meet the needs of all students accepted.
- **Need Aware**.... in this case the admission decision does, to some degree, factor in need, but usually only in the last 10% of the class accepted. For example if, in that group, two students have equal credentials, one has need and the other doesn't, the decision will

most likely go to the full pay candidate. If placed on the wait list, it will be unlikely that you would receive any aid.

- **Gapping**.... a process of admitting a student while providing a financial package that does not fully meet (gaps) your calculated need.
- **FAFSA**.... Free Application for Federal Student Aid...the form that is the foundation for all need based aid, used by public schools as its only required form and, along with other forms, by private colleges. It may be filed on-line or by mail on or after January 1st senior year. Forms are available in the guidance office. The data on this form will determine eligibility for federal grants and loans, work-study and other federal and, in some cases, state aid. Each school starts with these options and then builds on top of this foundation additional monies through their own endowment funds and loan programs.
- **CSS PROFILE**....used by private colleges to supplement the information offered on the FAFSA. The College Scholarship Service, which is a branch of the College Board, developed this form to streamline this process...eliminating the need for each college to develop its own form. There is a core form and then supplemental forms for the specific colleges to which you apply. Paper versions are available in guidance or they can be found online at www.collegeboard.org. Profiles may be filed with estimated information in the fall and then revised after income tax returns are complete in early winter. For Early Decision candidates the Profile is the only document that colleges can use to give you a preliminary financial aid package.
- **Differences between the Profile and the FAFSA**....in the case of the FAFSA, only the student and the custodial parent's information are considered. Schools using the Profile usually ask for a non-custodial parent's form as well. Home equity is not considered on the FAFSA but is on the Profile. A business/farm supplement is asked for by Profile schools and not by the FAFSA. More assets are taken into consideration by the Profile. The Profile also takes into consideration medical and dental expenses, private school tuition, student's summer earnings and trust funds held by siblings. Do not assume, however, that you are disadvantaged by submitting the Profile. Colleges using it may have access to more monies than public schools. The net cost to you at a private college is often the same or lower than at a public one.

SCHOLARSHIPS...

The MERHS Guidance Office receives several scholarship applications from local, state and national organizations each year, beginning in the late fall and picking up in the early winter. Information about such offerings is outlined in a guidance newsletter that is mailed home and announcements are made several times a week. In addition, each year local organizations and individuals give in excess of \$100,000 to the graduating class. There is a generic application that gives students access to many of them. It will be mailed home in early March, with the guidance newsletter. A very substantial scholarship is offered separately by Woodman's of Essex; that scholarship is also mailed directed to you each year. Check with your family's employers to see if there are scholarships available for children of employees.

WHERE TO LEARN MORE ABOUT SCHOLARSHIPS AND FINANCIAL AID...

- www.finaid.org Sponsored by the National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators, the Financial Aid Information page offers in-depth information on all aspects of financial aid.
- www.studentaid.ed.gov Information about federal student aid and more.
- www.fafsa.ed.gov Walks you through your online application for federal aid.
- www.fastweb.com Students complete a questionnaire and receive a list of scholarship opportunities that match their criteria.
- www.collegeboard.com Provides valuable links and calculators to help you estimate potential for financial aid awards.
- 1-800-433-3243 – a toll free number to the Federal Student Aid Information Center.
- 1-877-332-4348 – a toll free number at the Higher Education Information Center at the Boston Public Library, Copley Square. This is manned by current volunteers from financial aid offices in local colleges. Also on site services available. Open October through the winter.
- *Discounts and Deals at the Nation's 360 Best Colleges...* by Bruce G. Hammond, St. Martin's Press. Compares scholarship and aid policies, along with a general explanation of financial aid methodologies.
- *Don't Miss Out: The ambitious Student's guide to financial Aid...* by Anna and Robert Leider, Octomeron Associates. Excellent overview of the aid process.
- *Financing College...* by Kristin Davis, Kiplinger Books. This offers some great tips for parents of younger students about how to save for college in addition to a summary of the financial aid scene.

GOOD QUESTIONS TO ASK FINANCIAL AID OFFICES...

1. What percentage of the last freshman class paid full tuition?
2. What percentage of accepted aid applicants had full need met?
3. Is there a specific expectation for self-help?
4. Will my package change after freshman year or am I assured, if my need remains the same, of receiving a similar package for the remaining years?
5. What happens if my circumstances change and my need increases later?

PARENT "INFORMATION SHEET"

Name of Student: _____

Name of Parent: _____

1. What do you consider the outstanding accomplishments of your child during the past three or four years? Why did you select these as most important?

2. In what areas has your child shown most development and growth during the past three or four years?

3. If you had to describe your child in five adjectives, what would they be? Why would you choose those adjectives? Please be specific.

4. Are there any unusual or difficult circumstances (learning issues, family history, etc.) which have affected your child's educational experiences?

5. Please feel free to make any additional comments about your child or concerns you may have about the college process (financial, personal, etc.) below or on the back of the paper.

6. Do we have your permission to discuss the information you have provided here in the school letter written on behalf of your son/daughter? Yes No

_____ Parent
Signature