

HOW TO MAKE COLLEGES WANT YOU

Insider Secrets for Tipping the
Admissions Odds in Your Favor

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Bonus Chapter B

BACTERIA GIRL VS. THE VALEDICTORIAN

Not long ago a high school girl and her mother drove from fast-food restaurant to fast-food restaurant with a simple, harmless request – one cup of ice. Without exception, the restaurants handed over a cup of ice at no charge. The girl took the ice home and allowed it to melt. She then tested each cup for bacteria and carefully recorded the results. She took the results to her city’s health inspector who found the bacteria levels so staggering that he and the girl were able to successfully convince the state legislature to pass a series of laws regarding the safe handling of ice in fast-food restaurants.

When I tell guidance counselors that this girl, who had decent grades and test scores, was admitted to several highly selective universities they nod knowingly. This is clearly a remarkable girl and her story is one that would attract the attention of top colleges. What may not be clear in this story is that the entire project took less than a few hours to complete and her results were hardly statistically accurate. Still, this girl did something that allowed her to stand out. We have all heard stories like this one and they all have one thing in common – they describe an activity that most high school students do not do. These are great NTAs or Non-Teenager Activities.

Every year hundreds, if not thousands, of top students get rejected from the top colleges. Parents and students are floored when they hear of the straight-A student who is class president, captain of the football team, member of the yearbook staff and part-time assistant to the assistant manager of the movie theater gets rejected from college after college. They are even more flabbergasted when Bacteria Girl, whose grades weren’t as good, did not play sports and had no part-time job, gets accepted.

From the perspective of the parents, students and even teachers, a class president is unique. After all, there is only one of them. If that same person makes great grades, leads the football team to victory and still manages to work on the yearbook and make some pocket money on the side, they must be nothing less than incredible. And maybe they are. However, from the perspective of the admissions counselor the picture is quite different. There are twenty-three thousand high schools; which means there are twenty-three thousand class presidents and twenty-three thousand football captains. There are hundreds of thousands of straight-A students and part-time jobbers. Everyone works on the yearbook staff. To them, all of these people look the same. In fact, to most adults all teenagers look the same. So, when one comes along that is engaged in an activity we normally wouldn’t associate with a teenager, an NTA, they stand up and cheer!

The power of the NTA is unmistakable. The kid who started a charity to donate refurbished computers to inner-city schools shines. The kid who publishes a neighborhood newspaper glows. And the kid who discovers a new star rises to the stars. NTA's have the benefit of sounding really hard. Discovering a star may not be a very big deal for a kid with a telescope, but it sounds like the work of a genius. All of these things will give a student a serious edge over their counterparts who are busy working their tails off at a part-time job or waking up at four AM to play ice hockey. The common element is that none of them are typical teenager activities, they are all NTAs.

Once you understand that being different is much more important than being better, the sky is the limit. It immediately becomes obvious that joining every club on campus is a fruitless effort next to other activities that may actually be less work. I have nothing against hard work and this is not a tool to avoid hard work. This is a tool to make all of your work, whether it's easy or hard, pay off in the college admissions process.