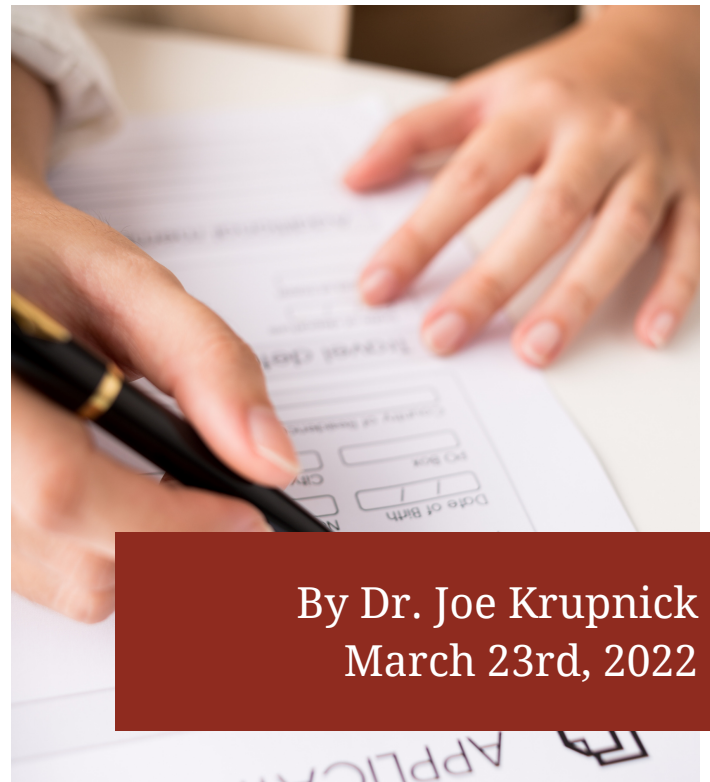


What to Think About: College Applications

Dear Students and Parents,

If you are like most people, the prospect of making a choice about where to spend the next four years of your life is both exciting and terrifying. Now, add in the fact that you're choosing not just any four years, but the formative four years, the adolescent-adulthood four years, the time you're supposed to "grow up" and become a fully actualized and contributing member of the human community four years. Also, that it's not entirely a choice in the first place—that you have to work hard and take tests and prepare and that, at some places, your odds of being "chosen" might be as low as five, or even three, percent. Now, add another variable—the paying-for-it variable—and the fact that this experience carries a \$300,000 sticker that, for most of you, will be expected in full and on time at semesterly intervals the whole way through. This is the kind of quadruple whammy that could give even the steadiest of hands a shake or two. Welcome to the wild world of the post-pandemic college application process, and if you are reading this it means that you are beginning to plot your course—and maybe looking for some support in making some challenging decisions to help you be all that you can be.

Before discussing our approach, I want to dispel two myths. The first is that there's a single formula or "secret" to the college application process. College admissions is



By Dr. Joe Krupnick
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not a science, and, unlike standardized tests, it's not based on a code or algorithm that can be cracked. Anyone who tells you that is selling you a fool's promise, a variant of the "get rich quick" scheme, or "how lose-25-pounds-per-week without dieting." Applying and getting accepted to your dream schools takes hard work and persistence and nobody has a magical crystal ball or knows precisely which levers to pull to guarantee your acceptance into Harvard, Yale, or MIT.

This brings up another myth—that the college application process is all about "getting into the best colleges." There's a whole market of "best colleges" rankings—

US News & World Report, Forbes Magazine, Niche.com, Princeton Review, the list goes on—but, in the end, these rankings are both imprecise (in general) and unmeaningful (for you). They are imprecise because they rely on arbitrary measures like self-reports on reputation and alumni giving that should be irrelevant in your choosing a college. They are unmeaningful because they don't tell you anything about you—where you'll be most successful, happiest, and where you'll get the best education for who you are. College rankings are designed to stress you out and make you feel bad about yourself. They're also designed for people who are lazy and unwilling to do the work (and have the fun) involved in finding colleges that fit their style, interests, and social proclivities. Some of the most successful and existentially fulfilled people in the world went to colleges not on the USNews top 50 lists. Some of the most superficial and emotionally hollow people went to Harvard, Yale, and Princeton. Your job is to do right by you and find a place where you can become your best self.

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We are here to help you become your best self. In what follows, I outline the general process by which we work with our students and help you soar. The process I describe is “general” because it is different in crucial ways for each student, but it sketches the three core areas in which we

will help you in the college application process. These are A) *Requirements*, B) *Strategy and Positioning*, and C) *Discovery*.



A) Requirements: Requirements comprise the foundational infrastructure of the college process—the necessary-but-not-sufficient factors that you must have but which will not on their own get you into your top colleges. Requirements include having good grades, earning solid test scores, and taking meaningfully rigorous college-prep courses. We help students with all of these parts of the process—from academic coursework to ACT/SAT prep—and we have the best track record in the area in standardized test preparation.

B) Strategy & Positioning: Strategy & positioning is the bread and butter of what most people think of when they start “college counseling,” but we do it a little differently. For us, Strategy requires a systematic timeline with chronologically overlapping projects. Unlike what you may hear from your college counselor, it is extremely useful to begin the planning process before junior year because there are things (like certain activities) that you'll want to start early. Moreover, there's nothing wrong (and much right) with completing some of these projects at the

same time. You do not need perfect ACT/SAT scores before visiting colleges, nor do you need to know exactly what you want to study before making your list. For us, Strategy and Positioning involves helping students with the following kinds of questions:

1. Given my interests, what kinds of activities should I pursue—and how?
2. How should I think about summer programs?
3. Whom should I ask to write my college recommendations—and how do I ask them?
4. How should I think about the college essays—and what is the difference between the Personal Statement (Common App Main Essay) and each of the college-specific supplementary essays?
5. When I begin to design my list, how many colleges should I include—and how do I make distinctions between “safeties,” “targets,” and “reaches”?
6. When I begin to narrow down my list, how many colleges should I narrow it down to—and how do I make the most of my college visits at these schools?
7. How do I think about Early Decision, Early Action, and Early Decision II—and when should I ED vs. when should I not ED?



As such, Strategy and Positioning typically involves assistance with college selection, college essays, activity guidance, recommendation advice, and college admissions probability modeling. Essay support is usually the most significant and time-intensive of these during college programs because the essays have become the most important part of the process. We usually recommend that students apply to 10-12 colleges. On average, each college has 2-3 essays. This means you'll be writing between 20 and 36 essays before January 1. Essentially an anthology.

Discovery is about finding the right fit for you.

c) **Discovery:** Discovery is the pith and substance of the college process and is about determining what you are interested in, where you want to apply, and what, essentially, you want to study. If Strategy and Positioning is about appealing to them (ie, the colleges), Discovery is about finding the right fit for you. There are two pieces of good news here: first, the colleges for which you are best suited will also be the colleges that, all other things equal, will be most likely to accept you. If you are a painter in the style of Jackson Pollock, you are more likely to be accepted to art schools than, say, engineering or business schools—unless you, somewhat incongruously, happen to demonstrate excellence in both painting and mechanics or investment banking. Second, your interests that are intrinsic and authentic will also be the interests that will be most appealing to colleges. This is where

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Strategy & Positioning and Discovery intersect. The best strategy for getting into your top colleges is often the strategy that is not designed around getting you into your top colleges. In fact, the last thing colleges wish to see is a list of activities that are transparently motivated by the desire to look good or game the system. This means that for college you'll want to either pursue areas that you genuinely enjoy or areas that you don't genuinely enjoy but are nevertheless sufficiently convincing that you can pass them off as such. Because the latter is extremely challenging to do in practice, it redounds to your credit to establish real and legitimate interests. Among the many projects on which we will work during the Discovery phase:

1. Extra-curricular Interest Discovery.

This includes interests and activities both in school and outside of school. If you are an angular (or "well-lopsided") applicant, you'll benefit from a relatively focused set of activities that center around your abiding interest—a passion that gets you up in the morning and keeps you awake at night. If you're a well-rounded applicant, you'll want to have more activities—and you'll want to demonstrate both excellence and intrinsic interest in areas that show leadership, service, and intellectual depth. We help students find and

recognize these interests and help direct you on where you can find activities—both in and outside school—that harness them.

2. College Discovery. College Discovery works in two ways. First, we use qualitative and quantitative methods to help you narrow down your college list into a reasonable set of safeties, targets, and reaches. Qualitatively, we get to know you as a person, triangulating between our knowledge of colleges and their intellectual, social, and cultural idiosyncrasies, to help you find schools where you will be happy and successful. Quantitatively, we use our proprietary data analytics and survey research to match features of colleges and features of you (or your personality). The second part of the College Discovery process involves not which university but which division within the university you are interested in. The default for most students is the College of Arts and Sciences, but you may wish to apply directly to Business Schools or Engineering Schools instead. There are crucial differences between these types of programs—both in admissions criteria and in the experience itself—and we help you think through their implications to optimize your success during the application process and your happiness when you actually go to college.

Looking forward to getting started!
All my best,
Dr. Krupnick ("Joe")

