HOW TO GET INTO AN IVY LEAGUE COLLEGE

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Introduction

Many years ago, back in high school, I was academically exceptional. I had the highest grades in the hardest classes in my school, the highest PSAT and SAT scores in my graduating class, scores of 5 on ten different AP exams, and perfect scores on two SAT subject tests. I was the captain or president of several academic clubs, some of which I had founded or co-founded. I was a varsity athlete, and had done community service locally and abroad. I was a national merit finalist, an AP National Scholar, and had won many of my school's most prestigious awards.

When I applied to college, pretty much everyone thought I would get in everywhere. And yet, the exact opposite happened. I got rejected from one college after another, including some of my safety schools!

There was one spot of luck. Before I applied to Brown, I read an article someone wrote about the essay he used. I took his advice, and ended up getting into Brown. A tiny bit of luck at a critical moment opened that door.

But I want you to have more than just a tiny bit of luck. I want you to have an unstoppable strategy.

After my surprising admissions experience, I applied the same relentlessness that had made me an academic superstar towards learning about college strategy. I read tons of books and actual, successful college essays. I spoke to college admissions officers, and listened carefully to both what they said and what they did not say.

In 2001, I founded my own private educational company. From early on, college strategy was a major part of everything we did. I had learned the hard way that strategy was just as important as academics.

Today the college strategy division of Vohra Method is considered by many to have the most ruthless strategies anywhere. We do whatever is necessary to get the job done.

Unlike other services in our tier, we don't use bribery or large "donations" to ensure admissions.

Instead, we use subtle, devious strategies that make admissions officers want to admit our

students. Admissions officers never know which students we work with. To the admissions officer, the students we help just seem like incredible diamonds they have discovered.

We are also very different from the lower tier programs, that focus on college matching. We don't waste time trying to see which city is the "best fit" for a particular student. Our students want to go to prestigious colleges. We get them there.

In this book, I'm going to teach you the strategies we use to set our students apart. It's not just about essay writing. An essay can get you pretty far, but a complete strategy can get you much farther.

You should plan to start your strategy by 7th or 8th grade. If you're already in high school, there are still plenty of things you can do, of course. But earlier is always better.

In fact, some of my most successful students started our programs as early as 4th grade! Obviously, the students don't think they are working on college strategy. They think they are just learning math or reading, but college strategy shapes even how we approach academics. I'll explain how in the academics section of this book.

Q: Wait, I thought college strategy starts in 11th grade?

A: Everyone on earth knows college strategy starts early, they just don't call it college strategy. They know they should try to get high grades, be in honors classes, join clubs, start playing sports, and/or play an instrument long before 11th grade. All that stuff is part of an effective college strategy.

No sane person would wait until 11th grade to start playing football, start playing a musical instrument, or take their first math class. Similarly, you shouldn't wait to do the additional strategies that are going to catapult your application above the rest.

Strategic Overview

In order to understand college admissions strategy, you must understand the treatment and selection effects, the theory of infinitely repeated prisoner's dilemmas, the diamond-water paradox, and the principle of diminishing returns. Our approach to college strategy involves more abstract theory than those used by other firms. That's what gives us the advantage. Understanding this theory is the key to being able to create a world class college application.

THE TREATMENT EFFECT AND THE SELECTION EFFECT

In education, you have a "treatment" approach and a "selection" approach. A treatment approach means trying to make people smarter. A selection approach means trying to figure out which kid is already naturally the smartest.

Selection based education is mostly useless. It provides nothing to the student. It doesn't make him any smarter; it just tells other people how smart he already is.

Elite colleges rely almost entirely on the selection approach. In other words, they don't have particularly good training or education. Their classes aren't any better than those at community colleges. In fact, having personally attended both Ivy League classes and community college ones, I'd have to admit they are often a bit worse.

Instead, elite colleges choose the kids who are already mentally and academically superior.

Because of this, you need to convince colleges that you are a rare and magical diamond. **Not** that you just work hard. **Not** that you do the same extracurriculars as everyone else in a greater quantity. **Not** that you care more about grades. **Not** that you get more of your homework done.

You must convince colleges that there is something special and innate in you. And in order to do that, you will have to convince your school of the same thing, causing them to tell the college that there is something rare and amazing within you. So, to summarize:

Principle 1: Convince Colleges that you are Innately Rare and Special

PRISONER'S DILEMMAS AND INFINITELY REPEATED GAMES

If you study economics, you will study the prisoner's dilemma. Here's the situation:

Fred and Paul are involved in a robbery and get caught. If both maintain their silence, both get a month in jail. If both rat each other out, then both get 10 years in jail. If one person talks and the other is silent, the talker gets no jail time, but the silent person gets 20 years in jail.

The ideal situation: both keep silent. But that's not what game theory predicts.

Fred knows that no matter what, he should rat out Paul. If Paul talks, it's better to talk too. Then Fred will only get 10 years in jail instead of 20. If the Paul is silent, it's still better to talk because then Fred will get no jail time at all. Paul takes the exact same facts into consideration. The result: both talk, and both get 10 years in jail.

However, game theory gets more interesting if there is an infinitely repeated game. That means, two parties are locked in a repeating process. In our case, suppose Fred and Paul work together forever. Then, they could use strategies to make the other person keep silent. This would allow both prisoners to get lower punishments.

They may use a "tit-for-tat" strategy. Fred can tell Paul that whatever Paul does to him in round 1, Fred will do to Paul in round 2. Whatever Paul does to Fred, Fred does the same to Paul.

They may use a "trigger" strategy. Fred tells Paul: "I'll keep collaborating with you, as long as you keep collaborating with me. But if you tattle even once, I will never collaborate with you ever again."

So, how does all this relate to your college admissions?

Your school is locked into an infinitely repeated prisoner's dilemma with your desired college. Your school would benefit the most by having a student go to Harvard. It helps your school's reputation. They have a huge incentive to lie and say that some student is the greatest, smartest, most brilliant genius in history.

However, if your school lies to a college, or even stretches the truth, the college will retaliate. The college will stop trusting the school, stop accepting students from the school entirely, etc. If the college is nice, it might freeze your school out for a year or two. If not, it might freeze your school out permanently.

Colleges also have plenty to gain from working with your school. Your school has real, on the ground information about which students are truly extraordinary, and which just hired a journalism major to write them an essay. Colleges would

strongly prefer to work with your school, rather than to break off the relationship.

So, with a general "trigger strategy" in play, the following truce has developed: colleges trust your school, and your school doesn't lie to colleges. A college believes pretty much anything your school says about you. After all, if your school lies, the consequences are disastrous for your school.

That means that if you convince your school that something is true, and it tells that to the college, the college will believe your school.

If your school thinks you are a rare, genetic genius, then it will tell that to the college. If your school thinks that you are one of your generation's visionaries, it will tell that to the college. And the college will, absolutely, 100% believe it.

On the other hand, if you tell the college that you are one of the major visionaries of your generation, they will just laugh at you.

Most amateur college strategists believe that college strategy is mostly about what you tell the college. They are wrong. Real college strategy is about what you tell your school. Real college strategy is about convincing your school that you are a rare and magical diamond.

Principle 2: Do college strategy to your school, not to the college.

THE DIAMOND WATER PARADOX; THE PRINCIPLE OF DIMINISHING RETURNS

Diamonds are expensive. Water is cheap. Water is necessary for life. Diamonds are necessary for nothing.

One reason that diamonds cost more is because they are rarer than water. Even though water is essential, it's common. It falls from the sky. Diamonds do not.

The same principle applies to college admissions. A college has accepted 999 people who are good at math and science, have high SAT scores, and high grades. Now there is one spot left. What will make a more interesting intellectual atmosphere: one more math nerd, or one kid who makes origami chess boards?

Of course, the college still needs people who are actually awesome at academics. If all 1000 students were making origami chess boards, but not good at math, you wouldn't have a college; you'd have a kindergarten.

The most effective strategy involves two parts. First, have excellent grades and SAT scores. We'll talk about how to make that happen in the Academics chapter. Second, have one or two things that make you radically stand out. To do that, you need to understand the concept of diminishing returns.

DIMINISHING RETURNS

Imagine the following situation: you are allowed to eat one ice cream sundae a year. One year, you are allowed to have a second one at the 6 month mark. How do you feel? Probably pretty excited (assuming you like ice cream sundaes).

Now let's say that you must eat one ice cream sundae every minute. Then, you are forced to eat an additional ice cream sundae in one minute. How do you feel? Probably nauseous.

The principle of diminishing returns basically says this: as you get more of a thing, each additional thing has less and less value. The 900th sundae is not as exciting as the first or second one.

Elite colleges see tens of thousands of nearly identical applications. They all look like this:

- High grades, sat scores, and AP scores
- Played piano or violin
- Internship at NIH or other large government research lab
- Community service at local nursing home or school, sometimes abroad.

All that stuff is good, but it's not rare. There is so much of it that college admissions officers are relieved to see pretty much anything else.

To stand out, you have to do something completely different (although you still need high grades and SAT scores, obviously.)

Principle 3: Be like a diamond, not like water. Be rare, not just essential.

FINAL NOTE: THE TWO STEP ADMISSIONS

Here's how the college admissions process works: first, a computer looks at your grades and SAT scores to make sure they are high enough. Second, if they are high enough, then a human reviews your essays, recommendations, and extracurriculars.

Note that a human will not bother with your grades and SAT scores. Uninformed students often tell each other that colleges care whether you take the SAT one time or three times. This is false. No one cares about minor details of your SAT scores.

As long as your SAT is high enough, you're fine. A 1600 SAT score is the same as a 1550 SAT score for college admissions. The only exception is for a recruited athlete, which I'll discuss later in this book.

Once your grades and SAT scores are high enough, don't obsess about minutia. Focus on big areas like essays, extracurriculars, and recommendations.

Academics

Academics are not enough to get you into an Ivy League college. But poor academics are enough to get you rejected. Fortunately, if you approach academics right, it will have great spillover benefits.

For example, let's say that you seem to be the smartest student in your math class. You seem to get concepts in seconds that others struggle with for hours. Your teacher then starts to think that you aren't just a hard worker, but a math genius.

What if you do that in 9th, 10th, 11th, and 12th grade? Now the whole school thinks you are a genius. What does your school tell colleges? What does your teacher tell colleges in her recommendation letter? What does your college counselor tell colleges in the questionnaire?

Will they tell colleges that you are just another hard worker? Or will they gush to colleges that you are the smartest genius that has ever attended your school?

Usually, they will gush and rave about how amazing you are. That's been the experience of many of my students. Their schools consider them genetic geniuses, chosen by god to be the leaders of their generation.

It obviously isn't true, by the way. My students succeed for the same reason anyone succeeds: hard work, perseverance, and intelligent techniques. Genetic ability has exactly zero to do with it. But it's fine to let others think something that helps you.

Here's what we do: in the summer before the school year starts, we have our students cover all the material for their conceptually hardest classes (math, science, philosophy, economics). For example, if they plan to take calculus in 11th grade, then we cover all of calculus in the summer after 10th grade!

By September of 11th grade, they know calculus. When their calculus teacher presents a new concept, they appear to understand it instantly, while everyone else struggles for 40 minutes. Obviously, they just struggled for 40 minutes during the summer. But the teacher doesn't see that struggle.

The key is that our students don't tell their teacher that they already did the work over the summer. They don't take a class for credit, or in their school's summer program, or any place that keeps official

records. The teacher assumes that they are seeing the work for the first time.

School teachers, just like colleges, believe in the selection effect. They believe that their job is to help find which kids are genetically and magically the smartest. This belief is idiotic, but it is easy to manipulate. Because they are looking for innate genius rather than hard work, they see innate genius rather than hard work!

It is really easy to manipulate selection effect believers into believing that you are a rare and magical diamond. It pretty much requires 2 steps:

1. Get ahead academically. Learn the material beforehand.
2. Don't tell your teacher, school, friends, parent's friends, friend's parents, or even your own Siamese twin about it. Keep that training a secret, so they see magical genius, not hard work.

But this does mean that you must, absolutely, without question, be willing to do academic training outside of school that is not assigned by school.

Q: But no one in my class does it.

A: They probably do. They might be our students, who are carefully coached to never mention their outside of school training while in school. They might be one of the several million other people,

who instinctively know the advantage of fooling their competition. They may understand that if they seem to be genetically super smart, you won't seriously try to compete with them. You'll think they are so far above you that it's not worth it.

But if no one in your class does it, that's even better news! That allows you to conquer them like conquistadors with steel armor and gunpowder facing American natives with stone arrowheads. It will be a blowout and a slaughter. That's what good strategy should look like! Good strategy doesn't mean winning by a few points. It means obliterating and completely demoralizing the competition.

You need to be willing to do what others are not. 1500 kids a year get into Harvard. A few million do not. Most of them don't even bother sending an application, since they know they have zero chance.

If you think or act like the average person, you have absolutely no chance. You must strategically outsmart the competition by acting radically different from how they act.

By the way, you'll probably end up doing less total work. If you learn on your own in the summer before, you'll try to learn in the easiest, simplest way possible. You'll watch Khan Academy or Crash Course videos, and read Barron's books. You won't assign yourself nonsense busywork. Then, when the

teacher gives you silly assignments during the year, you will finish them in half the time. You learned the material efficiently, which allows you to defeat busywork quickly.

The really good news: in honors math classes, teachers usually put questions on tests that include topics you have not yet covered. That is there to make them a little harder. But if you learn the whole subject beforehand, you will often be the only one who can do those problems.

Imagine if your math teacher can say, "He got more challenge problems right than any other student I have ever taught" on the recommendation – and then use that to give credibility to the fact that you are a rising national expert on New Sports That Mimic the Lost Mayan Sports, or a creator of watermelon sculptures, or a designer of philosophical t-shirts? That's the key to getting in.

PRESENTATION

This also requires a very specific presentation. I'll illustrate with this story.

When I was in 9th grade, I loved biology. I'd gotten ahead in biology, and had the highest scores in the class on the biology SAT subject test.

However, I spent most of the year arrogantly mouthing off from the back of the class, arguing about grades, etc.

At the end of the year, one student gets a biology award. Not surprisingly, that student wasn't me. But despite my antics, I was given an honorable mention.

The next year, I decided to try things differently. I moved to the front, acted really interested. I didn't argue about test scores. I still got high grades, but I didn't act arrogant. Not only did I get the chemistry award at the end of the year, but the teacher coached me personally for the AP exam in chemistry.

Note that I actually liked biology more than chemistry. But a small change in behavior made a huge difference in result.

All the academic talent in the world won't help you if you act like an arrogant jerk, argue about grades, etc. You need to show the teacher that you are humble, down to earth, interested in the subject, and, most importantly, NOT motivated by grades.

Don't sit in the back of the class; sit in the front (unless you have assigned seating). Don't argue about test grades. If you get a point taken off unfairly, don't say, "Hey teacher! You owe me a point on this test." Instead, say, "I'm trying to figure

out this problem I got wrong, but I'm having a lot of trouble understanding it. Can I meet with you to go over it?"

While you're "going over it", your teacher will notice the error, and adjust the grade. You look like you're focused on learning, not grades, and you still get the deserved points.

Never ask, "Will this be on the test." That just screams, "I don't care about knowledge or ideas. I just care about grades."

Instead, if you want to know if something will be on the test, just wait. Some other unstrategic moron will ask. He will damage his reputation, yours will be intact, and you will still know what will be on the test.

Your teacher must be convinced that your love of knowledge and ideas is so great that you cannot help but get the answers right. She must believe that you are not at all interested in grades. You must cultivate a persona of not caring about grades at all.

If someone asks you if you think grades matter, say, "No."

Never appear to put any thought into your grades at all. Don't hide your grades on tests. Don't display them either. Treat a grade the way you would a random smudge on a paper. Act as if it is the most insignificant part of anything.

That doesn't mean you actually stop caring about grades, as that would be idiotic. It just means you cultivate a persona of not caring about grades.

Most of what I've described here is most important in grades 7-12, but obviously more effective if you start early. In the next section, I'm going to explain what to do if you (or more likely your child) are younger than that. Ivy League admissions is serious business. The earlier you start, the better your chances.

THE BASICS OF BECOMING AN ACADEMIC SUPERSTAR

The key to being an academic superstar: do things versus your school, not with your school. Don't think of your teacher as your coach; think of him as the other team. Consider your school your opponent, not your ally.

That doesn't mean you need to disrespect your teacher. In fact, any competitor should respect his opponent. But that competitor should still know the difference between opponent and ally.

Recognize these two facts:

1. To get into an Ivy League college, you need to stand out. You need to set yourself apart from your competition at your school.

2. Your school is obligated to treat all students fairly.

Your school will not help you stand out from your peers, unless your mom or dad owns the school and isn't worried about appearing unfair. If you want to stand out, you're going to have to work around and against your school.

Your school will not help you get higher grades than your peers. It will not help you get higher SAT scores than your peers. It will not help you get higher AP scores than your peers. Your school will treat everyone equally.

But you don't want equality. You want victory.

Q: But every year, 20 people from my school go to Ivy League colleges, so it seems that they are doing a good job. Shouldn't I just put my faith in them?

A: Sure, 20 people get in, and 100 people don't. Unless your high school has a 90-100% Ivy Placement rate, I wouldn't put too much faith in their methods.

So, let's talk about how to achieve academic victory. I'm going to cover the academic techniques from the earliest ages. If you are a parent of a young child, you'll find the beginning parts relevant. But even if you are not, even if you are the parent of a

high school student, or are yourself a high school student, read the early parts. Even if you are 16 now, you might be able to address some of the gaps in your own education, and improve your academic abilities more than you might have expected.

Note that this section assumes that kids attend school, and are not homeschooled. In other words, this section is designed to preempt the errors that schools will make, as well as take advantage of schools' vulnerabilities.

Of course, homeschooling can give a huge strategic advantage over regular schooling, but that is discussed later in this book.

Phase 1: Multiplication Tables

As American math teaching continues to deteriorate, no sane parent will rely on schools to teach math fundamentals. As of this writing, both public and private schools are using Common Core, which is the single stupidest curriculum I have ever seen. I'm sure in the future they'll find something even dumber. Here's what you need to do:

1. By age 5: Know addition tables.
2. By age 6: Know addition and subtraction tables.
3. By age 7: Know multiplication tables up to 10.
4. By age 8: Know multiplication tables up to 12.

Of these skills, the multiplication tables are by far the most important. They need to be absolutely memorized, not just "understood". Students must be able to instantly recall multiplication tables.

RIGHT:

Q: What's 7 times 8?

A: 56

WRONG:

Q: What's 7 times 8?

A: Ok, wait, I know this. Hold on. Ok, 7 times 7 is, I think, 49. So 7 times 8 is...fifty...fifty six!!

You have to drill these until they are automatic. If you like to use phone apps, you can consider Multiplication Synapse, an app that my company put together just to help kids memorize multiplication tables.

Q: But most kids aren't going to be able to do that.

A: True, most kids aren't academically in the top one percent. When you're applying to an Ivy League college, it helps to be, so you have to train hard. You need to be ahead of "most kids", not at the same level.

Parents who are not mathematically inclined may wonder why this is necessary. After all, don't kids just use calculators?

I discussed this issue extensively in *The Equation for Excellence*, but here's the gist: in order to do something like 1/a + 1/b, a student must be able to do questions like 1/3 + 2/7, and in order to do that quickly, you need to know your multiplication tables.

By age 9, the student must be able to do multi-digit multiplication and long division, using normal algorithms. Do not use lattice multiplication, long multiplication, or other inefficient idiocy.

By age 9, he should also be able to add fractions with unlike denominators.

Phase 2: Factoring

By age 12, the student should be able to quickly factor trinomials.

If some of these later topics are unfamiliar, you can hire basically any tutor to get the job done. You can also attend Kumon if you're on a very tight budget, or a Vohra Method math class if you want to really get ahead.

At this point, two things should have happened. First, the student should be dominating every math test. Second, he should be finishing his math homework really fast. With more time, the student

should also gain a huge advantage in all other subjects, and be able to do much more with extra-curricular activities.

The second thing: the student should have learned to work independently of his school. Many kids are cripplingly psychologically dependent on schools. They literally cannot learn anything outside of school. Even when they do, they keep forgetting. While many elite tutoring services, including ours, have specific tools to change that, even for us it isn't easy.

Any student who can learn outside of school has a massive advantage over a student who cannot. The single most important academic skill your child should learn by age 12 is how to learn outside of school, without a teacher forcing him to learn.

STANDARDIZED TESTS

How do standardized tests fit into an overall strategy? Remember, the goal is to convince your teachers, administrators, friends, neighbors, local cashiers, and everyone else that you are a rare and magical diamond. You must convince them that you are innately special.

Standardized reasoning tests, such as the ERB,

ISEE, SSAT, Stanford Nines, Stanford-Binet IQ test, Weschler Tests, PSAT, SAT and others are a great way to do that. Most people view these tests as mysterious and incomprehensible. When someone does extremely well on one, they view that person with awe. This is exactly the result you're looking for.

Schools, particularly private schools, will often say, "We don't really look at these tests very seriously." They are lying. The fact is, those types of tests are frequently used to deny students access to honors classes.

Schools are just as much in awe of these tests as everyone else is. They don't really get how they work, and view these tests as a measure of innate ability. Doing well on such a test makes even your school feel a little awed.

So how do you do well on a standardized test? First, forget the idiotic notion that they measure something innate. IQ is 70 percent genetic, and 30 percent education and environment. An IQ of 100 is average, 130 is very high intelligence, and 70 is mentally retarded. In other words, 30 percent covers the range from the top to the bottom. Accept that you can prepare for any standardized test.

Then, learn how to directly solve the problems on the test. Work with a tutor, teacher, whoever. Don't waste time with people who focus on process

of elimination. Find someone who teaches directly. If your budget allows it, consider Vohra Method. If not, find someone within your budget.

Do NOT take the school's advice and take it without studying. That is just following the diseased "selection effect" mindset, that pretends that ability is inborn instead of earned.

Q: What if I cannot easily find copies of the test I plan to take?

A: You can find sample tests on the website of the test or at Amazon. If it's something that is harder to get, like a Weschler test, try eBay. You can almost always get access to pretty much any test.

Parents: do not let your school know that you plan to study for the test! That defeats the entire strategy. Your school should not know that your child is studying for the standardized test. You should let your school know that you "don't believe in standardized tests", and then ask which tests they use. Enough people actually don't believe in standardized tests, so any school will believe you.

The same applies to students. Even if you are doing intensive SAT tutoring, DO NOT let your school know. If your school offers an SAT class on campus, don't take that one. Take any other SAT class anywhere. If your teacher asks, just say that

you are more interested in <something rare and unique> than in standardized tests.

Your early standardized tests will set the stage for convincing your school that you are a rare and magical diamond. The critical tests happen in middle school and high school.

The PSAT

Your school will undoubtedly tell you that the PSAT doesn't count, that it's just practice for the SAT. Again, that's a lie. As a quick internet search will verify, a high PSAT score in your junior year is the ONLY way to become a National Merit Semifinalist. Being a semifinalist, in turn, opens the doors to many other scholarships and honors programs.

Your junior year PSAT is the most important standardized test you will ever take. You can take it only once, unlike the SAT or AP exams which you can take multiple times.

The practice PSAT tests you will take in your sophomore and freshman year are much less important. However, they are an opportunity to build your reputation as the rare and magical diamond.

You should start your PSAT training in 7th or 8th grade. If you are already past that age, and have

not started, start today. Make sure you are working with a program that teaches direct solutions, not process of elimination and related nonsense. Ivy League admissions require world class scores, which come from serious training, not lazy and unreliable gimmicks.

AP Exams

If you remember the introduction, you'll recall that I got scores of 5 on ten different AP exams. Guess what: I didn't even take an AP class for six of them!

Most people know that you can technically take an AP exam without taking the AP course. But they think that only super smart geniuses can do that successfully.

The fact is that it's actually easier to get a 5 on an AP exam without taking the course at all!

Most AP courses are full of all kinds of extra busywork. For example, if you take AP biology, you have to do tedious labs, lab reports, make a model of a cell, dissect a shark, do an oral report about the heart, and god knows what else. All of that stuff takes a LOT of time.

On the other hand, if you just focus on the actual

academics, it's nowhere near that hard. If you study a Barron's book, memorize a spark chart, and watch some Khan Academy and Crash course videos, you courses have 3-5 times the actual information you need for the exam. This doesn't help; many students are so overwhelmed with this unnecessary information that they end up forgetting the information they actually need!

When you get a 5 without taking the test, people think you are a magical genius. It builds your reputation like nothing else can.

Not to brag too much more than I usually do, but I've done some intellectually impressive things in my life. I developed an individualized form of teaching that works in a group setting. I've developed an algorithm that makes memorization easier. I've developed a method of speed reading that actually works on complex texts. I've written several books.

No one, in my life, has ever found any of that as impressive as the fact that I took AP exams without taking the AP class. When you do that it will set you miles above anyone else.

You can do that with biology, chemistry, psychology, both English exams, and all the history exams. Yes, the exams are hard, but they are much, much easier than taking the course on top

of studying for the exam. The course will just pile on extra work.

Of course, convincing your school is tricky. You don't want to seem all about the grades. Here's what I recommend.

Tell your school that you have been doing "independent research" in biology. Then, have your parents talk to the school, and let them know that you found some AP biology exams online and think you could actually do well on them.

Your school will push back. I promise you that. My school did. Every school that any of my students have ever attended also did. Your parents will have to fight. Let them be the bad guy. Your parents aren't trying to get recommendations from your school. You play the good, curious, intellectual. Let them be the achievement-focused elitists.

Train ridiculously hard for your first one.

If you decide to get tutoring or outside help, make sure you do it far away from your school. Your school must not find out. They must think that you are such a genius and innate intellectual that you just genetically got a 5 on the exam. Yes, I know it's an absurd belief, but most people believe that academic success comes from innate ability, not from hard work.

Take as many exams as you can manage. I've had

students graduate with as many as 16 AP exams, easily shattering my personal record. Like me, they took most of the exams without the associated course. Obviously, that actually made it easier for them, since they didn't have to do the school's busy-work. And it looks much more impressive.

The SAT Subject Tests

In addition to the SAT, you'll take some SAT subject tests. These are tests in biology, U.S. history, literature, etc. Each test is an hour long, and you can take up to three in a single day.

These tests are much easier than an AP exam. If you are already preparing for an AP exam, you should also take the SAT subject test in that topic.

The biggest mistake I see: people assume that their school course will prepare them for the SAT subject test. It almost never does.

AP courses at least try to prepare you for AP exams. Non-AP courses don't even try to prepare you for the SAT subject test. Your honors biology class will not prepare you for the SAT Biology subject test. Same for U.S. History, Chemistry, Physics, etc.

That's mostly because in non-AP classes, teachers tend to get a little distracted or political. Many biology teachers love to pontificate all day long

about recycling and global warming, for example. Maybe that teaches some kind of civic responsibility, but it doesn't get you ready for the SAT Biology subject test.

You must train outside of school. I recommend using the Barron's SAT subject test book for the given topic. Don't waste time with the Princeton Review books; those are much easier than the real exam, and will only lull you into a false sense of security.

The SAT and the ACT

If you're reading a book like this, you probably already know you need to study for the SAT or ACT. You know that there is nothing sillier than studying for some minor quiz, and not studying for the SAT.

But how should you study? If you're trying to get into an Ivy League school, a middle of the road program like the Princeton Review or Kaplan is a waste of time. Learning how to do process of elimination and other gimmicks is not going to get you to an Ivy ready score.

You need to learn direct solutions. That means, you need to learn how to directly solve each math and verbal question without process of elimination, backsolve, or related nonsense.

There are programs for every budget. If all you can afford is a library book, I recommend using the Barron's SAT book. If your budget is under $700, consider a video based program, and get help from a local tutor. If your budget is 1000-2000, consider a Vohra Method program. If your budget is limitless, consider elite private tutoring.

When should you start training? My company recommends 7th-8th grade. Most of my serious competitors recommend...7th to 8th grade. We're all right.

Why not wait until 11th grade? Several reasons. First, your school will almost certainly not teach you what you need. You will have to learn it outside of school in one way or another. Second, you want to train before your 9th grade practice PSAT so you can start building a reputation.

Understand that serious SAT training is not a 6 or 8 week process. It takes at minimum several months; usually it takes a year, sometimes more. 6-8 weeks is just a placebo that allows your parents to avoid feeling guilty about not trying to educate you. It's not serious training.

Most people train for at least a year for an AP exam. The SAT is more important than any AP exam. Studying for only 6 weeks for an exam 50 times as important is just nonsense.

Multiple Attempts

Many students worry about taking the SAT or another standardized test "too many times." This concern is silly. That's not how college admissions works.

As mentioned earlier, college admissions has two steps. In the first part, a computer looks at your grades and SAT scores. In the second part, a human reads your essays and recommendations.

The computer does not care how many times you took a test. Why? Because you can do poorly on a test because of back luck, or bubbling wrong, or whatever. But you can't do well unless you actually know the material. Good scores tell the college information. Bad scores are inconclusive.

Take the SAT as often as you need to take it to get the score you want. The same applies to any other standardized test. Don't worry about "taking it too many times."

That said, don't just take it without doing any training. If you just keep taking it, you'll keep getting the same score. If you do serious training in between, you'll improve.

Taking a test 4-5 times is fine. But if you take it 30 times, you will start looking mentally ill.

Two Intense and Ruthless Strategies

RUBICON STRATEGY: LOCATION

One of the most famous moments in military history is Julius Caesar's crossing of the Rubicon. He crossed that sacred boundary and brought his army into Rome itself.

No Roman general had dared to do so before. It was such a deep and sacred rule that no one believed anyone would violate it.

There was no physical or military reason not to cross the Rubicon. There was just a very powerful psychological impediment.

In college strategy, there is a similar opportunity. There are things you can do, that will work, simply because no one would ever believe you would have the guts to do it. In my next book, I'm going to reveal the secrets on how to do it.

Just kidding. I'm going to reveal the secrets right now.

A little background: geographic location is a major consideration in college admissions. Colleges get too many applicants from New York, Boston, San Francisco, and DC. They get too few from Wyoming, Montana, Idaho, etc.

Ideally, every college wants to say that each class has students from all 50 states. However, even elite colleges can't. Most just settle for having someone from each state in each 4-year cohort. There will always be someone from Wyoming at the college, but not in each class.

Someone from Wyoming with a few AP scores and some powerful extracurriculars will absolutely get into the college of their choice. The problem: you don't live in Wyoming, or Idaho, or Montana...

...or do you? What if you could convince colleges that you are actually from Idaho?

Not everyone can do it. But if your parents work from home, own a business, travel a lot, etc., you can. Also, this system works primarily for those rich enough to not need any financial aid.

Here's how it works.

First, you establish residency in some unpopulated state like Idaho. Your parents register to vote there, you get your driver's license there, etc. They

rent out some tiny cheap apartment as their official residence (not just a P.O. box).

You also make sure the state you pick has very relaxed homeschool laws, and register as a homeschooler.

You don't actually live in that state. You just take your SAT there, and your AP tests there. You can stay in any state for a couple weeks, it's no big deal.

You study independently, which you have to do anyway for any serious college strategy. You don't have to do the usual busywork, so you also have wayyyy more time for extracurriculars that put you out of the league of any competitors.

If you do all of this, your chances at an Ivy college are near 100%.

Q: If everyone starts using this technique, won't it negate the technique? In other words, if everyone from New York rents a cheap studio in Idaho and makes that their permanent residence, won't this trick stop working?

A: I doubt that's a real concern. Very few people have even considered this technique. But even if every man woman and child on earth reads it, the technique will still work.

Only a tiny fraction of people will be able to do it. Most people don't have the employment flexibility

to claim to work somewhere else. Only people who work from home or work online even have the option. Everyone else has a legal business address.

Of the people who can use the technique, very few will. Most people are very hesitant to use bold strategies (until they get rejected from their top choice college. Then, they usually get super angry, cry a bunch, blame each other, etc. Those who lack the courage to use the strategies that work also usually lack the courage to own up to the fact that they made a laughably weak decision, and have no one to blame but themselves.)

What if everyone starts working online and using these techniques? The most that will happen is that colleges will stop taking geographic location into consideration. That's great news if you live in a competitive state, but not if you live in an uncompetitive one.

By the way, homesteading is already used heavily by people seeking in-state tuition. Having legal residency in California, for example, gives you both lower tuition and admissions preferences for the University of California schools. Plenty of people just fake residency. There are all kinds of advisory services to help people do that, and not get caught.

It's much harder to pull off homesteading when you're dealing with in state tuition, since that's

actually about money. If you're homesteading to make it easier to get into an Ivy League college, it's actually much easier.

Remember, Ivy League colleges know that being from Idaho, Montana, Wyoming, Alabama, or any of the other less competitive states doesn't give you an actual useful advantage. It just sounds cooler if they can say, "We have students from 50 states and 90 countries" rather than "We have students from 47 states and 90 countries." In other words, they don't want to out you. If you're convincing enough, they can say they have 50 states. It isn't to their advantage to look too deeply, since if they do, they will have to swap a fake resident with great credentials and ability for a genuine resident without them.

They aren't losing any actual money. If this was about tuition, sure, they'd crack down as much as they could. But even with those crackdowns, as happens with in-state tuition, you can still do homesteading. In this case, there is no money to be lost, making it even easier.

RUBICON STRATEGY: RACE

Race plays a major role in college admissions. If you are Hispanic, Native American, or Black, you have a major advantage.

But you can't just say, "Hey! I'm Black!" and expect that to accomplish anything. You have to show that your ethnicity contributes to the diversity on campus. You need to show how being Black shapes the way in which you study and perceive physics, or history, or something. You need to show how your Native American heritage shapes how you interact with gender, or math, or your own internal self.

But what if you aren't in one of the underrepresented categories? Don't despair.

A famous successful Harvard essay is written by an African American woman who looks white (her mom is white). She talks about how different it was being someone who appears white but is actually black. It's a compelling and unusual story.

You know who else could write that story? Literally any white person ever. Many elite colleges don't bother to verify SAT scores. You think they'll check your mom or dad's race? Just set up some photoshopped pictures on facebook, set your profile to public. If the admissions officer is curious, that's where they'll look.

Actress Mindy Kahling's brother pretended to be black to get into medical school. And it worked.

In fact, Rachel Dolezal, a white woman, used a little hair and makeup adjustment to become the head of the Spokane NAACP!

If you go to a small private school that actually knows the parents, this obviously won't work as easily.

But if your dad has brown hair, couldn't he be half Cuban? Or entirely Cuban, but your great grandfather had to change his last name when they immigrated?

If you're East Asian, isn't it hard being biracial <wink>, and facing discrimination from your own family?

If you're going to pull a con like that, by the way, you need to start very, very early.

The second most ruthless college strategist in the country (after yours truly), is East Asian. East Asians are "overrepresented" minorities in colleges, so it is harder for East Asians to get into elite colleges. You know what he did before his first child was born? Changed his last name to something obviously not Asian.

You might not feel comfortable with such an aggressive race strategy. No problem. You have some kind of race. Maybe you're part English. Maybe you're Japanese. If you can discuss, in your application essay, how that cultural ancestry shapes some part of the way in which you intellectually interact with the world, then you are officially someone who contributes to campus diversity! It's

hard to do, but plenty of my students have managed to do it pretty effectively.

The key thing: don't make it a cliché. Find something completely unusual, even if it's mostly made up, that will help you stand out.

WRONG: From my Indian parents, I learned the importance of hard work and education. (This sounds cliché, tedious, boring, and obvious).

RIGHT: Hindu culture considers the material and spiritual world to be commingled. The material world is considered an extension of thought, not just mundane matter. When I began to study non-Euclidean geometry, my grandfather's many discussions on this topic finally made sense. (This sounds awesome.)

Extracurricular Activities

Most of my students spend thousands of hours on very difficult extracurricular activities. Some become elite pianists, others spend years doing research at NIH or a similar government lab. But when it comes time to write the application, all that work is not very useful.

In fact, we often either downplay or don't even mention those laborious activities!

In other words: the thousands of hours spent on all that stuff was basically a waste of time. All those piano lessons, all that time being miserable in a lab, all that time volunteering in a nursing home: totally pointless. They do absolutely nothing for an Ivy League application.

As we discussed in the diminishing returns principle, a successful Ivy League application stands out. It doesn't just do the same exact stuff as every other applicant. It doesn't do slightly more stuff

than other applicants. The fact that you play piano at level 11, but others play it at level 10, does not matter at all. The fact that you took 16 AP exams and other people took only 4, also doesn't matter enough.

Standing out means completely, totally standing out. I'm going to give some real examples. Most of these are not even my students, but either people that I met or learned about through admissions officers:

1. One person had a small business where she made and sold origami earrings. Whether the business was successful, or sold more than a single pair, is irrelevant.
2. One person made an independent blog, website, and YouTube channel about a particular branch of philosophy.
3. One person worked on several projects related to making minimalist items, and launched a couple Kickstarter projects related to that. These were not projects that raised millions, but raised probably a pretty small amount of money.
4. One person created a soft drink company (in reality, mostly just created a website for a soft drink company).
5. One person ran social media for a few local political candidates.

Note that none of these took nearly as much time as standard extracurricular activities. These people didn't have to work as hard as all-state musicians, or all county athletes. They didn't have to put in hundreds of hours, the way many who focus on community service do.

They were all essentially in a category that contained one person. There was no competition, so they didn't have to work overly hard. They just had to do anything at all, and they stood out.

Those that started early (before 9th grade) were often featured in school newspapers or local newspapers. But even those that started late still got into top tier, elite colleges.

When picking an activity, ask yourself this: Is anyone else you've ever heard of doing this activity? If the answer is yes, do something different.

Are there 100 people in the Young Republicans club in your school? If so, pick something else.

Does your school's entrepreneurial club have 40 people? Pick something else.

Do many people in your area do an internship at NIH? Do something else.

Do soooo many of your friends recommend CTY because they enjoyed it soooo much? Do something else. Doing what others do will not help you stand out.

Does everyone in your area go compete in a particular debate league? Pick something else.

THE ABSTRACT ART PRINCIPLE

Pretty much no one can tell if a particular abstract art painting is good or bad. Even collectors have a hard time figuring it out. Articles have been written that show the huge auction price differences between nearly identical abstract paintings.

So how do most of us actually judge abstract art? We look at the surroundings. If we see an abstract art painting in the Museum of Modern Art, we assume it's pretty good. If we see an identical painting in a stoner's basement, we assume it's less good.

Colleges work the same way. If you say you made a comic strip on the inside of a watermelon, they don't know if that's good or bad. So they will look at the surroundings.

On your college application, you will be able to list 5-10 extracurricular activities. If they all look like "watermelon comic", you may just look unhinged. Instead, you put in a mix of things that they can understand (e.g. Model U.N. president) and weird things (e.g. Egyptian Poet). The normal things provide a sense of legitimacy to the weird things.

Suppose you were the class president and also made cell phone cases that represent various historical wars, like the Punic Wars. Which do you put first?

Most people would erroneously put the class president first. They may think it's more impressive, takes more effort, etc. They may think, "These cell phone cases took like 20 minutes on CafePress, while being class president took a ton of effort."

But that's totally wrong. Here's the fact: the college doesn't know how good the cell phone case thing is. So, they are waiting for you to tell them.

Fortunately, they do know how good class president is. Maybe they think it's 20 units of good. If you put class president above cell phone cases, then they will assume your cell phone case thing is 19 units or less of good.

If you put cell phone cases above class president, they will assume that the cell phone cases are 21 or more units of good!

You should make the top thing on the list something unusual, and the second thing something known. You can also make the top two things unusual, and the third thing known.

But don't push it farther than that. If you have more weird things, put them after the known thing.

Note: weird just means unknown. So, if you win a major film festival, that counts as known, not as something weird. Weird means not having any standard measurement option. So, if something is in any way official, it is not in the weird category.

If you win an award for a thing, then it can count as known. If your school endorses a thing in some official way, it also counts as known.

THE CIGARETTE COMPANY PRINCIPLE

People often point out that cigarette companies and other socially hated companies will often donate a small amount to a charity, and then spend millions telling everyone that they donated to that charity.

You must do something similar to get the best result. Suppose you decide to make a blog about ancient Egyptian poetry. Here are the steps:

1. Make a blog and website about ancient Egyptian poetry. As of this writing, I recommend Squarespace.
2. Do a few YouTube videos about stuff you've learned.
3. Most important: tell your teachers, and have your parents tell your teachers as well. Get some Egyptian style jewelry for $2 on Amazon, so that everyone knows that's what you're about.
4. If your school has assemblies or school meetings, ask your school if you can do a presentation there.

5. Write your local newspaper, or ask to put an article in your school newspaper about this issue.

The total time for something like this is around 40-200 hours. Doing 200 hours of community service, or lab research, or piano practice will accomplish basically nothing. Doing 200 hours of something random will guarantee your admissions (assuming you have high enough grades and SAT scores).

The college will have about 9 billion people who played piano, and another 9 billion who did community service, and 10 billion who did lab research. If you are the only one who has expertise in Egyptian poetry, you will stand out like a rare and magical diamond in a pile of coal.

PICKING THE CENTRAL EXTRACURRICULAR ACTIVITY OF YOUR APPLICATION

How do you come up with something unusual enough?

First, don't ask your parents. Parents: don't ask yourselves. Parents are always wayyyyy too conservative to think properly outside the box.

In the many years I have worked with students, I have had many students come up with great ideas.

I have had zero parents manage to. Here's what it's like:

Student Idea: Maybe I can make a series of web comics that talks about the history of garbage cans.

Parent Idea: Maybe you can talk about how you play the piano...wait for it....at a nursing home!

Note to kids: Having kids is often terrifying. Parents are afraid of making mistakes. That's why so many parents just copy other parents. Better to take the safe path than to mess things up.

Teenagers, on the other hand, generally consider themselves immortal, and take huge risks for no reason. That's the type of thinking you need in this case.

When picking whatever you want to work on, start with your actual interests. Not your favorite class in school – you only take 6 classes, so 1/6 of the people in your school probably like that same subject. I mean something totally unique to you. Something that you like, that others don't like. It can be artistic, political, entrepreneurial, historical, whatever. Think of the things you liked as a kid, or are fascinated by now. It's different for every person.

If it's piano, violin, or science research, that's the wrong answer, obviously. If it's Aramaic, water guns, candy sculptures, monetary history, musical language, now you're getting close.

In general, I've found that entrepreneurship, authorship, fine arts, and politics are the most effective areas, but certainly not the only areas that work. Let's go over some examples on how to use each of those.

ENTREPRENEURSHIP

Some types of entrepreneurship focus on a single area. For example, if you are interested in chewing gum, entrepreneurship might involve making a brand of chewing gum with some unusual features. If you really like comic books, entrepreneurship might involve making a comic book, creating a website that reviews comic books, etc. If you really like music, entrepreneurship might involve creating a business that sells music accessories, or a music review site, or even writing songs or jingles.

Many of the most effective types of extracurricular entrepreneurship involve interestingly combining two areas. For example, let's say you like Japanese history and candy. A candy that explores this history of Japan (maybe on the inside of the wrappers), or a website+blog+youtube channel that looks at the history of Japanese candy would stand out way more.

HOW MANY INTERESTING EXTRACURRICULARS SHOULD YOU HAVE?

I would say 1-3 highly unusual extracurriculars is ideal. I have also seen successful applications with as many as 5.

But don't dilute the message. Don't put 2 good ones, and a third that falls flat. Look at the following two lists:

List 1:

1. Founder of Shoeplant, which uses plants to make woven shoes for orphans.
2. Winner, Maryland Minority Film Festival, Short Animated Documentary Category.

List 2:

1. Founder of Shoeplant, which uses plants to make woven shoes for orphans.
2. Winner, Maryland Minority Film Festival, Short Animated Documentary Category.
3. Member, English Club

List 2 looks much weaker than list 1. The presence of the flat, uninteresting, common activity, done at a low level (the person is a member, not an officer)

just makes the rest look like a façade, a lie, or a joke. It brings down the other activities. Realistically, even if the person were an officer here, it would still be better to exclude that particular item.

Now let's fix list 2.

List 3:

1. Founder of Shoeplant, which uses plants to make woven shoes for orphans.
2. Winner, Maryland Minority Film Festival, Short Animated Documentary Category.
3. Working on a novel about Cambodian refugees called "Red Sunset of the Khmer."

Now it looks like it means business. "Working on a novel" means literally nothing, but it sounds awesome. List 3 shows a person who is about doing big, exciting things. List 2 is just someone trying to fill up a resume.

By the way, it may seem like item 2 is too high. Shouldn't winning a film festival go lower down, so it can push the other things up?

Not really. First, a Maryland Minority Film festival doesn't really exist, and if it did, it wouldn't have more than maybe 2 entrees in the Short Animated Documentary Category.

But even if you won at Sundance or Cannes, the