

INVITATION
to the
IVIES

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INTRODUCTION

If you're reading this, you're probably more ambitious than most people your age. You do well academically because you work hard and don't make excuses. You've always been willing to work harder than other people your age. That's why you get higher grades. You're willing to work even harder to get into an Ivy League college.

But there's a problem. In school classes, you know exactly what to work on to reach the top. You have textbooks, study guides, and your own notes. You know that if you learn all the material and practice harder than other kids, you're going to get higher grades.

When it comes to getting into Ivy League colleges, you don't know exactly what to work at. You have the sense that "more" is probably better than "less." For example, more activities and higher grades are probably better than fewer activities and lower grades.

But you also know there's more to the story. You've probably heard of people with high grades and SAT scores and tons of activities getting rejected from Ivies, while others with lower grades and fewer activities got in.

There's no clear set of rules or guidelines that Ivy admissions officers follow. Admissions officers freely admit that they rely heavily on gut instinct and intuition. If an application "gives them a good feeling," if they just like the applicant, that person has a higher chance of getting in.

Learning the rules underlying those intuitions can help you strategically shape your application and get in.

When a customer buys one of many competing products, he relies on intuition. He chooses a particular type of toothpaste, for example, based on gut instinct. He may read the ingredients as part of that decision-making process, but when twenty different toothpastes have basically the same ingredients, he's relying on something other than analytical logic.

When people vote, they also rely heavily on intuition. Most people go to the polls knowing which presidential or gubernatorial candidate has earned their support. But when it comes to voting for state delegates or school board members, intuition has a lot to do with it. At the polls, people read candidate statements, see which statement gives them the right "vibe," and vote for that person.

In college admissions, admissions officers read your application essays and decide if you get their vote.

In each of these situations, the customer makes the decision based on intuition. But the seller has a whole different view of the process. For example, toothpaste sellers have analyzed consumer psychology and preferences thoroughly. While the consumer may feel like he's acting based on intuition, the seller has analyzed, studied, predicted, and influenced his behavior. The consumer feels emotions; the seller sees formulas. The consumer has an experience; the seller has analyzed and shaped that experience far in advance.

You can do the same thing to college admissions officers. You can learn formulas that shape their intuition. You can learn the equations that give them the right gut instincts.

Over the last 20 years, we have cracked the hidden code of Ivy admissions bit by bit. We've helped students get into top tier Ivies, including Harvard, Princeton, and Yale. We've helped students get into elite schools

like Stanford and MIT. We've also helped quite a few students create "mathematically impossible" applications. Their high schools said that they had no mathematical chance of getting into the college of their dreams (based on their grades and SAT scores), and we helped them get in anyway.

This book is about learning the psychological tools to impact the intuition of Ivy admissions officers. It is a book on psychological influence and analytical marketing. We will apply these principles to the extracurriculars you choose, the essays you write, the interviews you give. You'll use these tools to influence your teachers and secure great recommendation letters.

At the beginning of this chapter, we pointed out that you aren't like most kids your age. Most kids your age are lazy, undisciplined, and unambitious. You're the opposite. You're hard-working, ambitious, and highly disciplined.

But while you aren't like most kids your age, you are like almost every applicant to Harvard, Princeton, Yale, etc. Almost every Ivy applicant is hard-working, ambitious, and disciplined. 95% of them are going to get rejected. Harvard, Princeton, and Yale admit only around 5% of applicants.

The tools in this book are going to help you beat other highly ambitious students and get in.

A FEW DISCLAIMERS

1. There are no guarantees in Ivy Strategy. This book contains the best information and analysis we have and is based on extensive research involving our own students as well as other students. However, it does not guarantee any particular result.
2. This book contains unedited quotes from famous and influential people. Some of those quotes contain profanity. We have left those quotes in their original forms because we believe that they convey the relevant psychological principles better than censored versions.
3. Many of the techniques in this book require multiple years to complete. We recommend starting this process in 9th grade or earlier.

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THE FOUR PILLARS: BUILDING YOUR COLLEGE STRATEGY RESUME

In this chapter, you'll learn about the Four Pillars: four extracurricular activities that you'll use to stand out and get in. The Four Pillars are an Activity for Fun, Activity for Service, Intellectual Pursuit for Fun, and Intellectual Mission Statement. This chapter introduces them, and subsequent chapters will show you how to develop them in ways that will help you surpass your competitors and get into Ivies.

The best way to create strategic extracurriculars that work is to use an “essay-forward” approach. Here's what that looks like:

1. First, you look at all the essay questions on the applications for every college you hope to get into. Ideally, you do this in 9th grade or earlier. Note that most of these essay questions have been the same for decades; you don't have to wait until 12th grade to find what the questions will be.
2. Next, you create projects and extracurriculars that will help you answer them. We call those projects, the “Four Pillars.”
3. Then, you write amazing essays and get accepted.

Most people do the opposite. Here's what they do instead:

1. They don't look at any essays at all. Instead, they take their best guess about which extracurriculars to do.
2. In 12th grade, they realize that the extracurriculars they did do not match the essay questions at all.
3. They freak out.
4. They try to somehow make their extracurriculars fit the essay topics, using a combination of mental gymnastics and lying.
5. The admissions officers easily see through that ploy, and those students get rejected, along with 95% of other highly ambitious and motivated applicants.

But why don't normal extracurriculars help you answer the essay questions? Mostly, it's because the essay questions are completely, utterly, ludicrously insane. Let's take a look at the first group of crazy questions you'll find on Ivy applications:

- **Brown:** Brown students care deeply about their work and the world around them. Students find contentment, satisfaction, and meaning in daily interactions and major discoveries. Whether big or small, mundane or spectacular, tell us about something that brings you joy.
- **Columbia:** In Columbia's admissions process, we value who you are as a unique individual, distinct from your goals and achievements. In the last words of this writing supplement, we would like you to reflect on a source of happiness. Help us get to know you further by describing the first thing that comes to mind when you consider what simply brings you joy.
- **Princeton:** What brings you joy?

- **MIT:** We know you lead a busy life, full of activities, many of which are required of you. Tell us about something you do simply for the pleasure of it.

At this point, you're probably thinking something like:

"Are you kidding me?! I spend every waking hour in mandatory school, sports, and homework. I'm sleep deprived. I spend weekends doing more sports, mandatory volunteering, and other obligations. How on earth could I possibly have time for JOY???"

And your response is fair. Most competitive students don't have time for joy. But guess what? That's actually good news. Your competition has no time for joy either. That means if you create an amazing, unexpected, fascinating activity you do just for fun, you will start out with a massive advantage over your competitors.

Some of your competitors will tell obvious lies, like "For fun, I love to volunteer at a nursing home." Others will tell counterproductive truths, like, "For fun, I play video games." Those are the kinds of useless answers your competition will give; coming up with better answers will help you stand out and get in.

To answer these types of questions, you're going to need an Activity for Fun.

THE ACTIVITY FOR FUN

The first of the Four Pillars is the Activity for Fun, and it's used to answer questions like the ones listed above. Having a good Activity for Fun is going to give you a huge head start over your competition. In this book, you'll learn how to make your Activity for Fun amazing and unforgettable.

Your activity for fun should meet the following criteria:

1. It should be purely for fun (obviously).
2. It should involve ongoing experimentation that could last a lifetime.
3. No one you have ever met or ever heard of should be doing the same thing.

Here are a few examples of famous Activities for Fun that people have done. Since they've been done, these specific ones won't work anymore. Once an Activity for Fun has been done by someone, it's value plummets. But this list can give you ideas. Here's the list:

- Making Tulip Tea.
- Using AI to create comic strips.
- Making watercolor art from spilled coffee.
- Making vibrantly colored crazy pastas from scratch.
- Creating high heels out of thrifted cables.
- Redrawing modern logos as medieval illustrations.
- Creating a company that sells Christmas trees and then takes them back and replants them at the end of the season, only to return it to the same customer the next year.

Here are more general categories that might give you ideas.

- Write songs and put together an album in a unique or unexpected way.

- Create an independent film or documentary on a topic that no one else has explored deeply.
- Run part of a political campaign and bring in new and unexpected directions.
- Create a special event in your city or state that is different from anything done before.
- Develop a computer program or phone app that is unexpected and unique.

And finally, here are a couple from actual successful college applications. Some of these are from “mathematically impossible” applications. The student’s high school said that he had no mathematical chance of getting in, and he got in anyway:

- The creation of a small business selling origami earrings.
- The creation of a new kind of soft drink company.
- The creation of card games based on weird historical events.

A good Activity for Fun starts you out with a huge lead over your sleep-deprived, overworked, stressed out competition. Many of your competitors will discover in 12th grade that most of the miserable and boring activities they did won’t help them on their application at all. On the other hand, you’ll have an amazing and enjoyable Activity for Fun that will help you write these “joy” essays, wow the admissions officers, and get in.

At this point, you may be feeling unsure, confused, and overwhelmed. You might have no idea how on earth to come up with an Activity for Fun. Don’t worry. This book will show you how to develop an amazing Activity for Fun. Developing this activity is a process that takes several stages. You’ll go through them in this book and become an expert at creating compelling Activities for Fun.

THE ACTIVITY FOR SERVICE

Let's look at the next group of questions. These aren't quite as ludicrous as asking stressed out, overworked teenagers what they do for "joy." In fact, they are exactly the questions you expect from the Ivy League and top 20 schools.

Here are a few examples:

- **Dartmouth:** Labor leader and civil rights activist Dolores Huerta recommended a life of purpose. "We must use our lives to make the world a better place to live, not just to acquire things," she said. "That is what we are put on the earth for." In what ways do you hope to make—or are you making—an impact?
- **Princeton:** Princeton has a longstanding commitment to service and civic engagement. Tell us how your story intersects (or will intersect) with these ideals.
- **Tufts:** Where are you on your journey of engaging with or fighting for social justice?
- **MIT:** MIT brings people with diverse backgrounds and experiences together to better the lives of others. Our students work to improve their communities in different ways, from tackling the world's biggest challenges to being a good friend. Describe one way you have collaborated with people who are different from you to contribute to your community.
- **UC:** What have you done to make your school or your community a better place?

To answer these questions, you'll need a powerful and unique Activity for Service. The Activity for Service is the second of the Four Pillars.

It is usually much harder to create a great Activity for Service than a great Activity for Fun because the competition is tougher. Most of your

competition is doing nothing at all for fun, so beating them in that area is easy. Every competitor is doing an Activity for Service, so standing out is tougher.

Some of the most common ones include creating tutoring organizations or businesses, volunteering at nursing homes, participating in Relay for Life, creating nonprofits that serve common targets (the homeless, orphans, the elderly, veterans), working on food drives, working to increase awareness in healthcare related areas, etc.

These are all great and positive things to do, but they fail strategically because they are just too common among highly ambitious students. You might be the only student in your school who has started a nonprofit tutoring program in your city. But you won't be the only person applying to Harvard or MIT who has done that.

Creating an exception Activity for Service that is completely unique will be a necessary component of your college strategy.

Here are our criteria for creating strong Activities for Service:

- It should involve ongoing experimentation that could last a lifetime.
- No one you have ever met or ever heard of should be doing the same thing.
- Your Activity for Service must clearly serve one specific person or one clearly defined group of people. This allows you to use the Activity for Service to address the questions that ask how you served a specific community.

Many students get tripped up on this last point because their Activities for Service involve something big like saving the planet. Many environmentally focused activities falter here because they aren't clearly serving any specific community.

Fortunately, with adequate planning, this is easy to address. You can make an environmentally focused activity that disproportionately helps a specific group, region, or subculture. It might help farmers in western Peru, for example.

Here is a list of great Activities for Service that might give you ideas. Use these as starting points, not as final answers. Any specific Activity for Service that has been done before won't work anymore. You'll need to come up with something completely unique to you.

- Weighted blanket cleaning device (to benefit autistic kids and their parents)
- Recovering lost art styles of a particular culture
- Creating a video game that gets people to take their cancer medication
- Using t-shirts and tattoo designs to preserve an endangered language
- Creating new methods of engagement for the deaf-blind community
- Creating new tools to allow those those with physical disabilities to play specific musical instruments.

THE INTELLECTUAL PURSUIT FOR FUN

The next group of questions ask you about intellectual pursuits you do just for fun. These aren't activities, but rather intellectual areas you explore, think about, debate, wonder about, etc. Here are a few example questions:

- **Yale:** Tell us about a topic or idea that excites you and is related to one or more academic areas you selected [as a major]. Why are you drawn to it?
- **Dartmouth:** Dr. Seuss, aka Theodor Geisel of Dartmouth's Class of 1925, wrote, "Think and wonder. Wonder and think." What do you wonder and think about?
- **Stanford:** The Stanford community is deeply curious and driven to learn in and out of the classroom. Reflect on an idea or experience that makes you genuinely excited about learning.
- **Tufts:** It's cool to love learning. What excites your intellectual curiosity

Again, the great news about here is that much of your competition won't be able to answer these questions. Just as they can't effectively answer the Activity for Fun questions, they can't answer Intellectual Pursuit for Fun questions. Just as they don't have time for joy, they certainly don't have time to wonder about and explore knowledge outside of school. They're trying to get higher grades, SAT scores, and AP scores. They don't have time for intellectual curiosity.

That means that if you create an interesting and unique Intellectual Pursuit for Fun, you'll be light years ahead of your competition. Here are a few examples:

Here are a few examples of an Intellectual Pursuit for Fun:

- Becoming the world's leading expert on umbrellas.
- Becoming the world's leading expert on fake plants.

- Becoming the world's leading expert on the color yellow.
- Creating a theory on how musical instruments impacted gender hierarchies.
- Coming up with a unique theory on how weather impacted religion.
- Coming up with a unique theory on how literature impacted farming practices in Europe.

You'll notice that these topics are both tiny and specific. Big, popular, grandiose topics don't work for this. AI isn't on the list. Neither is space mining, quantum physics, nuclear fusion, climate change, or any other topic that already has thousands of scientists working on it. Later, you'll learn that storytelling techniques and personality archetypes focus on tiny, specific, overlooked areas. For now, just keep it as a rule of thumb: the small, specific, commonly overlooked topics always beat the big flashy topics when it comes to Ivy strategy.

THE INTELLECTUAL MISSION STATEMENT

The final groups of questions consist of a mix of reasonable and completely crazy questions. You'll use an Intellectual Mission Statement to answer all three groups of questions.

Intellectual Mission Questions

- **Harvard:** Your intellectual life may extend beyond the academic requirements of your particular school. Please use the space below to list additional intellectual activities that you have not mentioned or detailed elsewhere in your application. These could include, but are not limited to, supervised or self-directed projects not done as school work, training experiences, online courses not run by your school, or summer academic or research programs not described elsewhere.
- **Yale:** You are teaching a new Yale course. What is it called?
- **Princeton:** As a research institution that also prides itself on its liberal arts curriculum, Princeton allows students to explore areas across the humanities and the arts, the natural sciences, and the social sciences. What academic areas most pique your curiosity, and how do the programs offered at Princeton suit your particular interests?
- **Amherst:** If you have engaged in significant research in the natural sciences, mathematics, computer science, social sciences or humanities that was undertaken independently of your high school curriculum, please provide a brief description of the research project.

Why This Major?

- **Carnegie Mellon:** Most students choose their intended major or area of study based on a passion or inspiration that's developed over

time – what passion or inspiration led you to choose this area of study? (This may also include the Intellectual pursuit for fun.)

- **Cornell:** College of Arts and Sciences: Students in Arts and Sciences embrace the opportunity to delve into multifaceted academic interests, embodying in 21st century terms Ezra Cornell’s “any person...any study” founding vision. Tell us about the areas of study you are excited to explore, and specifically why you wish to pursue them in our College.
- **MIT:** Pick what field of study at MIT appeals to you the most right now, and tell us more about why this field of study appeals to you.

Why This College?

- **Yale:** What is it about Yale that has led you to apply?
- **Columbia:** Why are you interested in attending Columbia University? We encourage you to consider the aspect(s) that you find unique and compelling about Columbia.
- **Dartmouth:** Dartmouth celebrates the ways in which its profound sense of place informs its profound sense of purpose. As you seek admission to Dartmouth, what aspects of the College’s academic program, community, or campus environment attract your interest? In short, Why Dartmouth?
- **UChicago:** How does the University of Chicago, as you know it now, satisfy your desire for a particular kind of learning, community, and future? Please address with some specificity your own wishes and how they relate to UChicago.
- **Duke:** What is your sense of Duke as a university and a community, and why do you consider it a good match for you? If there’s

something in particular about our offerings that attracts you, feel free to share that as well.

- **Tufts:** Which aspects of the Tufts undergraduate experience prompt your application? In short, “Why Tufts?”
- **Columbia:** Please tell us what from your current and past experiences (either academic or personal) attracts you specifically to the areas of study that you noted in the application.
- **UPenn:** Considering the specific undergraduate school you have selected, how will you explore your intellectual and academic interests at the University of Pennsylvania?

Some of these questions are sort of reasonable. But others are just bananas. Asking “Why Yale?” leaves most students bewildered. Most students think, “That’s just obvious. Great academics, prestige, etc. Why would colleges ask such an obvious question?”

For these final groups of questions, you’re going to create an Intellectual Mission Statement. This is the most important of the Four Pillars, in part because it will answer so many of the essay questions you’ll see (sometimes more than one essay per college). The Intellectual Mission Statement is an intellectual topic that you will explore deeply and use as the centerpiece of your application.

Intellectual Mission Statements are so important to colleges that even college professors have them. College professors don’t research things like “history” or “science” generally; they focus on a highly specific area within their chosen field.

Great Intellectual Mission Statements are highly specific and infinitely explorable. You could spend a thousand years exploring the topic and still have plenty left to explore.

Your Intellectual Mission Statement must be different from those of your competitors. Among your competitors, biomedical research is oversaturated. While you might be the only person in your school studying organoids, for example, countless other Ivy applicants are studying them. The same applies to neuroscience research, which is obviously popular among smart kids obsessed with the brain.

Any big topic that is getting plenty of focus is unlikely to work, since it will be just too common. Reusable rockets, social media, women's rights issues, sustainability and saving the planet...All the issues you hear about constantly in the news are very difficult to use for this because they just won't stand out. Millions of people and billions of dollars are already focusing on those areas.

You must explore your topic deeply. How deeply? Many of our successful students write and publish books on their Intellectual Mission Statement. Others have contributed chapters to textbooks on the topic. Some have large, developed websites with a few dozen intriguing blog posts.

Through this book, you'll learn how to improve your Intellectual Mission Statement until you have something amazing. Here are a few examples of real ones from university students and college professors:

College Students:

- Black Liberation Theology (Harvard)
- Examining how the election technology industry's structure inhibits innovation from developing more reliable, accessible, and secure voting machines (Wharton)
- Electrophysiology of Plants (Duke)
- Uses of Media in Visual Culture for Social Change (Duke)
- The Folklore & Ethnomusicology of Southern Culture (Duke)

- Getting the Dreamhouse: Logics of Domination in Post 9/11 Romantic Comedy (Princeton)
- Quilombo Futurism: Translating Key Concepts in Afro-Brazilian Liberation (Princeton)
- K-pop and Islam in Turkey: The Pious Generation and the Heathen's Music (Princeton)

Duke appears so often in this list because Duke allows students to build their entire undergraduate education around a specific Intellectual Mission Statement instead of doing a traditional major.

Princeton appears so often because EVERY single Princeton undergraduate is required to write a thesis on a specific Intellectual Mission Statement.

Now let's look at a few professors' Intellectual Mission Statements. Many professors have more than one Intellectual Mission Statement, but each one is usually quite specific:

Professors:

- Examining working-class culture in Rio de Janeiro, based mostly on the analysis of homicide trial records (Harvard)
- The interplay between context-change and context-sensitivity, and the way in which the mechanisms of information structure and discourse coherence affect the resolution of semantic ambiguities (Princeton)
- A comprehensive examination of the evolutionary biology of human males (Yale)
- The history of aesthetic theory and the development and transmission of aesthetic and philosophic concepts during the Enlightenment and Romantic periods (Stanford)

Your Intellectual Mission Statement will help you answer all kinds of questions. Sometimes, the answer to a question is just the title of your Intellectual Mission Statement. For example, Yale asks what new class you would teach at Yale. To answer that, just write down your Intellectual Mission Statement.

It can also help you answer bigger questions, like questions about why you're choosing a particular major. For example, let's consider Duke's two undergraduate programs. (While Duke isn't an Ivy, it is routinely ranked above other Ivies, and is harder to get into than some Ivies.)

Duke has two undergraduate programs: Program I and Program II. Program I includes all the normal majors, like history, chemistry, biology, math, etc.

In Program II, students create an independent major around an important question or area of study. If that sounds to you like an Intellectual Mission Statement, you're 100% right.

If you're applying to Duke, you should talk about Program II. Specifically, you should talk about how you want to further explore your Intellectual Mission Statement through Program II.

Note that you should "further explore it" not "start to explore it." Nearly every Ivy admissions strategist in the country knows that targeting Program II is the obvious right choice. Thus, it's not enough to mention Program II; you must have developed your Intellectual Mission Statement more than your competition has developed theirs.

Many other colleges allow students to create an independent major. In those cases, in your application, talk about creating an independent major around your Intellectual Mission Statement.

However, some Ivies don't allow you to indicate an independent major on the application. That's not a problem at all. Just make your Intellectual Mission Statement the reason for choosing the major. For example, you

might talk about how you've been researching how one indigenous Brazilian culture's understanding of social hierarchy was shaped by their natural environment. You would then say that you want to major in anthropology to further explore that mission statement.

This principle works on both STEM and humanities fields. Here are some examples of how an Intellectual Mission Statement can help you defeat your competition.

Your Competition: "I want to major in chemistry because I find chemistry fascinating, and also it is very versatile."

You: "I've been working to develop disposable cutlery that quickly degrades in the presence of specific catalysts. I want to study _____ and _____ in chemistry to further this research in ways that will help dramatically reduce landfill waste. I hope to work in the _____ lab and do research with Professor _____, whose research on _____ would help us to achieve _____."

Your Competition: "I want to major in history because I am really passionate about history and history is my favorite subject."

You: "I have been studying the evolution of conversational forms in medieval Europe, and how those changing forms led to a democratization of European society. I believe that understanding how conversational forms evolve can shed light on why different cultures evolved so differently, while also helping understand _____ in the present. I want to major in history to continue this study, and I hope to be able to research with Professor _____, whose research on _____ would help us to achieve _____."

You can do something similar to answer those questions that ask why you want to attend a particular college. Talk about your work so far on your Intellectual Mission Statement, and the specific professors you would hope

to research with and learn from at that specific college. Obviously, mention the professors' Intellectual Mission Statements as well.

While your competition gives utterly useless answers that say things like, "I want to be in a medium-sized college near a vibrant city," you can use your Intellectual Mission Statement to show passion, intelligence, insightfulness, and drive. You'll explain the ways in which you want to explore your Intellectual Mission Statement at that college, and you'll be better able to stand out and get in.

The Intellectual Mission Statement is the "why" of your entire application. You should present it as the reason that you're applying.

By the way, once you get into a college, you can change your major. The Intellectual Mission Statement on your application is not binding. You can, if you want, pursue it in college. You can also use it just to get in and study something else entirely. For example, you can write on your application that you want to do an independent major that looks at the development of cultural hierarchies in a specific part of the world...and then switch to biology to do a pre-med major.

But before you do that, there's something you should know. Doing an independent and specific undergraduate major will help you get into medical school, law school, or business school too.

Medical schools are inundated with biology majors, so majoring in something highly specific and different helps you stand out and get into medical school as well. Similarly, law schools are swamped with political science majors, and business schools are flooded with economics majors. Independent majors help you stand out and get into professional schools.

In fact, a specific area of expertise helps you advance in almost every area. For example, journalist and author Derek Thompson has this advice for aspiring authors and journalists:

“...there is a paradox to scale, I think. People who want to be big sometimes think, “I have to immediately reach the largest possible audience.” But in a weird way, the best way to produce things that take off is to produce small things. To become a small expert. To become the best person on the internet at understanding the application of Medicaid to minority children, or something like that.

And the reason why I think this is true I call my Tokyo example. If you go to Tokyo, you’ll see there are all sorts of really, really strange shops. There’ll be a shop that’s only 1970’s vinyl and like, 1980’s whisky or something. And that doesn’t make any sense if it’s a shop in a Des Moines suburb, right? In a Des Moines suburb, to exist, you have to be Subway. You have to hit the mass-market immediately.

But in Tokyo, where there’s 30-40 million people within a train ride of a city, then your market is 40 million. And within that 40 million, sure, there’s a couple thousand people who love 1970’s music and 1980’s whisky. The Internet is Tokyo. The Internet allows you to be niche at scale.

Niche at scale is something that I think young people should aspire to.”

Harvard is also like Tokyo; being the world’s leading expert in a small niche is going to help you stand out and get in.

The Paradox of Specificity

As you develop an increasingly specific Intellectual Mission Statement, you’ll find something amazing: the more specific your Intellectual Mission Statement is, the more other things apply to it!

Consider an Intellectual Mission Statement that has no specificity at all, such as “biology.” To study that, you should study biology and maybe a bit of chemistry.

On the other hand, suppose your Intellectual Mission Statement is the experience of Irish Immigrants to the United States from 1910 to 1911. Even though it’s much more specific, more things apply to it. Economics obviously applies. So does psychology, anthropology, and history. So does literature. Even neuroscience would apply. So would genetics. In fact, it’s hard to find something that wouldn’t apply.

Thus, an exploration of a highly specific area paradoxically builds breadth of knowledge.

In each of your Four Pillars, specificity obviously increases rarity. But it also helps achieve completeness. The more specific your area is, the easier it is to advance to a higher level. It’s much easier to become the world’s leading expert on the uses of one specific flower than to become the world’s leading expert on plants.

THE FOUR PILLARS AND IVY INTERVIEWS

As part of the process of applying to an Ivy or other elite school, you will do an alumni interview. A graduate of the college will interview you and either recommend you or not. Alumni interviews are a major part of determining who gets in and who doesn't.

As much as possible, you should make the interview about your Four Pillars. Sometimes, that will be easy. For questions like "what do you do for fun?", just use your Activity for Fun. For questions like "why do you want to go to this college?", use your Intellectual Mission Statement. You might not bring up all four of the Pillars, but you should aim to talk about at least two of them.

But sometimes, the questions might not connect to your Four Pillars directly. What should you do then?

By learning one important interview principle, you can ensure that your Four Pillars make it into the interview.

The Power of Non Sequiturs

Take a look at the following conversation:

Fred: I'm hungry.

Joe: I know a Chinese restaurant that's open late.

It's easy to understand that conversation. We automatically fill in the blanks.

But what if a few literal-minded aliens were watching this conversation from their flying saucer? They might think, "How rude! Fred indicated a problem with his internal state, but Joe didn't care at all. He just bragged about his knowledge of local businesses."

Humans communicate with non sequiturs. Our responses don't directly connect to statements; listeners fill in the gaps.

In fact, humans prefer to communicate that way. Imagine if the conversations went like this instead:

Fred: I'm hungry.

Joe: If you're hungry, a common solution is to eat food. In order to eat food, you first need to obtain food. One place to obtain food is a restaurant. However, in order to do that, the restaurant must be open for business. Currently, it is late in the evening, and most restaurants are closed. However, there is one restaurant I know of that is still open. It serves Chinese food, which is a popular type of food.

Now there are no non sequiturs...but Joe seems like a robotic weirdo.

Now that you know this, you basically have a superpower for interviews. You can easily move to any topic you want. The most likely destination topics will be your Four Pillars. In the following examples, we'll pretend that "Cow Art" is your Activity for Fun or Intellectual Pursuit for Fun.

Interviewer: Tell me about your family.

WRONG: I have two parents and a younger sister.

RIGHT: I come from an artistic family, which is how I got into Cow Art.

RIGHT: I'm the odd one out in a medical family—I spend most of my time on Cow Art.

WRONG: I have two parents and a younger sister. My parents have been married for several years. Early in their marriage, they met a farmer. Much later, they saw the same farmer. He had moved from farming alfalfa to dairy farming. He mentioned that dairy farming was an art. They told me this story, and it made me think of cow art.

Long winded transitions look fake and emotionally obtuse. You don't need to connect everything together like some kind of android. Rely on

the power of non sequiturs; remember that humans naturally make connections. Just jump to your point simply and directly.

In some seminars, we've invited attendees to write down any statement of fact at all. Attendees write anything from "The grass is green" to "Annapolis is the capital of Maryland," to "I have 2 cats."

Then, the presenter reads out, "I am hungry," and an attendee reads their fact. No matter how unrelated the fact is, the mind of every attendee tries to make the connection. For example:

Presenter: I am hungry.

Attendee: I have a pet dog.

The mind tries to make the connection. Is the responder suggesting that I eat the dog? Offering me dog food? Telling me his problems are bigger than mine? Suggesting that if I get a pet, I will no longer feel hunger?

Automatically, the mind searches for any connection. You don't have to spell out the connection; the listener will find one for you.

If you make the leap smoothly, the listener's mind will make up a connection. You don't need to spell out each step.

Interviewer: Where did you grow up?

RIGHT: I grew up in Virginia, which is where I discovered cow art.

At this point, the interviewer would most likely ask a question about cow art. You've moved the discussion to your Pillar. You have the home field advantage now.

A discussion that focuses on your strongest areas will obviously beat a discussion that focuses on random topics. By moving an interview to your Four Pillars via non sequiturs, you can make your interviews unforgettable.

You now have an overview of the Four Pillars. Now let's learn how to make amazing and effective Four Pillars so you can stand out and get in.

3

RARITY AND COMPLETENESS

College applications are competitive tests that use essay questions to figure out your personality. The Four Pillars (Activity for Fun, Activity for Service, Intellectual Pursuit for Fun, and Intellectual Mission Statement) help you answer those questions.

The competition level is insane. There are 35,000 high schools in America. Harvard lets in 2,000 or fewer people a year, less than 1 person in 17 high schools. Harvard's acceptance rate is below 5%, and the applicants are mostly hyper ambitious high achievers with amazing grades and test scores. Every applicant has tons of extracurriculars and community service and clubs and all that, and 95% get rejected.

To win the competition and get in over other highly ambitious students, your Four Pillars have to be better than the Four Pillars of 95% or more of highly competitive students. But what does it mean to be better?

For a Pillar to be better, it must be rarer and/or more complete. The ideal is high rarity and high completeness. But if you have more rarity, you can win the competition even if you don't have quite as much completeness.

The competition level is higher than what most people expect. For something to achieve the absolute minimum of rarity, it means that no one else in your school is doing it. There is no school club that has any rarity at all. Remember, there are many more schools than there are students admitted to Harvard. Even if one person per school is doing something, it has no rarity at all.

The completeness standards are even tougher. Completeness ranges from just having an idea and doing nothing with it (zero completeness) to becoming world famous (high completeness). Low completeness means you have thoroughly developed your project, published a website for it, and have a strong online presence for it. Moderate completeness means having significant media coverage. Thus, while rarity is tough, completeness is tougher. Most students find that going for high rarity is more reasonable than going for high completeness.

Let's understand what the different levels of rarity and completeness look like.

RARITY

Zero Rarity

Zero rarity extracurriculars are common among highly competitive students. If at least one person per high school does something, then it has zero rarity.

This would include:

- Every school club. Even the respectable clubs (Model U.N., Debate Club, Varsity Sports, Math Team, Chemistry Olympiad, Science Bowl, National Honors Society, Business Deca, Future Leaders of America, Relay for Life, etc.) have zero rarity.
- Well known and established outside of school clubs. This includes Boy Scouts, Eagle Scouts, Girl Scouts (including the Gold Award), etc.
- Common combinations of common activities. For example, combining music and community service by playing an instrument at a nursing home or Veterans' care center.
- Common cultural activities and rites of passage, such as doing an Arangetram (a kind of classical Indian dance recital plus final exam).

This list may seem shocking. If a teenager was doing all the above, many people would say, "Wow, what a great and upstanding kid! He's so much better than the average teenager who spends his time on video games and unproductive nonsense." That description is true. But getting into an Ivy isn't about being above average. It's about being world class.

There are about 1,690 active NFL players. Princeton lets in 1,600 people a year. Getting into Princeton requires a major league mindset.

Consider how many above average athletes never make it into the major leagues. Consider how many exceptional athletes never make it into the majors.

Getting into an Ivy is like getting into the major league of a sport. It's not enough to be above average; it's not close to enough. You need to stand head and shoulders above other highly ambitious, highly motivated students.

Low Rarity

Low rarity extracurriculars are self-created activities that you do completely outside of school, but they follow themes that are too common. These are better than zero rarity because they are self-motivated and not just directed by your school. However, they follow common themes and thus don't stand out. Here are a few examples:

- Creating a small business or nonprofit that provides tutoring to economically disadvantaged students.
- Creating an online portal to provide scholarship information for economically disadvantaged students.
- Creating a nonprofit that encourages women to participate in STEM fields.
- Creating a nonprofit to provide food and clothing to the homeless.

These all focus on common, predictable, expected areas. Thus, thousands of your competitors will be doing them.

For low rarity topics to work, you need high completeness, which means world fame. It's not enough to get covered in your local or national newspaper. You need to make your project a household name.

For example, Khan Academy provides education to economically disadvantaged students (and everyone else), an extremely common focus

for a nonprofit. However, it is a world-famous, household name. Everyone knows about it. If you create something that famous, you will almost certainly get into an Ivy.

Moderate Rarity

Moderate rarity topics are different from common activities, but they lack a high enough level of specificity. A moderate rarity topic is usually a stepping stone to a high rarity topic.

For example, creating a board game about philosophy in general would have moderate rarity. Creating a board game about one specific philosopher's theories would have high rarity. A nonprofit that focused on gender roles in West African politics would have moderate rarity. A nonprofit that focused on gender roles in the politics of one specific, commonly ignored subculture in West Africa would have high rarity.

If you have a moderate rarity topic, you're halfway to a high rarity topic. Usually, you just need to make your topic or project much more specific, and it will have high rarity.

High Rarity

High Rarity topics are completely unlike anything anyone else is doing. They are highly specific and often overlooked topics. They are not something you would think of off the top of your head. It takes several weeks of research and brainstorming to create a high rarity topic.

Many of our students have had “mathematically impossible” applications. That means that their high schools said they had no mathematical chance of getting in based on grades and test scores, and they still got in. Every single one of those students had one or more high rarity topics.

One student created a weird kind of soft drink company. Another created a theory about gender based on a particular art form of a small subculture. Another worked to help save a dying language. Another created a game based on a specific and weird historical concept.

High rarity activities are all completely different from each other. There's no cookie cutter way to create one. However, this chapter provides general guidelines on how to create one, and future chapters will help you develop and improve them.

COMPLETENESS

Now that we've done an overview of rarity, let's look at completeness.

Zero Completeness

Zero completeness means that you have a cool idea and have done nothing with it. For example, you might say, "It would be cool to make board games designed specifically for the blind." At that point, you have an idea, but no completeness. Until you fully create such a board game, the completeness would be zero.

When developing a project, you need to consider the real likelihood that you will do the project. Many students start out with grandiose plans that involve a combination of AI, app development, quantum physics, and a bunch of other cool-seeming things. The problem is that the project is just too big to do. They end up not finishing the project, getting no mention of the project in their teacher recommendation letters, and of course no media coverage. With zero completeness, it's incredibly difficult to get into a top university.

Low Completeness

Low completeness means that you've finished your project, developed any relevant websites, social media pages, blogs, YouTube or TikTok channels, and the like. If your project involves writing a book, the book is written, complete, and for sale on Amazon. If your project involves a board game, you've made the board game, put it on your website, have it for sale, and have videos showcasing it.

If you have a high rarity topic, then low completeness is usually enough for a successful Ivy application.

Moderate Completeness

Moderate completeness means everything from the low completeness category plus media coverage. That means your project is in one or more newspapers, TV news stories, or the like. Moderate completeness is similar to Wikipedia's standards for what can be included on Wikipedia.

High Completeness

High completeness means that you have made one of your Pillars a world-famous, household name.

For example, the actor Emma Watson went to Brown University. Her extracurricular activity was theater, one of the most common extracurricular activities that exists. However, she was a world-famous actor. The high level of completeness made the activity work, despite its utter lack of rarity.

The gun control activist David Hogg's extracurricular activity was fighting for gun control. This is an extremely common extracurricular, with zero rarity. However, he was covered heavily in national and international media, worked directly on legislation, and built a massive following. He got into Harvard. His extracurricular was extremely common, but the level of completeness was high.

High completeness means extreme fame. That standard may shock many readers. How is fame a reasonable expectation of a teenager?

It isn't a reasonable expectation. No part of Ivy admissions is at all reasonable. But in this case, high completeness isn't necessary. If you have enough rarity, moderate or low completeness can work.

High Completeness and Sports

There is good news for athletes. For sports, high completeness doesn't require international fame. You just need to be recruited by the college to

play for that college. The standards are still tough, but it's easier to become a recruitable soccer player than to become a world-famous actor.

In sports, anything less than recruitment level has zero completeness. Being a starter on your school's varsity team has zero completeness. Unless you're being recruited, sports don't help your application.

This is a common area of misunderstanding. If being recruited gives your application, say, a thousand extra points, shouldn't playing varsity give you at least a few hundred points? Sadly, no. Sports are the most common extracurricular; anything less than recruitment level completeness adds no strategic value to your application at all. Dozens of people per school play varsity sports; it's just too common to possibly have any effect on an application.

HOW TO INCREASE RARITY

If you have an extracurricular activity you like, it may seem that the only option is to increase the completeness. Given how much completeness is required to make common extracurriculars work, things may seem a bit hopeless.

But the good news is that you can increase the rarity of most extracurriculars and make them work.

A few years ago, we had a student who really liked poker. The problem is that poker is the most popular card game in the world. To make poker complete enough, you would have to win the World Series of Poker.

Instead of going in that direction, the student instead increased the rarity. She started by learning about different types of card games from various cultures and points in history.

At the same time, the student covered intellectual areas that could form the basis of an interesting card game. Soon, she discovered a highly interesting and specific subject in history and used that as the basis of a new card game. She created the game, had actual card packs made, had a cool website, wrote a few blog posts, and made videos about the game.

Note that her level of completeness was low: she made the game, made a website, and made a few videos. Her card game wasn't in the newspaper, which would have been moderate completeness. Her card game didn't become as famous as *Cards Against Humanity*, which would have been high completeness.

With high rarity and low completeness, she was able to make her extracurricular work.

Another student really enjoyed his AP World History class. He also started out with zero rarity. At least one person per school likes history, thus history has zero rarity.

To make World History have enough completeness to work, you would need to become a world-famous historian, or at the very least have your own show on the History Channel or a similarly established platform. For our student, that seemed unrealistic. So instead, the student worked on increasing rarity.

The student had found the section in his history class about dying languages particularly interesting. He hadn't realized before how many languages were dying out. Thus, instead of focusing on history generally, he focused on endangered languages. He found one specific endangered language, learned more about the culture, and created a project based on that language.

His project was in the low completeness range. He didn't have major media coverage, but he did have a good website and an intriguing project.

That student had what we call a "mathematically impossible" application. His school told him that it was mathematically impossible for him to get into his top choice college, based on his grades and SAT scores. However, with a sufficiently rare extracurricular, he stood out and got in.

Creating a high rarity extracurricular often starts out with a low rarity extracurricular. Generally, we advise students to look for uncommon versions of a common thing.

Suppose you're interested in chess. The clear problem is that chess is common. So are other similar games (like Go). So, the first step is to spend a few weeks or months learning about many lesser-known board games. Learn about different types of board games, different styles, cultural differences in board games, asymmetric games, children's games, and more.

During the process of discovering uncommon, unusual, unexpected games, you will become an expert in board games. Soon you'll know more about board games than your friends, parents, and teachers. As you develop that expertise, you will be able to discover unexpected, uncommon

directions in board games. You'll learn about rare games as well as unusual techniques used to create board games.

Once you have the uncommon knowledge, you're ready to create something new and entirely your own. To do that, you might combine two topics. For example, if you become an expert in board games and an expert in indigenous musical instruments of the southern Amazon rainforest, you might create a board game inspired by what you've discovered about those musical instruments using techniques similar to a specific board game played by a specific subculture in ancient Japan.

That might seem like quite a bit of effort, and it is. Creating a highly rare extracurricular takes about as much work as a full-year AP or IB course. The difference is that all of your competitors have taken AP or IB courses, but most of them won't have a rare extracurricular. Thus, developing a sufficiently rare extracurricular will help your application much more than any AP or IB course.

HOW TO INCREASE COMPLETENESS

Moving up the scale from Zero completeness to Low completeness is both straightforward and entirely under your control. While highly rare projects vary a lot, here are some guidelines that will make almost any project more complete.

First, you must do the project. This may sound obvious, but many students don't make it that far.

If one of your projects involves making an app, you must make the app. It's not enough to have a sketch, outline, or white paper. If you're making a board game, you need to make the physical game. If your extracurricular involves writing a book, write the book. If it involves writing music, you must write the music. Even the rarest topics require that basic level of completeness.

Once the project is done, you'll need a public platform. For example, if you've written a book, that book needs to be for sale on Amazon. If you've made a board game about nematodes, that game needs to be for sale somewhere. If you're writing music, it should be on Soundcloud, Spotify, etc. If you're exploring the intersection between Incan dream interpretation and gender roles in Madagascar, you can put that on a blog.

Some students get nervous about making their work public until it's perfect. The work is never perfect, and the website never gets published. There's no such thing as a perfect website, board game, app, or blog.

Other students boldly make their work public, even when it's imperfect. The fearless group always beats the perfectionist group. Those who publish imperfect websites always beat those who are waiting for their work to be completely perfect.

Ivy Admissions favor the bold.

You may have heard that only amateurs publish imperfect work. If that's true, then Apple, Microsoft, and Google are total amateurs. Each

company routinely sends out updates to their operating systems. You've probably had to update your phone or computer a few times.

The fact that they need to update their operating systems means that the previous version of the operating system was imperfect. They published imperfect work and then kept improving it.

There's no such thing as a perfect anything. If Apple had waited to perfect the iPhone before releasing it, we'd still be waiting for the first iPhone. We'd be waiting for the next thousand years.

Put your work out, improve it, update it, and put more work out. Don't hide out of fear of being imperfect. Everything that exists is imperfect.

Refusing to present your work to the world is identical to not doing the work at all. If the admissions officers can't see it, then for them it doesn't exist.

Once your project is publicly visible, get your teachers and counselors on your side. Talk to your teachers about your project. You can ask for advice, and often get useful insights. Discuss your project with your school counselors, principal, and/or headmaster. If it makes sense, you might talk about what you're doing with your school newspaper.

You will also discuss your Four Pillars on your college counselor questionnaire. This questionnaire is given during your junior or senior year. Every single one of your answers should relate to one of the Four Pillars.

These steps will get you to the minimum level of completeness for a highly rare extracurricular.

How about moving from low to moderate completeness? Moderate completeness involves establishing yourself as a national leader on a topic, but not yet a household name.

Unlike low completeness, moderate completeness is not completely under your control. You can't force the media to cover your project. You can't make people follow you on social media.

But there are a few things you can do to get the process going. Here are some tips:

Don't make waves; make tsunamis. Teenagers are often told to be meek, silent, and obedient. But those well-behaved teenagers never make history.

If you want to get media coverage or a large social media following, be bold. Speak out. Don't be afraid to say unpopular things; don't be afraid to disagree with established adults.

Consider the environmental activist Greta Thunberg. As a teenager, she spoke out against the president of the United States boldly and unflinchingly. She wasn't meek or polite about it. Through her boldness, she captured endless media and social media attention, while simultaneously pushing the views she believed in. If she had been polite and meek, no one would have ever known about her.

Practice your media skills and wait for an opportunity. Simply put, practice making videos for social media. Get used to speaking directly to camera. Figure out how to get your audio to sound good. See what makes videos work well and get a strong reaction.

At the same time, practice debating your issues. Talk about them with friends and family. Make sure to listen carefully as well. You need to know the counterarguments as well, and that means you need to listen patiently and carefully to those who disagree with you. Learn how to counter the common counterarguments.

Then, when opportunity strikes, you're practiced and ready to go.

Consider the gun control activist David Hogg. He had extensively practiced speaking and debating about gun control and other political topics. Then, there was a tragic shooting at his school. While everyone else was freaking out, he immediately got on social media, captured the

attention of a grieving nation, and put himself at the forefront of a major political battle.

His social media videos during the aftermath of the school shooting weren't his first. Because he had practiced beforehand, he was ready when the moment struck.

A common way to boost your public presence is to piggyback on a larger public event. It doesn't have to be a tragedy, by the way. If a big story close to your area of expertise comes up, you will have the opportunity to use social media and traditional media to amplify your public reach...as long as you've been practicing your on-camera speaking beforehand.

Pick a fight with the biggest kid in the playground, so to speak. Find an expert in your field, and intelligently disagree with him. This will both increase your status as a public figure and demonstrate your passion. The kid who says, "I'm really interested in Egypt, trust me," might be lying. But the person who starts a debate on social media with the world's leading Egyptologist is clearly passionate about Egypt.

Go to helpareporter.com and sign up as a source. Helpareporter.com is a place that connects reporters with experts in many fields. Many of our students have gotten moderate media coverage by getting on the site.

Three times a day, you'll get an aggregate email that has questions from reporters. Most of the time, nothing will apply to you. If something is relevant, reply with your answer. Include your actual answer in your reply email. In other words, don't say, "I can answer your question." Instead say, "My answer is _____. I can be contacted for clarification or additional information." Reporters work on tight deadlines. They are more likely to use a quote they have than email back and forth with someone to get a quote.

If you have a big budget, consider working with a professional publicist. A publicist can help you get TV interviews and other major media interviews.

Testify before your city council or state legislature. This may seem like an outlandish request, but it's easier than you might think. In many states, you just have to sign up for it. Some of our students have testified on bills. Arvin (one of the authors of this book) has testified on educational legislation. He just had to write his name down to get a spot. Many of our students have testified on other topics. In most states, you just sign up.

If you're nervous about testifying, go watch the process before participating in it. It's not nearly as scary as you think. Testifying at the state or local level is not like a Senate confirmation of a Supreme Court Justice. Basically, you get 1-2 minutes to speak, you speak, and the panel says thank you. That's it.

A high-quality testimony can be a step into getting media coverage and making political connections. Legislators and their staffs are often excited to work with high schoolers on legislation. It makes the legislators look modern, vibrant, and energized.

The only reason that more legislators don't do it is that high schoolers are seen as unreliable. But if you show that you have the passion and competence to testify before the legislature, you might soon be working on initiatives that will make your application stand out.

Try to speak at local TEDx events. You might start out by watching a few events first. Once you feel ready, ask organizers if you could speak at one. Include a sample clip of a direct to camera speech, such as one you might have done on social media.

Let's look at the final level: high completeness. World fame. How on earth do you get there?

While we have met and worked with famous people, we are not ourselves world famous. Our level of completeness would be classified as “moderate.” We’re frequently interviewed on major media about education and college strategy. But we’re not household names.

However, we have seen enough of what works and what doesn’t to give a few general tips on becoming world famous.

Go where you are rarer and more in-demand. For example, the majority of acting roles are for men. But the vast majority of actors are women. Thus, there is a shortage of men and a surfeit of women in acting. It is much easier for a man to become a famous actor than for a woman to.

Similarly, the majority of politicians are adults. Almost none are kids. Thus, becoming a serious political figure is in some ways easier for a teenager than for an adult. While many students get involved in politics, very few try to become actual political public figures.

Whatever your area is, work like crazy on the fundamentals of that thing. As an example, many of the best movie and TV actors in the world are Shakespearean actors. Shakespearean acting is the best acting training in the world for one simple reason: no one understands any of the words. Thus, Shakespearean actors learn to convey meaning with tone and body language. They simply cannot rely on the words to convey anything at all. When they perform using normal words, they convey much more through body language and tone than non-Shakespearean actors. They work on the fundamentals of acting to become great actors.













The same is true of athletes. The best athletes work on strength, agility, coordination, flexibility, and endurance. Excellence at anything means excellence in the fundamentals.

Follow the examples and advice of other experts in that field. Many leaders in fields, particularly older ones who don’t feel threatened by new competitors, are happy to share their practical, pragmatic advice on how to

advance your career. For example, veteran actors routinely share audition tips.

Follow your passion, even if your passion is seen as silly. PewDiePie, who has often been the top Youtuber in the world, likes playing video games and talking about silly topics. He did both of those well and became world famous.

Here’s a quick recap of the levels of completeness and rarity that work and those that don’t:

	Zero Completeness	Low Completeness	Moderate Completeness	High Completeness
Zero Rarity				
Low Rarity				
Moderate Rarity				
High Rarity	