



Wanted in College Applicants: A Genuine Desire to Learn

When I ask students what they consider their strengths as college applicants, they commonly tout their drive to succeed but seldom mention a love of learning. Yet it's the latter that gets them further with college admissions officers, who are in the business of assessing what applicants would contribute to their college classes and campus life. Think about it: would you rather be surrounded by peers who are motivated primarily by pursuit of top grades, or by those who are genuinely interested in what they are learning? Who is more likely to contribute to a vibrant community of learners?

Too often, of course, our educational system seems to destroy the curiosity and pleasure in learning that comes naturally to young children. For high achieving students especially, much of the joy of learning for its own sake is eclipsed by the enormous pressure they feel to attain an ever-higher bar in both their academic and extracurricular pursuits. So this is a plea to remember that there's more to life than beating out the competition, and happiness is more likely to derive from a sense that one has found one's purpose in life than from any other markers of success.

One way to diminish the stress in high school is to figure out how to put your heart and soul into exploring something you love just because doing so makes you happy. Highly selective schools frequently say they could fill their classes with valedictorians and students with perfect scores on standardized tests, but they choose not to do that, preferring to consider an array of other factors too, including personality and motivation. Whether or not you accept the notion that everyone's learning experience in college is enhanced when they are exposed to diverse classmates' perspectives, it's hard to argue against the notion that everyone benefits from an atmosphere of enthusiasm, which is, after all, contagious.

So find something you can pursue with enthusiasm. If you're an academic sort and it's something intellectual, great! But if academics aren't your forte, you can still make your application compelling (and make yourself happy at the same time – a win-win situation) by delving exuberantly into anything ranging from entrepreneurship to community service to a school club or sport. Then be sure to convey that excitement in your college application essays, interviews, and the questionnaires you fill out to help your school counselor and teachers write their letters of recommendation.