



THE INS &  
OUTS OF  
COLLEGE  
ADMISSIONS  
**TOM  
TONNESEN**

In my work with students and families, I constantly am confronted with – and thus must address – and refute – firmly entrenched beliefs about

the college admissions process. One particularly difficult one is that the ACT score is the “be all and end all” of admissions criteria. (It’s not.) But I am not writing today to slay that dragon; rather, I want to discuss the concept (or the myth) of the well-rounded student.

Many students and families believe that colleges put a premium on enrolling well-rounded students. After all, why wouldn’t a college desire a student who has displayed proficiencies across a wide array of activities and academic subjects? Such students have proven the ability to achieve in many areas, and thus their probability to succeed in college, with its many conflicting demands, should be high. However, as counterintuitive as it may sound, it is not necessarily these well-rounded students that colleges, especially the more selective ones, covet. Quite frankly, the application pools at these schools are flooded with such students. It may sound harsh, but such students are almost a “dime a dozen.”

So if colleges are not necessarily looking for well-rounded students, it would be fair for you to ask, “What on Earth do they want?” In a nutshell, the answer is a well-rounded class. Since I am a big sports fanatic, allow me to use the analogy of choosing the players on a major league baseball team roster. When general managers assemble their teams (think entire freshmen class), whether it be through draft choices (think incoming freshmen) or trades (think transfer students), they must foremost consider the good of the whole. Granted, versatility is a valuable trait, and having a few utility players on your team who can play multiple positions is a good thing.

## Jack of All Trades, Master of None

However, if your whole roster is comprised of “jacks of all trades, but masters of none,” the chances of your team’s overall success are pretty slim. Your team needs specialists: those with a high on-base percentage, those who can hit for power; run, field, throw, pitch (starters, mid-relief and a closer), etc. There is a term in baseball called the “Five-Tool Player.” It refers to a person who excels at hitting for average, hitting for power, fielding, throwing and running. We old-timers will remember Willie Mays as the quintessential such player; in today’s game, perhaps Mike Trout best fits the bill. These types of players are rare, though, and the same is true for potential college students. Students whose résumés are chock-full of activities and have excellent grades might think they are the college equivalent of a Five-Tool Player, but they may be overestimating their credentials and have a misguided view of their attractiveness to the “general managers” in the admissions office.

Please do not misunderstand me. I am not at all saying that being a well-rounded student is a disadvantage. Instead, I am attempting to convey the notion that assembling a whole class of individuals who specialize and truly excel in a particular activity or academic area (music, theatre and drama, football, math, creative writing, debate and forensics, science, tennis, student government and leadership, community service, etc.) is what the best colleges desire. This gives a college a well-rounded and heterogeneous freshman class, rather than a group of well-rounded but overly homogeneous students. In college admissions parlance, this process is known as a “holistic” approach. Another way to look at this is through the prism of a mosaic. Taken as a whole, mosaics are quite beautiful and convey a unified quality, yet they are typically assembled from disparate parts that exhibit a diversity of shapes, colors, textures, etc. If the mosaic’s individual pieces were all “well-rounded,” with few radiating a particular, special quality or attribute, the piece as a whole would lose some of its appeal.

So how does all this apply to those who are currently

applying to college, or to those who will be doing so in the near future? Allow me to answer this question with a maxim that I provide to my student clients when they are writing their application essays: Rather than write something which is a mile wide and an inch deep, go for a topic that is an inch wide but a mile deep. In other words, emphasize depth over breadth. When itemizing your activities and extracurriculars on college application forms, be sure to list them in order of priority, emphasizing such things as leadership, time commitment, awards and honors, etc. Colleges want to know your passions, and you can show (not tell) them in your essay(s) and activities section. Rather than being a joiner (Ski Club in ninth grade, Foreign Languages Club in 10th grade, etc.), show colleges that you are a doer, and a committed one at that. Identify and seek your passions while in high school, but choose carefully. Once you have done so, devote your time and energy to hone your abilities and leadership traits and “be the best that you can be” in these selected arenas.

I trust that my readers are familiar with the term “Renaissance man” (pardon the gender bias). One definition of it is an individual who has acquired knowledge or proficiency in more than one field. Such individuals are extraordinarily rare, and those who aspire to such a moniker often fall a bit short across all areas. For two years, Michael Jordan thought he could be a professional baseball player. In retrospect, he should have stuck to basketball. Find your passion, no matter what it may be, and pursue it to the nth degree. Create your own matchless piece that colleges will desire to place into their larger mosaic.

*Tom Tonnesen is the director of College Admissions Pathways (CAPS) and works with students and their families on the entire college search, admissions, test preparation and financial aid processes. He is a member of the National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC). Contact information: tonnesen@caps2college.com; 377-0302 (home/office); 262-389-4588 (cell); or www.caps2college.com.*