Introduction

It is easy to understand why the college admissions process has become such a challenge, and even an ordeal, for many students and their families. Everywhere they look, families are barraged by evidence of “college mania.” Online and print media regularly regale readers with horror stories about the competition involved in gaining admission to selective colleges as application numbers rise and admissions rates fall, sometimes dramatically in a given year. Classmates, neighbors, coworkers, and even virtual strangers are all too eager to share tales about terrific kids with great academic and extracurricular records who were denied admission by the colleges of their choice.

As likelihood of admission becomes harder to predict at many schools, students find themselves applying to an increasing number of colleges to protect themselves. Of course, one major consequence of such behavior is an overall increase in application numbers and corresponding declines in admissions rates at those schools, feeding the very problem students are hoping to address by submitting more applications.

Adding to the challenge is the continuing rise in the cost of college, with the sticker price at some private four-year colleges now approaching $70,000 per year. Recent changes in the standardized testing policies of many schools, as well as changes in the tests themselves, have also contributed to the uncertainty surrounding college admission.
The result of all of this is that families often find themselves caught up in a high-stakes competition in which they are uncertain about the rules and even more uncertain about the outcome. Parents feel uncomfortable trying to support their children in a process that they do not completely understand and are not sure they can afford. Even those who consider themselves knowledgeable may quickly find that much of what they know is out-of-date or based on unverifiable hearsay.

Frank Bruni, author of a widely acclaimed book entitled Where You Go Is Not Who You’ll Be: An Antidote to the College Admissions Mania, dedicated his book as follows: “To all the high school kids in this country who are dreading the crossroads of college admissions and to all the young adults who felt ravaged by it. We owe you and the whole country a better, more constructive way.” We fully agree.

College admissions does not have to be, and should not be, an ordeal. A clear understanding of the process can empower students and their families to make good choices for themselves and allow them to retain their balance and sanity at the same time. That has always been the goal of Admission Matters, from its first edition in 2005 through this fourth edition today.

We have written this book to demystify the college admissions process by explaining how it works and to level the playing field for those without access to extensive assistance from knowledgeable high school counselors or sometimes any counselors at all. It will also help those who have access to good counseling but would still like some extra support. Our advice is designed for students planning to apply to any four-year college, whether highly selective or not.

Admission Matters explains

- How rankings motivated by profits contribute to the application frenzy
- How the admissions process really works, and what you can, and cannot, control
- The ways in which colleges differ that really matter
- How you can build a list of colleges that are a good fit for you and submit strong, competitive applications to gain admission to them
- How and why many colleges use standardized tests and how you can best prepare for them

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• What recent changes in standardized tests as well as testing policies at many schools mean for you
• When an early application makes sense, when it can be a mistake, and how to tell the difference
• How financial aid works, what you can expect from it, and how you can increase your chances of receiving more
• How to prepare strong applications that can help you distinguish yourself from other applicants
• What you—student and parent—can do to work together in appropriate and respectful ways throughout the admissions process to achieve a happy outcome

And much more. In this thoroughly revised fourth edition of Admission Matters, we have worked hard to address the many changes that have occurred in the world of college admissions since our last edition. We want you, our student and parent readers, to begin the college admissions journey confidently with the latest and most complete information available. As before, students with disabilities, international students, and transfer students will find much needed guidance to address their special circumstances, as will athletes, artists, and homeschoolers. Information for first-generation college students and undocumented students is included as well. We want Admission Matters to continue to be the most up-to-date, clear, insightful, supportive, and practical book on college admissions anywhere.

We recognize, however, that you may want more information on certain topics than space allows us to include. To help you access that additional information easily, we have provided a list of resources, many of them on the web, that give detailed information on topics such as financial aid and athletic recruiting to supplement our own coverage. To keep Admission Matters as up-to-date as possible, we are maintaining a website with free updates and additional materials. You can find it at www.admissionmatters.com. We welcome your feedback.

We feel we are especially well qualified to be your guides. Among the three of us, we have more than 100 years of experience in secondary and higher education in the roles of high school teacher and college counselor, college admissions officer, college professor and administrator, and independent educational
consultant. Collectively we have worked with thousands of students across the United States and abroad. We are also proud parents of successful college graduates, so we have experienced the admissions process firsthand from the parent perspective as well. We are delighted that our readers in the general public have found *Admission Matters* enjoyable and easy to read, and we are honored that professional colleagues use it widely as a text in courses on college admissions for those studying to be counselors themselves.

We hope *Admission Matters* will serve as your trusted road map through the college admissions journey.