

# **Class of 2020 Share Advice & FAQ's**

## **Advice to rising seniors:**

**“Sink your teeth into the classes you've been looking forward to; make memories with your friends; show your classmates and the underclassmen that seniors at Sycamore High School are kind, approachable and caring.”**

**- Stephanie De Falco, Sycamore Parent**

# The class of 2020 has this advice for you. Read on....

## Seven Helpful Tips on the Application Process from Grace Berlier:

- 1. Have a spike.** Although it is great to be well-rounded, finding a way to distinguish yourself is key. You can be good at everything, but doing one thing better than everyone else will make you stand out. If you don't think you have a spike, you do. Look for overlaps in your story, and find a way to connect the dots on the activities you love. Colleges aren't looking for a bunch of well-rounded students. They are looking to build diverse classes. They do not want to have a bunch of students who all did the same thing. Think well-rounded class, not well-rounded student. Find a way to make yourself "an expert" in a particular area. You can be creative with this — not everyone has to be the best trumpet player or top swimmer in the state to stand out. If possible though, highlight achievements at a district, state, national, or international level to show that not only do you stand out in your school community, you also stand out at a broader level.
- 2. Create a separate email just for the Common App.** Use this email to set up your common app and to write your essays. If a college emails you an update, you only will have to check one place, and it won't get buried.
- 3. Results-oriented activity descriptions.** There is a section on the Common App in which you must describe all of your activities. You have limited space so I would recommend using the following format:

**action verb\*\* {something that shows a measurable impact that you made};  
action verb impact; action verb impact**

Repeat this format until you run out of space.

**\*\* Action verbs:** evaluated, gathered, analyzed, participated, contributed, managed, planned, distributed, conducted, engaged, identified, assisted, bolstered, modified, organized, researched, scheduled, regulated, consolidated, cultivated, initiated, oversaw; streamlined

**Ex:** raised \_\_\_\_ at the annual fundraiser; oversaw a summer camp of \_\_\_\_ local underrepresented children; placed \_\_\_\_ in {insert competition} ; planned, marketed and oversaw {insert event}; analyzed and reviewed \_\_\_\_; developed analytics that laid the foundation for \_\_\_\_; bolstered \_\_\_\_ attendance by \_\_\_\_

- 4. Write your essays over the summer.** Don't wait until the Common App officially opens to start writing. The prompts are usually the same for both the Common App and

individual schools. See what the prompts were for last year... There's a good chance they will be the same this year.

5. **Make a spreadsheet with all of your colleges.** On this spreadsheet, make five sheets.
  - a. **First sheet:** names of colleges, deadlines, whether or not they accept the common app, rec letter details (how many; from who)
  - b. **Second sheet:** standardized test score policies for each college (superscoring, self reporting)
  - c. **Third sheet:** Write down all of the essay prompts you need to write, if the essay is required, and what the purpose of the essay is. This will allow you to see if you can modify an essay to be used again.
  - d. **Fourth sheet:** information you still need to answer for each school (i.e. if you left something blank on the common app)
  - e. **Fifth sheet:** scholarships (prompts, deadlines, requirements) — APPLY FOR SCHOLARSHIPS EVEN IF YOU DON'T THINK YOU HAVE A CHANCE! YOU DO!
6. **Make an impact on your community.** There are a lot of scholarships that support making community impact, so, if you are trying to figure out where to dedicate your time, consider ways to authentically contribute to your community.
7. **Talk to teachers about recommendation letters early.** A lot of teachers like to start on recommendation letters the summer before your senior year. If you ask them before the end of your junior year, they will be able to work on your letter without rushing. This will also give them a head start before they are overwhelmed with student requests near fall deadlines.

*Grace Berlier will be attending the Fisher College of Business at The Ohio State University in the fall of 2020, majoring in marketing and finance as part of the Morrill Scholarship Program and Business Scholars Program.*

## CLASS OF 2020 RESPONDS TO FAQ'S

*The following responses have been provided by -*

*Sam Barans, Michigan State University - English, Psychology, Theoretical Math*

*Hari Iyer, Harvard University (Boston) - Mathematics*

*Rohan Mathur, UC Berkeley (California) - Computer Science*

*Alex Rohr, Yonsei University (South Korea) - Business Administration*

*Lindsey Stevens, Ohio University - Special Education*

*and others.*

### **What was the best thing you did in high school - academically or extracurricularly - that may have influenced your post-graduation or college options or choices?**

I took a wide range of classes in different subjects, which helped me narrow down what I liked and didn't like, as well as what I was good at. You would be surprised when you take a class thinking you're going to love it and end up hating it in the end. I thought I wanted to be a surgeon so I took three sciences, and after the first semester, I realized I did not want to be a doctor (at least I got all my science credits done in junior year). Taking at least all honors classes and some AP helps prepare you for a heavy workload as well.

I found what area I was interested in (mathematics) and I sought opportunities to pursue my interests at an advanced level. In my case, this included competitions, research and reading opportunities with professors whom I contacted, and taking advanced undergraduate/graduate courses. Deep involvement in one area certainly stands out to colleges.

I reached out to a teacher (Mr. Whapham) for advice on narrowing down which schools I should apply to and categorizing the schools I intended to apply to (reaches, safeties, etc.) Even though you can not sit down with a teacher now, you could email one or sit down with your parents.

Working with the special education program. Specifically the step program and going to the tip house.

**What would you do differently in high school - academically or extracurricularly - that may have changed your post-graduation or college options or choices?**

Don't take an AP class unless you are thinking of pursuing that subject as a career. I could have saved myself a lot of time, and I hurt my GPA by taking AP classes that I was not interested in.

I would have taken more elective classes.

## **How did you balance completing college applications and high school obligations?**

It is hard, but pretty much everyone else is in the same boat as you. In my experience, teachers were understanding and counselors helped a lot. One specific thing that I did was when I found myself bored in school doing nothing, I used that time to complete the most monotonous parts of the college apps process (like filling out grades, classes, AP scores, etc.)

I planned ahead and did not procrastinate. I often got finished with classroom assignments early, which allowed me to have more time to dedicate to college applications. But if you can, ask your teachers if you can have assignments ahead of time, if you foresee yourself getting really busy around the time where your applications are due.

I did not. I completed all of my college applications over the summer before senior year, so I was saved from the stress of a busy senior year.

I completed my college applications while in high school. It was a difficult thing to do but if you find time then it is possible.

## **How early should I start working on my application and essays?**

Start your Common App essay over the summer, but don't try to finish it over the summer! It took me several revisions and versions to figure out my final personal statement essay. Also, you grow a lot over senior year, so the person that's finishing your essays at the beginning of the summer may not be the same person that you are by the end of application season. I started my supplemental essays (for each individual school's application) during the school year, which was more than manageable because I scheduled out weekends that I could work on them.

As early as the schools publish the application guidelines and/or questions. I know during junior year you make your first attempt at college essays. During this time DO NOT goof off; you might need it when you apply, so work really hard on it. Also, I would prepare a handful of application responses, so when you have an application that requires answers to specific questions, you could have already answered them and you can save your time by using what you had already written.

The end of your junior year, about fourth quarter. Do not tell yourself you will do this now and go back to fix it later. Strive to complete essays and applications to the best of your ability now, so you may sit back and be content with the work you have done.

I would recommend starting them the summer of your junior year.

Start/finish Common App Essay around July/August if possible.

## **What do you wish you had known at the start of your senior year?**

I wish I had known to allow myself more flexibility and open-mindedness! I almost didn't apply to the school that I'm now in love with and so excited to attend, but I'm clearly glad that I did. You may picture yourself in a certain location or a certain school right now, but you may be overlooking places that you never gave a fair consideration! Also, having a dream school is fine (I did!) but there's a very real chance that you won't get in, and you need to be happy with and open minded about your other options :)

The dream you have of your senior year will not unfold as expected, not even in the slightest. But, with the right lens, you may choose to make it fantastic.

Don't slack off but also cherish your last moments in the school. Talk to your teachers and talk to people who you couldn't talk to before.

Everyone wants to help you, don't be afraid to ask for it.

That corona was coming.

## **How do I go about developing my list of schools to apply to?**

First, decide location. If location doesn't matter I would look at a bunch of different sites that allow you to narrow down colleges to fit your criteria. Look at the tuition cost, and the amount of scholarships that YOU most-likely can get. (unless you are going into a specific career path such as the arts) Choose colleges that have a wide list of minors and majors. If you want to go for photography, make sure there is a minor in let's say business, just so you have something to lean back on. Don't choose colleges just because your friends are going there, choose what is best for your future. Also, look at the reputation of those colleges. Will you stand out in this college or be another one of their robots.

Consider what characteristics are most important to your undergraduate experience (for me, it was largely academic, considering where I could deeply involve myself in my subject of interest). It may be academic, extracurricular, social etc. Of course, consider distributing schools between safeties and reaches.

First, figure out what kind of school you are searching for. Do you want to go to a large or small school? Somewhere that sports is big or academia is the priority? Are you aspiring to go to an affordable or prestigious university? (In most cases, balance is best.)

Take college visits and look at what they each offer.

## **How important is testing in the admissions process?**

## **Likewise, how important is the personal statement essay?**

As long as you have average to above average test scores, worry more about who you are as a person and what you can contribute to their college as an individual. You can have a 26 on the ACT and still get into a really good college. You can also have a 36 and not get into a really good college. Your personal statement is the most important thing because it is what differentiates you from the other applicants. Don't write the same thing as everyone else, but make sure that when the person reads it, they can hear your voice and hear who you are through the piece of paper.

Sharing this truth is upsetting, but testing is extremely important. The scholarship I received for the university I am attending was based on my performance in a singular test that I was invited to take based on my test scores. At every university I applied to, the only scholarships I received were based on my test scores. Honestly, I cannot say how important personal essays are.

Both are important, but I found that the personal essay has more of an influence and that is what you should focus on.

## **How should I go about choosing my personal statement topic?**

There are so many successful ways to do this, but I started out by brainstorming qualities about myself and principles that I live my life by that may not be well developed or conveyed in other parts of my application and choosing one that I felt was an integral and endearing part of who I am and who I would be on a college campus. Then, I thought of anecdotes/stories/journeys that have been important to me or that have helped me grow as a person throughout high school. I chose one that was especially poignant or significant and, with it, I created a compelling narrative throughout which I wove that tenet I valued. Don't try to fabricate some life-altering adventure or tragedy if you don't have one; we're still just teenagers and admissions officers know that! A detailed and funny story about a small but memorable moment can be just as, or even more, valuable than that :) If there is something, like a family situation or personal health, that affected your grades or life in some way, there are other sections on your application to explain that and you do not need to use your entire personal statement to justify something like a drop in grades due to that situation.

I would write a couple of essays, a few following the given questions/topic that college board gives you. But I would say, write one that speaks about you. A really good tip is to write an essay as if you are trying to get them to be your new friend. Be funny and be human, and show your unique qualities. Show that you are responsible to take this new step, you are not perfect and possibly will never be, but you will give it your all.

Just pick one interesting topic that you find easy to write about. Don't try and use this as a resume. If you have an awesome story about you doing something incredible and you want to write about it, do that. If you are really into cooking and you love to talk about your experience, that could be just as good if not better.

Write about something you are passionate about. Writing a college essay should be enjoyable and fulfilling. If it is not, you are not writing about a subject that properly illustrates who you are to the university. They want to see YOU.

Write about something you are passionate about

## **What instructors should I ask for recommendations?**

Instructors that are not busy. Choose a teacher who normally doesn't write a lot of recommendations. Choose an instructor that has been with you since the beginning of high school or when you started to form into your true self. Don't pick that one teacher who you secretly hated but you got all A's in their class, because as long as they don't know who you are as a person, they cannot write a good recommendation letter.

Anybody willing to help! Your counselors! Your teachers!

Administration and teachers who have impacted you.

## **How important is it to visit the schools I apply to?**

It's definitely important and can help you pinpoint the atmosphere on campus and even help you picture yourself attending that school. However, I don't think it's the be-all-end-all of deciding what schools to apply to! After applying to ten schools, I'm going to one of the two that I never visited :) A lot of information that you'll get on tours and campus information sessions are also available on school's websites or through talking to current students/alumni. Also, if you need that confirmation that a school just "feels right" for you, you all will (hopefully) have Admitted Student Days/Weekends next year too that we didn't get.

Just visiting the campus probably won't do much for admissions at the most competitive places (might be good for safeties), because they'll give you the same standard spiel about how great their school is at every place. For me, it was far more important to personally interact with faculty at the places I planned to apply and in the areas I wanted to pursue. This gives far greater insight into specific programs and you often meet interesting people. I set up many of these meetings virtually.

It is somewhat important. However, I would pick a couple of schools that you are on the fence about to visit. Pick a few colleges that you are not sure about, because going there and seeing the college will decide if you are going to use your time applying to it or not.

If you have the opportunity to see campuses, I highly recommend it. Visiting is your best means of getting a glimpse into campus life and what the students and faculty at the university are like. Still, online tours may be your best option, but they will do!

VERY, you want to make sure you feel at home at your new school.

## **How did you structure and conduct your campus visit(s)? Road trips? Virtual? One school at a time?**

I only saw one school and it was in New York. I actually structured it at the same time my favorite band was having a concert, just so that I can use "college visit" to miss a Monday. I couldn't go see other colleges because they were in Korea and the virus broke out before I could go.

I just went on singular trips to the schools I thought I was most likely to attend; it saved a lot of time.

I traveled around with the TPA class offered at school. I would usually go to one school at a time.

## **What scholarships did you apply for or recommend? Would you do anything differently with regard to scholarships?**

I would recommend throwing your name into the hat for bigger scholarships (e.g. Coca-Cola, Bryan Cameron Impact, Jack Kent Cooke, full-ride scholarships at some big schools like the Jefferson Scholarship at UVA or the Morrill Scholarship at Ohio State). They can be a long shot, but having that much scholarship money to cover your undergrad education is a dream (especially if you plan to apply to grad school)!! Just make sure that you're applying to a college because you really want to go there--there are so many wonderful schools that may give out full rides or otherwise sizable merit aid, so don't apply to one for only that reason. Also, small scholarships make a big difference! Right now, it may not seem like it's worth your time to write an application or essay for a \$500 or \$1,000 scholarship, especially if you're looking at private/out-of-state/otherwise atrociously expensive schools, but they really do build up and make a dent in tuition.

The way scholarships work in Korea is different than in America, but from what my friends did, I would apply for as many scholarships as you can. It doesn't matter if it's for small money or big money, I would apply to as many.

Apply to literally any scholarship opportunity you may, and you will likely get at least one scholarship at one of the schools you applied to. Then, you're set.

Look at all scholarships available and shoot your shot.

## **What was/were the major influence(s) in selecting your college? Location? Academic reputation? Social life? Recommendations from an alum? Finances? Athletic participation? Other?**

One major influence was location for me, because I want to go to eventually live and work in South Korea. At first I was thinking of going to college here, doing study abroad in Korea, and then moving there after college however, I found a couple of articles stating that some businesses think that foreign degrees are a liability, because the individual was not able to make the necessary connections the college students in that country make. Another major influence is money. I am paying for college myself without parental help and cannot afford high college tuition. Thankfully tuition in South Korea is significantly cheaper than instate public tuition in the united states. Also reputation is a big thing. Because I am a foreigner and will be at a big disadvantage working in South Korea, I needed a college that will make me seem admirable and reliable compared to others, and make up for that disadvantage. Going to a more prestigious and higher ranking college there will help me more in the long run than just a small party school.

Although I wanted to find a school with everything I was looking for (a big school, with solid academics, close to home, affordable), it all came down to money in the end. I got my dream scholarship at a school that had everything I was searching for.

For me, this was partially based on academic reputation in addition to recommendations and conversations with students and professors who have had firsthand experience with the institutions and programs where I was admitted to.

My major influences are the program, people and social life.

## **Please add any other thoughts you want to share?**

Please be kind to and supportive of your friends during this process! You are all figuring this out as you go. If you're the type of person who is applying to extremely selective or prestigious schools, that doesn't mean that other people's college application process is less stressful or less important than yours. The same thing applies if your friends aren't going to a four-year university or are doing something like joining the workforce! Edit each other's essays, hit up a coffee shop for a study date together, etc.! It will make this whole tough application season a little bit easier and your friendships will be stronger as a result :) Finally, I know this may be tough and overwhelming and exhausting and all of the other negative adjectives, but please stay positive and take care of yourself! You got this! It will work out :)

The college admissions system is very complex, stupidly opaque, and SHOULD NOT have any bearing on your self-esteem. There are so many factors that go into your decision that you can't control. If you get into your top choice school with a trillion dollar scholarship, that is absolutely fantastic. If you don't, it means nothing about you other than that you're gonna be successful at a different school. This does not mean "don't try cause the establishment is gonna cheat you anyways", it means don't blame yourself if you don't end up with your ideal college scenario.

A lot of college admissions decisions seem pretty random, and there can often be a lot of luck involved. There are way too many qualified people competing for too few spots.

### **Alex Rohr's journey towards studying in South Korea and other advice:**

My story and the road I took in my college admission process started the end of junior year. After coming to the decision to go directly to South Korea and study there I started my research. No one in my family, friend circle, teachers or administrators knew anyone who went to college in South Korea. So I was all alone on this journey. It wasn't too overwhelming because once I knew what I wanted to study (something in business), I just had to pick a university.

I actually think I had an easier time than other people in school who maybe still didn't know what they wanted to do after high school or what to study. Because the U.S. is so big and there are many options, and students can feel overwhelmed. However, in my case, I knew where I wanted to study--Seoul, South Korea-- and I also knew that because I am American, finding a job in Korea would be harder than native Koreans or Asians in general. So I had to pick from the top universities, the ones who had an English track for the first two years, and that would allow me to have an easier path in getting a job right out of college. Once I found those colleges I noticed that their years were different than ours, which made my college admission process easier. Their 1st semester started in March and ended in June and their second semester started in August. This meant that I would have to apply for the 2nd semester, and I would have over a year to plan for it.

I did my own research about the colleges: departments, scholarships, professors, reputation, and tuition (which is significantly cheaper than the United States). Because I don't have the full support of my parents, I have to fund going to college by myself. This wasn't a big problem because I already was working part-time and I was already saving more than 75% of my paycheck, however, I did take up three jobs during the summer and was able to make almost enough to pay for all four years of college. Next was actually preparing for the process. A bonus was that none of them required or asked for an ACT/ SAT score, which was great because I had an average ACT score (26). They only look at GPA and credentials for admittance.

The hardest part for me was that information on the colleges I wanted to go to were not available on websites most other students used (common app, college board, over grad, etc.). So I had to find each college individually and go off of their websites. I also couldn't apply to 90% of the scholarships the school was notifying everyone about, because a qualification for them was that I had to pick a college--from their databases-- that I wanted to go to, but they only

had U.S. colleges. This meant that I couldn't get any scholarships or financial help unless they were from the college I was accepted into.

Because this was all new to me I had to have an efficient way of organizing all my research, plans, and colleges. I work better having everything written down and displayed on spreadsheets, so I composed all of my data on a spreadsheet and mapped out when I should be looking out for the admissions documents; Looking at past admission guidelines for what documents I need (which are a lot); And the timelines of those colleges. Thankfully I had some teachers and a counselor who filled out many handwritten rec letters and verification for each college, without any hesitation. This made it a little easier.

Overall I do not regret my decision on only applying to South Korean colleges and choosing this path for me. And I have so much gratitude for my teachers, counselor and friends who stood by me through this and helped out in every way they could.

If I would give any advice to an underclassman/ woman, it would be... it is perfectly fine if you don't have the best ACT score or SAT score. It's perfectly fine if your GPA isn't the best, or you are not going to the prestigious colleges out there. To be honest, all of that is overrated. The only thing you need to do is do what you like. Find a path-- no matter if it goes against your family, friends-- that YOU want to take. Just because no one else has walked that path, doesn't mean you can't build your own and walk on it yourself. Find at least one person who you can trust to tell you that you can do this and you are doing it for the right reasons. That person will help you throughout this whole process. I am thankful that my best friend and I share the fact that we both love Korea. Another would be to plan, make sure you don't miss your opportunity, know deadlines and have an organized way that you can work with and you can tell when something is coming up and when you should be preparing. One last thing is to get a job. Once you start earning your own money, (and saving it!) you can be free of everything around you. If I had my parents pay for college, they would have a say in my future, and I didn't want that (I even told them that). Even if your parents are helping you pay or you are not getting any help at all, having a job and some money can help you stay afloat, and help lessen your college debt.

### **A Final Thought from Madison Humphrey:**

I'm not sure whether it's good or tragic to see kids growing into adults earlier and earlier. On one hand it's beautiful to watch levels of maturity strive to their full potential so early on. But on the other I watch my younger sister break her neck everyday with the hopes of keeping straight A's thinking this is the best way to a good university. This is the same approach I took upon entering high school. The better grades, the school leaders, the athletic stunners, the club forerunners, the pressure. Most of all the pressure. High school is a competitive environment, which makes perfect sense because it's preparing us for the competitive world around us. During my four years at Sycamore I spread myself as thin as possible. I was a three sport varsity athlete for the school, student council representative, club leader/ starter, and group mentor. And though I loved everything I was doing I wish I had made it to a few more football games and seen my friends outside of Sycamores green and gold walls.

Sycamore was a beautiful place to grow into my skin. It fostered all the things I love about myself while at the same time changing me and turning me into the person I am now. The end of my junior year changed a lot for me. I had an impressive college application and resume a mile long but tied with that was a sense of regret that ate at the back of my head for the rest of the year. I never left the school at 2:20 when the final bell rang and though I was proud of all my hard work and accomplishments I wish I had taken more breaks and had more fun. Everything I had done and worked so hard at was to help me get into a good school. But the fact is just because the school is higher ranked doesn't mean it is what is right or better for me. On any job application they will ask what is your highest level of school, not what university did you attend. This was a huge eye opener for me because now I could start focusing less on what I thought I needed to do and more on what I wanted to. I made my senior year as stress free as possible while at the same time maintaining everything I loved to do. I applied to all my universities early action, meaning I submit the applications during the summer of my junior year. It was a win win because not only would I hear back earlier but I also had my senior year stress free and college ready.

My senior year came to end earlier than expected. When COVID-19 hit in the USA it was only a matter of time before schools closed for the year. I missed the 4th quarter of my senior year and prom and graduation were canceled. Though it was disappointing I couldn't finish my senior year, I had the best three quarters before it. I had fun with my friends and took hold of every senior opportunity I could. As much as I wish I could have finished the year like a typically

senior I am so grateful for my change in perspective my junior year. This has taught me just how important it is to take advantage of every moment you are given. Though stress is a part of every high school experience I am proud I was able to put myself and my happiness first before leaving high school.

*Madison Humphrey will be attending Alma College in Alma, Michigan in the fall of 2020, majoring in psychology, minoring in social work, and swimming for the college's team.*

The Gear Student to Student Forum Committee would like to thank ALL the 2020 Senior Share Panel members, as well as those who offered their words of advice in the responses above:

**Grace Berlier, Ohio State University - Marketing & Finance**

**Sam Barans, Michigan State University - English, Psychology, Theoretical Math**

**Madison Humphrey, Alma University (Michigan) - Psychology & Social Work**

**Hari Iyer, Harvard University (Boston) - Mathematics**

**Rohan Mathur, UC Berkeley (California) - Computer Science**

**Alex Rohr, Yonsei University (South Korea) - Business Administration**

**Lindsey Stevens, Ohio University - Special Education**

**Good Luck Aves!!!**

**Go Aves, beat Mason!!**

