



8 First Choices

**An Expert's Strategies
for Getting into College**

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INTRODUCTION

“I had a question, but now I’ve forgotten it” is what I hear most often from juniors and seniors who look in my door at the College Advising Office.

“Step right across that threshold,” I reply, “and I’ll bet you’ll remember it!” Sometimes students stand there for a minute or two before they remember two or three questions on their minds.

The second comment I hear most often from seniors is, “Ms. Mitchell, wait until I tell you my dream about getting into college! You won’t believe it—I dreamed it was raining college applications!”

How on earth do you suppose the college selection process got to be such a scary task? Was it always like this? Maybe you’re like the high school students I know who ask, “Isn’t there some way to make it easier?” “How do I know if I want a big college or a small one?” “Should I go to one in the North or South, East or West?” “Isn’t there some way to get around all of this judging and evaluating by people who don’t even know me and still have some dignity left?” No, it wasn’t always like this. And no, there isn’t any way around being evaluated by the dean. The good news is that *Eight First Choices* will help.

After being the college counselor at two Connecticut public high schools and two private high schools (one in New Jersey and one in New York City), writing two college newspaper columns (one for the *Hardwick Gazette* in northeastern Vermont, the other a college column for the public school students of mainland China) and spending more than thirty-five years visiting and writing about college campuses, I decided to write a book for all of you college-bound high school students who want to get a handle on the process before everyone else tells you where to go to college. This book is also for those of you who don’t have a counselor, teacher, or parents who know the college process. And it’s for those of you who do have a college counselor but want to get the whole picture of what’s going on before you go to your own guidance office to ask your questions.

I have one goal for writing this book: To help you understand the college selection process so that you will know that you are in control. Understanding the process makes it possible for you to make good decisions about where you want to go after high school. You will learn how to evaluate yourself, how to research the colleges accurately, and how to win the heart of the admissions dean by communicating and personalizing those evaluations to the colleges. Throughout the college selection process, the emphasis will be on you, a particular student looking for a special college.

Seven Basic Assumptions

Over the many years that I have worked with high school students as they have chosen their colleges, I have developed seven basic assumptions and facts that are unique to my college selection program. *Eight First Choices* is based on these seven assumptions:

1. Choose eight first choices.

You can't choose your college until the college has chosen you. In the fall of your senior year, you are establishing options for April decision making. You must choose where you hope to attend from the list of those colleges where you got in, not from where you applied. You will prioritize your college list only *after* you know the decisions the colleges have made about your applications. That's a major difference. Your family and friends often don't take this into account when they ask, "What's your first choice?" Do not prioritize your applications—think eight first choices. When others ask, name your final eight—your "eight first choices."

2. You are in charge.

The second basic assumption is that you are in charge. And that's new. Usually your parents and teachers have been in charge. They have had the last word. They know you. They know what's best for you. For the first time, you will have the last word. You are going to depend on how well you know yourself, and it's possible that some of your values are different from those of your parents and teachers. You are going to decide what is best for you.

3. Make a friend of your advocates.

People usually don't know how they make decisions. We are going to build our program around the unconscious aspects of decision making, as well as what we do know about winning the heart. No matter how you feel about them, you are going to make a friend of your guidance counselor and of the college representatives who come to your high school. Your guidance counselor will write your school recommendation to the colleges describing you to the college dean. The college dean is not going to call your favorite teacher or coach to ask them questions about your application; the dean will call your guidance counselor. You can't afford not to know—or to be less than friendly—with that counselor. Find out the name of the college admissions dean or college representative coming to your school, the so-called “designated advocate” at the college for your application. Start by knowing that person's name and how to spell it correctly. You can't afford not to know—or to be less than friendly—with your designated advocate at the college.

4. SATs and ACTs don't get you in.

No SAT score will get you in. Harvard and Stanford turn away about half of their 800 perfect scores. Half. That's a lot of denial letters going out to perfect scores—but that doesn't mean that they were perfect applicants. A verbal 650 and a math 650 on your SATs won't keep you out of any college or university. Once you are in the SAT range of the colleges on your list, don't spend another hour or another dollar to raise your SATs an insignificant 20 or 30 points. Instead, spend your resources (time and money) in the classroom, on the playing fields, in the arts rooms, reading, and winning the heart of the admissions dean.

5. The college market is not a tight market.

The fifth basic assumption that students should make is that there are hundreds of colleges and universities with different campus cultures and high academic standards all over America that you will love and that are a great match for you. Every high school student who takes the college prep curriculum will find many colleges who want him or her. Contrary to what you read in the media, there is no shortage of colleges. We have more than 2,400 four-year accredited, fascinating

colleges and universities in the United States. Don't get stuck on having to go to only the few that you've heard of. What you must keep in mind is that you will like best what you know best. Therefore, your task is to know several "best." Don't keep knowing one college better and better, because that's how you fall into the trap of "I've got to go to Williams and only to Williams." Ask yourself, "What is it that I like so much about Williams? What else is out there like it, with less competition for admission?"

6. Personalize the process.

The sixth and most important basic assumption of *Eight First Choices*, and for you to repeat every morning while you are brushing your teeth, is this one: There are three major steps in the college selection process: (a) assess yourself, (b) research the colleges, and (c) personalize. But the greatest of these is personalize. Personalize. Personalize!

7. Be authentically and specifically you.

The seventh and last assumption to remember is that college admissions deans are looking for ways to choose one qualified student over another. Your job is to give it to them! They are looking for authentic applicants. Find ways to express your authenticity.

When the college selection job is well done, you will have several colleges to choose from in the spring of your senior year, several campuses where you will want to go. This book will help you develop your own list of colleges with your academic record and your interests, values, and aspirations in mind. Read *Eight First Choices* thoroughly and refer to it often. Plan early, think carefully, and use all the resources available to you.

Remember that you are not in this college selection process by yourself—you're on a team. Your high school teachers, advisors, guidance counselor, principal, and coaches join you and your parents in working things out. They are your advocates. They will send your records and letters of recommendation, and they will highlight your strengths as they talk to the college admissions deans about you. They will help you gather the necessary information to make a good college decision. Therefore, while you're gathering the data about yourself and the colleges, think of it as "teamwork." You'll need advocates to

help you get where you want to go. It's exciting to choose your college. It's a great adventure. Enjoy it!

How Eight First Choices Will Help

This book will expand your view of what's out there by teaching you to research the hundreds of colleges and universities in America that provide you with more options than students anywhere else in the world. It will show you the specifics that the college admissions deans are looking for, so that you will learn how to best communicate who you are and why you want to go to their colleges. *Eight First Choices* was written to give you ideas and examples you can use to describe who you are and what you want.

When I meet high school students who want to get started in the college selection process, I always begin the conversation in the same way. It doesn't matter whether they are from New York City, or northern Vermont, or Auckland, New Zealand, or Beijing, China. I start by having students tell me what kind of students they are. I want to know what they like to study, what they are looking for in a college, how independent they are, how much structure they like, how social they are, how interested they are in the performing arts, in sports, in reading. My purpose in all of these questions isn't to find "right" answers but to get them thinking in very specific terms. If a senior tells me that she swims, I ask her which events and how fast. It's not that colleges are looking for statistics in swimming, but they are looking for the particular details of those things that make you unique. Being specific and being "authentically you" are the only ways that you can separate yourself from your classmates and the rest of the applicant pool (the group of applicants applying to the same college).

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You are going to learn how to assess yourself as you begin to research colleges. You will make all kinds of decisions about which aspects of you to highlight on your applications. And you are going to decide which interesting specifics about your life, interests, and studies