

Introduction

The Genesis of Our Educational Consultancy

We are a mother (Lillian)-daughter (Jennifer) team of educational consultants. While writing this book, we were often reminded of Jennifer's college application process. Although we couldn't have known it at the time, that experience turned out to be the genesis of our consulting service.

We first began thinking about Jennifer's college prospects in her sophomore year of high school. Even back then, the selectivity ratio was daunting. Everyone kept calling college admissions a "crap shoot," which sounded precarious and intimidating.

As a Canadian, Lillian had applied to one college—late on a school night, after TV and homework. It never occurred to her to apply to more than one school. But by the time Jennifer was approaching college age, we lived in the ultra-competitive Northeast. College was a defining status symbol, a brand plastered on sweatshirts, hats, and rear windshields. College lists ran to double digits in length, with separate columns for "safeties," "probables," and "reaches." We decided that rather than avoid the system, we would learn it.

What we have learned since that experience, in more than two decades working with hundreds of students and speaking with numerous admissions officers, is that the college-admissions process actually isn't a crap shoot. As with preparation for any other activity—from a sports

tournament to a job interview—following a smart, step-by-step strategy makes success far more likely. Over the years, we have refined our own proven strategy, which we now call “be alike but spike.” The reasons for “being alike”—that is, performing at least as well as other top applicants, specifically in the academic arena—are simple. First, admissions officers don’t want to admit students who can’t succeed in the classroom. Four years of academic struggle isn’t fair to the student and reflects poorly on the college. The second reason is less “altruistic.” Each year there is intense pressure on college administrators to boost or maintain their school’s rank on the *U.S. News & World Report* lists (“Top Universities,” “Best Small Colleges,” and so on). The academic performance statistics of incoming students heavily influence these rankings. Thus, while accepting candidates with below-average GPAs and SAT scores does happen, it’s rare. Today, colleges simply expect applicants to fit in.

As we will show, however, *just* fitting in with other top students isn’t enough; admissions officers routinely claim that more than 80 percent of applicants fall within their desired metrics. Successful applicants also have to stand out, or “spike,” in some specific area. Contrary to an old myth, selective colleges don’t desire well-rounded *students* as much as well-rounded *classes*. Of course, colleges don’t want their students to be completely one-dimensional, but they do want each student to contribute a special attribute or skill to the college community. They want a superb musician, a star athlete, a master mathematician, and a brilliant dancer. By combining these kinds of students, admissions officers strive to create a vibrant, diverse, and multidisciplinary campus community. The well-rounded student may do each of these activities, but through lack of focus probably won’t end up doing any of them really, really well.

With this in mind, we knew that Jennifer needed to stand out from the thousands of applicants competing with her. We thought back to areas in which Jennifer had always excelled. Once we identified this interest—something Jennifer *chose* to do when she didn’t *need* to do anything—she went through a process very similar to the one we describe in our book.

Like the students in our case studies, she was incredibly lucky to have parents who helped her cultivate her interest, which happened to be art. Through a process we now call “layering,” we sought out art-related summer programs, internships, jobs, and volunteer opportunities. Each opportunity led to and built on the others. By Jennifer’s senior year, she had developed her interest in the arts into an area of true distinction.

While Jennifer was developing and layering her passion, she was also making sure that her grades and standardized test scores compared well with those of other students applying. When she applied to college, she was competitive in all respects and outstanding in one. Receiving acceptances from the schools she applied to was both exciting and rewarding.

It’s common to hear people tell you to do what you love. And it makes sense: the only way you’re going to be great at something is if you genuinely love practicing and perfecting it. This book shows you how to create opportunities to do what you love—or at least what you’re interested in (as we’ll describe later, high school students often tell us that they only *love* video games or hanging out with their friends, so at first we brainstorm activities they *like*.) At the same time, this book shows you how to match other top applicants’ academic performance. (The “be alike” half of our strategy shouldn’t be confused with social conformity, let alone mediocrity. What you’re conforming to is simply the standards set by the colleges you want to attend.) While we can’t promise Princeton-level GPAs and SAT averages, we can provide strategies for maximizing your ability within the high school system.

What *In!* Covers

In! covers all aspects of the college application process, explaining everything from course selection to creating a college list to essay writing and interview preparation. Following our strategy, we have organized the book into four parts:

Part I: “Be Alike.” This section shows you how to match—if not outdo—admitted applicants’ performance in certain key areas. In the chapters devoted to academic achievement, standardized testing, and in-school leadership, you will learn everything you need to do for your academic record to equal or surpass that of other successful candidates at the colleges to which you are applying.

Part II: “Spike.” The second section of this book is about *not* being alike. While successful applicants must perform on a par with other students applying to similar colleges, they must also work to become highly distinctive—like a spike on a graph—in one area. (Remember, it’s often the “well-rounded student,” an ideal that many applicants strive toward, who gets rejected.) In this section, we show you how to create that distinction by isolating a passion and layering it, showcasing it in many different ways and under many different circumstances.

Part III: “Pulling It All Together: Being Alike and Spiking on the College Application.” As we tell our students, your college application has an important job to do: it’s four or five pages that must represent some seventeen years of your life. Part III first explains how to prepare to apply—by creating a working college list based on your preferences and visiting those colleges. It then illustrates how to create an application—activity charts, essays, letters of recommendation, interviews, and supplementary materials—that instantly and effectively shows admissions officers that you will be both a comfortable fit and a distinctive asset at their college.

Part IV: “College and Beyond.” The final part of *In!* demonstrates that the skills you develop in your college application process have long-lasting benefits and direct applicability to post-college life. From exploring a passion to acing an interview, these skills will not only get you into top-ranked schools but also lay the groundwork for real-world success.

How to Use This Book

There are two ways to use *In!* First, and ideally, you can read it from end to end. Used this way, it provides a strategy—no matter how early or late in the process you begin—for getting into the school of your dreams.

The second way to use this book is as a reference for specific topics. Need help with letters of recommendation? Check out Chapter 10, “Letters of Recommendation.” Confused about which classes to take? See Chapter 1, “Academic Achievement.” You get the picture.

Note: The part that we most strongly recommend reading from start to finish is Part II, “Spike” (Chapters 4 and 5). In it, you’ll learn, through brainstorming and case studies, how to figure out what you’re interested in and fully develop that interest. You’ll see how small, simple steps can, over time, add up to a big impact.

Parents’ Role

We realize that just as parents are generally the first to inquire about our educational service, they are also likely to be the purchasers of this book. Although it is written primarily for students, we know that few students have the time to think about a comprehensive college strategy while studying for standardized tests, engaging in extracurriculars, completing classroom assignments, and yes, squeezing in some fun. At the same time, we are well aware that being a parent is tricky. While we all understand that college is a major family expense and the university your child will attend often has long-lasting implications, parents still need to walk the fine line between being involved and not *too* involved, being helpful and not *too* helpful. Interference can backfire. Here is some advice we’ve shared with families:

First, trust your instincts. As a parent, you’ve gotten this far!

Expect the college application process to be an extension of your existing relationship. How have you worked with your child in the past? Has it been a close partnership, or have you helped from behind the scenes? Whatever the dynamic, it will probably continue (with a few bumps) in much the same fashion.



"It's a lot of pressure on me not to pressure him."

Many parents worry about getting too involved. While we understand this concern—especially in light of the media coverage given to the “helicopter parent” phenomenon—we’d also ask you to consider the findings of the March 2007 College Board study. Over 1,700 students who recently completed the college application process were asked about parental involvement in that process. Their findings? More than 95 percent said their parents were “involved to some degree” or “very involved” in their college application process. Of that 95 percent, more than 60 percent were very happy with their parents’ level of involvement. However, 30 percent wished their parents had been *more* involved. This figure rises to 40 percent among students with lower SAT scores and household incomes. Only 6 percent wished their parents had been *less* involved.*

* “High school students want parents to be more involved in college planning,” CollegeBoard studentPOLL, vol. 6, issue 1, 2007, http://www.collegeboard.com/about/news_info/report.html.

The takeaway lesson? Parental over-involvement may be less of an issue than previously assumed. Again, trust your instincts: even though your kids may nag, complain, or scream, chances are they are secretly grateful for your support and glad that they're not confronting this stressful and time-consuming process on their own.

Finally, although students are often grateful for parental support, keep in mind that colleges want to learn about your child, not you. We often tell parents that their job is that of an unpaid intern: to schedule, organize, proofread, review, and plan. While you should never write your child's essay, you can check for spelling errors or grammar mistakes. While you should never accompany your child into an interview, you can schedule her interview and make sure she arrives on time. Is there a question about tour and information session dates? That's a call you can make. A question about course requirements for a bio major versus a pre-med major? That's a call your son or daughter should make. (For more on this topic, see pages 150–52).

How Is Our Book on College Admissions Different?

In! differs from others of its kind in a few important ways. First, while many other books on college admissions explain (with varying degrees of success) how students can make the most of individual components of the application—for example, essays, standardized test scores, or interviews—no other book helps students combine all these elements into a more comprehensive and more effective strategy. For example, we don't just show you how to create an outstanding activity chart; we explain how to create a chart that reveals to admissions officers the ways in which you are both comparable to and distinct from other applicants. Given the intense competition surrounding college admissions, it's not enough to create a successful application piecemeal; the pieces must function together as a seamless whole.

Second, our book shows students how to identify and cultivate an area of interest that will make their application unique. Many students arrive

at our offices convinced that they are exactly the same as all their friends, with no unique hobbies or interests. After a little digging, however, genuine interests emerge. Yet even after isolating these interests, many students aren't sure how to explore and expand them, so that they evolve from hobbies into passions. By providing case studies, examples, and resource lists, we explain how to cultivate the activity that makes you stand out.

Third, and most importantly, *In!* shows how small steps can add up to large accomplishments. Passions are not created in giant leaps, but rather through small, thoughtful steps in a specific direction. Students are always surprised at how seemingly trivial activities can lead to opportunities they might never have expected—and how this process can lay the foundation for a lifetime of creative exploration.

Finally, unlike most books about “getting in,” our story doesn't end at high school graduation and acceptance into college. Exploring a passion through varied channels is not just a strategy that gets you into college. It's something our most successful students do again and again throughout their college, postgraduate, and professional careers. As in college admissions, equaling your professional peers in the basics is expected. At the same time, developing a special talent or niche is almost always a prerequisite for professional success, whether you're a pro football player or a tax lawyer. Similarly, interviewing well, creating a strong “activity chart” or résumé, obtaining positive recommendations, and maximizing a financial-aid package are all skills that matter after college. Perhaps the only form that makes a financial-aid form look simple is a mortgage application.

Rather than viewing college admissions as something to be dealt with as quickly and painlessly as possible, we see it both as an opportunity and as a crucial stage in any young person's development. It's an important opportunity to mature, expand your horizons, and discover what makes you tick. We have repeated our college-preparation process with hundreds of families all over the country and the world; it works. Not only does *In!* “get you in,” but it also gives you the tools and confidence you'll need for future success.

About Us

A graduate of McGill University, **Lillian Luterman** has been advising students on college and boarding school admissions since 1989, but has been involved in education throughout her career. Having a master's degree in speech pathology and counseling, Lillian has worked with students of all levels and backgrounds, from those with learning disabilities to gifted students aiming for the top-tier colleges. She lives with her husband in Westport, Connecticut.

A graduate of Harvard College with a master's degree from Cambridge University (U.K.) and an MBA from Harvard Business School, **Jennifer Bloom** began working with her mother in 2005. Previously she spent more than ten years in marketing and advertising. She has worked for companies such as American Express and Ogilvy & Mather, creating and launching new services as well as award-winning advertising campaigns. She lives with her family in New York City.

Together, Luterman and Bloom founded Entryway Inc., providing premier counseling and specialized workshops.