

3 WAYS TO *stand out* FROM THE CROWD AS YOU APPLY TO COLLEGE



The most important—and difficult—college assignment you'll ever get comes before you set foot on campus, or even know what school you'll attend. That assignment? Telling a compelling story about yourself in your college application.

It's hard enough to boil down four years of academic and extracurricular accomplishments into concise, clear answers to the admissions questions. Then, you also need to explain what makes you unique and what you can contribute to the student body of your desired university—that certain something that's going to help you stand out from the crowd of highly qualified candidates. And you only get one chance to grab your dream college's attention and shine. **It's a tall order, for sure.**

These are my *Top Tips* for college candidates to **stand out** from the crowd:

identify your key messages

The most important thing you can do to stand out from the crowd is to be consistent and clear in how you talk about yourself and your accomplishments. In the business world, these are called key messages. You should have no more than three.

How can you possibly boil down everything you've achieved over the last four years into just three messages?

You need to look for the themes that tie it all together. Take Camila for example. She's the captain of her school's basketball team, first chair clarinet player in the band, and teaches Sunday School at her church. Rather than focus on those activities themselves, Camila could create a key message about being a natural leader in any situation. She could use basketball, band, and church to

demonstrate the accuracy of that claim, talk about what she's learned from those experiences, and share how she plans to act as a leader at her future university.

Voila! Using a key message about natural leadership, Camila has woven together seemingly disparate activities—basketball, band and church—into a cohesive story that will be more memorable to college admissions.

They don't even need to remember what the actual activities were—and they won't! What they'll remember is that Camila is a leader. She did the hard mental work for them of connecting her accomplishments to a bigger idea, asserting what it means about her, and demonstrating that she's already thinking about how she can apply what she's learned as a student of her future college. This is masterful communication, and anyone can do it with just a little extra effort.

If this extra effort sounds daunting, consider how much more memorable Camila will be compared with another applicant who focuses solely on trying to impress admissions with a laundry list of his achievements. Like Camila, he may have held various leadership positions. But he won't stand out from the crowd because he didn't connect it all together and tell a cohesive story like Camila did. His application will look just like everyone else's—impressive, but easily forgettable.

Now that we've combined so many of Camila's accomplishments—in sports, music and church—into just one key message around leadership, you may have a new worry. Rather than having a hard time

Be *consistent* and *clear*

in how you talk about

yourself and your

accomplishments.

boiling everything down into only three ideas, now we've grouped all of Camila's accomplishments into just one key message. What could be left for the other two?

Let's look a little deeper. In Camila's case, she plans to major in engineering and knows she's much more well-rounded than the typical applicant, who's been building robots in her parent's basement for the past four years. Camila could create a key message about how engineers must be versatile to succeed in the business world or for the engineering college to be relevant across the university, and how she helps achieve that goal with her varied background.

Another key message could be focused on Camila's heritage as a Latina woman, and how she plans to contribute to related groups on campus, or how she'll help increase diversity within the engineering school and in that field after she graduates.



WHAT YOU *have done*



WHAT YOU *will do*

Bottom line: There are so many angles you can take to your three key messages. Just be sure you're looking for the themes that tie everything together rather than listing activities or accomplishments one by one.

Look forward

You may have noticed that in each of the themes above, we bridged from what Camila did in the past to what she planned to do in the future—how her leadership, well-roundedness and heritage could contribute to the university once she arrived. That needs to be an integral part of each of your key messages.

Once again, it's about doing the hard mental work for the admissions committee by making a direct tie between what you've done so far and what you will do for them as a member of their student body. Most applicants won't proactively communicate that connection so when you do, you'll stand out from the crowd and be memorable.

ask great questions

If there's a place in the application to add miscellaneous comments or final thoughts, use it to share the questions you have for the admissions committee. No one else will do this—they'll make it all about themselves and getting in one last plug for their qualifications.

But since you'll already have aced that part based on the tips above, you can use this section to showcase your ability to ask thoughtful questions, providing a preview of the way you'll show up in the classroom once you arrive on campus.

The key here is to ask truly thoughtful questions that tie to the themes in your key messages to further reinforce those ideas about you. Generic questions like "What's life on campus like?" won't work here. Remember, this is about taking one last chance to show the kind of thinker you are.

For Camila, thoughtful questions for each of her key themes could be:

natural leader

Beyond the obvious opportunities with clubs or groups, what student leadership opportunities are there at your university?

What problems can I help solve in my classroom, in my dormitory, or elsewhere by using my natural leadership capabilities?

well rounded

How can I best apply my varied background within the engineering school?

How can I make my experiences contribute most positively to the overall student body?

heritage

What feedback do you receive from your Latino students about what it's like to attend your university?

How do Latino retention, graduation, and job placement rates compare to your other graduates?

How can I help drive any needed improvements in these areas on behalf of all students?

In each of the examples above, Camila is reinforcing her key themes, asking thought-provoking questions that demonstrate sophisticated thinking, and focusing on how she can contribute to the university. If you don't have an opportunity to share these types of questions in the application, you can save them for any interviews you may

do as part of the application or scholarship process (by the way, interviewing skills are an entirely different subject with a whole other set of advice—stay tuned for my thoughts on that in the future!). Regardless of where you get to ask them, I promise these types of questions will make you stand out from your competition.

LET'S MAKE IT *happen!*

When you're close to something, it's hard to see it objectively. And there's nothing more personal than your accomplishments—after all, they're yours! They're what you've stayed up late studying for. What you've tirelessly hustled down the field or court for. What you've woken up early and stayed up late to achieve every day for the past four years.

You need someone who can objectively consider your accomplishments and how to represent them in the best way possible. Someone who can see patterns in what you've achieved and what drives you, and help you tell a compelling story about how it all fits together and makes you unique. **That's where I come in!**

I've spent 15 years helping companies clearly communicate about themselves to those who matter to their success. You're up against the exact same challenge as those companies—clearly communicating what you've done to those who matter to your success. And just like those companies, you need to stand out in a fiercely competitive situation. Together, we'll clearly synthesize your hard work and accomplishments into a compelling case for why you're the ideal college candidate, using the ideas shared here and much more!

“

Stef showed me how to develop key messages about myself and continually reinforce them, ensuring the scholarship committee understood what makes me unique. I went into the interview feeling confident because no matter what I was asked, I knew I could relate it back to one of my key points.

- **SAM ROSE** | Class of 2020, Champlin Park High School
Recipient of University of Minnesota Presidential Scholarship and
College of Science and Engineering Freshman Scholarship

Stef helped boost Sam's confidence as he prepared for his scholarship interview. It was invaluable to have the input of another trusted adult who wasn't one of Sam's parents. Stef put the best thinking from her corporate communications career to work for our son, and it made a huge difference.

- **JULIE ROSE** | Sam's mom

”

Want more info on how to create key messages? [Access a free webinar replay and key messages worksheet](#) to learn more.

Need help to make it happen? Short on time and need help fast? [Contact me.](#)



Sch