

COLLEGE GUIDE

2012

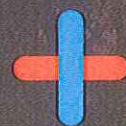
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STRATEGIES

FOR LATE SAVERS

BE THE INSIDER

EVERYTHING YOU NEED TO KNOW
TO GET INTO AND AFFORD
THE COLLEGE OF YOUR DREAMS

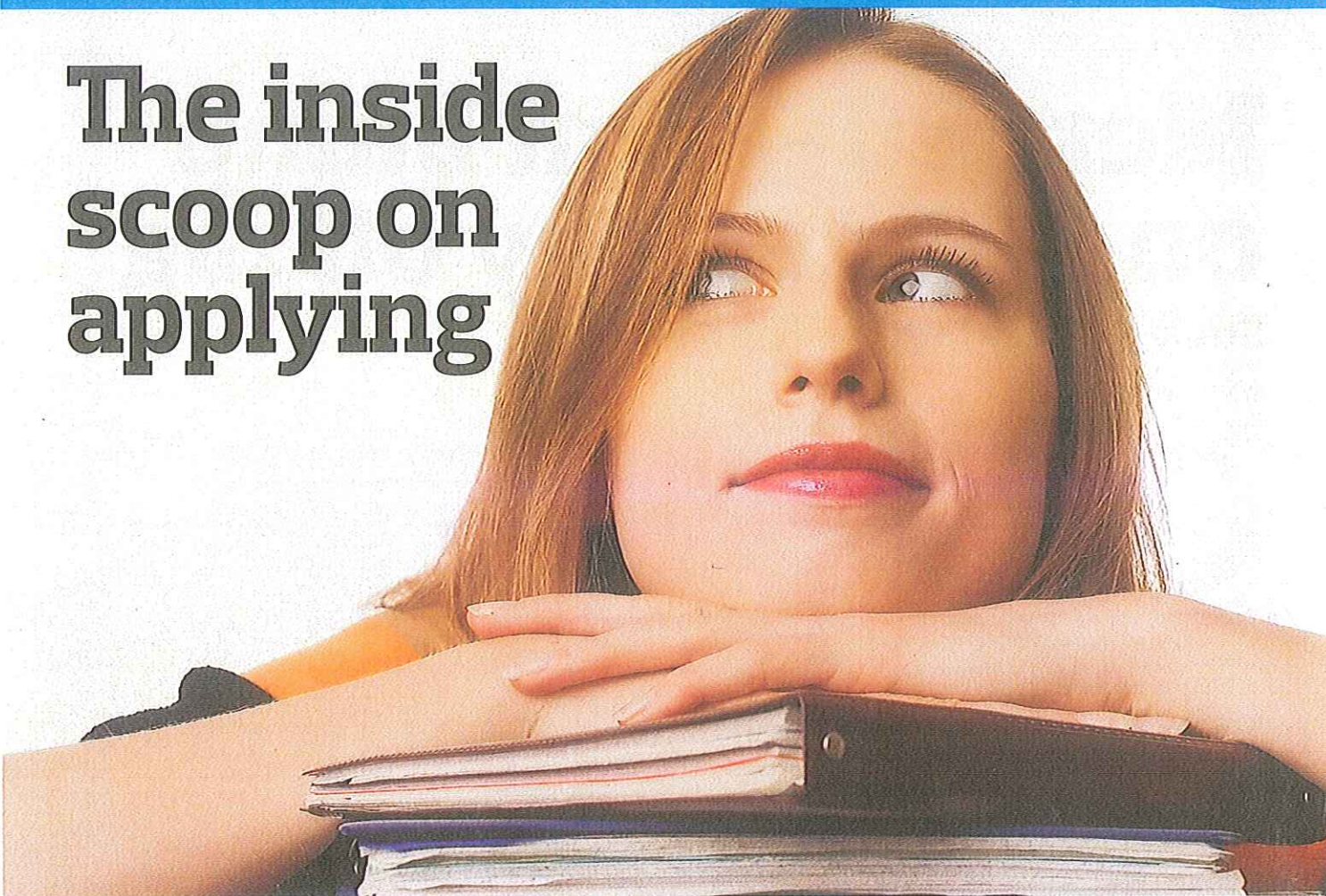
*Polk Place is the central
quad at the University of
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our spotlight schools. P. 57*

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The inside scoop on applying



SWAMPED. SCARED. OVERWHELMED. The teenagers about to undergo the arduous process of applying to college find much to fear and fret over, as do their parents and guardians. Will they make the right choice? Will they be accepted? Can they afford it?

Robin Mamlet, former dean of admissions at Stanford University, Swarthmore College, and Sarah Lawrence College, and writer Christine VanDeVelde teamed up to produce a book that can help ease that rite of passage. *College Admission: From Application to Acceptance, Step By Step* (Three Rivers Press) was published in August. The authors shared their insights and advice with USA TODAY's Larry Weisman.

Q *Why is the college admission process so fraught with tension and terror? What don't kids and parents know that would enable them to relax a bit?*

RM: The antidote to the frenzy is information, and that's why we wrote the book. The more you arm yourself with information and know how to move through this calmly, the better off you're going to be. Panic is a distraction. It takes energy away from what people should be doing—learning about themselves and what they care about, finding the colleges that have that, and doing a good job representing themselves on an application so the colleges can see who they are.

CV: Part of the message of this book is: "Calm down." For parents, it's a big, expensive decision. But it has the added anxiety of being the decision that will take your child out of your household. One of the things I wrote about in the foreword to the book is that a dear family friend said to me while I was fretting over the decision and my daughter leaving home, 'Oh, it's just another part of the adventure.' And she was right. It's not the last important decision you're ever going to make. It's not the most important decision you're ever going to make. It's just another segment of the journey.

Q *Which factor seems to be the most important in admissions decisions?*

CV: One of the things that was most surprising to me was that the single most important thing in a college's decision about whether to admit a student is the academic record. And that's the courses you take and the grades you get. That makes sense because students are being evaluated to become members of a learning community.

Q *Perhaps another adult mistake is being unmindful of the emotional drain for the teens as they embark on this seemingly endless parade of tests, essays, and comparisons with their friends and competition for college acceptance.*

RM: My advice to parents is, don't underestimate how stressful this can be



for your students, and that this is a very different ballgame than the one we were in.

CV: Parents and other adults constantly underestimate how much work it is to apply to college. I've heard it compared to taking an additional AP course.

Q *How important is it for the student to have a major in mind before applying?*

CV: The majority of applicants, I've been told, are undecided as far as their majors. Unless you're applying to a specific degree program—for instance an architecture program or an art institute—your choice of major, especially as an applicant, is not really important.

RM: I think that there are certain areas of study where students need to be aware of whether a college is strong in it. If you want to be an engineer or go into the arts, you need to make sure that you're finding a place that is at least strong in that area. But I do think that one of the great luxuries of going to college in the United States is that you don't need to know what you're going to be for the rest of your life when you're 17. We know from our experience you rarely have just one career, and the best

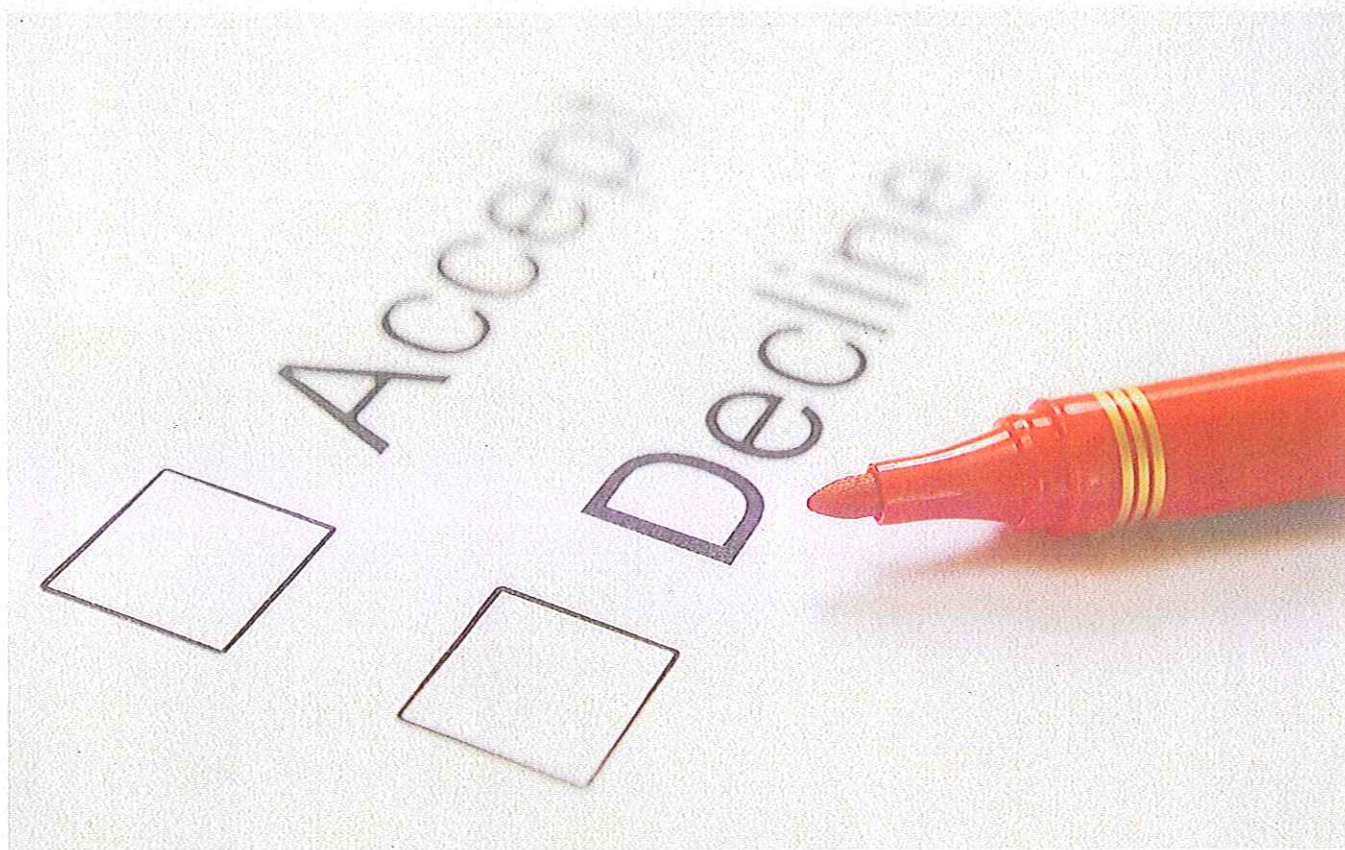
education teaches you how to think and learn and be prepared to excel at any number of things rather than just one. This is a time when young people should be finding out what's important to them and learning about a whole variety of things that weren't necessarily available when their parents were in school. If they do that well, they will come out of that prepared for a world that we can't yet envision.

Q *You say that colleges value sincerity: How do admissions people pick out what they believe is fake?*

RM: These are professionals. You do it year in and year out and you read so many applications. What students need to remember is not that they might be caught but that phoniness hurts them, it obscures who they are, and it makes it harder for the colleges to distinguish them from one another. The perfect applicant is an illusion. Mom and Dad? Hands off the essay.

CV: As one dean of admissions said, "Do they think I don't know what a 45-year-old investment banker sounds like?" When they look at an SAT score and an essay and there's a disconnect,

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that's going to tell them something. In terms of trying to invent a resume, there are many ways they can see it. All of a sudden a kid has a lot of community service at the end of his junior year with no evidence of it before. The student may present himself or herself as a leader and yet the recommendations don't support that or the extracurricular activities don't. The fact is that admission is not infallible. Any parent reading this will immediately call to mind an example of a kid who they thought should not have gotten in somewhere. Kids go really wrong with the preconceived idea of what colleges want and not being themselves. If you asked deans of admission which essays they most enjoyed, they're not essays about discovering a planet. They're often essays about baby-sitting for their kid sisters every Wednesday night and the meal that they all made together or holidays traditions that a family has. They're looking for science-prize winners, but they're also looking for nice kids who make the dorm floor that they are on feel like a good place to live.

Q *What really goes on in the war room as applicants are accepted or turned down?*

RM: I don't have a satisfactory answer

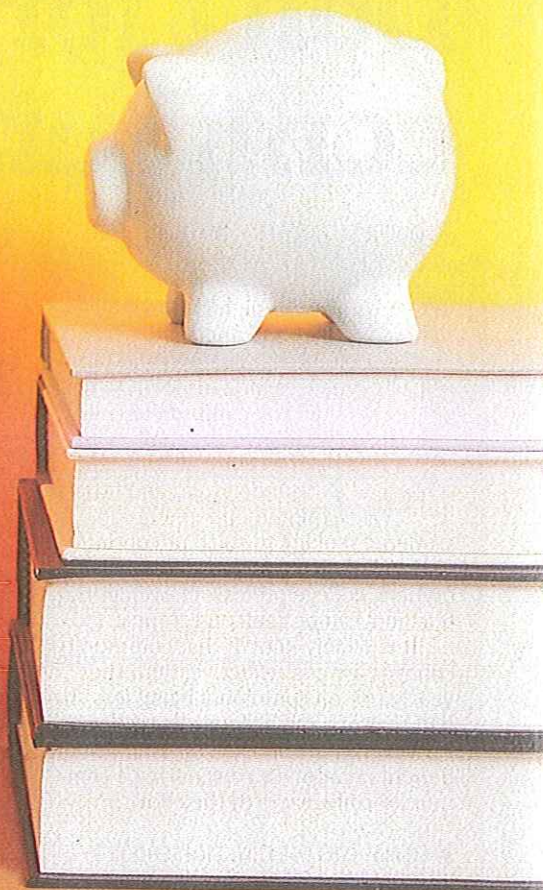
for you here and I'll tell you why. It varies from college to college and, within those colleges, from dean to dean. When I was at Stanford, what happened is very different from what happens with my successor. It's not a different set of values in what the college is looking for but a different approach or a different way to move through the applications. What students need to be aware of is how to find out what they care about most and what colleges have for them and then to depict who they are in the application so the application readers can see that and make good matches. The majority of students coming into any class at almost every college are students who don't have a hook. They just get in because they are good.

Q *How about three do-this tips and three don't-do-that warnings?*

RM: Be a savvy consumer and learn about the process. Second, don't abdicate your role in figuring out which colleges are truly right for you because these are the colleges you will not only thrive in but stand the best chance of getting in because the colleges will see the fit. Be authentic. As far as don'ts? Don't become hijacked by the frenzy. Keep your eye

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on the prize. Don't let yourself become distorted into someone you're not because you think that's what the colleges want—they may not. Be you—that's your best shot. And third would be: Don't over-apply. Keep your applications to a reasonable number, eight to 10 tops, so that you can learn deeply about the colleges of greatest interest to you.

Q *Financial aid strikes most people as a scary area to explore. Apparently, though, the money is out there. What's the best way to pursue these dollars?*

RM: The first thing students have to do is apply. What's really important is that students from families where four-year colleges are not the norm understand that they too can dream big and that financial aid is available

for them. The number of people who disqualify themselves before they even begin because they think they can't afford it is a national tragedy. The families that are applying need to observe the deadlines, visit the college websites, and make sure they are in the pipeline for everything that is available.

CV: This statistic blew my mind. The American Council on Education reported that in 2006, 1.8 million students who [probably] would have qualified for federal and financial aid did not apply. That's astounding. If you don't file for federal financial aid, you often will not be eligible for some state scholarships and other private scholarships. There are financial aid calculators that are required for every college that will tell you what you might qualify for and what college might cost you out of your pocket. The College Board has really good resources. Federal student aid is at www.studentaid.ed.gov. There's a fantastic website called www.finaid.org. I would say those are your best

bets. The other resource is the financial aid office at the colleges. You should definitely educate yourself before you go in there.

Q *In the end, don't most students tend to wind up where they most hoped to be?*

RM: Yup. The studies show eight out of 10 end up in the colleges that were their first choice. If you do the work right—and it's not rocket science—you can go through the process well. The reality is, and the great tragedy of our country is, a lot of people are not dreaming big enough. They can go to great colleges and financial aid is there for them and they shouldn't disqualify themselves before they get started. So many students need to dream bigger, and think bigger, and know that this is a world they can enter and that it is going to transform their lives. For a whole lot of students, the message is: Don't aim too low. 