



ADMISSIONS INSIGHTS FROM HEATHER MCCUTCHEN

Former Admissions Officer
at Dartmouth College

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Heather McCutchen worked as an admissions reader at her alma mater, Dartmouth College. For our Former Admissions Officer interview series, Heather tells us about her role as a writer working in the admissions field, how she advises students - especially budding writers - to build an impressive application profile, what Dartmouth looks for in its applicants, and more.

How was being a Dartmouth student different from being an admissions reader?

As a student it's all about your personal journey - it's much more about do you get in, do you have a good room, do you have nice roommates? It's all about your own experience, whereas working for admissions it's really about making decisions that are going to be for

the whole community. As an admissions reader, you're more aware of the full texture of the university:, of its long- term goals, its budgets, the priorities in terms of what it's looking for from each incoming class, and more.

How did you get involved in the admissions field and how did your experience as a writer play a part in your role as an admissions reader?

When I first worked for admissions, I was hired as a writer to create promotional materials for Dartmouth's website and for their brochures. So what was interesting about that was that I was involved in all of the strategy sessions and research. I was interviewing and talking with the deans and the President's Office, and really getting a sense of the full scope of how the university saw itself and wanted to tell their stories to attract the kind of students they hoped to attract and the way they wanted students to think of the school in terms of how they wanted to put themselves out there.

So as I did that, I became very interested in the other side - in the results of which students actually did apply and which students were accepted. That's when I asked to spend some time as an admissions reader looking at student applications. As somebody really interested in narrative and story, I loved that job. I loved reading students' applications. An admissions officer really tries to read the story of each application, figure out who the person is, and whether or not they are a good fit for that university. While I was doing that, I began just advising people I knew for their applications, and that just turned into a full time job.

With your creative background, were you more interested in reading applications from applicants with similar backgrounds? Did anything about more STEM-leaning applicants surprised you?

I think I'm interested in all the kids. It was kind of exciting read an application from a very unusual background because all the similar applications can blur together. I would say the applications I was most excited to read

were kids who had unique stories to tell and different life experiences - those journeys stood out in some way. Those are the ones I liked to read the most.

Since people are always curious - what does it take to get into an Ivy League school, and particularly Dartmouth? Is there an ideal candidate?

In general, it takes everything. It takes grades, and the scores, and recommendations that really describe you as someone who is unique, and looking at your context, and your high school. You have to have all of that, and your own personal journey has to show that you've had an impact on others, that you are a good member of your community, that you'd contribute positively to the college community and the world.

It really is just about being a super strong candidate from all angles. Any one angle isn't enough. All the pieces have to fit together - you have to be able to prove that you're going to do the work and excel academically, demonstrate that you're going to engage in the community and benefit from all of the resources, and give back and make the community a better place through your engagement. Just all of it.

If a student is interested in a writing career or creative writing at a top school, how should they plan out their high school courses and activities?

There's no one way to prepare to be a writer, except to read and to write all the time. The more that you read and the more that you write, you'll find your own voice, you'll find your style. You'll be able to see your own work with more perspective the more that you've read the more that you've seen. I would say lots and lots of that, and engage with other writers. Find or form communities of writers - people who will give each other feedback and support. Sponsor readings, just build up tangible evidence of your commitment and passion for writing because just saying that you like to write is like saying "I like art" but you don't have a portfolio.

You have to have something to back it up. So, try to find publishing opportunities, either in your school or online or creating your own publishing opportunities.

Find new ways to share the work that you're doing because being a writer is an isolated practice, so finding ways to connect with others in person or through your writing is important.



For you, what constitutes an engaging personal statement?

I like a personal statement that I think no one else could have written. It's gotta be so specific to whoever's writing it - the examples, the anecdotes, the voice - all of that is like reading a person. A memorable person. Too many personal statements sound like any 17-year-

old could have written them and described them in the same way. To me, what makes a standout personal statement is one that when you read it, you feel like you've met someone interesting and you'd like to get to know them more. That's the goal.

What should be the most important thing for a student when thinking about which extracurricular activities to participate in?

For me primarily, they should think of genuine interest and passion when choosing an activity. Don't participate in an activity you don't enjoy just to have it on your list. It's always evident. Those are the activities you're never really consistent with. Find activities you enjoy so much that you're willing to do more, go the extra mile, to create new experiences within that activity. That would be my first thing.

The second thing would be to look for activities where you can have a positive impact on others. Any activity can be turned into something that can have a positive impact on others if you're willing to share. Again, that doesn't necessarily mean being an extrovert and doing something in person. You can share through publications, through blogging, through building a website. There's lots of ways and new ones all the time to share your interest. I think that piece is really important for the activity list. Finding one or two activities where you jump in so deep, that you're so engaged that the person reading or hearing about it will say, "Wow! That's cool!" I like to remind students who say, "I was president of a club in high school and I've got all my activities covered" that being president of a club is great but every high school in the world has a math club and every math club in the world has a president. There's thousands of them. That in itself will not make anybody say wow. So, if you're president of the math club, do something with that position: create a fundraiser, create an opportunity for math excitement in elementary school, create some kind of math engagement event at your high school. Think of something that makes people go, "Wow that's cool!"

I worked with a student recently who was president of the math club and created a Rubik's cube team and taught everyone the Rubik's cube. You hear that and

you say, "Oh cool! That's interesting!" That's the goal. Take an activity and do something with it that'll make people say, "Oh that's cool!"



Did you have a particular method that you followed when reading applications?

I think every reader has their own system in terms of what part of the application they start with. I think the most common is to read in order, to go through the Common App. But I think based on my own experience of people that I knew, there are admissions officers who start with the essay. They want to get a sense of the student's voice before they read anything else or, start with the recommendations to hear what teachers say about them. For myself, I like to start with the activities list to get a sense of how a person spends their time. And all the pieces have to come together.

I'd say in the end, you look for students you could get to know, you look for students that you think would be a great roommate for someone else, you look for students who you want to tell someone else about. You read their application and you want to tell other admissions officers about them, you want to tell your family about this cool kid. If I had a method, it was kind of seeking those students that I thought would be a great asset to the community.

Do you have any funny or memorable anecdotes to share from your time in the admissions office?

We had a lot of funny moments during training. There was training each year to bring admissions officers up to speed on any changes in the application system, to the SAT, etc. We also did exercises to become aware of our own biases - positive and negative, things to watch out for as we read applications, to be aware of things you might be overly impressed by or things that you have a bias against. People are usually aware of what their negative biases are - political, religious. A lot of people have their typical triggers that are their negative bias.

It turned out that I have a positive bias for students who've gotten the Eagle Scout or Gold Award in Girl Scout. I'm just super impressed by that and tended to be really in favor for kids who had accomplished that. It was funny to hear different people's positive and negative biases for things that they looked at. The moral of the story is that admissions officers are trying to be fair about what their positive and negative buttons are.



What was your favorite part of working in admissions?

My favorite part was feeling like I was getting to know these really interesting young people through their applications. There are so many amazing applicants. You just feel good about the world as you read them

and think, wow all these amazing young people full of dreams and talents and vision of what they're going to do. The hardest part was knowing that you couldn't accept them all.