



# **ADMISSIONS INSIGHTS FROM MARIAMA ADEKOMAYA**

Former Admissions Officer  
at Brown University

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Mariama Adekomaya worked as an admissions officer at her alma mater, Brown University. For our Former Admissions Officer interview series, she tells us about the difference between working in admissions as a student and as an admissions officer, what Brown looks for in its applicants, how a STEM applicant should build their profile, and more.

## **You worked for the admissions office while you were still a student – could you elaborate on how that interest grew into wanting to pursue it professionally?**

For me, working in the admissions office as a student allowed me to see the process of admission. I worked in the basement and the admissions officers were all upstairs in their own individual offices. During the time I worked there, everything was in files - the majority was in paper. Applicants would send their supplements or documents and the student workers would file it all and make sure everything was in the right order. And if anything would come in, we'd notify the admissions officer if they were waiting for a certain document.

But it allowed me to see how detailed it was and also how seriously admissions officers took the information they received because admissions officers would come in and say, "Hey has this document come in for this student, we're just waiting on this." For me, it was a way of understanding that. You know how admissions officers talk about the holistic process - really for me it was seeing that this is a holistic process because they want every single piece of information to be able to make decisions.

The other piece that made me more interested in pursuing admissions professionally was seeing the human side of admissions officers. When you're an applicant, you have this perception of these people, and oftentimes that perception isn't correct. Like I always imagined them to be these super old, historic people who had restricted views of the type of students they wanted. But they weren't like that. There were a lot of different personalities - young people, and people who genuinely seemed to care about what they were doing. There was one admissions officer who I ended up working with when I was at the admissions office. He read my sister's file because she had applied to Brown and she attended Brown. He had read my file when I had applied and was familiar with it. He was telling me about things he'd remember from my file and I just found it fascinating, like, how do you even remember this? It shows that you actually do read all of these applications and that you do care about what you're reading.



## **How was being at the school as a student different from being an admissions officer?**

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My sense of pride for Brown increased as an admissions officer. As a student, I was so busy with college - I tried to make sure that I was on the right path academically, trying to make sure that whatever it was I was studying would lead to something, whether it was graduate school or some sort of job. I wasn't really focused on school pride. Brown is not necessarily a big sports school, so it's not the type of school where the idea of like, "Yay Brown!" exists like some of the national universities. But that didn't exist. Also, because I lived in Rhode Island, there wasn't the opportunity to experience what others had who weren't from that state, so there wasn't that sense of pride. Not that I wasn't proud of going to Brown but it was just like, okay, it was another university.

But after I graduated and became an admissions officer, I started learning about all the things that make Brown unique. Being able to travel with other admissions officers from other schools and hear about their experiences, getting a sense of how they function and what they look for in students, what typical qualities they admit - what a Columbia admissions officer looks for versus what a Yale admissions officer looks for - then that gave me a sense of pride. Brown is very unique, we looked for a very specific type of student, and there is a certain quality that applicants have that make them a good match for Brown.

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

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I think an ideal candidate for Brown is someone who wants to save the world, but on a small scale even. I don't mean to say that Brown students have a superhero complex - that's why I said on a small scale - so someone who wants to make an impact. If that's on a grand scale, that's awesome.

But I think a good candidate is someone who realizes that one person can't change everything and probably can't have a lot of impact, but you can have a small impact in certain areas. Brown looks for students who show a great sense of community involvement, and that definition of community can be whatever you want. It could mean your local community, school community, national or if you identify with certain groups - an ethnic community, or religious community. Whatever it is, you feel connected to it and want to make an impact. I think that's one thing that makes Brown students stand out.

Generally, students who get into the Ivy League want to make an impact, whether it's in a certain field, within a community setting or a national setting, they want to make an impact. I think the way in which courses run in the Ivy League, they encourage that. Brown students are people who work within their local community. There's

this idea of being part of the nonprofit world - you have a lot of Brown students who graduate and become part of the nonprofit world, while other students from other schools like Penn, may want to make an impact on a more grand scale, or have different definitions of community.

I think another thing that I tell students during information sessions is the idea of niceness or kindness, and I know that sounds a little cheesy and also a little less tangible than other qualities. But I remember that when I was an admissions officer, learning from other admissions officers, that they really cared about students who are nice. Questions that would come up during committee were like, "what kind of roommate would they be?" or "is this a nice person or someone you'd want to be in a seminar with?" If you're a nice person, you care about helping others and being part of a team, learning from and collaborating with others, Brown is that type of school.

Then obviously, you have to work hard. You have to love education, you have to love learning, whether it's in the classroom or outside the classroom, and I think that applies to all Ivies.

## What was your favorite part about working as an admissions officer?

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My favorite part was definitely talking to students and meeting them, whether it was students who were considering Brown or students I met when I went on visits. I think in the same way I was surprised as a student working in the admissions office and interacting with the admissions officers, the students who I met on the road were also surprised by who they were talking to, because I wasn't that stereotypical image they have of an admission officer. That allowed

me to have more freedom in conversation and allowed me to get to know them.

I also enjoyed getting to know the students who we'd admitted. It was amazing that I had the opportunity to talk to some of the applicants we'd admitted and seeing who they were and seeing that we did make the right decision, and getting to know them beyond what they had in their applications.

## Did you have a particular routine that you followed when going through applications?

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I did, and I think everyone does. I think people may sometimes try something different. When you're reading hundreds of applications a day, you'll eventually want to switch it up. But the order in which you'll read - your routine is probably similar. For me, my order would always be looking at the academics first, just to figure out whether the student was prepared for an education at Brown. So, the transcript was my go-to. The SATs and ACTs were nice to look at, but they didn't provide much information other than, okay, this is a good test taker, or the student's not really that great of a test taker. I thought the transcripts provided more information in terms of the student's academic ability and their intellectual thirst.

I looked at the grades immediately and if there was anything that stuck out as glaring, I always tried to learn more, like if there was a C on a transcript, trying to figure out why, when did it come about. Also making sure they had the recommended list of courses that were satisfied, like three years of English, four years of history, or whatever the suggestions were at the time.

Going from there, I would want to get more insight about who they were in terms of the extracurriculars, so I went through their activities list next, then their essays. I would always end with letters of recommendation because I felt like they were a nice conclusion to what I read in the file. Sometimes they reiterated things that were already in the file, but then there were times they provided more context or surprising information which was helpful.



## Tell us more about your experience working with the Program in Liberal Medical Education.

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The Program in Liberal Medical Education, otherwise known as the PLME program, is Brown's guaranteed acceptance into Brown for undergrad and also into Alpert Medical School without having to take the MCAT. Students who get into the PLME program are free to pursue whatever they want to pursue, just like a typical Brown student. So, you can study the arts and be a PLME student.

But my work with the program as an admissions officer was as part of a team with other admissions officers. There were three of us in total who would read the files. The way admission worked is that if a student wanted to apply to the PLME program, it would be included in their file information and an admissions officers give it a score. Depending on the score, it would go to the PLME pile and we would read it, and determine whether it was a strong applicant, and whether it was a strong applicant for that program. So we would go into the final round, which the medical school would determine.

It's possible that a student applies to the PLME program and the admissions officer who reads that file decides that the student is a good fit for Brown but not a good fit for PLME. I would recommend them as an acceptance and go into committee and talk about their file for Brown, but I won't recommend them for the PLME program. If there were students who were a good fit for Brown, and a good fit for PLME, they were recommended for acceptance for Brown and then they'll give them a score for PLME and then that would go to my pile. PLME decisions are never made in committee. So you won't go to committee meetings - and I actually don't know whether the results are - of the PLME applicants because physicians ultimately made the final decision. People like myself and the other two people I worked with had a sense of how they were doing the process.

The program was really interesting to me. In order to get into it, you had to get into Brown first, so you had to be a good match for Brown. You could be someone who's a fantastic match for the PLME program but not a good match for Brown, so in that case you wouldn't get into the program or Brown. In terms of what they look for, they look for superstar students. Similar to Brown undergraduate applicants, the PLME program looks for students who are strong in the STEM field and have demonstrated a clear interest in pursuing medicine. It's not just like, oh I shadowed a doctor or I want to become a doctor. You have to demonstrate that you've thought about the idea of going to medical school and committing yourself to that.

They also want to know that you're able to handle a strong science education. The students who tend to do well in the program are students who've participated in well-known science competitions and have excelled, students who've had research experience. But the one piece about the PLME program is going back to the community piece - being able to show that you recognize that as a doctor or physician, you're someone who'll be able to need to work with the community and have that interest in working with people.





## **If a student wants to study STEM at a top school, how should they plan out their high school courses and activities?**

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I'd always recommend sitting down with your guidance counselor first, and I know that not all students have the advantage of having a great counseling office at their school. But if you do have that opportunity I'd recommend sitting down with your guidance counselor as soon as you can, mainly if you can your freshman year, just going and meeting them. Most of the time you're limited in what courses you can choose as a freshman and as a sophomore. But when you do have the opportunity to select your courses, make sure that you're talking to your guidance counselor and taking classes which are considered the most challenging courses at the school. Whether they are humanities classes or STEM classes, but especially STEM classes. You want to make sure you're taking the hardest STEM classes offered and not only taking those classes, but doing well in them. If the highest math course your school offers is Multivariable Calculus, you should definitely take multivariable calculus. Or if you have Calc BC and Calc AB, you should take Calc BC instead of Calc AB. Or, take Calc BC instead of statistics. Statistics is slightly easier and admissions officers know that. So, take the hardest courses. Talk

with your counselor and learn more to get a sense of who the really strong students are at your school and making sure that you're taking the same courses as them or even more challenging courses. If there's an opportunity to take classes outside your high school - ones that your school doesn't offer, obviously - I encourage students to go ahead and try to do that. You could take an online course or a local community college course.

In terms of activities, be part of STEM extracurriculars. If your school offers a biology club, chemistry or science olympiad, be part of those groups. But I also encourage students to consider things outside of STEM. It may sound weird to want a STEM student to pursue something other than STEM, but if you have a true interest in something outside of those STEM subjects, go ahead and pursue that and be committed to it. When it comes to activities, my advice is to always be committed to your activities. Don't just fill up your extracurricular activities with typical things that you think admissions officers want to see. It's more about knowing your personality and pursuing that.

## **Do you have any fun or memorable anecdotes about your time working in the admissions office?**

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There was one time where I remember a student had applied ED to Brown and I believe I deferred their application. And they sent a supplemental material and it was literally a roll up, at least 10 feet long. The student had drawn out many images as to why they love Brown. Some very specific things about Brown, and made it all connect - like the Van Winkle Gate, and why they see themselves being able to walk through those gates. And I was impressed by it because it took a lot of energy to come up with something like that. But the other people in my committee were not impressed at all because they were like, this took a lot of time and all the energy for this should have been spent focusing on their academics instead of this. So that's one thing I thought was hilarious, I'd never seen anything like that.

There are also students making up things about themselves. There was one particular student who lied about everything in their application but somehow managed to get into almost all of the Ivies. But then there was a red flag somewhere and the history started unraveling. But it showed the collaboration that can happen between different offices. The Harvard admissions officer contacted us and said, "Did this kid get in? Here's the story behind this student's case."

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