



WHAT A UPENN ADMISSIONS OFFICER REALLY LOOKS FOR

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Before working for InGenius Prep, Liz Culliton was the Associate Director of Admissions at the University of Pennsylvania. In this interview, as part of our podcast [Inside the Admissions Office](#), Liz delves more into the various schools and programs at UPenn, how the application process works, how to write the Penn supplemental essays, and more.

Q: You were an Associate Director of Admissions at UPenn — so you were reading hundreds of applications, deciding who got in, you've really seen it all at UPenn. And as everyone knows, UPenn is an extremely popular school and also very competitive. Last year, the acceptance rate was an all time low of 7.4%. So, for all of the students who are looking to apply to Penn this year, what would your advice be?

I would say my number one bit of advice is to make sure that it is the right fit for you. In what we do, we talk a lot about fit for students and that's really important, particularly when you're applying to a selective institution. Don't just pick the name because of the name. Pick it because you believe you fit in with the student groups, with the academic situation, with the campus.

Penn really looks for students who feel like they are going to fit in and can contribute to the community. I would say make sure you do the research on what that looks like. If you have a chance and you're able, a campus visit is always the best way to feel that and make that decision. I think it really comes down to whether or not you're a good fit for the institution. And obviously, competing with the 40,000+ applications that come in every year. But first start is fit.

Q: So students shouldn't just be applying to UPenn because their friends are applying or because they know that it's a very popular school.

Right. Don't just look at the selective institutions at the top and say, "well I'm going to get into one of them so I will apply to all of them." And at the end of the day, it really matters whether or not it's going to be a match with both sides — whether it's a match for you, and whether it's a match for them.

Q: Right. You're going to be going to this school for at least four years, so you need to make sure you like the campus and the people.

Totally. As a former Director of Alumni Relations at two different schools I will tell you that your relationship is hopefully longer than four years — it's a lifetime. So you're going to have to want a good experience and that all starts at the beginning.

Q. So you mentioned that it needs to be a match for the students and the school. So, what is UPenn really looking for in accepted students that they feel like are a good fit for their campus?

Well of course, there's the obvious. They have to be academically viable. Sometimes there's a misunderstanding and people think that admissions officers are just being mean because they deny everybody. But the reality is that at a selective institution like Penn, their job is to make sure you're going to academically succeed at the institution. So making sure that you've taken the highest level of courses available to you depending on what school you're applying to is really important because you want to get there on day one and not feel completely behind. You want to fit in with all of your classmates and be able to continue on the academic trajectory that they want you to successfully complete in four years, which is the goal. So, I think that's one of the biggest things that people misunderstand - that you do need the academic preparation to succeed at a selective institution like Penn.

I would also that there's a personality fit for sure, and again, that goes for any school but particularly at Penn. I like to say I got the luxury of working with tons of students on campus because I was also in charge of the tour guides and our call center and visit center. So, I interacted with students daily. And my favorite thing about them was just their energy. If you are a lowkey kid who doesn't love constant hubbub, Penn might not be the place for you. It's a place where students love to work and play. The campus is constantly a buzz of energy. It doesn't matter what time it is. You could be in Huntsman Hall at Wharton at 2 am and students are doing group meetings. And it's not because they have to, it's because that's their energy level. So, I think that there's for sure, just this kind of personality match that happens. And it obviously also, was founded by Ben Franklin so fundamentally they're always looking for students who really care about giving back and serving others. And so, despite people's successes in life, they want to see students use their skills in life.

And I'd say as long as you want to live in center city Philadelphia, it's another important thing. When students talk about Philly as a part of Penn, that's always a really good thing too. It shouldn't just be you're mentioning it because I'm telling you to. It should be because you truly love the idea of being in a city. Philly is a walkable city - you can go anywhere, do anything, it has amazing food. So when you're able to connect the part of what Penn is to the city around you, that's also a big thing as well.

Q: At Upenn, there isn't just the one big college of UPenn. You actually have to apply to a specific school and there are four different schools at UPenn. Could you walk us through what those different schools are?

Sure. There's the Wharton School of Business, there's the School of Engineering and Applied Science, there's the College of Arts and Sciences, and the School of Nursing - all very different pre-professional in some way shape or form. Yes, the interesting thing is that you do have to select one of the schools. That's different from some of the schools that you may be applying to. And match for the schools is huge to the process. So, it really comes down to obviously what major you're looking to do. Fundamentally you need to be a right fit for the school. Every school is read differently. They're looking for different things for different schools. At Wharton obviously they're looking for incredible passion and interest in business. That doesn't mean that you have

to have gotten your company on the stock exchange by the time you apply. But, they're looking for leadership too and your ability to be a leader. One of the big things when you get there as a freshman is you are going to be put into a group. You are going to be constantly working in a group setting because they really believe that learning how to be an instrumental member of a group is the best way to set yourself for success is to walk out and learn how to be good in business.

They're also looking to see that you've taken the highest level of math that's available to you. Let's say in junior year you get to decide whether or not you're going to take that BC Calculus class or you might say you've had enough of calc and you want to go for AP Stats. I would firmly say that BC Calc as long as it's offered at your school. One thing I'd offer as a caveat is that if those classes aren't available at your school, say AP AB is the highest level. That's going to be the expectation of what you take. There's never an expectation that you're going out and taking it somewhere else, so that's important to remember. So they're going to be looking at the highest level of math at Wharton.

When you switch over to the School of Engineering, they're going to be looking for the highest level of math, and hopefully if your school has it, that you've taken that second level of physics as well. For Nursing, really not the same level of which classes you have to take. The women who works at the Nursing School admissions always used to say, "I actually prefer that a student takes AP Stats" because that's a huge part of nursing and understanding medicine. When it comes to personality fit for Nursing, I will tell you that they're looking for a genuine interest in nursing, and a genuine interest in helping others. That's a huge part of the conversation that happens at the committee table so that's really important to keep in mind.

Then there's the College of Arts and Sciences, which is the liberal arts education of Penn. There's really no prerequisite for getting in. But they all have their own personalities. So again, that visit can be really important to decide which is the right fit for you. You can also explore the majors that are available. So hypothetically, there's a Computer Science major in the College of Arts and Sciences and a Computer Science major in Engineering. So whether or not you want to go forward with that Applied Science, and really get your hands in and do comp sci in the School of Engineering, or whether you want to learn about the theory behind computer science in the College. So there are these variations in how you study and what you study in the schools. So I can tell you that you can always pick up the phone and call the admissions office and ask to talk to a student to talk about these differences because it's really important that you pick the right one. I will say that so many times during the admissions process we'll be reading a student and say "ooh I wish they'd applied to the College instead of Wharton." So, it's really important to pick the right one.

Q; In these schools, you can pick one program or school that you apply to. But, UPenn also offers dual-degree programs that you can apply for in two of the colleges at the same time. Can you walk me through how those programs work?

Sure. It's one of the coolest things that I think that Penn does. It's one of the things that they're most proud of. You actually walk out of Penn with two distinct degrees from Penn. So it's not a dual major, which is important to keep in mind. It is literally your parents get to see you get two diplomas

from each of those schools. They are very, very competitive and they are small class sizes. I will tell you that the biggest thing hypothetically for M&T, between Wharton and School of Engineering, you need to be academically viable and prepared for both. So, what you're going to be looking for is that you have both sides of that story. So you are an engineering student and you are also a business student. It is a very competitive process and I would make sure that you are not choosing it lightly. It would typically take five years to complete, but again you would get those two degrees.

They are intense. In M&T for example, you get in there and you are working hard right from the start in order to meet all the requirements to get two actual degrees from Penn. Recruiters are literally waiting every year for each of those graduating classes so they can pick them up. They have incredible outcomes when it comes to their salaries and what they're able to get just because they're these dually trained students in two different areas. It's incredible and the students that walk out of those programs are so successful and so interesting. But yes, you have to be mindful about whether or not you feel like you can succeed in those programs and whether or not you're ready to do the work behind them.

Q: So when students go to apply to one of these programs, they list which first choice degree they would like and then their second choice. So, for students interested in this, do you have any tips on strategies for picking which would be their first and second choice?

So, how it actually works, let's say hypothetically you're applying early decision to one of the coordinated dual degree programs. You would select Huntsman as your top choice, and the hope is that you would pick a secondary option and say you know what if I don't get into Huntsman, I would either like to be considered for the College of Arts and Sciences or Wharton. So that's where that drop down happens and you're going to decide which school you'll choose as your secondary option. So what happens in this process is that you're evaluated in the pool of students applying to Huntsman. If you're not selected, then you'll be evaluated in that secondary pool, whether it's Wharton or the College of Arts and Sciences.

I'd say my recommendation would be pick your strongest school. If you're academically and extracurricularly viable, pick the school you're going to be the best fit in as a standalone. Do you match that school? So, I would say that obviously we all know that Wharton is competitive. But if Wharton is your dream and you don't want to be in Penn unless you're in Wharton, and you apply to Huntsman first, pick Wharton as your second choice, but again recognize that you're applying to the two most competitive programs at Penn

I love the College of Arts and Sciences as a secondary option and depending on what major or what coordinated dual degree program you're selecting because it's a home base for everything. You can basically choose from 80-100 majors and there's so many things that you can do. It's a great place to call home I always say. But again it depends. If you're applying to M&T, the management and technology dual-degree, you don't have that choice, you have to pick between Wharton and the School of Engineering. But if you feel like you're more of an engineering kid, pick Engineering instead of trying to shoot for the stars and pick Wharton. Again, it's that match. Does your academic profile fit? Do your extracurriculars fit in with that school as well? It's not a game or strategy, it's how you're going to fit in with the rest of the school.

Q. So you mentioned that these dual programs are very competitive and the students are very high achieving. Other than academics, what kind of students are you looking for to be admitted to one of those programs?

I would say the student who isn't afraid to jump in and do things. So, if you're a theoretical person, all of those programs take on a very hands on approach depending on where you are. But they're all where you're jumping in and starting right away. So, an extracurricular profile that suggests that you have not been afraid to do things, you have not been afraid to lead a group of people to do something. For example, that you've been in your robotics team at school and you guys have seen major success in that regard. Stuff like that where you are a very hands-on person in that academic discipline because that shows the reader and that committee that you're not afraid to move forward. It's your hope and dream but you haven't gotten that off the ground yet - it might not be the best place to start.

Q. We've talked a lot about fit for Penn in general and for the specific major or program you're going to. And a major way that colleges look at fit is through a student's supplemental essays. Can you talk about the UPenn specific supplemental essays and how it's in a student's best interest to be answering those.

Sure. I will say that it is one of the fundamental things of your application. We know that every student worries about their testing and transcripts and Common App essays but I will share with you the supplemental essays at Penn are just as important as all of those other pieces. I think a lot of students approach the supplemental essays as a last minute thing like "oh shoot I have to get everything done" and at Penn they shouldn't be an afterthought whether or not you care enough to sit down and write about Penn. And again, I think a lot of that can come from were you able to visit? If you weren't able to visit, there are so many ways you can do that alternatively - through a virtual visit or make a phone call to the college, you know, really learning about the school and learning why you're interested in it.

So they have separated their prompts this year and are asking two different questions. One is about your intellectual and academic interests which is really, really important. So you need to be able to articulate, "Why do I want to go to Wharton" or "Why do I want to be a nurse?" Students think that the answer can be super broad. And one of the things that I do when I work is really push them. "So you want to be an econ major. Why?" And sometimes the answer is, "I don't know." When it comes to answering your supplemental essays, you need to go beyond "I don't know" or "I like econ, it's cool." You need to be able to answer that question, and not in an adult way. It's very much expected that you're going to answer it from a 17 year old's perspective. But you need to be able to say these are the classes I'm interested in Penn. "I looked at the curriculum and this is so exciting to me" or "This professor's research is so fascinating to me. I love the opportunities that I have within this major," and talk about what you've done in the past. Connect what you've done and what is offered. It's such a huge portion of answering that question properly.

And they also want to know why you're interested in the specific school that you are applying to. You can always tell when it's really not a student's first choice because they didn't do the research and they don't understand the distinction between the College and Wharton or Engineering or Nursing. Usually, the nurses pretty much get that right. But just understanding

why you're choosing that school is very very important. And the second prompt this year is talking about learning outside the classroom. A big thing at Penn is "what are you going to add to the community?" I always tell students that there are 300 student organizations at Penn. When I was there there were 12 acapella groups, there was an I Heart Canada club that was not started by Canadians but you know it exists for fun. These kinds of things - what do you connect with it? All these different organizations on campus - is there something that speaks to you?

Articulating how you are going to be part of the community and how you feel like your identity could be shaped, how you can help shape others, is a huge part of the process as well. I always tell students, "you're going to want to show an admissions officer that you can fit in." And they have to be able to see you walking down Locust Walk, saying hi to everybody, being part of the community. If you're interested in being a tour guide say that. If you want to be a part of an acapella group or the Latin dancing group or any of the things that are going on mention those specifically in your application. Then you're helping to paint a very clear picture of the admissions officer. The supplemental essays are the only places you get to showcase that voice, unless you're extended an alumni interview.

Q: Other than students thinking about supplemental essays as an afterthought, what are some of the other biggest mistakes that you would see when you were reading applications at Penn?

The biggest mistake that we've ever seen — and any admissions officer will tell you — is when you get the name wrong in the supplemental essay. It sounds like such a simple thing but I can't tell you how many times students would do that, and it would be such a sad thing. You'd be reading all the different documents, you'd be getting all excited about the student because they have the academic preparation, their teachers love them, their testing is wonderful, and then you get to the supplemental essays and they're like, "At Cornell.." and then you go, "oh shoot!" Then you think, "Actually, he might be really good at Cornell so that should happen." So all of a sudden you give an admissions officer this moment to contemplate you somewhere else and sometimes we can see you at those other places better than we can see you at Penn. And all of a sudden, that's it. It's really hard to overcome that because a lot of people forget that admissions officers are human. Sometimes you read something and it's hard to get that out of your mind. Sometimes, they're looking for reasons to admit you. But when you come across the name of another school - but you said Penn at the beginning but University of Michigan at the end - you have to make sure you're proofreading.

Another mistake that students make is that of not accepting an interview. Of course, you don't have to, but again having my Alumni Relations hat as well, it's such a wonderful way to connect with alumni at the school. A lot of the times I've seen that a student walks out of an alumni interview feeling more excited about their choice to apply to Penn. And it's a great way to ask questions you may have been asking along the process, or known who to ask. And then that alumni interview goes in your actual application. And 99% of the time, it's powerful and it's positive and it helps you in the process because it's one more adult saying, "I think this person would be great here."

I would say that the last mistakes that students make - and this can apply to any institution - is don't over communicate with your admissions officer. I think a lot of students think that

they have to be in constant communication letting their admissions officer know. And a lot of schools now are building a process for offering those updates. But just because you call a school like Penn and it's different depending on the school - but at Penn specifically, you don't have to call them everyday letting them know how much you love it. Use the appropriate avenue for offering that information and also, talk to your counselor.

Let your counselor know how much you love it because they'll communicate it back with the admissions officer, which is the appropriate level of communication as well. My final advice would be to apply early decision if Penn is your number one choice because early decision is a great way to get everything in and also to say, "I love you, and I hope you love me back."

Our early decision students at Penn were always the most enthusiastic and they were the coolest bunch of students on campus in terms of their spirit level because they were all ready to say yes first. So I think Penn holds a special place in its heart for early decision students because they know that they were willing to choose them first.
