



Finding Yourself: How to Breathe Life Into Your College Application

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On the morning of March 27th, 2025, my college plans couldn't have been more clear. I had my eyes set on the University of Delaware, where I had been accepted into the World Scholars program and destined to spend my first semester in Athens, Greece. Though many of my peers felt apprehensive or nervous about college, I was ecstatic—I thought I had found the perfect school for me.

But when the clock struck seven o'clock that night, my life was changed. As I opened my Harvard applicant portal, I was shocked by the single, bolded word awaiting me:

Congratulations!

I was floored. My *family* was floored. At that point, I had largely thrown out the idea of going to Harvard—or any Ivy League, for that matter. Their acceptance rates were outrageously low, and though I was quite proud of my academic record, it barely held a candle to many of my peers'—at least, that's what I thought. Even now, as I write this, I find myself asking, "How did I, of all people, get in?"

Over the next few blog posts, I want to dig into this question! From extracurriculars to essays, I'm hoping I can shed some light on my application and the steps current high schoolers can take to pursue top schools.

The Most Important Part of Your Application: *You!*

In my experience, there are two types of people when it comes to high school. There are those who pursue activities and honors that will give them an edge in college applications, and there are those who only involve themselves in things that directly interest or challenge them. There is certainly something to be said about both approaches, and I don't believe that one is superior to the other. The college-bound mindset adopted by the former group undoubtedly prepares them for top schools, and they often are able to learn incredible life lessons from these experiences. However, I firmly found myself in the latter group. I succeeded in my undertakings not necessarily because they would yield impactful results, but rather because I simply found them fascinating or rewarding. Heck, the thought of applying to a top school like Harvard didn't even occur to me until my junior year.

I think determining which of these two categories you fall into is a crucial step in your journey towards college. In my freshman year, I found myself involved in activities that I had no interest in. Though college, at that point, was not a concern to me, I still took on responsibilities solely because I figured they would look good on a résumé. And I suffered: freshman year was arguably my least impressive year of high school. I learned a valuable lesson about myself in that year: I can't bring myself to work towards a goal if the work itself doesn't interest me. This may not be true for you—what's important is that you understand where you derive your motivation from and pursue opportunities that excite you.

So... What Next?

Knowing which type of student you are is only one piece of the puzzle—now, you have to take advantage of your strengths! To this end, going to a burgeoning charter school was an invaluable gift. Odyssey Charter School's Greek program has, in many ways, shaped the person I am today. It instilled in me a love for foreign languages, and this love drove me to pursue fluency in Greek.

- I've taken the Ellinomatheia (Greek Learning) Exams four times now, passing levels A1, A2, B1, and B2. Mind you, I don't have a single drop of Greek blood in me—I mastered the language entirely on my own with the unwavering support of my Greek teachers.
- I earned the Delaware Certificate of Multiliteracy in English and Greek in 2022 and had it reinstated in 2024.
- I was selected as Odyssey's student for Harvard's High School Summer Program in Nafplio, Greece in 2023. This was easily the most life-changing experience of my life: Odyssey fully funded a trip to Greece for three weeks in which I attended a Harvard-curated seminar alongside twenty Greek students. Not only was I immersed in the culture I had spent so many years

learning about, but it was also on this trip where the teaching fellows encouraged me to apply to Harvard!

As you can see, the change in my motivation after freshman year was like night and day! While in ninth grade I could just barely drag myself to a monthly club meeting, in my sophomore and junior years I spent hours after school every week studying for the Ellinomatheia Exams. My appreciation for the Greek program at my school even extended beyond pursuing fluency: one of the biggest reasons I decided to join the DCSN Student Advisory Council was to advocate for dual-language charter schools like Odyssey. Throughout high school, I was able to find ways to translate my love for Greek into both personal success and community impact.

If you ask any Ivy League student their advice for getting into a top school, ninety percent of them will say the same thing: find your passion. Though I hate to sound like a broken record, I think there's some merit to this. I firmly believe that my passion for Greek is what got me into Harvard. It wasn't just the honors that I received for Greek—it was the way in which it challenged me to grow. I think *this* is the crux of getting into the school of your dreams. Find a way to let your passions challenge you, and the growth you experience as a person will speak for itself.

See you next time, where I'm hoping to showcase some of my supplemental essays and give some advice on essay-writing!

Thomas