‘Well-Rounded Versus Angular’: The Application Colleges Want To See

By [Fred Thys](http://www.wbur.org/people/fred-thys) December 26, 2013 <http://www.wbur.org/2013/12/26/well-rounded-passion-college-application>



A group of students walk through the Sather Gate on the University of California, Berkeley campus in Berkeley, Calif. (Eric Risberg/AP, File)

BOSTON — Are you well-rounded or are you angular? That’s the language of the college admissions process these days. And if you’re a high school senior, the answer could affect whether you get into the most selective schools.

College admission is on the minds of many students over the holidays. Some have already been accepted early decision or early action. Others won’t know where they’re going until the spring. But it turns out competitive colleges are looking for a different set of criteria than they used to.

Sean Logan has been involved in the college admissions process since 1989 and he’s seen a dramatic change in what the most selective colleges look for. Back then, he says, his college was admitting close to 30 percent of applicants. In each class, it accepted a large number of well-rounded students: musicians, for example, who might also be the president of their class and involved in some other activities.

“Fast forward 20 years, 22 years, that same school that I used to work at is now admitting 15 percent of its applicants,” Logan explained. “Maybe in the past they would say to the music office, they could give them 20 or 30 names of kids who could benefit the program. That number may have been cut to 20 now, or 15. So the ability has to be better. And so it’s not just you’re competing with kids from a certain region who are playing the tuba. Now you have to do it with the whole United States and probably internationally.”



Sean Logan, the director of college counseling at Phillips Academy in Andover. (Fred Thys/WBUR)

Logan, now the director of college counseling at Phillips Academy in Andover, has worked in admissions at Williams and Occidental colleges, as well as Harvard and Stanford universities. He says colleges place applications in buckets: well-rounded students, exceptionally talented athletes, musicians, actors, children of alumni and children of donors. And as the bucket available for well-rounded students has gotten smaller, the most selective colleges have looked for students who excel at something.

But Logan warns that trying to predict what a particular college wants in any given year is a losing proposition.

“You might be the top Massachusetts soccer goalie, but the school you really want, the freshman was all-New England, right? So that coach isn’t going to spend his time recruiting a goalie that year,” Logan said.

But he offers some context: It only applies to students who have challenged themselves academically and performed well. Also, it’s a discussion limited to some colleges.

“This issue of angular versus well-rounded kids, it’s really a conversation that has grown up around the most selective schools,” Logan said. These are the schools that — over the last 20 years — went from 30 percent admission rates down to 20 percent, for example.

Beyond the most selective colleges, well-rounded students are still being told that they are welcome, but they are warned not to get involved in too many activities.

“My perspective is that there has been a shift from, ‘We want a kid who is so well-rounded they check off 25 boxes,’ ” said Stephanie Bode Ward, the mother of a senior at the Boston Latin School. “Now it seems the pendulum is moving back to, ‘Well, we want to know what you’re passionate about.’ ”

Bode Ward’s student does not earn straight-A’s and is not getting perfect SAT scores. He enjoys improv and plays piano in a jazz ensemble. She says he’s been looking at small liberal arts schools in the Midwest and New England.

But many students are not getting the message that they should focus on what they do well.

“There’s just a lot of talk like, ‘Oh, that’ll look really good on your application,’ ” said Grace Jenkins, a senior at Boston Latin. “I feel like that kind of creates this inauthentic way that we’re trying to approach our senior year or whole high school career, doing things that look good on applications as opposed to just doing what interests us.”

Jenkins has done what interests her. She dances and teaches dance to kids in Jamaica Plain — spending 40 hours a week there during her junior year. This year, college applications forced her to cut back. For Jenkins, the admissions process is already over. She has been admitted to Rice University early decision. She wants to study molecular biology.

One of Jenkins’ classmates, Grace Styklunas, is a talented artist. You can see her gift in the paintings all over her family’s house in Roslindale. But she wants to study neuroscience, and that’s one reason why she likes the University of Pittsburgh. She’s already been accepted there — and at four other colleges. She has a confession about one of her extracurricular activities.

“I know I joined my club that I’m now president of, Ladies’ Collective, because I was like, ‘I need to join a club, ’cause I need to do that for college,’ ” Styklunas said. “That’s the only reason I joined. I’m going to be honest. I mean, I joined that club specifically because that’s the one that most interested me, but I probably wouldn’t have joined a club if it didn’t look good for colleges, because I’d rather just go home after school and relax when I finally have the time.”

Styklunas says she’s glad she joined, because she loves Ladies’ Collective. It’s a volunteer organization where members learn about women’s issues and do what they call “girl bonding.”

“I do think that a lot of people join clubs and do community service and all that just to look good for colleges, and it is frustrating,” Styklunas said. “Because I know some people in my school who do that and they don’t actually care about it, and then there are some people who do that and they really care about it, and there’s no way for colleges to know.”

But Logan warns his students that colleges can tell the difference. He remembers working at another high school where three siblings were, each in turn, president of the same nonprofit.

“But it wasn’t a passion of theirs. It was more an opportunity,” Logan said. “They thought it would look good, but none of them could really write about it with any kind of sophistication or passion, and it really came through on the application.”

Too often, students and parents focus on what they think colleges want.

Andrew Flagel, senior vice president for students and enrollment at Brandeis University, tells the story of a huge high school student and his parent who recently walked up to him. The student was towering over Flagel, his muscles rippling, a big, tough-looking kid. His mom, maybe a third of her son’s height, storms up, wagging her finger in Flagel’s face.

“Saying, ‘You need to tell my son to drop crew because I need him to do better in his extracurricular and he’s got to take more APs, and that’s what going to get him into college, and you gotta tell him it’s about debate and about about doing the APs and get out of crew.’ And I turn around and look and this big, tough-looking, powerful kid has tears in his eyes. And he gets all choked up and says, ‘I just love crew.’”

Flagel wonders why anyone would encourage a student to quit something they love. His advice — and that of most college admissions directors and high school counselors — is to do what you love.