



MIDDLEBURY COLLEGE
MIDDLEBURY, VERMONT

May 17, 1999
Dear Ms. Hartman,

I apologize for not being in touch for a while. I am re-emerging from my annual winter hibernation, during which life revolves around reading and evaluating application folders, and which culminates in weeks at our admissions committee table, making final decisions. I've noticed in the meantime that our large, white, Vermont snow banks-of-old have long since melted into the pools, puddles, and muddy footprints that signal our initial signs of spring. I sometimes wonder how I missed the transition. Having arrived, however, I sure do welcome the daffodils of May!

We've had a particularly competitive admissions year and each of us is a little beleaguered as a result. I am terribly proud that we debate and examine our decisions so individually; at the same time, the roller coaster between potential heart-break, excitement, and exhaustion can make for a wild and wooly several months.

As I reflect on the almost five thousand applications that have come before me in one form or another, several observations come to mind that might help to support the work you do with students. If any are useful, feel free to engage me as your excuse; to embellish upon them; or to say, "See I *told* you that's what colleges want!" My thoughts fall under the general umbrella of: What I Wish I Could Have Told You [that is, you freshmen, sophomores, juniors], Before You Applied...

If you want to have some good choices when you graduate, put your foot on the gas academically now. This is the time to show colleges what you are made of. Admissions committees don't want to hear excuses; they want to see a solid, proven, track record of genuine intellectual energy, curiosity, and consistency. Don't lose time worrying about past imperfections. Spend your energy making the most of each class today, and tomorrow, and each day after. Most importantly, if you haven't already, become a life-long learner, for your own sake.

If you apply to the most selective colleges, you will be competing with massive amounts of quality. Don't let that scare you off; there must be a reason that some colleges are so sought after. You are fully capable; but realize that, in a nutshell, your job is to distinguish yourself from many other kids who would like to go there, too. To do so, don't assume a list of activities or clubs will speak for you. Most colleges don't care nearly so much about specifically *what* you've done (doing *this* versus doing *that*), as much as they will care about *who you are* and *who you are becoming*, through whatever you've experienced. That's good news. You don't need to go climb Mount Kilimanjaro in your bare feet next week to stand out as an applicant. Instead, stop and look within; look for patterns in your life; they can help you see connections among your thoughts and experiences; they can help you present yourself in interesting ways that will distinguish you.

Take a look at what applications will be asking you. (The Common Application is a good place to start.) Take some time to craft some responses to those essays now, well before the pressure is on. When you do: Write about what you know. Write from personal experience. Write with honesty. Write about what you think and feel. Paint a picture. Paint it well. Paint it vividly. But keep it simple. Don't paint the whole mural. And don't write about your boyfriend or girlfriend. Please.

Take the big tests. It is wiser to take more of them than you may want, rather than fewer than you may someday need. Cover all the bases. Now is the time to get advice on which tests to take, and exactly when. If you are applying to highly competitive colleges, be sure to take a good range of SAT II's and the ACT, as well as SATI's. Take each test more than once if you possibly can. It is not at all unusual for applicants to take any given test two or three times...in fact, it is very common. Give yourself every chance to show your strengths; most colleges will only use your very best scores anyway.

Fall in love with who you want to be...and start being it. Colleges don't want to hear about dreams alone; they want to see proof of your ability to act upon them. If you want to be a poet, start writing poetry now. If you want to run a marathon, start getting in shape today. If you want to become a courageous person, start acting courageously now. If you want to be a moral and ethical human being, conduct your life in moral and ethical ways. If you care about the environment, begin saving it this afternoon.

Think about what you are doing and why. I can't tell you how many students I've interviewed who say, after having some pivotal experience: "I learned so much about myself"...and then can't name a single, specific insight gleaned from it. Take some initiative this year. Do something that's of your own creation. Put your signature on it. The reality is that there are over thirty thousand high schools in the United States. Most of them have soccer games to be played, children to be baby-sat, and clubs to be joined...but what can you call your very own?

I hope that some of this is helpful. Give me a buzz if you or your students want to chat further. I'd love to have the excuse to continue the conversation. Happy Spring!

Sincerely,

Caroline Donnan
Associate Director of Admissions

P.S. Please excuse me for not personally signing this. I am battling some very persistent carpal tunnel and tendonitis in both arms, and am not supposed to write.