

Winner: Lucas First, Freshman at Union College (NY)

Banana Slug



LUCAS FIRST, now officially a Dutchman, still believes in the Mascot Theory of College Selection. He wrote this essay while a senior at The Albany Academies (NY), soon after submitting the last of his college applications.

College. Everyone insists you have to go to a school that's right for you, somewhere that fits who you are, a place where you belong. But there are more than 4,000 colleges and universities in this country; how am I supposed to find the one that's right for me?

My answer: Follow the mascot.

That's right. Don't judge a college by how it looks. Don't worry about where it's located, how big it is, whether there's sushi on the dinner menu every night.

Just follow the mascot.

A mascot can define who you are. This is something I learned from my dad. Thirty-six years ago he decided to transfer to The Ohio State University (OSU). It was in that moment that he became a nut—literally. At OSU, he was a Buckeye. Obviously, he didn't enjoy being a Brewer at Vas-sar College, where he spent a year, but why did he have to become such a nut? I guess he picked the mascot that was right for him. In my eyes, my dad is as nutty as they come.

So with my dad as my inspiration, I decided to focus on matching myself up with the right mascot. This focus became even clearer when I began writing my application essays. The colleges all wanted to know the same thing. Why do you want to go to Colgate? What draws you to Bowdoin? Why is Lehigh the right fit for you?

I struggled terribly with these questions. Each hour I seemed to have to pledge my allegiance to one school mascot over another. I transformed from a Raider into a Polar Bear, a Polar Bear into a Mountain Hawk. With each transformation, a little part of the previous mascot seemed to stay attached. It was because of this that I found the college process so grueling and tiresome.

I wasn't sure what I wanted to be. A traditional animal, like a lion or basic bear, sounded fun at first, but was that really for me? I like creativity and originality, so I don't want a mascot that belongs to 10 different campuses.

When I wrote my essay for Trinity College, I found out fast that animal mascots can definitely be original. After spending two hours trying to convince the admission staff I wanted to be a small aggressive rooster, otherwise known as a Bantam, I decided that maybe originality was overrated.

And after buying a sweatshirt from the University of Maryland that said, "Fear the Turtle," I came to the conclusion that maybe a mascot doesn't have to be intimidating or ferocious. I liked the idea of being a Terrapin. Did that mean every time I was homesick or failed an exam I could hide from the world by pulling my arms and legs into my protective shell?

After a while, all I could think about were mascots. Tar Heels and Camels and Bison, oh my! One night while lying in bed, thinking about the University of North Carolina, Connecticut College and Bucknell, I couldn't take it anymore. I was ready to throw in the towel. I wanted to give up and become a Dirtbag. But Long Beach State was too far away; I wasn't ready to move to California. My mom, I knew, also wasn't too keen on the idea of having a Dirtbag for a son. But if that wasn't the answer, what was?

The fact is, I won't know where I'm off to next fall until April. I could end up being a member of The Tribe (William & Mary) or a Commodore (Vanderbilt). I could take flight and become an Eagle (Boston College), or stay grounded and become a Terrier (Boston University). Orange has never been my favorite color, but that might change fast if I end up at Syracuse. I might need to make the tough decision between being a Union Dutchman or a Hobart Statesman. How about a Holy Cross Crusader?

Holy cow! All I know is that I am sick of transforming. I am ready to be one mascot, the one that is right for me. You may think this is a joke, that I am masking my real fears and feelings about getting into college, but my approach to the college admission process makes as much sense as any other. After all, some joker invented the SAT. Why not let mascots lead the way?

I guess as long as I don't end up at UC Santa Cruz—what self-respecting college man wants to be a Banana Slug?—everything will work itself out.