



My Illustrious College Plans, or Lack Thereof

During my sophomore year, I signed up to take the PSAT at my parents' urging, not expecting to get anything back except, y'know, PSAT results.

Silly me.

When you take the PSAT, it's not about taking a *test*, as I naively believed. You're signing up for the Universal College Spam List. I found this out within a few months, when I found myself suddenly drowning in a deluge of mail from every conceivable bastion of higher education imaginable.



JULIE HANSBROUGH is currently a senior at Greenwood High School in Bowling Green (KY). When she wrote this essay as a junior, she had no illustrious college or career plans. Now she *still* doesn't have any illustrious plans, but she's working on them.

Both puzzled and flattered by these mailings, I dutifully read each letter and sent back the business reply card for nearly every one. After all, Stanford University's students, who "exhibit energy, curiosity and a love of learning in their classes and lives" sounded like a crowd I wanted to be with.

Carleton College sent me a calendar with arty photographs and a guide on "How to Turn College Brochures Into Origami Frogs." The tongue-in-cheek comments about college life on the sides of the calendar sounded like something I would write, and I was dying to learn more about the place.

And how could I resist Swarthmore, which touted a Nobel laureate, a Google software developer, and others among their alumni's ranks? (Never mind that their student population sounded claustrophobically small; I'd deal with it somehow.)

When itty-bitty engineering school Harvey Mudd sent me their cheerful letter, which confessed to borrowing the adjectives "demanding," "rigorous," "difficult," "intensive," and "highly charged" from other college brochures to describe their own school, I signed up straightway for their mailing list. Sure, I had no plans whatsoever to become an engineer, but they had such a great sense of *humor!*

Okay, maybe I'm just a sucker for any mail that has my name on it.

After a while, though, it occurred to me that I'd have to actually *attend* one of these schools in the next few years. Which meant I'd have to eventually *choose* one. Oh God, choices—I can barely decide what I want to eat for lunch, let alone where I'll be spending the next four years of my life. And even if I *did* manage to choose a school (a tall order indeed), that same school may reject me (Stanford cheerfully noted in its brochure that it had an 11 percent acceptance rate). Being a longtime believer in listmaking, and armed with a pile of cheerfully-colored mailings, I decided to start a list of my favorite colleges.

After my list began to span over three pages, I realized listmaking was not the best plan.

So I tried a different approach: what do I *want* in a college, anyway? I came up with three things:

1. I want a thorough education. I want to be fluent in a foreign language, or two, or even four; and I want them to be quirky languages: say, Japanese, or Arabic, or Ukrainian, or Sumerian cuneiform. I want to debate existentialist philosophy. I want to learn the Latin names of logical fallacies and use them to poke holes in arguments during heated debates. And what are statistics and economics *about*, anyway? There's got to be more to statistics than "Jimmy has a bag with five blue marbles and five red marbles; what are the chances of Jimmy selecting a red marble?"-type problems, and there's got to be more to economics than "supply and

demand," or else there wouldn't be all these statisticians and economists topping the bestseller list. I want to know how to solve the toughest math problems; I want to learn how to turn my notebook doodles into respectable sketches; I want to take a class in anthropology. I want to learn as much as I can while I'm in college; it may be my last chance to learn so much in such a short time.

2. I want to be around bright, interesting people. Life is never boring when you get lots of kooky, clever kids together in the same place, my experience has taught me. They understand your corny jokes about famous dead authors, they figure out farfetched hacks to play with the network in the computer lab and they teach you obscure talents like how to make a robot, identify birds, cast iron, or program in C++.
3. I want to be far away from Bowling Green, Kentucky. Okay, this may seem a bit arbitrary. But after living 17 years in the Bluegrass State, I'm ready for a change. Not that I hate Kentucky—when I think of leaving, I find myself getting all misty-eyed about the gorgeous, rolling countryside, Derby Day excitement and Mancino's pizza—but it's just one place, after all, one small patch of soil in this whole wide world. What's it like to be Californian? Or Minnesotan? Or Massachusetts-ian? I want to taste a different culture, experience another place, as soon as I am able to.

After I listed these three things, it occurred to me: almost every college fits these three requirements. The Ivy Leagues may pretend they have a monopoly on the brightest kids in the country, and teeny-tiny liberal arts schools may trick you into believing that any school with over 3,000 students is going to horribly mistreat you somehow, but this simply isn't true. I've known tons of bright, interesting people from my own public high school who go on to Western Kentucky University or the University of Kentucky. They get thorough educations and go on to succeed in whatever they decide to do.

So, I asked myself: what am I getting so worked up about? Yes, maybe I'll apply to Harvard, or to Stanford, if I think I'd like to go there; but there's no reason to panic about it. I will find a college somewhere, I'll learn lots, I'll be around interesting people, and I will be happy.

With that, I decided to cease worrying. After all, there's a whole high school experience that I'm living right now—and though none of the college pamphlets mention it, it's just as exciting and valuable in its own way. When the time comes, I'll pick a few colleges, apply and see how things turn out—maybe it's not so complicated after all.