

# College Admission: New Year, Same You

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With the drop of a ball and flip of a calendar page, we have arrived at a new year, one that brings opportunity, renewal, and hope. Over the coming weeks, there will be a lot of talk of resolutions, new beginnings, and becoming a “better” version of ourselves. Self-reflection, improvement, and personal growth are enviable goals, but what if we also resolved to be proud of who we are and resolute about the strengths and interests that make us uniquely us?

Many high school juniors will be beginning their search for a college in the months ahead. It is an experience that, when done right, involves similar reflection and growth. However, **too often, young people feel pressure to manufacture exceptionalism.** This drive is most commonly seen in selective college admission, but can play out for all students as they face the perception of being judged for acceptance.

Meanwhile, college admission offices try to ease the tension by telling students that they simply need to be “authentic.” It is one of the buzzwords in admission, like “holistic” and “passion,” that is used so often that it begins to lose meaning. Young people ironically wonder: “What kind of authentic person should I be?”, “What type of authentic person are they looking for?”, and “How can I best prove my authenticity?”

As we launch into the new year, I asked college admission leaders to unpack authenticity for applicants. The response was overwhelming, and common themes emerged. Students, as you approach the college search and application experience, hopefully you will find comfort in their messages. What follows is a sample of the wisdom leaders offered. More reflections can be viewed [here](#).

**“Students should spend their high school years participating in organizations and activities that bring them joy.** It always saddens me when a student or parent asks which clubs or organizations they should join to increase their chances of admission to college. Living one's life simply to please others is never a good strategy for happiness and personal fulfillment. **By exploring genuine, authentic interests as you move through high school, you'll learn a lot about yourself and will be best able to showcase your talents to colleges when the time comes.**”—Grant Gosselin, Director of Undergraduate Admission, Boston College

“Being your authentic self should come naturally and easily. Often in the college selection and application process, we are faced with applicants who are forcing themselves into boxes that they think we want to check. We want you to be “you” because as much as you want to be here at our university, it’s important that the “you” who shows up, is comfortable and doesn’t sacrifice their own needs to fulfill some perception that “this school” wants “this version of you” and this is how you will achieve enlightenment and the path to contentment.”—Jody Glassman, Assistant Vice President of Enrollment and University Admissions, Florida International University

“Conveying authenticity is difficult because it contradicts applicants’ overall need to spotlight their achievements and plans. Our authentic selves (at age 17 or 50) have limits, uncertainties, and gaps. I find these emerge best in essays, not as a deliberate ploy to demonstrate authenticity, but when students accept the least amount of help from well-meaning adults itching to edit their work. Some applicants’ entire personal statements can be somewhat meandering, pointless, and unhelpful in ways

that no adult reader would have allowed—and thereby scream ‘authenticity’ that can help the rest of the application click.”—*Jonathan Burdick, Vice Provost for Enrollment, Cornell University*

“Students should not spend their junior and senior years of high school trying to twist themselves into a pretzel to be something they think we want. **There are literally hundreds of colleges in the country that want them exactly as they are at this moment - without founding any clubs or earning any awards.**”—*Thyra L Briggs, Vice President for Admission & Financial Aid, Harvey Mudd College*

“Authenticity may be a lost art form for a generation of applicants exposed to reality tv and social media “likes.” My one piece of advice for 2022? **Step away from social media apps for a quiet hour of reflection then call a friend or family member and have a real conversation in real-time.** It may be awkward at first but it will better prepare you to finish that college essay, better engage in the classroom this term and be more comfortable talking with a future roommate.”—*Catherine McDonald Davenport, Vice President for Enrollment and Dean of Admissions, Dickinson College*

“Being authentic means revealing the best version of yourself in your college application materials, not the best version of someone else. **Colleges appreciate honest self-reflection in your writing samples or essays.** It is a difficult request. Honest self-reflection is a lifelong process. However, **colleges do not expect you to know the end of your story...they are interested in hearing more about where you are right now, as a high school student. Tell us what you care about, your successes, your challenges, why you are interested in a certain major, or why you don't know yet which major is of interest to you. Tell us something that only a few close relatives or friends know about you.**”—*Wendy Beckemeyer, Vice President for Enrollment Management, Cornell College*

“**A great way to check for authenticity is to simply read your application aloud to yourself.** If it sounds like you, then what you're sharing and presenting is authentic. If you question some elements of your application or trip up on phrases while reading it aloud, then chances are you've strayed a bit from your authentic self. You can fix that by going back and reworking certain portions of your application to feel confident that all is coming from your voice.”—*Leigh A. Weisenburger, Vice President for Enrollment & Dean of Admission and Financial Aid, Bates College*

[Adam Grant](#), is an organizational psychologist, faculty member at the University of Pennsylvania’s Wharton School of Business, and bestselling author of [Think Again](#). He writes, “**The time people spend building personal brands would be better invested in personal connections.** Products have brands. People have relationships and reputations. Authenticity is not about marketing yourself to create an image. **It’s about aligning your actions with your values.**” In the year ahead, whether applying to college or simply living our best lives, let’s nurture the relationships with ourselves, and others, and focus on those connections while we authentically live our values. Let who you really are shine through.