

Under The Undergraduate

by Albert Cassorla

(Also see author's note in 1999 at end.)

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Senior
W.C. Mephram High School
Bellmore, New York



(authentic yearbook picture!)

The college-oriented high school senior finds himself precariously poised on the edge of something wonderful and threatening -- admission or rejection. The outcome can have a great influence on his life, determining the future bounty of his education.

In a sense the senior is already in a period of incubation. For more than any other society ours protracts the period from birth until independence. By 12th grade, the Magnificent Gestation has been ongoing for awhile and has still further to go. Yet this ultimate year of high school is laden with Super-Significance -- and the senior is in for a year quite unlike any he has experienced before.

An amount of uncertainty pervades the conversations of any group of seniors gathered in the corridors whenever the topic turns to college. Ears perk up and minds may even open in effort to glean some helpful information. The risks involved in this sort of omnivorous digestion of facts and fancy are always present, but the process itself is unavoidable. No matter how vaguely a student realizes the gravity of his plight, the electricity of the guidance office and the fatefulness of mail delivery lend an atmosphere that one that that one cannot help but breathe in.

A senior begins, in my school, as in others, by mailing to the colleges he is interested in and asking for catalogs, application papers and alike. Once a student has amalgamated a sufficient heap of such materials he begins to more them over and pondered the meaning of such incoherencies as ACH, SAT, PCS, and N. M. S. Q. T. and CSS. To add to the confusion, the entire attitudes of various applications forms can contrast sharply.

Cornell, for instance greets the student with a generally cheerful: "We are pleased to know of your interest in Cornell, and if the printed materials which he received cannot answer all your questions, don't hesitate to get in touch with us. Because of their size and weight we send catalogs by second-class mail which sometimes moves rather slowly, but we hope that mailing will reach you in the near future. Sincerely yours, etc."

Dartmouth, on the other hand maintains a thoroughly businesslike demeanor:

"Enclosed is the material which with which to make formal application for admission to Dartmouth. We presume that you have a copy of the 1966 General Information Bulletin. It should be read with care. Indications of carelessness, of lack of candor, or of failure to read instructions may be unfavorably prejudicial to the candidate."

And to finally winnow the chaff: "It is your own responsibility to see that your application is completed properly and on-time."

One could hardly be more exhilarated.

Most colleges oblige the applicant to search for teacher who will fill out a recommendation form for him. A vain quest awaits some students, but by and large teachers are more than willing to part with their time to try to give a candid appraisal of the students abilities. (I assume that the reports they make are so, but I've never said seen a completed recommendation, as they mail them directly.)

The actual process of selecting a teacher to do this can be a soul-searching affair. The student has to pre-estimate the evaluation a teacher will give him. An unfavorable report can be disastrous, but this is rare. A teacher who really thinks little of the student will usually forewarn him and given the opportunity to withdraw his request.

Almost as damaging, though, is a middling recommendation, and one can never be too sure that such a report won't be written by a kindly teacher who hasn't the heart to refuse a request from an average student.

For some people now, the paperwork is over. However if you're applying for financial rated any of the institutions of your choice, completion of the nationally used Parents Confidential Statement is required. This is a detailed analysis of the parents' income, tax deductions, and nondeductible but necessary expenses. This report is mailed to either Berkeley or Princeton, depending on proximity, where it is copied and mailed to the colleges the student is applying to.

Now, pretty much, papers are in order.

Once mailed, the application is now, in most instances, the finished article. However, there are exceptions. Some colleges require interviews; others euphemistically "encourage the student to arrange one."

This involves the process of making oneself salable merchandise. It would probably be safe to say that most interviewers look for mountains of prudent sobriety and a foothill of genial humor. The interviewee should be confident, but not to the point of anointing the interviewer, if the point must be made. To use of paraphrasing of team argot, they're looking for neither a "meatball," nor a "Joe Cool." And educated estimate would be that enthusiasm and direction are in order for most campuses.

Once the interview is in progress, typical questions and stock answers might run as follows:

Q: What interest do you have in Anchorage Community College?

A: I look forward to the opportunity to learn from your excellent faculty and from other students. Most importantly though, I desire to attain a liberal education. (Search catalogs for key catch phrases.)

Q. Why do you think you would be an asset to Anchorage Community?

A: Well (feign modesty for a very short time), I would bring the richness of my ethnic background (Puerto Rican, Jewish, Italian WASP) home life to the campus along with a willingness to make friends and culturally lend part of myself to my fellow students. I

also desire to participate in extracurricular activities, football, debate, glee club and Ping-Pong.

Q: I see in your application here, that you have read both Herzog and An American Dream. Did you find any similarity in them?

A: Well, yes, the strong tendency to use American as locale was manifest, aside from that I enjoy both books immensely. (Originality is appreciated if it can be supported.)

Q: Is Anchorage Community your first-choice college?

A: YES!

Basically a distinction can be made between two types of interview styles. There are you-ask-me and the interchange manners. Most colleges used slightly mixed variations, but they all tend heavily to one style or the other.

That you-ask-me version is somewhat more frightening than the mutual interchange method. The brunt of the burden is placed upon the student, and he must create relevant questions or become intensely embarrassed by the triviality he finds himself sprouting.

He will not be obliged to withdraw from nurturing high school academia for another year, yet he's worried about or looks forward to his freshman year and college. He knows that one there, he will not be altogether protected from life and consequently will be more independent. Much of the last year high school, in this respect, is a preparation for an event one year in the offing.

Having filled in applications and had an interview, the ability to affect one's chances for admission is exiguous. The interminable waiting period begins and laces itself across approximately a three-month expanse, varying with each institution. It generally ends on April 15, the date that the Ivies and other schools have conspired upon as the consummate and universal Judgment Day.

During the intervening convalescence period, the senior may amuse himself with rumors of all sorts ranging from reports of deterioration of his first-choice school's faculty to the failure of an A-student to gain admission to your "safety school."

The aforementioned diversions however cannot hope to measure up favorably to the second semester senior's principal source of pleasure -- an almost complete de-pressurization of school life.

Grades are no longer being reported to colleges, said the senior may now, (within the bounds within the bounds of passing and within certain acceptances made "ending successful completion") relax for the first time in 3 1/2 years.

By April, most students have been notified of action on their applications, and most of these who are college-oriented have decided which colleges they will attend. Then, it can truthfully be said that that sweet bliss lurks in the heart of every senior.

Note: Albert at age 50 let this essay stand mainly as written by Albert age 17. True, I sound pretentious at times. But I suppose that was me! I had in mind that this essay would appear in the New York Times Sunday Magazine section.

Given how bad I was at "getting it together" back then, it's no surprise that the article only made it to the handwritten draft stage. Now that my kids are 17, I thought I'd like them to hear how I thought at their age. So I dictated this article into Dragan Naturally Speaking software, cleaned it up a bit, and here 'tis! The dictation took about 30 minutes, cleaning 15, and minor editing 10.