"It's More Than A Job"

The Insightful Truth and Stories behind MIT Admissions Process

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This letter was written by Ben to the MIT Class of 2010 Applicants in March, 2006.

In response to an earlier entry of mine, this post appeared on College Confidential:

You know, I get sick of college admissions officers saying how they couldn't accept so many wonderful people. While it's supposed to be comforting, obviously, I just find it really insincere. I mean, either you're accepted or you're not. There is no grey area... so they shouldn't try to sugarcoat the harsh reality.

I'm thankful to whomever posted this, because it really made me think. It's certainly a fair post, and I imagine a lot of our applicants share these sentiments. A million years ago when I was applying to college, perhaps I would have felt the same way.

I've written before about how the class is selected, but I'm too tired to dig up the post so I'll give a quick recap. First you apply. **Your application is read by a senior staff member who will look for deal-breakers (like a bunch of D's, for example). Assuming you're competitive, your application is then read by a primary reader who will summarize it at length for the committee. Then a second reader (and sometimes a third) will read and write their own summaries. Then it will go to selection committee, where multiple groups of different admissions staff and faculty members will weigh in on it. Assuming you've made it that far, the senior staff will then review it *again,* and then finally Marilee will spend some time with it before it gets put definitively into the admit pile. Approximately 12 people (give or take) will significantly discuss and debate your application before you're admitted. This is all very intentional; committee decisions ensure that every decision is correct in the context of the overall applicant pool, and that no one individual's bias or preferences or familiarity with a given case has any chance of swaying a decision unfairly.**

With that in mind, let me tell you a little bit about what my job is like from November through March. Three days a week, I take a random bunch of applications to the public library, find a quiet corner, and immerse myself in your lives.

I read about your triumphs, I read about your dreams, I read about the tragedies that define you. I read about your passions, your inventions, your obsession with video games, dance, Mozart, Monet. I read about the person close to you who died. I read about your small towns, your big cities, the week you spent abroad that changed your life. I read about your parents getting divorced, your house burning down, your girlfriend cheating on you. I read about the car you rebuilt with your dad, the championship debate you lost, the team you led to failure, the performance you aced. I read about the people you've helped and the people you've hurt. I read about how you've stood tall in the face of racism, homophobia, poverty, injustice.

Then I read about the lives you've changed - a math or science teacher, a humanities teacher, a counselor. I read the things that they probably don't say to your face for fear of inflating your ego: that you're the best in their careers, that kids like you are the reason they chose to be a teacher in the first place, that they're better people for having known you.

If you've had an interview, I get to read about how you come across in person to someone you've just met - how your face lights up at the mention of cell biology, how you were five minutes late because you had an audition, how your smile can fill a room, how you simply *shine.*

(**Your grades and scores are clearly competitive or your application wouldn't be on my pile in the first place**.)

By now I'm fully invested in you so I write a gazillion nice things about you in your summary and I'm smiling the whole time. I talk about your depth, all the ways you're a great match to MIT, all the things I know you'll contribute to campus. I conclude with phrases like "clear admit" and "perfect choice." In my head I imagine bumping into you on the Infinite Corridor, asking you how your UROP is going, seeing your a cappella group perform.

I come home each night and tell my wife over dinner how lucky I am, because I never seem to pick boring applications out of the pile. In fact, I tell her, I'm inspired enough by the stories I read to think that the world might actually turn out to be okay after all.

In March I go into committee with my colleagues, having narrowed down my top picks to a few hundred people. My colleagues have all done the same. Then the numbers come in: *this year's admit rate will be 13%. For every student you admit, you need to let go of seven others.*

What? But I have so many who... *But..*And then the committee does its work, however brutal. It's not pretty, but at least it's fair. (And by fair I mean fair in the context of the applicant pool; of course it's not fair that there are so few spots for so many qualified applicants.)

When it's all over, about 13% of my top picks are offered admission. I beg, I plead, I make ridiculous promises (just ask the senior staff) but at the end of the day, a committee decision is a committee decision.

Of my many favorites this year, there were a few who really got to me, and when they didn't get in, the tears came. Some would call me foolish for getting this wrapped up in the job, but honestly, I couldn't do this job if I disconnected myself from the human component of it. It's my job to present you to the committee; if your dream of being at MIT didn't become *my* dream on some small level, then really, why am I doing this at all? Others would disagree, but then, others aren't me.

To the 87% of you who have shared your lives with us and trusted us with your stories over the last four months, please know that they meant something to me, and I won't forget you. When I say that I share the pain of these decisions with you, I'm not lying. I'm really not lying.

To the person up there who said "while it's supposed to be comforting, obviously, I just find it really insincere" - you have it backwards. I don't expect it (or anything else) to be comforting at this moment. But insincere? No. Not that.

Just got confirmation that the USPS picked up the mail (for real), so it's on the way. I'll be thinking about all of you.

For more information from Ben, go to
http://www.mitadmissions.org/Ben.shtml