

**SURVIVING THE COLLEGE  
APPLICATION PROCESS**

You have to be angular to fit into a well-rounded college. Colleges seek to be well-rounded so they can offer varied experiences to their students. Students who express their intimate relationship with themselves are more successful in communicating their uniqueness to the college. By providing a variety of case studies Lisa Bleich shows how it's done. Kudos to this author.

—**C. Claire Law**, MS, Certified Educational Planner,  
co-author of *Find the Perfect College for You*

# **SURVIVING THE COLLEGE APPLICATION PROCESS**

**CASE STUDIES TO HELP YOU FIND  
YOUR UNIQUE ANGLE FOR SUCCESS**

*Lisa Bleich*



NEW YORK

## CASE STUDY

# 4

## HAYLEY THE RELUCTANT ENGINEER AND RUNNER

### Lessons Learned during the Application Process

In this case, you will see how Hayley grew as a person by applying lessons learned in running cross-country and track to her academics. You will also see how she was able to combine two seemingly disconnected interests (Model UN and strength in math and science) to create a unique angle as a girl interested in engineering. Hayley's story also shows the benefit of doing a lot of research in a given area of interest before determining her major (or at least before writing about why a particular area interested her at a given school).

### Hayley's Snapshot

- GPA: 4.01 (weighted, out of 4.36)
- Rigor: 11 AP/honors classes
- SAT: 1480/2280

- ACT with writing: 24
- Class rank: top 20 percent

### About Hayley

- Main interests: business, math, science
- Hayley was a well-rounded student who was not entirely sure what she wanted to study in school at the beginning of the process.
- She ran track and cross-country throughout high school and enjoyed the camaraderie of the team and the ability to see herself improve through hard work.
- She participated in Model UN and enjoyed debating with peers about various issues.
- She was open to the location of the school and wanted a medium to large school with a lot of opportunities.
- She was also involved in the Jewish community through her summer camp and a community service program at the Jewish Community Center.
- She did not have a strong financial need, but her older sister was in college at the University of Texas, so finances did play some role.

### Personality Profile

Hayley was a strong student and did particularly well in math and science. She took a balanced course load, pushing herself in math, science, and Spanish. She challenged herself by taking honors or AP classes in her areas of strength and took academic-level classes in history and English. This gave her the opportunity to work hard but not burn out.

This balance extended to her extracurricular activities. Hayley joined the track and cross-country teams during her freshman year and continued to run throughout high school. She also participated in Model UN, taking on some leadership as a subcommittee co-chair. During her junior year, she began volunteering at the Jewish Community Center. She continued

to do well in school and was nominated by her teachers to be a transition leader during her senior year to help freshmen transition into high school.

### **Creating Hayley's College Application Wheel**

I met Hayley in January of her sophomore year. She was a strong student and had an interest in math and science. At that point, she did not know what she wanted to study in college, which is typical of most sophomores. I suggested that she participate in a pre-college program the following summer between her junior and senior years that would expose her to engineering or a deeper level of science to help her home in on her academic interests. We also identified that she should pursue at least three AP classes in math and science during her senior year.

Since Hayley felt more comfortable with math and science, she did not typically read for pleasure. I suggested that she try to find books of interest to increase her vocabulary through reading, as well as visit the website [freerice.com](http://freerice.com) for five minutes per day to increase her vocabulary. We set a goal for 1350/2050 for her SATs or 29–31 on her ACTs with writing to match her current GPA.

Hayley was involved in Model UN, cross-country, and track, but was considering trying out for volleyball her junior year. I asked her if she had an interest or aptitude to become a leader in one of her activities. She was not sure, but she wanted to give it a go, so we set a goal for her to run for a leadership position with Model UN for the next year. We also decided that she could try out for volleyball the following year, but if she did not make it, to stick with cross-country and track and think about becoming captain by senior year.

Finally, we talked about areas where she could get involved in the community because she had very little community service. Since she had a connection with the Jewish community through her camp and temple, she decided to get involved in a new Teen Action Service Corps (TASC) program at the Jewish Community Center that combined leadership and community service. I also suggested that she look into becoming a transition leader at her high school to help freshmen acclimate.

### Hayley's Strengths

- Math and science
- Hardworking
- Strong grades in challenging curriculum
- Desire to push herself if given a plan

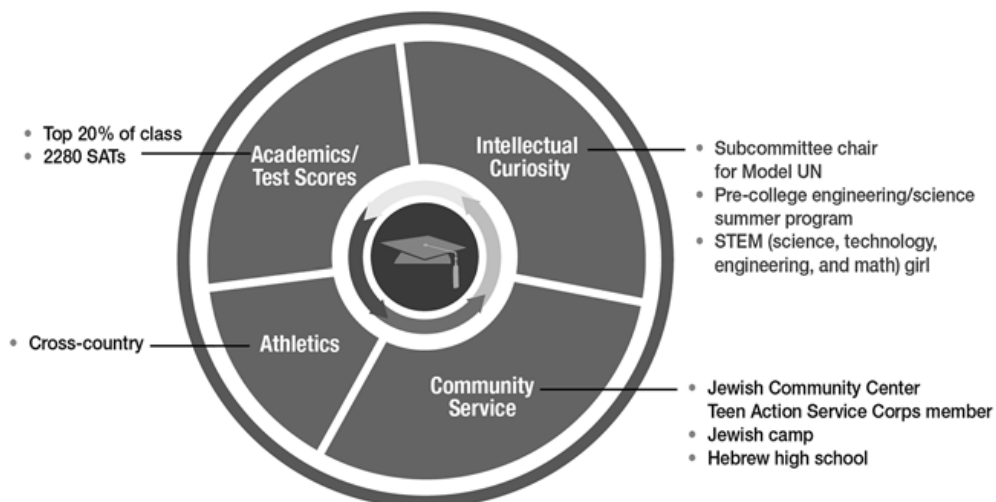
### Hayley's Weaknesses

- Limited community service
- Did a lot of things, but no clear focus or depth
- Limited leadership

### Hayley's Checklist

Hayley had a strong academic record. Her goal was to continue with a rigorous curriculum, particularly in math and science, where she had an aptitude and interest. I suggested that it would be great if Hayley could find a passion for one of these subjects, rather than just doing it because it comes easily for her.

Hayley needed to work on her community service and leadership. Since she had a strong connection to her Jewish background, she decided to get more involved in TASC and also participate in a program that pairs



*Hayley's Application Wheel: Fall of Senior Year*

Jewish teens with teens in a neighboring lower-income community. She also needed to try to take on a leadership role in Model UN.

- **Academics:** Hayley had a strong academic record, particularly in math and the sciences. She continued to push herself by taking AP classes in those subjects.
- **Test scores:** Hayley initially thought she would favor the ACT with writing, but after disappointing results, she switched to the SATs and hit the ball out of the park, getting into the mid-high 700s in math and critical reading and an 800 on the writing section.
- **Athletics:** Hayley decided to focus on track and cross-country rather than switching to volleyball. She learned a lot about discipline and perseverance from her coach.
- **Special talent:** This was not a piece of Hayley's chart.
- **Intellectual curiosity:** Hayley showed intellectual curiosity in math and science. She pursued that further by attending a six-week pre-college program at Vanderbilt University to home in on some possible career options. She also showed this by participating in Model UN on the Environment and Technology Committee.
- **Leadership:** Hayley worked on developing this through her participation in TASC and becoming a subcommittee chair at Model UN.
- **Other:** Hayley had the potential to be a girl interested in one of the STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) fields, but she was undecided about her major.
- **Financial:** Hayley did not absolutely need to get merit aid, but it would certainly help.

## Developing the College List

Hayley wanted a medium to large university with strong STEM or business majors, an active Greek life, and a strong school spirit. She wanted to major in something in the sciences or business, but her mom was pushing



her toward engineering because of future job prospects, so we identified schools that offered strong programs in both engineering and business.

### Key College Criteria for Hayley

- Medium to large university
- Location not a critical factor, but wanted to be near a big city or a town
- Wanted to study science, business, or engineering
- Name of the school was important
- Financial aid was not a deal breaker, but it would be nice to get some merit aid
- Wanted to join a sorority and have strong school spirit and sports

### The Final List

#### *The Reaches*

- **University of Virginia:** UVA has a great reputation and the size is good as well. Hayley liked the feel of the school and the fact that it has strong business and engineering programs.
- **Northwestern University:** This is another great medium-sized school. Hayley was basing this on the reputation of the school and the strong pre-professional programs.

#### *The Possibles*

- **University of Michigan:** Hayley liked the big “rah-rah” aspect of Michigan, along with the excellent academics. Since she was applying to the School of Engineering, it became a possible and not a likely choice, given that engineering is a more competitive major.
- **Vanderbilt University:** Hayley spent six weeks at Vandy over the summer at PAVE, a pre-college program, and liked the feel of the campus. However, she was not 100 percent sure it was the school for her.

- **Washington University in St. Louis:** Hayley liked the atmosphere at WashU, but not sure if it was going to be “rah-rah” enough for her.

### *The Likelies*

- **University of Texas at Austin:** Hayley was very comfortable with UT because her older sister was there. She also had family in Texas. She loved Austin and also liked that UT has strong business and engineering programs, particularly environmental engineering, which was the direction she was leaning.
- **Lehigh University:** Hayley felt comfortable with the student body and it was close to home.
- **University of Maryland at College Park:** Hayley knew a lot of people from her school who went to UMD and felt comfortable with the atmosphere. She liked the “rah-rah” aspect and strong business and engineering options.
- **University of Wisconsin:** Hayley liked the feel of Wisconsin and Madison. It also has strong engineering and business programs.

### *The Safety*

- **Tulane University:** Hayley anticipated getting a substantial merit scholarship based on grades and outstanding test scores. She also liked the feel of the school.

## Choosing an Essay Topic

After brainstorming with Hayley about her strengths and interests, we identified several areas that she wanted to communicate within her application:

- **With freedom comes responsibility:** She learned this while on a trip to Israel where she had a lot of freedom, but also realized that she had to act responsibly since there were others in the group.

- She liked to push herself and set internal goals, but she did not like to compete with others.
- Her ability to learn from her mistakes: When she first started cross-country, she was cutting corners and the coach told her she had to push harder to improve. She learned this lesson again in honors pre-calculus when she got a D on the first test and pushed herself to change her study habits and go in for extra help. She ended the year with a B+ in the course.
- Her interest in working with and learning from others: JCC, Jewish summer camp, and a trip to Israel.
- Hayley was still uncertain about her major when we started the process, but her mom was pushing her to apply for engineering.

## Narrowing Down Possible Topics

### *Experience: Hayley's Major Experiences and Their Impacts*

- **Track and cross-country teams** (taught her to push herself to continually improve and gave her a sense of community). Hayley joined the track and cross-country teams during her freshman year mostly to have something to do. However, she soon found that she enjoyed the camaraderie of the team and started listening to her coach's pep talks. She became more diligent not only in running but also in her schoolwork.
- **Trip to Israel** (opened her eyes to different levels of Jewish observance). Hayley had never been out of the United States before and she was surprised by how different the cultures were. She got to interact with Israeli teens, and since there was a language barrier, she had to push outside of her comfort zone to find a way to connect. She was also surprised by how intensely people were praying at the Western Wall in Jerusalem. It made her realize how strongly some people feel about their religion and how impervious they are to the perceptions of others.

- **Pre-college program at Vanderbilt University** (exposed her to different career paths and provided her with insight about her strengths). She had the opportunity to explore engineering, medicine, and business. She particularly enjoyed learning about advertising and marketing. She also completed the Myers-Briggs personality-type test, which suggested she was kind, task-oriented, and not domineering.

*Issue: Personal, Local, National, or International Issue and Its Importance to Hayley*

- **Model UN** (developed leadership and interest in the environment). Hayley became interested in the environment through her participation in Model UN as a member and co-chair of the Environment and Technology Committee. It made her aware of how much we need to work on sustainable energy to protect the planet.

*Person: Individuals Who Have Had a Significant Impact on Hayley's Life and Outlook*

- **History teacher and coach** (taught her not to cut corners). Her freshman history teacher was also her track and cross-country coach. He was always telling students that if they cut corners, they only hurt themselves. She did not pay much attention to this in history, but when she joined the cross-country team and saw that she would only improve if she ran the entire track without taking shortcuts and gave it 100 percent, she started to bring this mantra into everything she did. It helped her become successful.
- **Maternal grandmother** (taught her to have a positive outlook). She had a very close relationship with her grandmother, who taught her to always look on the bright side of things. This helped Hayley develop a positive outlook.

### ■ ■ ■ Possible Essay Topic Summary Chart ■ ■ ■

#### Experience and Its Impact

##### **Track and cross-country teams**

Found a community with other girls on the team

##### **Trip to Israel**

Opened eyes to not only a new culture but helped her see religion in a new light

##### **Vanderbilt pre-college program**

Helped clarify academic and career goals

#### Issue and Its Importance

##### **Sustainability and the environment**

Provided another area of intellectual curiosity and possible career path

#### Person and His or Her Impact

##### **History teacher and coach**

Learned not to cut corners and always try her best

##### **Grandmother**

Developed a positive outlook on life and always looked for the good in every situation

## The Personal Statement Essay

Hayley decided to write about her history teacher and coach's words, which resonated with her at different times in her life and propelled her to do the right thing.

“Only you know the truth of what others cannot see.” Initially, I thought nothing of these words my old, seemingly boring freshman history teacher spewed throughout class. Figuring they had no relevance to my life, I easily ignored what I believed to be trite clichés. However, Mr. Smith kept offering these kinds of philosophical quotes every day, and at some point, instead of tuning out, I started to listen.

She related this quote to her experience first in cross-country. She described how she did not really understand the true meaning of this quote until she was running cross-country. Hayley talked about how only she would know if she was running the full length of the track; however, she also knew that her times would not improve if she didn't. So she started running the whole course without cutting corners and ultimately improved her times.

This essay answers the Common Application prompt “Reflect on a time when you challenged a belief or idea. What prompted you to act? Would you make the same decision again?” In this case, Hayley shows how she initially challenged her own belief and then showed how she did in fact make the same decision to challenge her belief when she was in Israel. It also worked for the University of Texas essay prompt “Tell us about someone who has made an impact on your life and explain how and why this person is important to you.”

During the summer between her sophomore and junior years, Hayley went to Israel. She tied this together with another quote from Mr. Smith.

Once I saw the power behind these words, I was inspired to apply this concept to other parts of my life as well. When I attended a five-week trip to Israel with my camp, it was the first time I had total freedom to come and go as I pleased. However, after showing up late and holding up my group, I saw an application for another Smith quote: “With freedom comes responsibility.” I realized I needed to approach my freedom with respect to the others on my trip and that it was my responsibility to show up on time.

Hayley showed that she was open to improving and taking advice throughout her life. She also showed how she matured from a freshman to a senior.

### **The Short Answer**

After using the personal statement essay to give an in-depth description of how Hayley matured and grew throughout high school, she wanted to use

the short answer to introduce a different aspect of her personality. Within the short answer, Hayley describes her experience with Model UN and talks about how she got involved with the Environmental and Technology Committee. This sets the scene for her “Why this academic interest?” essay later, where she wrote:

Researching environmental issues and debating possible solutions gave me insight into real-world problems and made me realize that I could learn how to use technology to help prevent environmental problems in the future.

### **Supplemental Essays by School**

Even though she initially had a strong interest in business, Hayley decided (after much urging from her mom) to apply primarily to engineering schools. This was not an easy choice, because when Hayley researched the curriculum for engineering disciplines—for example, mechanical engineering, civil engineering—none of them interested her. However, when she found environmental engineering, she became intrigued by the courses. She realized that her experience as the co-chair of the Environmental and Technology Committee for Model UN had given her a good foundation for this field. She also agreed that it might be a good idea to start with a degree in environmental engineering and then get an MBA later. As a result, many of her schools had a “Why engineering?” essay. This essay became the key for helping her stand out because she was able to tie together her strength in math and science to her experience on the Model UN Environment and Technology Committee.

#### ***Why Engineering?/Issue of Importance***

This essay required a lot of research on Hayley’s part to determine which type of engineering she was interested in. Environmental engineering seemed the most interesting to her largely because she had some experience thinking about it through Model UN and she was taking environmental science as a senior and enjoyed the class.

When I became a member of the Model United Nations club as a high school sophomore, I was randomly assigned to the Environment and Technology Committee. Prior to this placement, I did not hold much awareness about environmental issues. As I started researching and arguing Latvia's position on the issues of environment and technology, I began to realize the huge impact human beings make on the environment through their smallest actions and behaviors. After some serious debates on the topics at issue, I realized just how important the environment is to the survival of all living organisms.

She tied her Model UN involvement with her interest in developing sustainable products to protect the planet to describe an issue of importance for the University of Texas.

These and larger issues such as water contamination and air pollution affect countries and communities all over the world. For example, in Latvia, health issues stem from improper handling and disposal of waste materials, especially when too much waste is sent to landfills. The landfills are incapable of handling such a large amount of waste, and these waste materials begin to pollute the air and cause hazardous health problems. Nations need the tools and resources to help achieve developmental goals, improve their residents' quality of life, and make their communities more economically and environmentally sustainable.

With each of my discoveries I became increasingly impassioned and realized that I could combine my love of science and math with environmental advocacy. I hope to study civil and environmental engineering at UT/Austin and ultimately work on issues related to public health and the environment, as well as the larger issues of acid rain, global warming, and ozone depletion.



For the schools that asked how she would explore her academic interests at their school, she then found specific courses at each of the schools. For the University of Michigan she wrote:

One of the programs that really caught my interest and seems unique to Michigan is the interdisciplinary Global Change curriculum. I am intrigued by the topics listed in this curriculum, such as climate change and human impact to the environment. In particular, I would want to use my math and analytical skills in classes such as “Environmental Informatics: GIS and Modeling Program.” The Environmental Informatics curriculum emphasizes the science and societal issues behind environmental problems, which would allow me to dig deeper into this field of study.

This essay allowed Hayley to show her intellectual curiosity in the application. She submitted a variation of this essay topic to University of Virginia (UVA), University of Michigan, Lehigh, Wisconsin, University of Texas, and Vanderbilt.

### *Book That Impacted You*

Hayley had to write about a book that influenced her and why for the University of Maryland and UVA. She chose to write about *The Last Song* by Nicholas Sparks, which is about a girl whose father has cancer. She chose this book because she read it when she was helping a friend cope with cancer, so she was able to relate to the feelings of wanting to help someone even if they resisted the help. This showed Hayley’s caring side.

## Complementary Angles

### *Letters of Recommendation*

- Hayley asked her chemistry and Spanish teachers for letters of recommendation because they would show different sides of her academic strengths.

- She also got a letter of recommendation from the track coach who was so instrumental in her development.

### *Brag Sheet/Resume*

- Hayley had a fairly balanced wheel, so her activities demonstrated strength in track, cross-country, community service, and Model UN.
- It also highlighted her STEM involvement through her pre-college PAVE program at Vanderbilt and her involvement with the Environment and Technology Committee of Model UN.

### *Supplemental Materials*

- Hayley had no supplemental materials.

### *Additional Information*

- Hayley did not have any extenuating circumstances to report in her record. She uploaded her detailed brag sheet/resume here.

## Results

### *The Reaches*

- **University of Virginia:** Denied
- **Northwestern University:** Denied

### *The Possibles*

- **University of Michigan:** Accepted
- **Vanderbilt University:** Denied
- **Washington University in St. Louis:** Accepted

### *The Likelies*

- **University of Texas at Austin:** Accepted
- **Lehigh University:** Accepted

- **University of Maryland at College Park:** Accepted into honors program
- **University of Wisconsin:** Accepted

### *The Safety*

- **Tulane University:** Accepted with \$27,000 per year scholarship

### **Final Decision**

University of Texas at Austin Engineering School

### **What Can You Learn from Hayley's Story?**

#### **Questions to Ask Yourself**

- Who is someone who has influenced you or made you think about how you approach life? How have you changed because of this person?
- How has a travel experience changed the way you view yourself or others? How have you changed?
- What are your academic strengths? How can you apply those to a potential major or career?
- How do your extracurricular activities tie into your intended major?
- How can you show a theme that runs through various aspects of your life to create a unique angle?

## Notes

