

How to Be a High School Superstar

A Revolutionary Plan to Get into College
by Standing Out (Without Burning Out)

Cal Newport

A NOTE FOR PARENTS

This book is written for high school students. You'll notice throughout that I directly address the student concerning his or her journey through high school and the admissions process. I highly recommend, however, that parents read the book as well. The strategies described in the chapters that follow work best if the entire household is involved.

Introduction: “Stanford Doesn’t Take Students with Bs!”

IN LATE spring 2004, a nervous student walked through the doors of the college counseling center at an elite Bay Area private high school. The student, whom I'll call Kara, had an appointment to discuss her college prospects. She entered a cramped office. The space was dominated by a desk, and what little area remained was taken up by a small round table. Multiracial clusters of happy students beamed at her from the college brochures pinned to the wall.

Kara took a seat at the table. Across from her sat her college counselor, a redheaded woman, pregnant and in her late twenties, flipping through a file. Kara thought she saw concern flash across the counselor's face.

After the obligatory small talk, the counselor began the session. “So, how are your grades going to be this semester?” she asked.

“Not as good as I hoped, probably some Bs,” Kara answered.

The counselor glanced down at the list of schools where Kara wanted to apply, as if reconfirming, for the umpteenth time, that she had read it right. “Stanford has a ten percent acceptance rate. Do you know what that means?” she asked.

“That one out of ten get in?” Kara ventured.

“It means that nine get rejected,” the counselor replied, trying to keep her voice even and reassuring. She paused for a moment, then asked, “Kara, do you think that you're better than those nine other people?”

Kara began to stammer a response.

“Kara,” the counselor said pleadingly, “Stanford doesn't take students with Bs.” She pulled a sheet from the folder. “You're on the cross-country team, which is good. But you're not the president of any clubs, and with these mediocre grades you're not going to get into your reach schools. You're just not. The people who apply to these schools have done *amazing* things.”

Though it was left unsaid, Kara knew exactly the type of “amazing” student her counselor meant—students like Elizabeth, who was Kara's best friend and one of the high school's most impressive seniors. Elizabeth was a master at the college admissions game, someone Kara later described to me as “the poster child for students who do lots of uninteresting things.” Elizabeth was president of the key club, played piano and varsity tennis, competed in math competitions, and belonged to what Kara described as “lots of boring clubs that I would never join.”

When it came to grades, nothing short of straight As would satisfy Elizabeth. She was maniacal about gaming courses, figuring out which would consistently yield As in exchange for hard work and avoiding those that relied too much on insight or natural ability (attributes that scared her off because they could not be acquired by raw effort). Like many students at her high school, she suffered from what Kara called “gratuitous AP taking.” By contrast, Kara, much to the horror of her counselor, had only taken three advanced placement courses. Keep in mind that her school had practically coronated a student who had broken the state record for the most APs taken by a freshman.

In the first few weeks of that spring semester, Elizabeth had dropped a course because she got a B on the first test, which increased the risk of her missing a full A for her final grade. She then pleaded with Kara to drop a linear algebra course that was giving her trouble. “Take AP stats instead,” she said. “All you have to do is a crapload of homework—that's forty percent of the grade; if you do it all they give you an A.” Kara ignored this advice. She liked linear algebra.

Elizabeth, on the other hand, didn't like much at all about high school. As Kara recalls: “Elizabeth was working all the time; she had no social life; she was just so freakin' diligent!” She was also, as you might imagine, stress-addled and often upset or anxious. But this is the approach that most students at her elite high school swore by. It's also the approach followed by tens of thousands of other talented but overworked students across the country. It persists for one simple reason: if you're not an amazing athlete or a genius, and if your parents aren't capable of donating a new library to Harvard, demonstrating time-consuming “commitment” to lots of things has been deemed the only reliable way to maximize your admissions chances. It's a brutal game, and it's no fun to play, but at least the rules are clear.

Then along came Kara.

Spooked by the grim encounter with her college counselor—a meeting that concluded with the counselor pulling out the applications for the less-competitive California public universities—Kara scraped together enough money to apply to twenty-one different schools. (Her dad refused to pay that many application fees.)

“I was freaked out that I wasn't going to get in anywhere,” she recalls.

But here's the thing: Kara did get in. In fact, she got into twenty of the twenty-one schools she applied to, including MIT, Caltech, Columbia, Cornell, Berkeley, Johns Hopkins, and, of course, Stanford—proving, to the surprise of her counselor, that those schools do occasionally accept students with Bs.

Kara's long string of acceptances surprised her classmates because she had refused to play the standard admissions game. Kara had the lowest GPA of any student from her school who had ever been accepted into MIT (where she now attends). She took a reasonable course load and avoided a crushing extracurricular schedule. Unlike most of her competitive peers, Kara actually enjoyed high school.

“I was perceived as the relaxed kid in my school,” she told me with a sheepish grin. It was as if she were admitting a crime.

As you might imagine, Kara's success proved disruptive. The entire motivation—the *raison d'être*—for the brutal schedules of students like Elizabeth is their unshakable confidence that doing more things than the thousands of other applicants applying to the same schools is the *only* way to stand out. Kara shattered this confidence, and in doing so she provided a glimmer of hope for stressed students everywhere: it might be possible to stand out without burning out.

Meet the Relaxed Superstars

Kara is part of a little-known subculture of students that I call the *relaxed superstars*. These are students who live relaxed and happy high school lives yet still breeze into their reach schools. Like Kara, they challenge a lot of what we thought was true about the college admissions process.

Most relaxed superstars pay little attention to college admissions until application deadlines loom—the topic doesn't dominate their lives the way it does for so many of their peers. They dismiss the belief that you should suffer through the hardest possible course schedules; instead, they build reasonable schedules that provide challenge but still leave plenty of free time. They abhor crowded lists of extracurricular activities; instead, they focus on a small number of genuinely interesting pursuits. Perhaps the most striking trait of these students is their happiness. Spending time with them, I have been astonished by how much they seemed to enjoy their lives. They flat-out reject the idea that happiness must be deferred until after you get accepted into college, and they prove that living a relaxed and engaging life can actually make you *more* successful in the admissions process.

This book presents the first insider look into the fascinating world of these students. For the past three years, I've tracked down relaxed superstars from across the country and listened to their stories. During my research I met Olivia, for example, a student from New Hampshire who earned a full-ride scholarship to the University of Virginia even though she spent, on average, only six or seven hours *per week* on extracurriculars during the school year. I also met Michael, from Paradise Valley, Arizona, who took only one AP course during the dreaded junior year and dedicated his abundant free time to a single activity. Most impressive to me was the fact that during the school week, at least four days out of five, Michael would set off, after the final bell, on a trail that cut through campus before winding its way to the summit of a nearby desert mountain. The hike took from one to two hours, depending on which route he chose. At the top, sitting among the scrub grass and sweating in the dry Arizona heat, Michael would clear his head.

"When I would start up the mountain, I might have something bothering me," he said. "By the time I came down, it was not as big as it had seemed."

It's hard to find a happier or more well-balanced high school student. This Zen senior was accepted at Stanford.

I also met Maneesh, who described himself as "the laziest student at Bella Vista High School"—a large public school tucked away in a Northern California suburb. Maneesh somehow rigged his senior year schedule so that he could leave school at 11 a.m. every day. When I asked him what he did with this free time, he laughed before replying, "Dude, whatever I wanted."

He was serious. He used the time in random ways, notably in figuring out how to build a cheap iPod case from an athletic sock—an idea that became an Internet sensation after he posted the plans online. Like Michael, Maneesh got into Stanford.

Maneesh was not the only relaxed superstar to rig an abbreviated school day. Another student, Kate, arranged her senior year school day to end before lunch so that she could work on an independent study project. Like Maneesh, she carried a light course load; she could often finish her daily homework by early afternoon. This, along with avoiding nearly all extracurricular activity beyond her independent study, made for a relaxed lifestyle. She got into Princeton while many of her friends—who had taken many more courses, scored better grades, and suffered through many more difficult extracurriculars—had to settle for the waitlist.

My inspiration for this project stems partly from the fact that I can count myself among the ranks of the relaxed superstars. As a member of the class of 2000 at a small central New Jersey public high school, I was infamous for my aversion to hard work. I never pulled an all-nighter and rarely worked past dinner. I scored mainly As, but Bs were sprinkled throughout my transcript, and there was even a C+ from a French class that never quite agreed with me.* I took AP courses, but never more than two or three at once, and I was a big fan of study halls. In terms of formal extracurricular activities, I was my class's liaison, a member of the model UN club, and ran track—hardly an overwhelming load. As my good friend Michael Simmons recently admitted: "I was always amazed by how much time you seemed to spend relaxing."

When it came time for college admissions, I applied early to Dartmouth because I liked the students I had met during a whirlwind tour of East Coast campuses. A few months later I received the acceptance notice. All told, the admissions process required only a few days of effort; it was never a major part of my student life.

Olivia, Michael, Maneesh, Kate, and I are just a few examples from among the many relaxed superstars you'll encounter in this book. Every story is true, though in some cases I've changed the student's name at his or her request. In the chapters that follow, you'll learn exactly how these stars pulled off their amazing combination of relaxation and admissions success. I'll then teach you how to replicate their feats in your own student life. Forget the stress and anxiety of the Elizabeth approach to college admissions. As the story of Kara suggests, you're about to learn a much better way.

Cracking the Superstar Code

At a high level of description, the secret to the relaxed superstars' success is straightforward: these students are *genuinely interesting people* who did *genuinely interesting things*. Kara, for example, developed a technology-based health curriculum. Olivia spent her summers working on horseshoe crab research at a nearby university. Michael spearheaded a series of sustainability projects at his school that earned considerable press attention. Maneesh wrote a bestselling guide to computer game programming for teens. Kate's research on teaching methods changed the way that a well-known charter school taught reading to its students. And I cofounded a Web development company.

As you'll learn, however, none of these accomplishments required an unusually large amount of work or a rare natural talent. In fact, I would argue that every one of these projects required less time than a varsity sport and less natural talent than that possessed by the violin players who sit in the first section of the school orchestra. When you combine this reality with the fact that these students took reasonable course loads and didn't add unrelated extracurriculars to their schedules, the observation that they lived relaxed and happy lives comes as no surprise. To an admissions officer, however, such students are superstars. Admissions officers are bored by applicants, like Elizabeth, who attempt to impress them through the sheer volume and difficulty of their accomplishments. They see right through faux passions carefully chosen to highlight aspects of the applicant's invented "personality." By contrast, students like Kara, Olivia, Michael, Maneesh, and Kate, who are genuinely interesting and doing genuinely interesting things, sparkle—even though their lives are much less stressful than those of the applicants they're outshining.

This high-level explanation, however, is not enough. Becoming genuinely interesting is not an easy task. After first hearing about relaxed superstars like those described above, the typical high school student will quickly survey his or her own life before declaring, "I have nothing that I'm that passionate about," and will then return to the cold comfort of the show-commitment-to-lots-of-different-activities strategy.

"The devil I know," the student thinks, "is better than the angel I don't understand."

Don't worry, the high-level explanation is just the beginning. This book moves beyond what these students did to get accepted and explains how they got started down their paths. In the chapters that follow, I deconstruct the lifestyle of the relaxed superstars, and then highlight the key ideas that will enable you to emulate their approach. Put another way, this book does not describe tricks for making you look more impressive. It provides, instead, advice for changing your life into one that naturally attracts impressive opportunities.

The Three Laws of the Relaxed Superstar

As my research into the relaxed superstars progressed, I began to notice three big-picture ideas popping up again and again:

The Law of Underscheduling

Pack your schedule with free time. Use this time to explore.

The Law of Focus

Master one serious interest. Don't waste time on unrelated activities.

The Law of Innovation

Pursue accomplishments that are hard to explain, not hard to do.

These were the general *laws* that most of the students I interviewed seemed to follow on their path from average to standout. This book is divided into three parts, one for each of these laws. Each part is then split into halves. The first half explains the law and gives examples of real relaxed superstars putting it into practice. The second half provides a *playbook* of specific advice to help you make the law an important part of your own life. By the time you finish all three parts, you'll have gained both a detailed understanding of the relaxed superstar lifestyle and a set of specific steps that can help you transform your own lifestyle to match.

The relaxed superstar philosophy is radical. If you're a student, I'm asking you to abandon much of the well-worn conventional wisdom about what you "must" do to get accepted into competitive colleges, and I'm offering you, instead, the hope that you can actually enjoy your high school life without sacrificing your long-term ambitions. If you're the parent of a student, I'm offering you the hope that your child can fulfill his or her potential without burning out or transforming into an unhappy, work-obsessed drone.

Along with these hopes, however, comes a request for your trust that the counterintuitive ideas I offer can actually work. With this in mind, I have provided, in the following section, the answers to some common questions about the relaxed superstar philosophy. I ask that you take a moment to skim these questions and answers to see if I address any objections or concerns you may have at this point.

By the time you finish this book, I hope you'll be a believer in the powerful idea that stress and admissions success are not inextricably linked. I've spent time with dozens of students who have proven that connection false. You're about to encounter many of their stories, and hopefully you'll join the growing ranks of relaxed superstars who've discovered, to their happy surprise, that college admissions doesn't have to be an ordeal to survive. Instead, as you will see, it can be a stress-free reward for living a happy, interesting life.

*As fans of my book *How to Become a Straight-A Student* know, it wasn't until college that I figured out the type of smart study habits that make it possible to combine a relaxed schedule with top grades.

Common Questions About the Relaxed Superstar Philosophy

Normal students can't write bestselling books or conduct breakthrough research, no matter how hard they try. These "relaxed superstars" sound like geniuses. How can you expect us mere mortals to replicate their amazing feats?

This is probably the most common reaction to the relaxed superstars. It is true that by the time these students apply to college, they're different from their peers. Among other things, they're surprisingly mature and engaged with the world. They also possess a knack for conceiving, and then pushing to completion, interesting projects. When you meet a relaxed superstar at this late stage, it does seem as if he or she possesses something special. **What's important to note, however, is that such students were not born with these abilities.** The traits that we admire developed as a side effect of their unique lifestyle—a lifestyle built around the three laws I describe in this book. This is the core idea of the relaxed superstar philosophy: **Genuinely interesting accomplishments are generated only by living a genuinely interesting life—not by special abilities or careful planning.**

This book provides a road map for constructing such a life. It asks that you don't focus on the final accomplishments that made these students stars, but that you look instead at the path that led them to the place where such accomplishments come naturally.

How important are my grades and SAT scores if I follow the relaxed superstar lifestyle?

This is a crucial question that demands a clear answer: **Your grades and SAT scores together remain the most important factor in college admissions, even if you do follow the relaxed superstar lifestyle.** Most college guides will provide statistics on the median GPA and SAT scores of their accepted students. They typically describe a range of scores. For example, a school might report that the middle 50 percent of their accepted students scored between 650 and 700 on the math section of the SAT. This means that 25 percent of their accepted students scored above 700, 25 percent of these students scored below 650, and the rest scored somewhere in between. You can use these ranges to estimate your chance of being admitted. Here's my general rule: If your scores fall into the range of the top 25 percent of accepted students, then you can consider this school a *target*. With the exception of a handful of top universities, the school will probably accept you if you apply. If your score falls comfortably in the middle 50 percent, you can consider this school a *realistic reach*. You've passed the academic threshold for proof that you can handle the workload, but it's up to the other parts of your application to earn you a spot in the incoming class. If your scores are in the bottom 25 percent, then this school is probably out of your reach—regardless of your nonacademic achievements. Of course, exceptions abound, as any number of special circumstances can boost your chances—for example, if you're a recruited athlete or your parent is a senator—but this general rule applies to the majority of applicants.

With these terms defined, we can return to the original question and provide a more precise answer: **The relaxed superstar lifestyle will help you get accepted into your *realistic reach* schools.** It cannot guarantee that you will get into your *dream* school. If your grades and scores don't pass the minimum threshold, you're probably out of luck.

Keep in mind that, for some colleges, this threshold can be daunting. Consider Harvard. The middle 50 percent of its accepted students in the fall of 2008 had an SAT math score between 700 and 780. It follows that if you can't easily score in the 700 range on this section, then Harvard is likely off the table—regardless of your extracurricular prowess. At the same time, however, the relaxed superstar philosophy prevents you from needing to score a 790 or 800 to get in. Simply passing the middle 50 percent threshold is enough to allow the other aspects of your application to take over. This frees you from stressing out about getting the *highest* possible scores and grades. If you subscribe to the relaxed superstar philosophy, it's okay to have scores and grades that are *high enough*.

Can this book answer my technical questions about the college application process?

No. This book doesn't address the technical details of applying to colleges. I don't discuss the advantages of early decision, or provide a timeline for taking standardized tests. There are dozens of great guides—many of them written by college counselors or former admissions officers—that cover these technical details in depth. This book, by contrast, focuses exclusively on the one topic that these other titles miss: how to become the type of student who breezes through the admissions process.

I just finished my junior year of high school. Is it too late for me to reap the benefits of the relaxed superstar lifestyle?

There's no hard cutoff date after which these changes stop helping. Some of the students you'll encounter in this book, for example, made their transition to this lifestyle near the end of their junior year. The accomplishments that helped them stand out were completed in the fall of their senior year, right before applications were due. Other students, like Michael, the sustainability guru from Arizona, sent additional information to the colleges in the early spring of their senior year, after their applications were already submitted. (For a student on a waitlist, accomplishments from this final spring can make a difference, if brought to the attention of the admissions staff.)

That being said, the earlier you transform to the relaxed superstar lifestyle, the better. For one thing, it gives you more time to add interesting accomplishments. More important, each year you fail to live as a relaxed superstar is another year potentially marred by the stress and unhappiness that the traditional approach to college admissions generates.

Kids are too stressed out about college admissions. Shouldn't you be teaching the lesson that "there's more to life than Harvard" instead of focusing on "tricks" to beat the system?

Though it may be true that there's more to life than Harvard, the kids who are suffering the most from admissions-related stress are also the kids most likely to ignore this advice. This point was emphasized for me when I heard the following true story:

In the fall of 2007, Palo Alto's Gunn High School held an assembly led by Denise Pope, a Stanford researcher who specializes in high school stress. Gunn was an appropriate venue for this assembly, as the school is notorious for college-admissions-related anxiety. As Noreen Likins, the principal of Gunn High School, once commented about those of her students who were ailing: "When it spills over to kids getting two or three hours of sleep a night and doing too much, that's when we need to say enough is enough."

During the assembly, Pope highlighted the dangers of stress and outlined some alternative paths through college admissions—paths that emphasized finding a good fit over focusing exclusively on the most competitive schools.

"The students' reaction [to the assembly] was mixed," was the charitable summary included in a report published by the school later that year. The students were more candid. In an online discussion group, one Gunn junior sarcastically responded:

Well, that assembly taught me that if I want to relieve my stress I should throw away all my college prospects ... and go to some random Cal State University! Thank you, Gunn Administration, for letting us hear from the best in the field!

Later that year, a group of parents gathered at nearby Palo Alto High School's theater to attend a talk titled "Let's REALLY Talk About College." Originally billed as a "panel discussion for parents and students," the event had generated a buzz once it was revealed that several college admissions experts would sit on the panel.

Only a few minutes into the first speaker's presentation, however, it became clear that the focus of this assembly, as with Pope's talk, was the idea that students should look beyond the Ivy League and settle for less-competitive schools that would generate less stress. A murmur spread through the crowd. Someone stood up and walked out of the auditorium. More followed. As Louise Singleton, a college counselor who helped organize the event, estimates, at least 20 percent of the audience left before the first speaker finished.

I asked Louise why parents were ignoring this message, even though it was aimed at improving their kids' health.

"They think it's other people's problem," she told me. "They think, 'Not my kids—my kids will be okay.'"

The relaxed superstar lifestyle is the first admissions strategy that couples stress reduction with an improvement in your admissions chances. It allows students (and parents) who are wedded to the idea of getting into the best possible college to still have a shot at living a happy and relaxed life. With this in mind, this book doesn't contain tricks for beating the system. Instead, it focuses on building the type of sustainable lifestyle that can yield rewards not just in the admissions process, but also for life beyond.