

Discussion Guide to the 2012 Casebook

Harvard College Admissions

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United States District Court
District of Massachusetts

DX 24

Case No. 1:14-cv-14176 (ADB)

Date Entered

By

Deputy Clerk

HARV00018164

DX024.0001

Discussion guide to the 2012 casebook

All are admissible cases, but none is clear. Each folder contains information that gives pause and yet offers positive reasons to admit. They illustrate the perennial difficulty—philosophical as well as actual—of responding to individuals of merit, creating the overall mix of a Class, and trying to determine what seems best for each student (i.e., match with Harvard). The importance of essays, recommendations, objective data, and interviews is evident in these cases.

1) Sergei Liukin (1 3+ 4 3)

Appeal

- Extremely bright student across academic fields with very strong faculty support
- Real passion for learning; he would make the most of Harvard academics
- School officials write (generally) very strong letters of recommendation
- Has high aspirations to contribute to academia
- Has done very well despite repeated moves and possible family upheaval (guidance counselor mentions it, though it's not addressed elsewhere)
- Strong interview report with good supporting details

Pause factors

- Active outside the classroom—a contributor in several areas—but not a bell ringer
- Teacher 2 raises some serious PQ flags (not mentioned elsewhere) about intellectual arrogance and Sergei's difficulties working with others who are less able than he
- What will his transition be like—from big fish in small pond to Harvard—and how will Sergei interact with roommates, classmates, and administrators?

Other information for your "committee"

- Area person called teacher 2 to find out more about Sergei's personal qualities; teacher stood by his assessment and said that other teachers he's spoken with concur
- Teacher reaffirms Sergei's enormous intellectual potential but can't get 100% behind his case

Action

- After several lengthy discussions, Sergei was placed on the wait list
- Sergei and alumni from his area wrote in to express his continued interest in Harvard and his hopes to be admitted from the waitlist
- Sergei visited his area officer while in Boston visiting another school in April; officer met with him and found him polite, pleasant enough, and a bit nervous
- Not admitted from waiting list

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2) Thomas Smith (2 2 4 2)

Appeal

- Bright student with several areas of academic interest
- Harvard offers a lot for students interested in politics, community service, and religious activities; Thomas would make the most of PBH, the IOP, etc.
- Interested in public service law as a possible career—seems like whatever he does, Thomas will continue his tradition of service to others
- Has done well in spite of great family upheaval and financial difficulties
- Student requested a fee waiver, which is generally a very good indicator of high financial need; he may qualify for the Harvard Financial Aid Initiative
- Myclassguides.com seems a good indicator of his self-starting personality
- Teachers and guidance counselor tell us that Thomas is a real doer who makes a strong impact when he gets involved with something

Pause factors

- We would like to know more about his note-selling business; would it be in violation of Harvard's principles for academic integrity?
- Academic and extracurricular accomplishment, while very strong, are not unusual for us
- Alumni interview report is not particularly helpful or well-done, though the alumnus seems supportive
- Alum calls him “mechanical” and “aggressive” without elaborating—what does he mean?

Other information for your “committee”

- Area person called Thomas to find out more about his business. Thomas says he needed a job that would allow him to help out around the house and watch his younger brothers. He posted the outlines on the internet but didn't sell them (revenue came from ads), and the service was *not* about finding answers to old exams online. He understands that colleges may place greater restrictions on what he's able to do with notes and in study groups, and he hopes to find a different job when on campus.
- Area person called interviewer to flesh out the “mechanical” and “aggressive” comments. Over the phone, the interviewer gives a much stronger endorsement of Thomas' case than the write-up suggests, and says he meant “aggressive” as a good thing: here's a young man who creates his own opportunities and works hard to get things done. By “mechanical” he meant “standard” with regard to his volunteer activities—not that Thomas doesn't care about them or did them just to pad his resume.

Action

- Admitted in April
- Enrolled

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3) Melissa Guzman de Jesus (3+ 2 4 2)

Appeal

- Very bright Hispanic-American woman
- Modest family background
- Parents have no higher education and her guardian has a dental certificate; she has made the most of her situation and excelled in school without much support from home
- Melissa has balanced work, family, and school commitments well in high school; she seems to have the drive and time-management skills to do very well at Harvard
- The oldest of ten, Melissa's acceptance would mean a lot to her younger siblings and family
- Visible and active in her local community
- Wonderful support and interview

Pause factors

- Her essay gives pause. Did she write it for shock value? Does she really believe all of the things that she has said in her essay? Is she naïve?
- Pre-med will be an adjustment for her, though her academic credentials are strong and she has the work ethic to do it
- Her extracurricular niche at Harvard is not clear, though she has many interests she could pursue on-campus and off

Other information for your "committee"

- Interviewers are few where Melissa lives, and scheduling one was difficult for her because her religious beliefs and community commitments keep her busy or unable to interview all weekend. Thus, she moved throughout most of the process without a face-to-face interview until the very end.
- An alumnus and the area person conducted phone interviews with Melissa. Both saw enormous personal appeal and academic substance, but the Committee was hesitant to move forward without a face-to-face interview.
- Area person spoke with Melissa about her essay on the phone. Melissa did not retract her statements; she believed her friend's statements and affirmed her commitment to helping others in similar situations.
- Area person called school counselor and both teachers to find out more about Melissa. All raved about her (as they did in their letters), and her guidance counselor added that Melissa wrote her essay on her own, and that it wasn't passed to her for editing (as some students do). She understood how it would raise some eyebrows, but stands firmly by her conviction that Melissa is a wonderful prospect for Harvard.
- Area person eventually got in touch with an alumnus who did the very thorough face-to-face interview included in the write-up.

Action

- Interview arrived at the very last minute; Melissa was the last case admitted before letters went out in April
- Enrolled

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4) Giang Nguyen (3 2 6 2)

Appeal

- Very bright Vietnamese-American woman with compelling family history
- Modest family background; likely to benefit from our Financial Aid Initiative
- Important family responsibilities
- Blue-collar/no-college background; Giang seems to have done well without much help from her parents or other relatives
- Public school in the heart of a major American city; her acceptance would resonate well in the local community
- Wonderful support
- Interview (even though it is not particularly well done and has inflated ratings) sheds light on Giang's important family responsibilities, which we don't learn about elsewhere

Pause factors

- Her extracurricular niche is unclear, especially because she has not had time to pursue much outside of a few academic activities
- Giang's application does not tell us much about her, though we learn of her family's struggles to come to the US and do well (and, by extension, we learn about her values and life history)
- ACT score is modest—but ACT scores do not correlate nearly as strongly with future academic performance as SAT II scores do, and those are quite strong
- Pre-med will be an adjustment for her, though her chemistry and math scores are encouraging

Action

- Admitted in April
- Enrolled

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5) Evelyn Satmar (2 2- 3 2)

11-2

Appeal

- Very bright, active, appealing personality: a classic “well rounded case”
- Interesting family background, which she writes about and seems interested in sharing
- Charming essay that gives us a sense of her personality (though it was not universally liked by the committee members!)
- Teachers and guidance counselors write extensively about her strong personal qualities
- Strong (though not especially well done or helpfully written) interview; clearly the alum interviewer liked her and saw the same person as the recommenders

Pause factors

- While a strong overall candidate, Evelyn’s credentials are not unusual in our applicant pool
- She lists swimming and diving as her preferred activity, though her level of talent is probably not at our varsity level: what, exactly, will she do at Harvard?
- Her extracurricular niche at Harvard is not clear, though she has many interests she could pursue on-campus and off

Action

- Discussed extensively in subcommittee and full committee meetings
- In and out of the class
- Waitlisted
- Admitted from waiting list
- Enrolled

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6) Megan Turner (2- 2 3 3+)

Additional Information

- Admissions Officer called Teacher #3 to flesh out negative recommendation. Professor stood by his assessment of Megan, her *ad hominum* comments, and her “small-town” insecurity. However, the Professor suggested that Officer call the young woman who was a teaching assistant for the course.
- Admissions Officer called the teaching assistant. She had a very different point of view about Megan. She explained that the whole seminar had started off making points using more personal arguments and she could see how someone else might have construed them as “*ad hominum*.” She, however, viewed them as immature or not very developed arguments. She sat the seminar down and worked with them on developing a new style of arguing. Megan was among those who were most responsive and worked hardest at improving her style of making a point. As to Megan’s choice of colleges, the teaching assistant admitted that at the start of the summer, Megan had asserted that she wanted to go to Harvard but had not really thought it through. During the course of the summer, she pushed Megan to really consider her college choices, and by the end of the summer, Megan had really coherent arguments for why Harvard most suited her own interests. As to possible negative comments about her family, the teaching assistant said she had only heard positive things. The only thing she remembered that might be construed differently was that Megan once explained that it was sometimes hard for her to explain to her family why really wanted new experiences, as they tended to be home-bodies and to not want to leave their home-state. As to Megan’s ability to fit in at Harvard and be a positive influence, the teaching assistant felt that she would be a wonderful addition.
- Admissions Officer also called the school guidance counselor to follow up on Megan’s personal qualities. Guidance counselor had nothing but praise and insisted that she had never heard Megan be arrogant or dismissive of another student.

Appeal

- Native American and Caucasian young woman from rural area of a Mountain States.
- Very bright and very active.
- School leader. School would never understand if this student were not admitted.
- School backs her extremely strongly for academics, leadership, and personal qualities.
- Would have lots of niches at Harvard and Harvard would provide her with a much-needed outlet for all of her many energies.
- Megan has experienced set-backs in her life and appears to have dealt with them well.

Pause factors

- Own essays very well-written but can come across as very negative and dismissive of her high school context. Some readers may even find them slightly arrogant.
- Third teacher recommendation raises flags about her personal qualities, her ability to interact with peers, and her “brightness.” (IR3 also makes vast generalizations that “committee” may want to flesh out.)
- Big fish in a small pond?
- What will Megan be like as a roommate?

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Action

- Admissions Officer made various phone-calls after sub-committee discussion and presented information gathered to the full admissions committee.
- After many hours of debate, the student was admitted.
- Student matriculated at Harvard College.

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7) Tracey Eckham (3+ 3 1 3)

Appeal

- One of the top female recruits for women's crew.
- Good scores.
- Many interests outside of academics and crew per activities list.
- Strong academic preparation and challenging curriculum.

Pause factors

- Essay makes her sound driven and, at times, unhappy ("how unhappy I was," "endure," etc.).
- Letters refer to her as a bit of a loner ("lone wolf") and quite driven; letter from crew coach even suggests that she may be depressed and is withdrawn at times.
- Personal qualities very hard to assess—who is Tracey Eckham?
- Interview certainly doesn't help us with her personal qualities and doesn't make her sound particularly passionate about anything.
- Grades should be better given scores.

Action

- Was wait-listed in April.
- Not admitted from the waiting list.

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8) Mandisi Botlhoko (3 8 2 2)

Appeal

- Extremely deserving student who values education above all else
- Inherently very bright; impressive SAT II results despite substandard K-10 education
- Obvious desire and ability to use his education in a way that positively affects others in need; already strong evidence that he has done this and will continue to do so his whole life
- Unusual maturity, resilience and perspective—he will have a real impact on classmates
- Might be able to contribute to our cross-country/track team
- Interview by experienced staff member sees him as special and worth any potential risk

Pause Factors

- Lower SAT I scores raise concern about English language proficiency. Student is certainly less well-read in English than other successful applicants, and essays are a bit awkward.
- While the package is appealing, the case lacks the “hook” provided by a special academic or extracurricular talent. Not clear whether his running will translate to college competition.
- Adjustment to U.S. and complicated, fast-paced college environment might be challenging

Other information for your “committee”

- Mandisi’s IB math exam didn’t go as well as predicted. The admissions officer wrote to the counselor to see if there were extenuating circumstances. The counselor responded:

“I have gotten to know Mandisi even better this term as he is actually volunteering here at school in his mini gap year as he waits to hear from his US colleges. He has been extremely helpful in our office. He continues to ooze humility and gentle humour and is one of the highest scorers ever in that ‘reaction to setbacks’ tick box.”

His sister has just passed away, which at her tender age normally means one thing. The Botlhoko family had no way of affording the funeral expenses, the body was impounded by the morgue until our faculty raised funds to pay for a coffin, etc. He was back at work the next day and appears to be coping remarkably well. I asked him why he didn’t do as well in Maths earlier in the term. At the time his mother was very sick and had returned to her family home. (His father died years ago). This left Mandisi as the head of the household—he does have older brothers but they are drunkards—and around the time of his Maths exam he was inundated with calls and demands from the extended family back home. He hasn’t used this as an excuse, however, and I would not have known about this if I hadn’t asked.

All of our previous, successful applicants in my time have done remarkably well, faced hardship, etc. but I think all came from professional (if still poor) families. Mandisi, I feel, and as you have identified, has come even further. He is certainly worth investing in, and we can all count on his using his education to the great benefit of many others.”

- This school really uses the grid which can be much more helpful than simply checking all to one side or not checking any boxes at all.
- Note that while Mandisi only lists one brother on his application, he comes from an extended African family with half-siblings from multiple mothers, many cousins, etc.

Action

- After long discussion, Mandisi is accepted. He will be roomed and advised carefully. Special care will be taken in assigning him to a host family.

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9) Carrie Miller (3 2 6 3+)

Appeal

- Filmmaking skills really stand out—at least before we get the faculty reading
- Impressive resilience with SID
- She writes enthusiastically about her interests

Pause Factors

- Scores not as high as we might hope with all A grades—though counselor gives us some explanation for them
- Why did Carrie think her first interview went so poorly? The interviewer clearly enjoyed meeting with her.

Other information for your “committee”

- Carrie’s film was sent to a faculty member in Visual and Environmental Studies for review. The professor wrote: “Carrie Miller’s film was engaging as I learned something, however dry. I applaud her interest in finding inspiration from political injustices. Good grades. Good recommendations and press.” (Ranked 3rd out of 4 films reviewed by that professor.)

Action

- Was waitlisted and then not admitted

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10) Grace Blake Cheng (3 2+ 3 1)

Appeal

- Unusually appealing personal qualities echoed throughout the entire application. Grace's teachers, guidance counselor, and alumni interviewer describe her in terms we rarely read. A true "1 personal"—one of the few we see each year.
- Grace has engaged substantially with various communities (school, housing co-operative, local, state) in meaningful ways.
- From a very modest socioeconomic and ethnic background that we also don't see often in our student body. She would bring a unique life experience to Harvard, and she seems eager to share her story and learn about others in the process.

Pause Factors

- While a strong student in her high school, Grace's test scores suggest that she won't be a top engineering student at Harvard. She will have to work hard here (like most students!).

Other information for your "committee"

- This case, unlike most in the casebook, is a "clear admit." We include it because it shows the importance that non-academic and non-extracurricular factors in our process (in this case, unusually compelling personal qualities and school praise).

Action

- Grace's case was a compelling one upon first read, but the alumni interview report confirmed to the admissions committee that she was a truly special personal in many ways. The committee sent her a "likely letter" in February to show its enthusiasm for her case.
- Accepted and enrolled

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11) Peter Duran (2 3+ 4 3+)

Appeal

- Very strong student who would do well in our engineering or science concentrations.
- Peter's mixed-race background is underrepresented at elite colleges—and is a growing demographic in the United States.
- Strong interest in robotics; he could do that in the School of Engineering or Applied Sciences.
- Writes about the importance of education in his family and life; we get the sense that he would make good use of his time at Harvard (though that does not make him unique).

Pause Factors

- Certainly a strong student, but—believe it or not!—not unusually strong in Harvard's applicant pool. Nothing here elevates Peter into the "1 academic" circle.
- Extracurricular accomplishments are more modest compared to many of our other applicants. Do we get the sense that he would fall in love with his concentration—or more academic extra-curricular activities (such as robotics)—enough for him to contribute meaningfully here?

Other information for your "committee"

- What do people think of the interview report? Where might it have been improved? (Point to lack of detail in the extracurricular section. What other things is Peter *interested* in? Sometimes it's as valuable for us to know what he wants to do in college as what he did in high school.)

Action

- Discussed in subcommittee and full committee. Not admitted.