



THE SHORT LIST

COLLEGE & CAREER COUNSELING

www.THESHORTLIST.org

THE EARLY APPLICANTS  
2025-2026



# Greetings from THE SHORT LIST

## Letter from Our Founder

The **college admissions landscape continues to evolve** at a remarkable pace. While admissions has always been competitive, **students today face increasing selectivity, shifting institutional priorities, and a growing array of application options.** Understanding **how and when to apply** has become just as important as **where to apply.**

This year's **newsletter focuses** on one of the most **important strategic decisions** students make during the admissions process: **choosing an early application plan.** Colleges place **significant value** on **demonstrated interest**, and few signals are stronger than the timing and commitment reflected in an application. Whether through **Early Decision, Early Decision II, Restrictive Early Action, Early Action,** or newer programs such as Wake Forest's **innovative EDO**, students today have more choices than ever before.

We also continue to see **several notable trends.** More **international students are pursuing both U.S. and International university** options simultaneously, allowing them to compare **different academic systems and opportunities.** Interest in **large public universities continues to grow** as families recognize the breadth of **academic offerings, research opportunities, and career pathways they provide.** At the same time, many students are increasingly drawn to **spirited campus communities in the South,** where strong traditions and a **vibrant** sense of **community** complement **outstanding academics.**



The Short List Founder Bill Short with Lewis Lopez, a student under his guidance, in a scene from *Admission Possible*. [Click for trailer.](#)

The **five students featured** in this issue each **pursued a different early application strategy.** **Anna, Ava, Harry, Ethan, and Helly** remind us that there is **no single formula for success.** The **right strategy** is the one that **aligns** with a student's **aspirations, circumstances, and vision** for the future.

Their stories also reflect many of the themes explored in *Admission Possible*, a documentary film that **follows seven first-generation students** through today's increasingly complex admissions process. We are thrilled that the film recently celebrated its **World Premiere, earning both the Grand Jury Prize and Audience Award for Best Documentary Feature.**

As you read the stories that follow, I hope you are reminded that while admissions policies and strategies may change, **the qualities that matter most remain the same: curiosity, perseverance, leadership, and the courage to pursue opportunity.**

— Bill Short, Founder



WORLD PREMIERE

🏆 **Winner, Grand Jury Prize**  
— *Best Documentary Feature*

🏆 **Winner, Audience Award**  
— *Honorable Mention*

“Being the first in the family to go to college is like being the first to scale a mountain. The courage, discipline and persistence required is monumental and to see it unfold in this film is beyond inspiring. Everyone who cares about educational equity needs to watch this amazing movie.”

— Arne Duncan

U.S. Secretary of Education  
(2009-2016)

CONTINUED ON PAGE 4 »

THE SHORT LIST'S success stories:

EDO — Rolling Early Decision (Binding)

Wake Forest

USA



Anna



### The Cheerleader

Having worked with Anna's older brother through his successful college search, we quickly recognized something familiar in Anna: she also had a strong instinct for what she wanted in a college experience.

During a college tour through the Mid-Atlantic and South in February of her junior year, Anna realized she wanted a school that combined strong academics with a spirited campus culture. As a lifelong cheerleader, she was drawn to communities where students were engaged

both inside and outside the classroom.

To help evaluate each campus, we prepared Anna before visits. She spent time with current students and experienced the culture beyond the admissions presentation. Additional visits and conversations confirmed what she already suspected: Wake Forest was the right fit.

That opened the door to Wake Forest's innovative EDO program, which allows students to apply in early fall and receive a binding admission decision before traditional Early Decision deadlines.

The accelerated timeline required unusual focus. Recommendations, testing,

essays, and application materials all had to be completed months earlier than most seniors. Over the summer, we worked closely with Anna on her application strategy and essays.

Anna submitted her application at the end of September and received her acceptance at the end of October—before many students had even submitted their Early Decision applications.

By spring, she had also earned a coveted spot as a sideline cheerleader and will soon cheer on the Demon Deacons in the ACC. Her story demonstrates how an early commitment to the right fit can create extraordinary opportunities.

THE SHORT LIST'S success stories:

ED1 — Traditional Early Decision (Binding)

Dartmouth

Philippines



Ava

### The Community Builder

We first met Ava through her older brother, a charismatic music lover who went on to perform in his college marching band. Ava, however, was determined to carve out her own identity and path.

By the end of sophomore year, Ava was a strong student, varsity tennis player, and active leader in her school community. To build confidence before enrolling in her school's IB program, she joined a 28-day National Outdoor Leadership School expedition in the Pacific Northwest. As a student raised in Manila, she initially

felt overwhelmed and out of place among younger but more experienced campers. But, as fellow campers began seeking her advice on academics, leadership, and high school life, Ava discovered that her greatest strength was not surviving alone but building community.

When she returned home to Manila, her confidence and leadership grew. By senior year, she was organizing major school events, leading service initiatives, performing bass guitar with her student rock band, and rallying classmates during Battle of the Bearcats.



As we explored colleges together, Ava was most energized by the idea of joining an intellectually vibrant, collaborative campus. We recommended Dartmouth for its close-knit culture, distinctive

D-Plan, and emphasis on relationships, reflected in its unique peer recommendation requirement.

She loved what she discovered, so we encouraged her to apply through Dartmouth's binding Early Decision program and helped shape an application that highlighted her ability to build connection wherever she went.

On decision night, Ava opened her admissions portal. Moments later, confetti filled the screen: Dartmouth had welcomed her into its community.

THE SHORT LIST'S success stories:

ED2 — Early Decision II - (Binding) **Swarthmore***Harry***The Architect**

From a young age, Harry was fascinated by model trains and increasingly captivated by the buildings, landscapes, and communities surrounding them.

Recognizing his growing interest in architecture, we helped Harry explore ways to pursue it more seriously. When it became clear his local school offered few opportunities in architecture and design, we worked with Harry and his family on transferring to a boarding school better suited to his interests. The decision proved transformative. Harry flourished academically and

personally, eventually serving as Dorm Prefect and Asian Affinity Leader.

As the college process began, we helped Harry explore universities offering different approaches to architecture and encouraged internships that allowed him to experience the profession firsthand. Initially, he applied early to a highly selective university with a structured architecture curriculum. But after being deferred, he began questioning whether the narrowly focused path truly matched his interdisciplinary interests.

Harry kept returning to a visit at Swarthmore College, where



he immediately felt at home. Together, we developed essays, resumes, portfolios, and interviews highlighting connections between architecture, literature, environmental studies, art, and community.

Confident in his direction, Harry applied through Early Decision II, a January binding option that gives students additional time to refine their plans.

Six weeks later, Swarthmore notified him of his acceptance.

In an interesting twist, the university that initially deferred Harry is part of a consortium with Swarthmore, allowing students to take classes across campuses and even pursue a joint degree. Harry discovered he did not have to choose between architecture and intellectual exploration. Sometimes the perfect fit can offer both.

THE SHORT LIST'S success stories:

REA — Restrictive Early Action (Non-binding) **Cambridge**

New Zealand

*Ethan***The Mindful Leader**

At age twelve, Ethan's doctors discovered a serious medical condition that forced him to give up many of the activities he loved. Suddenly, a carefree childhood became clouded by uncertainty and worry.

Searching for answers, Ethan and his father traveled to Bhutan, where a Buddhist monk introduced him to mindfulness meditation. Three simple words—"Stop. Breathe. Refocus."—would ultimately transform the way he approached life.

When we began working with Ethan, he was already emerging as a thoughtful leader at his boarding school in England. He excelled in

debate, mentorship, and community service, but what stood out most was his desire to help others through mindfulness.

Ethan developed a mindfulness program for local primary school students. The initiative eventually reached Westminster, where he was invited to address Members of Parliament about expanding mindfulness education throughout the United Kingdom.

By senior year, Ethan had been elected Head of School, becoming the first student in the school's history from a South Asian or New Zealand background to hold the position.

Like many international students, Ethan wanted to keep his university options open. We helped him explore opportunities in both the United States and UK. Restrictive Early Action proved ideal, allowing him to apply early in the U.S. while preserving his UK options.

Together, we refined his personal essay and prepared for interviews. The results were extraordinary: a conditional offer from Cambridge, along with offers from Ivy League and elite liberal arts colleges.

In the end, Ethan chose Cambridge. His story reminds us that the best decisions often begin the same way his journey did: Stop. Breathe. Refocus.

THE SHORT LIST'S success stories:  
EA – Early Action (Non-binding)

University of Michigan

USA



## Helly – The Sports Analyst

Helly has always loved sports. A dedicated tennis player, he developed leadership skills as a two-year Varsity Captain and member of his school's Student Athletic Leadership Council. At the same time, he possessed a natural talent for numbers, channeling his love of statistics into math league, quiz bowl, and trivia competitions.

By junior year, Helly already had a clear vision for his future. He wanted to combine his passion for sports with his analytical mindset and pursue a career in sports analytics.



To help him explore that interest, we encouraged Helly to apply to the selective Moneyball Academy through UPenn's Wharton Global Youth

Program. The experience confirmed he had found his path.

As we built his college list, we encouraged the Michigan native to take a closer look at the University of Michigan. A campus visit changed everything. Helly discovered that combining Movement Science and Statistics could provide a strong foundation for sports analytics while offering opportunities to gain hands-on experience with a premier athletic department.

As application season approached, we discussed strategy. Like many selective

public universities, Michigan fills a significant portion of its class through Early Action. We encouraged Helly to take advantage of the non-binding option, allowing him to demonstrate strong interest while keeping his Regular Decision options open.

Together, we crafted essays connecting his leadership, academic interests, and passion for sports analytics. The strategy worked. Helly earned Early Action acceptances and ultimately chose Michigan, where he will begin his journey as a Wolverine this fall.

## Award-winning Documentary

For the past 23 years, our Founder, **Bill Short**, has volunteered as a college counselor at **Humanities Prep**, a **New York City public high school** serving many **first-generation** and **immigrant students**. What began as a short-term volunteer assignment grew into a **lifelong commitment to helping students navigate the college admissions process** and pursue opportunities that can **transform their lives**.

That work became the focus of **Admission Possible**, a **documentary film** following **seven first-generation, college-bound seniors** and their families as they **navigate** today's increasingly **complex admissions process**. Led

by **Academy Award-winning filmmaker Cynthia Wade**, the **film captures the hopes, challenges, and determination of students striving to create brighter futures** through education.

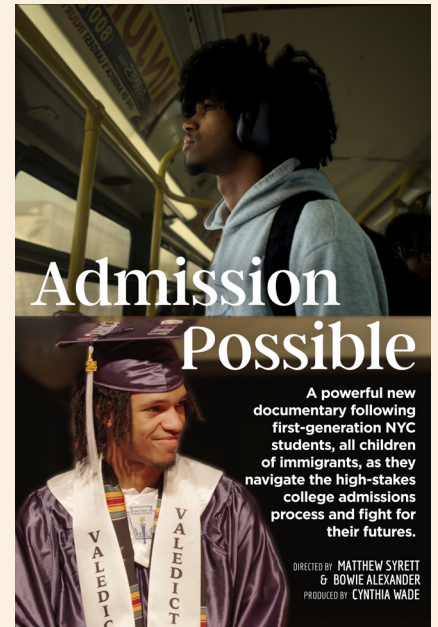
**Admission Possible** recently celebrated its **World Premiere**, where it **received both the Grand Jury Prize and Audience Award for Best Documentary Feature**. We were also thrilled when the **filmmakers selected award-winning singer-songwriter Aileen, featured in our 2024 newsletter, to write and perform an original song** for the film's closing credits. [Listen here.](#)

While the **film** follows one graduating class, it reflects more than **two decades of remarkable student success stories**.

Many **Humanities Prep graduates** have gone on to become **doctors, nurses, teachers, lawyers, social workers, and community leaders** who are making a difference in the lives of others.

We hope **Admission Possible** will **inspire more first-generation students to see college as a possibility and encourage more adults to become mentors**. In many ways, the film is as much about the **power of human connection** as it is about college admissions.

To **learn more, watch the trailer, or support the film's educational outreach efforts** with a **100% tax-deductible donation**, please visit [AdmissionPossible.net](http://AdmissionPossible.net).



**Admission Possible** follows seven high-achieving, first-generation college applicants from a single NYC public high school as they strive to secure a future once unimaginable for their immigrant families.

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