

Bard's Better Admissions Application



Eccentric teens of America: Skip class, pursue your own passions, and apply to Bard.

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I have wonderful news for all you stressed-out parents of kindergartners whose [school play was canceled](#) to focus your 5-year-olds on college and career. Good news, as well, for you anxious 11th-graders, terrified that the Boone's Farm you drank instead of writing a five-paragraph report on *The Red Badge of Courage* will ruin your future forever. *Fantastic* news for anyone who, like a certain friend of mine named “me,” choked on the SAT. And great, great news for anyone apprehensive about the [Common Application](#) and its reputation for glitchiness.



Rebecca Schuman

[Bard College](#), a highly selective liberal-arts school in Annandale-on-Hudson, New York, is about to enter the second year of a revolutionary college-admissions experiment: [four wickedly challenging essays](#), 2,500 words each, reviewed by Bard faculty (who, I assume, [enjoy grading papers](#)). All four

essays get a B+ or higher? You're *in*, period. No standardized test, no GPA, no CV inflated with [disingenuous volunteer work](#). Last year, [41 students completed](#) what the college is calling the Bard Entrance Exam—and [17 scored high enough to be admitted](#). This coming fall, that number may be substantially larger, as the country's only true alternative application to an elite school gains publicity. I'm certainly doing my part to push it, because the idea is genius.

The [ramped-up pressures of admission](#), especially to elite schools, are very apparent to any Gen Xer (or older) who spends time with millennial college students. There is no way, for example, that 1994-era me would nowadays be admitted to my own alma mater, Vassar College. Today, perfection is the bare minimum: 4.0 and co-valedictorian, perfect Board scores, spotless extracurriculars, 30 hours a week of volunteering you don't enjoy, a perfectly platitudinous essay about the Challenges In Your Life That Have Made You a Better Person—and then you *might* make the first cut. Don't get me wrong—I love a high school goody two-shoes. But are they really the only people who deserve to go to a great college? Does an entire school full of imagination-bereft perfection not result in [the sad demise of collegiate fun](#)?

The Bard Entrance Exam aims for exactly the kind of student who, for any number of reasons, doesn't fit inside that infernal perfection cage—who is instead, as Bard's Vice President of Student Affairs and Director of Admissions Mary Backlund told me, “someone who really likes learning,” but perhaps “couldn't be bothered with what they saw as the ‘busy work’ of high school, and instead invested themselves in things not perceived as ‘academic’ in some places, like music or the arts—or just reading on their own.” For these students, Backlund tells me, “this option is a ‘twofer’: They get to apply and do what they love—researching and thinking—all at the same time.”

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Granted, many stress-addled seniors *don't* research for kicks, and for them, the Common Application is a

timesaver—although how does a young person memorize her own Social Security number nowadays, if she's not made to write it by hand into seven different applications in a row?

Granted, many universities require supplementary essays—such as [Tufts' infamous prompt about #YOLO](#). But the Common App, which acts as a clearinghouse for everything from a student's name and address to her GPA, extracurriculars, and recommendation dossiers, may still strike artsy or angsty students as poorly indicative of what they have to offer. Its emphasis on the usual prestige-suspects also disadvantages students with more eccentric résumés. But for almost every school in the country, there is no alternative. Except at Bard.

The genius in Bard’s method is that while it might be simpler in construction than the Common Application, it is substantially more difficult. Students have [21 essays to choose from](#), in three subject areas: social science, history, and philosophy; arts and literature; science and mathematics. “The faculty had a lot of fun” designing the essays, Backlund says, “not to be hard, but to be engaging and open, so that the applicants had something real to chew on and show their thinking abilities.” All require substantial amounts of original research (all sources are available on the portal) and close reading. Last year’s questions included this one:

In his 1963 lecture on gravity (you can also see the video [here](#)), Richard Feynman mentions that the “weird” behavior of Uranus led to the discovery of a new planet. More precisely, the fact that Uranus's movement did not fit what was predicted by the then-current understanding of planetary motion could be explained by the existence of a not-yet-observed planet—and the planet was then observed right where predicted. Suppose that observatories had looked at the indicated position and had not actually found the predicted planet. What then? What new questions would this outcome pose for the scientific community? How could they test other explanations for the unexpected motion of Uranus?

Personally, I think any kid that manages to write 2,500 words without joking about “the unexpected motion of Uranus” deserves automatic admission—but seriously, that essay doesn’t mess around. It’s a fascinating hypothetical; it takes into account astronomy, physics, and math, but also the philosophy of science and the thrill of the unknown that research confronts. Plus, a healthy dose of Feynman! I’ve seen this year’s questions released June 2, by [creating an application myself](#) that, sheesh, no way will I finish. They are just as tough.

[Skeptics have argued](#) that these essays are just another way for privileged students to pay for “help” in their college applications. (I know at least a few [unscrupulous and unemployed Ph.D.s](#) who’d be game.) But Backlund assures me Bard has accountability measures: Every incoming freshman takes a three-week workshop in “[Language and Thinking](#)” before school officially starts. “Everyone has to pass L+T to matriculate into the College,” she explains, and at the workshop, faculty will have successful Entrance Exam applicants’ essays in hand. “If, over the three weeks, it becomes obvious there is a real discrepancy” between their admissions essays and their work for L+T, “we can take appropriate action, and the student will not face ‘expulsion,’ as they will not have as yet ‘matriculated’ at the College.”

There are other schools in the U.S.—many, like Bard, elite small colleges—that [don’t require the](#)

SAT or ACT. St. John's College (you know, that “Great Books place,” where they all learn geometry in Greek or something) also requires a unique set of essays—but they still require the Common Application and view transcripts. Even my birthplace, Deep Springs College, possibly the most iconoclastic institution of higher learning ever, **requires Board scores and transcripts.**

But Bard seems to be the sole college of its caliber in the United States to give students the option to *absolutely blow* their high-school classes and still have a chance to be great in college. Since I find it preposterous to determine a young person's entire future based on her choices as a 14-year-old, I couldn't be happier that the BEE, as Backlund puts it, subverts the “the mad doggie-tail chase created by *U.S. News* and the Common App.” (However, Backlund does *not* begrudge any student who wishes to use the Common App: Bard still accepts it, after all.)

But why don't more colleges offer alternatives to the traditional application—alternatives that acknowledge that many promising young people simply crash in high school because their lives are messes, or their families are falling apart, or because they just plain hate it? And why stop with essays (which, face it, are not the cup of tea of plenty of kids who might still excel in college)? What about submitting a spectacular and original science or math project? The detailed business model of a company you invented? I wish more American colleges and universities would stop asking students to jump through a series of increasingly **privilege-reifying hoops** (the current admissions process **favors higher-income students**) and start asking for applicants to show their *real* potential.

So, eccentric 15-year-olds of America: Keep skipping class to paint graffiti murals on the side of the abandoned White Castle! Quit that insincere volunteer work and get the part-time job you really need! And when some authoritarian tells you you'll never get into a good college with behavior like that? You tell him you're going to Bard.