Ari Chasnoff: Hello, and welcome to our conference call, “MBA Admissions Insights: Being a Great Applicant.” Thank you for joining us. My name is Ari Chasnoff. I'm the communications manager in the MBA Admissions Office. I'm joined by my colleague, Lizabeth Cutler, an associate director here.

Lizabeth Cutler: Hi, everybody.

Ari: In the next 30 minutes, we'll be talking about steps you can take to be a great candidate for the Stanford Graduate School of Business MBA Program and then we'll answer some of the questions you submitted in advance. First, let's discuss what being a great candidate even means.

Lizabeth: Absolutely. For us, that's about identifying people who will be great students while they're here on campus, and who will have a meaningful and positive impact wherever they go once they graduate.

Ari: So, what steps do you think people can take to be a stronger candidate?

Lizabeth: Well, here are some thoughts based on interesting questions people have asked me over the years. There's lots of different ways people think about this. One is, focus more on being a great candidate than on creating a great application. Believe it or not, we want to make the process as simple and efficient as we can for you and we only ask for what we really need to know to create a great class. That said, I know the application process takes so much of your time and energy.

Like anything you really want, it takes hard work and a lot of heart to be successful at it. But sometimes, I get the impression when I'm talking to people that someone's letting the application process take over their life. So, if you spend every extra minute in your year leading up to the application studying for the GMAT or the GRE, what aren’t you doing? So, for example, given the choice between taking on a great new project and spending 24/7 on your application – take on the project. It will give your recommender more to talk about.

It will give you the kind of growth opportunity that will help you become a better student once you arrive.

Ari: I've heard –
people ask, "I've got an exciting new job opportunity doing something I've always wanted to do, but everyone's telling me to stay in the same job until after I get into school, even though I'm bored."

Lizabeth: Yeah. I've heard that one, too. A great candidate, for us, jumps on opportunities. If you're ready and excited about it — do it. Don't do it to impress us.

We're perfectly happy that you stay in your current job for whatever amount of time that makes the most sense. What I'm talking about is someone who is ready for a change but is using the application process as an excuse not to do it. You really want to get out and live your life, and that makes you a great candidate. Obviously, I want you to put the time and effort in for a strong application. What I'm talking about is knowing when to draw the line.

What's the marginal benefit — that's a word you learn maybe after becoming an MBA for some of you — of taking the GRE one more time or rewriting your essay one more time? If you think, at that point, you can really improve either your score or your essay or your application, definitely spend that time. But if you reach that point where you know deep down you've done your best and you're just worrying over it — move on. We think you should follow your interests, take the risks to try leading someone or leading something, learn from your successes and failures, and apply that learning to doing it better the next time. Step up for challenges and do an excellent job.

Those are the things that will show up in your recommendations and show up in who you are and get us excited.

Ari: So, you're saying, "Do what you feel strongly about, not just what people will tell you will help you get into business school."

Lizabeth: Yes. Absolutely. Don't let anyone else tell you what we want or that you should shape your career decisions — which are so important and so personal — around the application process. You know yourself best. If you want to know what we want, come ask us.

That's why we travel around the world, we do this session, we answer the phones, and we post information on our website.
Always go to the source, whether that’s us or another school, about what the school is really looking for.

Ari: Great. What else do you think could help people –

Lizabeth: Well, so one thing is we hope you'll show us your best self. Just make sure it's your self – that it's really you being yourself as opposed to what you think we want you to sound like or what other people are telling you you should sound like. And the other is – I think the best thing you can do is really research the schools, just like you're doing by being on this call today. Know why you want to come to Stanford. What would you get from this experience and what makes it a good fit for you?

Because then, you narrow down and only apply to the schools that are really good options for you and that'll show up in your application, too.

Ari: So, if I am a great candidate, what else do I need to do to actually demonstrate it? Are there logistics of submitting an application? How are those important?

Lizabeth: Yes. I get the impression that sometimes people spend too much time on some things and miss others. Here's some examples of things people may miss. One is – just following instructions. Literally making sure you've read through the instructions and followed them.

Another is to be aware of the deadlines. Very often people will try to submit information – like another test score or another recommendation or things like that – after the deadline and we don't accept it. The other thing is to review the entire application ahead of time so you know what to expect. So, I think sometimes, people will work on the things they know about – like, "I need to get a letter of reference" – but they won't look at all the different sections of the application and make sure they've got everything that they need. So, I think that's important.

And the last thought on that is to make sure you're putting your best foot forward and presenting yourself well, but be true and factual about your experience. We do validate the information you submit before you can become a student, and we can rescind an offer if you misrepresented yourself, so you do want to be careful about that.
Ari: Yep. There are all kinds of great students – some inside the classroom –

[0:06:00] some in extracurricular activities or other contributions to their class and the school. There's really no one mold for the perfect Stanford MBA student.

Lizabeth: So true. And yet, they do have some things in common. So, let's quickly review our evaluation criteria. We'll just touch on this briefly since you can learn more about this on our website.

Ari: Right. So, the first one is – intellectual vitality. What are we looking for there, Lizabeth?

Lizabeth: The way I'd really encourage you to think about this is Stanford's a vibrant place. It's a place to solve big problems and take intellectual risks. So, we're really looking for someone that is intellectually engaged in whatever the one or many topics are that catch their attention.

Ari: Our next evaluation criteria is demonstrated leadership potential. What is the reason behind this one?

Lizabeth: Well, we aim to graduate students with an increased ability to lead. You've seen our motto – "Change lives, change organizations, and change the world." It's the only way you can go out and create change is if you can actually lead. So, we're both looking for what skills you may have now and how open you are to learning new ones. Do you know what makes you a good leader?

Do you know what you aren't good at at all? It's okay if you don't have much experience yet, but a great candidate is at least performing well at work or in school, so they're likely to be in a position to advance later in their career and be able to lead.

Ari: Well, the third criteria we consider is personal qualities and contributions. What do we mean by that?

Lizabeth: This is the hardest one to explain. There's no right or wrong answers to this. It's a way of saying that we're interested in getting to know you. We don't seek to put people in boxes and don't have any quotas or anything so, we look at each individual. We consider what they might gain from our program and how they might contribute to the program.
Ari: Fantastic. So, now let's move on to answering some questions from participants. Thank you all for submitting so many questions in advance. So, here's a question we received: "Many people talk about the importance of distinguishing one's self from –

Lizabeth: the majority in the application process. With regard to the essay questions, what are some of the most common mistakes made by the majority of the applicants who are not admitted?"

Lizabeth: So, the answer to this changes year to year, of course. I would say these days, the main one is pushing your own agenda rather than just answering the question we asked. And frankly, even some of the people we admit are doing this – are making this mistake. So, be really careful about the advice that you take on essays, even if it's from someone who got in, because you don't know if the choices they made contributed to them getting in or were an obstacle to our making a decision to admit them. Really, the main thing for you to do is take the time to reflect.

Read the question carefully. Reflect on the true answer for yourself and then spend the time trying to articulate the answer rather than thinking about anyone else and distinguishing yourself from anyone else. Because you don't know who else is applying and what they're saying, and that's just about impossible to do.

Ari: So, second question: "How would you evaluate leadership potential in candidates whose professional roles don't give them opportunities to demonstrate it? For example, in entry level positions or positions where they don't lead a team or if they have a non-traditional background?"

Lizabeth: Yeah. So, I think this is an important question because so many of our candidates don't actually have leadership experience yet or anything very formal. It's not important. You don't have to have work experience coming in, and you don't specifically have to have leadership experience. We're looking at the qualities that you do have and how they might contribute to your effectiveness as a leader.

We're looking at your self-awareness, because a good leader is able to learn from situations around them and adjust their behavior and actions. Those are some of the ways I would start looking at it. And the other thing is, don't get tripped up thinking –

Ari: we're only looking for formal leadership experience. It might be how you helped someone next to you at work or something. Many,
many candidates are coming from situations where they don't have leadership opportunities yet.

**Ari:** Here's a question about a candidate's GPA. How can applicants confident in their academic ability but with a poor undergraduate GPA demonstrate that their intellectual capacity, discipline, academic rigor is not limited to their past academic performance?

**Lizabeth:** Okay. So, we're not evaluating your GPA alone. We're looking at your whole transcript. We're looking at things you've done since you finished undergraduate, if you're not still a student. So, the question I'd ask you is, "What leads you to believe that your intellectual capacity or discipline and rigor are different than [what] your GPA shows?"

What evidence can you demonstrate to show that to us? Because that's what we're looking for. We want the evidence that you can succeed in the classroom and that you contribute to your classmates. So, that's what you want to think about.

**Ari:** Great. So, here's another question. "What are the best ways to engage, as an applicant from abroad, to learn more about Stanford and help Stanford get to know me?"

**Lizabeth:** Yeah. It's definitely a challenge. So, first of all, I should make it very clear that we don't expect you to come visit campus. Anything you can do to learn about us is great, but it's all for you so you can make a good educated decision about us. We're not evaluating you based on whether you've been involved with us or attended anything.

That said, we are travelling literally all over the world this summer and take a look at our website. See if we're coming somewhere near your or close enough that you can get so you can meet some alumni and an officer in person and really learn about the program. We encourage you to do that.

[0:12:00] And then really, it's our website. Dive in. Ari's created amazing opportunities to learn more about the program there – like, the Day in the Life and other things. So, really focus on how you can learn about Stanford.

You don't need to do anything separate in order to help Stanford get to know you. That's really the application. The only way we're getting to know candidates is through the application. We don't expect people to do anything else. And, to keep it as fair as
possible, we're evaluating candidates based specifically on their application, not on any outside factors – like, whether you're coming to campus, whether you know anybody – none of that.

_Ari:_ Fantastic. The next question – "Does it matter what age or point in life I'm in? I have a vision and direction I want to go in, but I don't know what it's going to look like in terms of job function or company."

_Lizabeth:_ This is a little harder to answer. You know, it doesn't matter what age or point of life you're in to us. It absolutely matters to you. And so the way it matters is you really want to be thoughtful about why you want to be in the program and what you want to get out of it and be able to articulate that for us. We're completely neutral about the where you are part. It's more about where you are and where you want to get and how we can help you with that. So, if you have a general vision and direction you want to go in, then help us understand what that direction is and why you think coming here will help and why the MBA program specifically will help. You definitely do not need to know what exact job function or company. You'll notice our Essay Two question is more about Stanford; it's not about your short and long-term goals. We don't ask that because we know it's going to change as soon as you get into the application process, and certainly by the time you're a student.

So, we think that those longer term visions and aspirations are more likely to remain stable and that's what we're really interested in.

_Ari:_ Well, here's an interesting question. Someone is asking –

[0:14:00] "Can you help us understand what happens behind the scenes after I submit my application?"

_Lizabeth:_ Sure. The key things that you need to know, really, are first of all, it's a real human being that's reading your application. It's not an algorithm. I've had people who create algorithms for a living not believe me, but it is actually a fact. So, it's a real human being – it's me or someone like me – that's interested in getting to know you.

Our readers are not faculty or students. They're all paid staff and it's a well-trained, well-calibrated group so there's no randomness in here. It's a professional group of people reading your application. We read it, we decide whether you'll make it to
Ari: Great. The next question is, "How do I strike a good balance between communicating the value I'd receive from the program versus the value I can contribute to peers?"

Lizabeth: Well, first of all, that's a really great question. I'm so glad you're even thinking about it. I don't even know how to answer it because all you need to do is answer the questions we asked, and that's not specifically a question we'd ask. So, I think it's really especially up to you to focus on what you are here to learn, and I think we'll pretty much assess what value we think you could contribute. It's not a question that we ask, but really great that you're thinking about it and I hope that you're contributing to the people around you wherever you are. And that also makes you a great candidate.

Ari: Great point. So, the next question is about the three evaluation criteria we recently discussed. "The GSB website talks about the importance of three criteria –

Lizabeth: Again – that's totally – one thing doesn't correlate to another. Those are the things that I keep in mind as I'm evaluating every section of the application. So, we might see more intellectual vitality showing up in your transcript where we're really looking at what you studied and why, but truthfully, it can come up anywhere in the application. And the same is true for all the other criteria. So, they don't map to specific locations in the application.

Really, they're things that shine through – can shine through anywhere, and it really depends on you and your answers.

Ari: Fantastic. Well, we got a high volume of questions submitted in advance, we have about 13 minutes left, so let's move on to some additional questions. Lizabeth, how would you recommend a candidate reference personal or professional relationships with GSB alumni in their application? Is there a special way to go about doing that?

Lizabeth: Well, no. I'd be wondering why you're – I guess I'm wondering what's behind the question. Is it that you're trying to demonstrate that you know somebody here? If that's the case, you don't need to
and I don't even necessarily encourage you to do so. It's not a requirement.

It's not one of our criteria. If there's something you learned – if there's a reason – so, for example, if the GSB alums you've met are the reason you're applying or there's something about them that stands out to you and that's part of your decision process, then that could be relevant for you to share. But otherwise, it's not really – I don't recommend you go out of your way to do it at all. I've had people –

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ask me for a reference – someone I know really well – and they thought, "Well, as an alum, it would be really helpful to hear from you." I actually suggested they not waste their time. So, really focus on getting references from people who know you well and can speak to your performance at work, and don't worry about the alumni factor.

Ari: Great. The next question is about reviewing one's essays. "What is the recommended process to review and re-review your written statement? How do you recommend going about that?"

Lizabeth: Yeah. So, we have no recommendation. It's totally your own process. Some tips I've heard from people are things like, you can give it to someone who knows you really well and say, "You know, hey, if you read this essay, would you know it was me? Does it sound like me?"

That's a way to make sure it's really your authentic voice. Another thing you can do is you can give them the essay without the question on it and ask them what question did they think you answered. That's a really great way to make sure that you've answered the question. What I'd be careful of is getting too much feedback there or having other people guide your process. Anyone who starts to tell you what we want – what Stanford wants – is probably misleading you, so really focus on whether it sounds like you and whether it answered the question, and also, to make sure there's no lingo in there.

Have somebody who doesn't know your industry or very much about your work take a look at it. Because anyone should be able to read it and understand it and they shouldn't have to know anything about the business you're in.

Ari: Great advice. So, the next question is, "What if I live in a country that has few opportunities for minorities to show our skills? How
can I show that I'm a well-qualified applicant despite my lack of awards?"

**Lizabeth:** Well, first of all, this question makes me a little sad and I'm really sorry that anybody feels they don't have opportunities to show their skills –

[0:20:00] or be their best. And I certainly hope that coming here, you'd have a very different experience. We don't expect any specific awards, so you don't need any to apply. I think the most important thing to understand is that we – the people who are reading your application have extensive experience. We understand different cultures around the world – different cultures within the U.S., different cultures within different organizations – and that those environments impact what opportunities you – any one of us have, and just like we understand that transcripts and grading systems are really different all over the world.

So, we're going to get some insight just based on your application about that and we'll try to calibrate our reading accordingly and understand the context in which you're operating. And, the other thing is, sometimes it comes through in the references. Sometimes references give us an idea about the context you're in and what challenges you may have in that context. And that can be very useful, as well.

**Ari:** Fantastic. Here's another question about a candidate's age. This candidate says, "I'm a 40-plus applicant. Is there anything important for a candidate in this age group to consider?"

**Lizabeth:** I don't think so. Age isn't one of the factors we consider. What we're looking at is what have you contributed? How are you performing at whatever level you're in? So, whether you're currently a college senior or you're 2 years out or 5 years out or 20 years out or whatever it is, we want to see what you're actually accomplishing and what your impact is.

And we might expect slightly more impact from somebody later in their career than earlier in their career just because they've had more opportunity to create such impact. That's really the only thing that comes to mind for me. I think people ask a lot about like, the average age, and they forget that that's really a function not of our decision process, but of who applies. And
people typically are applying at different stages of their career. But we're really excited to see anyone, at any stage of their career. It's just one more kind of diversity we can add to the class.

Ari:

Great. So, here's a question from someone who has already applied to the program and is reapplying. "Any advice for re-applicants who did not get interviewed in general? Any general advice for re-applicants?"

Lizabeth:

Yeah. Sure. Well, first of all, we welcome re-applicants. There are – I was talking to a student who told me it was his fourth time that he got in and he's having a great experience. And the reality of it is that we only have such a few number of seats in the class relative to the number of people applying.

And so we have to turn away great candidates every year. And we welcome you to come back and take another try. We will look at your application fresh in the pool of candidates that are applying when you apply, so we're not looking back at your previous one and we don't want you to either. We want you to really take it fresh.

An essay like, "What matters most to you and why" may not have changed. It may have changed because you've thought more deeply, but you can certainly reuse an essay like that. But you want fresh recommendations. You really want to approach the whole process fresh. Don't let the fact that you applied before and had a negative outcome dominate your process. Just think of yourself as a new applicant, just like we would.

Ari:

Great. So, the next question is relevant to candidates who have experience in the military. "How does the admissions committee consider the role of mandatory military service, particularly if it occurred before college?" And then, the second part of that question is, "What is the single most common mistake that military applicants make during the admissions process?"

Lizabeth:

So, we're aware that in certain countries, there's mandatory military service.

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And we see, obviously, from every applicant in that country – or in some countries, every male applicant in that country – we'll see that mandatory service. We are interested in what you did during that time. A lot of times, it can be a great opportunity to explore
your leadership skills or observe other people in leadership roles in a different way than you do in daily life. But we don't look at it any differently than any other application, so we're still looking for the same criteria in all candidates, regardless of what their specific path is. And in terms of the single most common mistake for military applicants – I don't think there is one.

People are so different, regardless of what background they're coming from. So, I don't think there's any one thing I see there. I think we have lots of strong applicants, and nothing comes to mind.

_Ari:_

Okay. I think we have time for just a couple more questions. So, this next one is about diversity here on campus. The question is, "How does the GSB work to create an intentionally diverse learning community? How do applicants best demonstrate their diverse backgrounds and experiences in their applications?"

_Lizabeth:_

It's an exciting question. It's one of the big challenges for us, and an exciting one, because we really have the opportunity to put together a class where people get to know so much about each other. And frankly, they learn lots of things about each other that we didn't know in the application process, too. And I think where people sometimes get hung up here is that they very narrowly define diversity. And for us, we look at it very broadly.

So, every aspect of who people are comes into play, and yeah, there's no categories or anything. So, how to demonstrate your background and experience – you have opportunity throughout the application to just – again – all you have to do is answer the questions – and it just shows up. I think sometimes, people are applying and they know other people are applying and they think, "How can I possibly distinguish myself? We're all the same." But the thing is, you're most likely to be most like the people you know already. They might be working in your company or your industry. They may be your friends. But we're actually seeing a much bigger, broader, pool and so we don't necessarily see that as a challenge. And this year, in our, "More About You" section, there's actually an opportunity to specifically share how you think your background or your perspective has had an impact on your experiences. So, that's another place as well.

_Ari:_

Great point. This will be the last question that we take in this session. Lizabeth, are students that apply for deferred admission
evaluated separately or differently from those applying for direct enrollment?

Lizabeth: No, they're not. That said – so, basically, all candidates are reviewed together in the round in which they apply. But the one difference is that obviously, we have a set number of spots for next year's class, and so as we get to round three, we have much fewer seats to offer and it gets more competitive. But for deferred admission, we don't have that limitation, and so for college seniors, anybody applying that qualifies for deferred admission, you can actually apply in round three because it's not going to be more competitive then. It'll be about the same throughout the rounds.

But, that's about it. The application process and the evaluation process are identical.

Ari: Great. Well, we're almost out of time. If you didn't get your question answered today, feel free to contact our office by email or phone to ask your question. Before we go, Lizabeth, any last words for our listeners today in terms of how to be a great applicant?

Lizabeth: Sure. My one last thought is that one thing our students –

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really have in common is that they all applied. You can't change the world if you aren't willing to fight the odds.

Ari: Thanks, Lizabeth. And thanks to you all for joining us. There is one more MBA Admissions Insights conference call coming up. It's called "Considering a Joint or Dual Degree" and it's on August 31st. So, if you're considering doing a joint or dual degree, try to join us for that one. You can register for it on our website.

An audio recording of all of our conference calls – including the one today – will be posted on our website in the next few weeks. You can already find two up there. The current application is now available through our website. There are three application deadlines – September 21st, January 10th, and April 5th.

There are lots of ways to learn more about our program and the admission process. On our website, you'll find videos of past webinars and a calendar of on and off-campus events. We look forward to reading your application. Enjoy the rest of your day and goodbye. Thank you.

Lizabeth: Bye, everybody. Thank you.
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