



parents league
of new york

the review 2021

Essential Articles on
Parenting & Education

College Counseling in the Time of the Coronavirus

Melanie White Director of College Counseling
Grace Church School

Early in 2020, just before COVID-19 changed our world, I attended a college admissions evening at my son's public high school on the Upper East Side. At the start of their presentation, the counselors asked the parents assembled in the auditorium "Who of you has been through this process before?" I debated whether to raise my hand or not. Since my son—my older child—is only a junior, this was my first time through the college application process. Yet, I have worked in college admission for my entire career and, for the past 20 years, as a college counselor at independent schools in New York City: Someone in Grace Church School's Class of 2020 will be my 1,000th student. (My colleagues and I even joked about a potential balloon drop for an unsuspecting senior.) Nonetheless, I did not raise my hand that evening.

My Turn at Bat

I've consciously not intruded on my son's studies, but with the college process I figured "I got this." I earnestly vowed to try not to influence my son with my own (correct) opinions about institutions and to trust him to be as on top of the application process as he always is about his schoolwork. I mean, really, there's a lot on a daily basis that makes me unnecessarily anxious, but the college admission process was something in which I delighted and felt secure. (You know ... eyes shut, one hand tied behind my back.)

I even tried to be honest about what I was bringing to it. Over the years, I've heard so many other parents (well-intentioned, no doubt, yet still deaf to their own preoccupations) share protracted details about their own childhoods, their own college admissions results, their job prospects upon graduation, and what that proved

about their college choice. I've heard details about pregnancies and births, and why they were of consequence in a child's college process, and why a particular institution would justify all that had come before.

Given my own journey to college from a trailer park in rural Michigan, simply that my son expects to go to college means a great deal to me. So yes, definitely, I was invested in the process. But, honestly, even this was me anticipating what I expected to anticipate: *You will read more into this than a simple admission decision; you will overlay his process with your own concerns; the overblown significance of the college admission process will draw you in too.* I tried to simultaneously smile at my own foibles, while kicking them under the table.

Uncertainty, Multiplied

In these recent weeks, it is those things we took for granted, what we assumed would happen, that have felt so under assault. I find comfort in ritual; the seasonal nature of the academic year and the college process itself is reassuring to me in its repetitiveness. While I can recognize this, it is no less difficult to watch it slip away in cancelled visits, postponed testing, grades transmuted into credit. Every year, the college application process, to some degree, requires living in uncertainty. It demands gargantuan amounts of it this year.

Now, in mid-April, daily I hear myself repeating phrases in each family meeting I host: "if," "we hope," "we assume," "this is day-to-day." Usually, I aspire to greater certainty and a higher level of assurance in these spring family college meetings; I want families to leave thinking I am competent, helpful and even, perhaps, entertaining. Writing this article as I shelter in place with my two teenagers in Brooklyn, I, much like the families with whom I Zoom every day, resist examining too deeply that this college admission process is now altogether different, unknown—there is no precedent and no models to tell us what to expect. Magic wand and tarot cards at the ready, I listen to myself speaking calmly and carefully with families as we map

out the coming weeks and months, trying to account for all possibilities. Am I stepping on solid ground? Testing? Grades? Extracurriculars? Deadlines? Which of these elements that we consider essential, sacred, necessary, will be proven otherwise? And, possibly, might we view these uncharted waters as freeing and exciting, rather than distressing and unnerving?

A Time for Parents to Step Up

Yes, it's still recognizably the college application process as I have lived it for these many years but now, more than ever, this is truly what it is: parenting. While this is advice germane to any admission season, in the face of this crisis I'd double down on it. It's even more important to recognize your own triggers and what you bring to your child's process—and what you expect from it. Despite all our efforts and choices—private school, the after-school lessons, all the test prep—it has always been a process with an unknown outcome and rules which are opaque at best and, most likely, unfair.

There is a Monday-morning quarterbacking question parents sometimes ask: “What went wrong?” It reveals the underlying belief that—if they simply try hard enough or hope hard enough—parents can ward off the vagaries of the admission process (and of life).

This year, certainly, we won't have all the answers. But my colleagues in college admission have been remarkable in the face of this, and so have all the teachers I know. Especially right now, we parents must recognize and rely upon them as the best resources we have. They are, in fact, on our side. Listen to your counselor. Reach out to admission professionals. Listen. Don't shop for the opinion you want to hear. (I identify with this behavior: I read article after article seeking the one out there that assures me this will be the year the Tigers win the World Series.) Please, admit that the scattergram data pertains to your child too.

Some Things Remain the Same

I've heard of schools who say parents should stay out of the process (“just drive and pay”), and independent counselors who

will tell you this process is too hard, let them do it for you, freeing you and your child of the tension, the friction, the disappointment. In my experience, that advice is suspect; this isn't something to assign to TaskRabbit.

Don't outsource parenting throughout the college search and admission process. I am always very clear with my students about what should be a family decision. I lay out possible routes and choices and their likely effects, yet am always clear that the decision is for the family to make. Appropriately it should be rooted in the student's and the family's values and goals. I try very hard to refrain from telling my students what to do—especially about a commitment to one institution, whether through Early Decision or in April. The process and the parenting (and they are entwined) will be messy, sometimes tense. Your priorities are not the same as your child's—or perhaps even your partner's—and you are not in control.

But whether you have those conversations with your child while on the road between college visits or now, sitting on the floor beside your child's desk, please have them. Talk to her about why this is hard; ask her what she wishes for, what she is comfortable with and why. Explore her desire to please you and make you feel satisfied and proud. Nearly all children with whom I speak tell me their parents say that all they want is for them to be happy, but then, sadly, happiness as defined by their parents becomes a fine needle to thread.

Generally, parents can't win: we are either too optimistic and kids resent that pressure, or too practical and kids feel unsupported. Perhaps rather than those binaries, we can, now with the need even greater, examine what is laden with emotion for us, isolate the wise, practical decision from our wishful thinking, recognize what we are making unnecessarily complicated, determine what is essential and define the real goal. High school students are still children and work best with structure and a consistent bedtime. Parents can be left awake to deal with the dark. What seems especially apt now is the airline analogy of putting on your own oxygen mask before helping others.

Are We Back in 1986?

Perhaps I deceive myself, but as I lie awake worrying over the disruption to what I know to be the customary college search, my son just wants to play baseball and see his friends and prepare for his performances. And, honestly, that was the case even before we stopped leaving our apartment. He does a much better job of living in the present than I currently do. It's easier, I think, for him to concentrate on whatever is right in front of him—study for the AP, put himself on mailing lists—just enough to make it happen, to move the process ahead. I recognize in that behavior what I've always counseled my students to do: Show your parents evidence of some movement in order to buy yourself some space. It all won't be accomplished at once; more isn't necessary.

That's not a bad thing, in this the year of the pandemic, I feel. There won't be unnecessary college trips just to see *The Greatest Hits of American Higher Education* and, let's hope, there will be less shopping around too, less worrying about what you haven't yet discovered. Perhaps we can allow what feels so limiting to be clarifying instead. In the college process, most recently, there was always more: more testing, more visits, more activities, yet more advice. Enough. It is enough. You are enough.

In my most optimistic moments, I believe that from this disruption will come a more thoughtful, more meaningful, more deeply considered college search and application cycle. Instead of leading off with journeys around the country to visit campuses, students are being asked to invest in genuine research and exploration. They need to first marshal their evidence, then test it out. We encourage them to wade deeply into the resources available online, the blogs, the social media, and the virtual tours and hope they'll get a chance to step on campus later in the season.

I bet we parents didn't visit or even apply to more than a handful of schools. This year might look something more like 1986.

Let's Help Our Children Carry On

With our spring break college tours cancelled, I try to lean into those qualities of an academic community my son has already

liked, and I try not to convince him that he likes things he doesn't. I once heard an admissions dean advise that the best (and only) response to anything a child says about a prospective college is "that's very interesting." Parents deserve a lot of credit for acknowledging and mirroring back what they've heard from their son or daughter, and doing so before venturing an opinion of their own. It's akin to the textual evidence shoring up your thesis. So much better to be building with what they've been willing to give you than building separately.

Also, I've learned that while there are plenty of times (pretty much always) when it might be more efficient for me to accomplish a task, I shouldn't. Not only does this extend to making my son's bed and breakfast, it really would be more efficient for me to knock off a lot of this college stuff. Mostly, I try to leave the room and ask him to let me know when it's done. As long as he acknowledges that I could write a great college essay, I can settle for seeing his at least before it is sent, rather than merely after.

We know our children well; they aren't going to be any different in this process than we know them to be. But neither will we. Pro tip: Don't wake them up early the morning after they got deferred from their dream school, insisting they complete their remaining applications. Instead, let them feel angry, sad, fearful, and encourage them to express it. Then, help them carry on. At those critical moments in the college application process, we need to be the adults. And that means neither blaming nor attacking, despite our desire to find a target.

Learning to Relax Our Grip

The prospect of a child leaving the house, the end of day-to-day parenting, and the uncertainty around how that will be realized is an underappreciated milestone. Long before the decisions arrive, there are so many points of happiness and delight possible in the process: the test scores achieved (the test taken!), the college-branded gear, the completion of tiny tasks. Applying is to be celebrated, each offer of admission is to be celebrated.

Celebrate, before you begin worrying about the next decision that needs to be made. If quarantine has taught us anything, it is to dwell in the daily.

It's natural that we want for our children what we anticipated being able to give them; our fears for them, our deep-seated instinct to spare them disappointment, are equally understandable. These past months, I think I mourn my children's lost opportunities (the baseball season, the dance performances, the trips with their classmates) more painfully than even they do, so much so that I couldn't bring myself to remove the baseball games from my calendar.

I urge us all to relax our grip just a tad. The Saturday of the November SAT last fall, the last morning of Daylight Savings, I walked in the dark to the subway to meet my son, who had stayed at his father's the night before. I'd printed out the admission ticket at my office earlier in the week and had decided (oh so wisely, I prided myself) to keep it for safe-keeping rather than pass it on to him. It was in the front pocket of my coat, so that if someone stole the purse that hung across my body, I'd still have the ticket. Talk about a tight grip!

Every step of this process toward college is exciting for our children, while for us every step is bittersweet. "How can you be ready to go to college?" I ask my son. "You can't even toast frozen waffles."

We're going to work on that during this extra time we have together—this grace period the pandemic has given us.

Melanie White is Director of College Counseling at Grace Church School, a school for children in Junior Kindergarten through 12th grade in Manhattan.