Stop Your Stress, Stay Informed: How to Start the Hunt for College

By Camden Pierce

As Altamont welcomes the end of the school year and summertime, the battle is not over for rising sophomores and juniors. It is just beginning. Major exam scores, GPAs, and extracurriculars all weigh on the consciences of high-schoolers approaching their senior years. With the pressure of pursuing academic excellence, especially at a school like Altamont, where success is expected, an uninformed student's mental health can take a turn for the worse. So *The Acta Diurna* interviewed Altamont college counselor Cindy Bond to help students understand and manage the journey toward the next level of education.

Should I take the SAT, ACT, or both?

First, regarding major high school cumulative exams such as the ACT and SAT, many people don't know what to focus on. Rather than disregarding these assessments entirely or studying for only one, Bond says to consider taking *both* because "many colleges are returning to requiring standardized test scores for admission and scholarship consideration." These scores, even if at first they aren't as high as you'd hoped, will show schools your "commitment and growth." Attempting to make your results "reflect your true ability" will be beneficial in finding the college for you.

What should I be doing now to strengthen my chances at selective schools?

Bond says "the most important thing you can do is show up to school with a positive attitude and a desire to be the best version of yourself." This might seem obvious, but, she says, "meaningful contributions" in and out of the classroom "eliminate the need to play catch-up and will positively impact your grades, test scores, recommendations, and future leadership opportunities." In other words, that sparkle will not only shine inside the walls of the school but will make itself apparent on your resume through your involvement in the community.

Are there summer programs, internships, college camps, or volunteer activities that you recommend?

Bond says that the college counseling office "does not have one specific recommendation beyond making your summer count." While having an extensive resume is positive, that doesn't mean just signing up for as many things as possible. A meaningful summer consists of gaining knowledge and skill to bring back to your academic journey. She says that even if students work or play travel sports, they should "take time to build relationships" and "figure out how you can contribute to the team … look for ways to apply what you've already learned to enhance what you are learning."

How do I connect my passion to my extracurriculars?

Finding ways to show your interests through your activities can be vital because, if you don't know where to start, you can present yourself as bland or unserious. Bond says that the best way to begin is to "surround yourself with people who share your passions and seek out those who are already doing what you hope to do one day." Students should take advantage of the advice and tips you can get from these people. Additionally, look beyond Altamont for opportunities out in the community. There are so many different ways to serve or be involved.

How can I make my activities and passions stand out on an application?

If you're wondering how to stand out from the likely thousands of seniors who are applying to the same schools as you, Bond says, "authenticity is key." If you don't want to come off as generic or average, "be genuine in what you pursue and how you present it." Admissions boards value true interest and curiosity, and they "can tell when your passions are real and ideas are your own." Passion will show in action and impact, not just in performative or impressive-sounding titles.

Other advice?

"Overall, stay coachable and be grateful for the opportunity to learn and grow in an environment [like Altamont]. Always seek new information anywhere."