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Fact vs. Fiction in Admissions
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NOTES

My job today is to teach you things you don't know.
I'll speak for 40 minutes, then will answer questions for 40 minutes.

Please email me at paulk@collegewise.com and I'll be happy to send you my presentation within even more details than what you'll see tonight.

Last Christmas my wife and I went to teach at an orphanage in Ghana. An *orphan* in Ghana is a child who either has no parents, or has parents who can't afford to raise them and gives them to the state. I was asked 3 questions:

1. How many pairs of shoes do you have?
2. Do you have malaria?
3. Have you been to Harvard?

Even in the farthest corners of the earth, where children don't own a pair of shoes and get malaria routinely, they have heard about Harvard.

The why behind the math

About 10 years ago the ivy league schools made a fundamental decision: "The globe is our pond." The Ivys began to market aggressively to China, India, Eastern Europe, and other regions across the earth. When you think about it, there are more juniors in China than K-12 students in the entire United States. So what do you think happened mathematically? The number of applications skyrocketed. And the Ivys have gradually transitioned to becoming international universities. It is literally easier to win the Hunger Games than it is to get into Stanford!

The admittance rates have changed dramatically. In the 1990's ...

USC admitted 70% of applicants!

U Chicago accepted 66% of applicants. (Their essay prompt in 1995 was "How do you feel about Wednesdays?")

Yale - 23%

Berkeley - 22%

Stanford - 22%

Today all of these schools admit under 10% and most around 5%.

Don't overthink the activities piece

Many college applicants and parents ask me: Is it better for colleges if I do X or Y? It's better for colleges if you do whatever you **love** to do! Admissions officers don't care what students choose to do. They care about the story. *Why* did you do it? *What* did you learn?

Don't list activities because they sound good on your application; list them in the order of their importance to you.

And there is NOTHING that says you have to do an activity for four years.

5 of the Great Myths

1. It's so hard to get into college
2. Highly competitive colleges are about the numbers
3. Standardized tests are highly important
4. If you ask for financial help, you'll be penalized in admissions
5. The giant fib

Myth #1 : It's so hard to get into college

It has never been easier to get into college than it is today -- accurate statement.

- Let's take an example of a junior who has a 3.0 GPA and average test scores.
- Out of the 2800 colleges in America, she would get into 2600 colleges and would get money from 1000 of them!
- The 149th rated college in the US last year accepted 99% percent of their applicants: Kansas State University.
- When you apply to the flagship campus in a state you have not been to, you will have a great experience, graduate in four years, will be in a liberal environment, and receive aid money. We are foolish to pretend we don't know where Oklahoma is!

It has also never been harder to get into than it is today -- also an accurate statement -- because we are obsessed with a very small number of highly selected colleges.

- High Selective College admissions rates are getting crazier EVERY year. I worked with a valedictorian who was remarkable in every respect -- who even donated her kidney to a homeless man!! -- and was waitlisted at Princeton.
- My prediction is that if the current trend continues in the next five years, the admissions rate will drop below 2%.

But you do not need to fear: This is a journey where ending is guaranteed. Your child will get into a college!! Your work is to sit with a college, talk with the students and graduates of that college, and figure out where you'd be happy. You can be happy at many schools other than the few highly selective colleges.

Myth #3: Standardized tests are highly important

1050+ colleges today are test optional

Send them your scores only if you want to

Bowdoin, Bucknell, Wake Forest, and U Chicago are test optional, and the UC system is discussing whether to go test optional

1300+ colleges today use the SAT and ACT test scores as part of their admissions process
No preference of SAT vs ACT; either test is fine

Note: The tests are the mismeasure of man. If you're good with tests and bubbles, you'll do well. If not, don't take the tests! Do something else that you love.

SAT and ACT are nowhere near as important as you think they are.

The average test scores of those students admitted to Yale vs. those students denied from Yale are exactly the same!

Testing Timeline

There are several key components to consider

- Accelerate your timeline if you're applying early somewhere

You can do test prep for free on Khan Academy. Compass, Kaplan, and many other good test prep companies exist.

To get merit money, colleges ask themselves:

Do you have a talent that I want at my school? (sport or performing arts)

Do you have high test scores? (e.g. national merit scholars)

Many parents use test scores as the strongman for quality. If scores of students at Oberlin are high, it must be a good school. And that's why colleges super score.

Myth #2: Highly competitive colleges are about the numbers

Colleges want to know: Are you smart enough to do the work?

But beyond that, **do we like you?** Your letters of rec, essays, etc. all help them make that decision.

Think about job interviews. Companies almost always hire the applicant they like, who fits, who they connect with. It's subjective! College admissions is subjective too.

When I went to Korea, everyone played violin and piano. I want the trombonist at my school!

When we were growing up, everyone wanted to be "well rounded."

Today's highly selective colleges seek angular applicants who do one or two things really well. They take the chef from Atlanta and the farmer from Iowa and the robotics kid from Silicon Valley and put them into a dorm room and interesting soup is made. Being well-rounded is not as important.

Essay writing

My advice: *Tell your own story with your own voice.*

Never EVER show your college essay to your parents.

Why? When a kid knows parents will be reading it, the kid will self edit.

Your parents will say your essay is wonderful when it's not.

OR they'll explode and inject their 46-year-old constipated writing style, and you'll lose the authenticity in your voice (and besides, you'll be cheating). Admissions officers can smell parent editing from a long way off..

Instead, take your essay to someone who knows you but doesn't love you and ask them, "Is this me? Or is it me trying to be someone else?"

On the Stanford application there's a question: If you were stranded on a desert island and could only take two books with you, what would they be? The top three answers are: #1 the Bible, #2 the dictionary, #3 the complete works of William Shakespeare. As soon as you answer one of these three, you're out of the game! You've lost your chance to be authentic and original.

The best stories are little stories about little things, like on the TV show Seinfeld. You don't have to write only about something big; choose something little.

I once read the following essay: I'm the worst soccer player on the worst team in our league. In 4 years of playing I've played for 5 minutes. The last line of the essay was: Do you know when I knew that I really sucked at soccer? When I won "most improved" two years in a row! The admissions counselors loved that kid.

Write what you love, write what you know and feel in your voice. You are much closer to that 24-year-old admissions officer who's reading your essay than your parents are!

Last week I sat down with my 16-year-old daughter. Mind you, I'm considered an expert in this field who has spoken all across the US on the topic of college admissions. She asked me a couple of questions which I answered. Then she shrugged and said, "What do you know?" I walked away.

Myth #4: If you ask for financial help, you'll be penalized in admissions

There's a myth that if you ask for help or money you're less likely to get into a school. That's a lie. "Need blind" schools don't care what your monetary needs are. Most colleges are "need aware."

These two types of schools are the same in 95% of ways. The difference is in the waitlist. Need-aware schools work their waitlists. They'll say to a waitlisted student, "We have a spot available at our school but there's no more financial aid left. Do you want it?"

Myth #5: The giant fib: Going to a powerfully branded college means I will get an even better job.

There is currently no link between where you go as an undergrad and how much money you make.

There is a powerful link between where you go to **grad** school and how much money you make.

The only link at the undergrad level is between the **major** you choose and how much money you make. (chemical engineering and computer science majors make the most, history majors make the least)

You don't need to spend a lot of money in the summer!

A JOB is a great way to spend your summer.

By wary of the psychological scam. Most colleges that have summer programs rent out their campuses to for-profit summer programs and have nothing to do with the actual summer experiences of the high school students that take place on their on campus. Going to one of these summer programs will have zero impact on your chances of getting admitted there.

Hard Won Wisdom:

"I heard ... "-- These are the two most dangerous words, and usually wrong!

For most of you:

A great college is one where your child will be happy and successful, that will admit her, that you can afford to send him to. The name doesn't matter. The process is what matters --

True story: My son Jordan came to me several years ago and asked for my help applying to colleges. His top choice school was the University of Richmond. At the time I was running the Princeton Review. I told a guy on my staff: Rob, Jordan has been waitlisted at his top choice school. Fix it! So Rob calls the president of the university. Long story short, the dean of admissions called to welcome Jordan to Richmond. But Jordan felt he didn't get in on his own merit; he only got in because I pulled strings for him. So he didn't go to Richmond! He went to Gettysburg instead and had a great experience.

Question & Answer (Q&A) Session

Q: No one knows my child better than I do. How can I help her show her personality on her essay if I'm not involved?

A: Give your child the gift of your opinion of her **before** she writes the essay. Be specific, help her remember. But a kid who loves science doesn't need to be able to write. It's never about the fluidity of the writing; it's about the joy and the passion. If you try to insert your voice, you have a VERY different voice than your daughter, and the admissions officers will be able to sniff it out in a minute.

Q: Student with mental struggles that she overcame. Should she write about that?

A: YES. The kid has great determination and a much broader perspective on life. A kid who goes into deep depression and comes out the other side tells a powerful story. I'm a big advocate of telling those authentic stories.

Q: How can we make our students understand that the college admissions process can be exciting?

A: Start telling the stories of how much fun you had in college! The formal education was probably the least important part of your college experience. Examples from Cal Tech and MIT, who many people think of as similar, but are really very different.

Cal Tech - 980 students - known for it's mischievous humor - Freshmen who were able to solve the seniors' challenging problem then disassembled the car and reassembled it in the senior's dorm room! (And took the keys!)

MIT - 13,000 students - Greatest prank of all time -- MIT covered the Harvard football field with bird seed. When the whistle was blown to start the game, hundreds of birds descended on the field!

Q: How to find several good college fits for my child?

A: Ask your child a few key questions:

- What kind of program do you want? Semester or quarter?
- Where do you refuse to live?
- Do you want to go to a college that's smaller than your high school?
- How do you feel about going to a school with 35,000 people?

Have your child read every college brochure and write 1 or 2 things they like about each college. Food, internships, etc.

Then go to collegeboard.com, plug in your criteria, and a list of recommended schools will pop up.

Q: I have a great kid but he has average test scores. How do I get past being dinged by colleges?

A: If you have an interesting kid who's not reflecting well with numbers, pick a school that has essays and supplements instead. Kids with ordinary numbers that have a good story to tell or good fit with the school will get in.

Q: How to decide which colleges to visit and when to start?

A: Whenever you are somewhere, go check out colleges. Dump your kid in the dining hall during a meal, and disappear. They'll learn more about the college in one hour in a dining hall than they will in all the official tours and admission presentations. I think it's a mistake to visit the highly competitive colleges because the odds of unrequited love being returned are extremely small. If you do go to a sexy college, make sure you set the expectation right with your child that they most likely won't get in.

Q: How do you get money out of colleges?

A: 2 ways: The first way is to have an economic profile that's weak (need based) so colleges want to help you get there. The second way is to have something so interesting that they want you. They'll offer you merit money to get you to come. They use the word "scholarship" rather than "discount" to attract the kids they want - sports, abilities, test scores. Students from Palo Alto will get more money if they go to schools in midwest and south, not schools like U Washington on the west/east coast. Schools like the University of Alabama offer a free ride.

Q: How do kids negotiate a gap year?

A: Gap year is a very European notion. Apply to colleges as though you will attend them when you graduate. Suppose you get into UCLA and want a gap year. Call UCLA and tell them what you have in mind. If you have a really interesting idea for a GAP year they'll probably defer you. If you're doing nothing, they might not.

Q: 60% people from Gunn apply early. How does applying early impact merit money?

A: about 10% of kids nationwide apply early; in this community it's more like 60%, which makes sense. Admit rates in general are higher for kids who apply early. When you apply early decision you're giving up your economic leverage, so you'd better know that you want to go there and that you can afford it. Early Action is not binding. ED is very powerful for the very elite colleges; it's a way for them to lock in their athletes.

Q: My son has autism so test scores are very high but transcript is very spotty.

A: Make sure to apply to schools that want and know how to connect with your child.

Read the K&W Guide to Schools for Kids with Learning Disabilities. Find a school that values teaching and will match his learning style.

Q: My daughter is very bright. She's bored in school. She wants to take charge of her own learning outside the traditional pathways.

A: That is great. College admissions counselors will really value that.

Q: Are highly selective schools better because (a) professors are better, (b) peers are better, or (c) counseling, internships, and other services are better?

A: I don't think the academics are necessarily better. I don't think the counseling is better. Yes for peer group and yes, there are probably more internships and more interesting opportunities.

Q: My child doesn't know what he wants to do. Is that bad? Do you have any advice?

A: The #1 major on the UC application is "undecided". It's perfectly acceptable to be undecided! But if you have a broad idea of what you're interested in, it's good to share it.

Q: How much do grades matter if they are unrelated to the applicant's declared major?

A: It depends. If student is very specific about what he wants to do, such as engineering, and the college is very competitive, they will just look at the specific grades for his intended area of study. Otherwise they will probably look at all the grades ...

Please email me at paulk@collegewise.com if you'd like a copy of this presentation.