

Editor's Note: As seniors sit down to write their college applications—or to await the results of early decision applications already submitted—the PA has been thinking a lot about the college admissions process. The PA General Meeting on October 28 featured three speakers, all professional college advisers with a lot of experience, who had much to say on the topic. Interestingly, their points of view differed, as did the accounts the Bulletin received of their talks.

Below you will find Gerry Khermouch's somewhat tongue-in-cheek overview of the evening and the admission process. Then Florri Levy and Michelle Herman summarize the advice given by the speakers. Another parent, Inna Deshkovich, also reports on some advice from her son's college counselor that she found helpful and wanted to share with other parents.

As we see just on these two pages, even experts on college admissions have differing opinions on the best way to proceed, and the advice they give may not always be appropriate to every student. For example, some experts tend to focus their attention on students at the higher end of the applicant pool. As with any advice you receive, parents need to take it all with a grain of salt and do their own investigation and comparisons.

Three Views on College Admissions

by Gerry Khermouch

For many Stuy students and their parents in recent years, planning the college application process has become almost like marshaling a military campaign. Tactical and strategic contingencies must be carefully evaluated, rigorous basic training undertaken (we call it test prep) and diplomatic negotiations conducted on many fronts (college interviews, letters of recommendation and the like). For parents of current students who are girding for such an extensive campaign, the first two speakers at the recent Parents' Association meeting offered a wealth of practical advice on which standardized tests to take and when, which advance placement courses to sign up for and how to write that crucial college essay, with the objective of getting accepted into a prestigious institution – Ivy League or otherwise – that will turn heads and put your child on the path to a rewarding career. And the third speaker? He had a quite different take on things – more on him in a moment.

The first speaker, Scott Farber, founder of A-List, a full-service educational consulting company, likes to use his own story of how he applied to Harvard almost on a whim (his mother said it "couldn't hurt") and gained admission with almost total financial support to illustrate the elements that go into a successful campaign. Given the stakes involved, students should take the SAT exam early – and only after taking at least three full-length practice SAT exams--preferably not at home with the iPod on.

The second speaker, Michael Motto, read 2,500 applications while working in admissions at Yale and currently advises a handful of high-school students each year while pursuing a career in criminology. Having read more than 6,000 personal statements over the years, Motto felt qualified to offer advice on this crucial part of the admissions game. Most of all, he argued, the essay should have an interesting "story line" that will engage the reader, rather than being a dry recitation of accomplishments. Writers need to show in a concrete, vivid way how they've met or exceeded expectations. That doesn't always mean captaining five sports teams or winning six science medals. For instance, financially pressed students who had no time for extracurriculars can spin an engaging account of how they were able to balance the necessity of working multiple jobs with their academic commitments. (By the way, if you do have the luxury of engaging in extracurriculars, Motto advised, don't overdo it: most colleges prefer well-balanced students.)

Then there was the third speaker, Steven Roy Goodman, whose business card describes him as an "educational consultant and admissions strategist." Goodman offered what was to this writer a more reassuring message that, if students and their parents can broaden their horizons beyond the relative handful of institutions that seem to have a lock on academic prestige, they can enjoy a smoother application process that gets the student both an outstanding education and generous financial aid.

This starts with families asking themselves "Whose process is this?" One warning signal: parents who find themselves employing phrases like "we're applying" may need to take a step back and let their kid have more control over the process. Indeed, though college applicants often are counseled to resist peer pressure, it may be the parents who need that advice more. "Some of the most powerful peer pressure in New York is parent peer pressure" to get your child into a "name-brand school," said Goodman, who is co-author of the book *College Admissions Together: It Takes a Family*. Indeed, if a key objective is to get the best possible merit-aid package, "then look at schools you've never heard of, because Stuyvesant High School will stand you in good stead."

Goodman offered pungent, and sometimes contrarian, advice on several fronts. His opinion of early decision contradicts the advice of Stuy's own College Office. Still, it may be relevant to some students for whom financial aid is a significant factor. Mr. Goodman feels that applying early can disadvantage students trying to achieve the best financial aid package for themselves. While Mr. Motto claimed that colleges that professed to be "need blind" adhered to that policy, Mr. Goodman asserted that "some schools do play shenanigans with financial aid" perhaps offering less to those who apply early. "Engaging in early decision erodes your financial bargaining power" Goodman said.

The following article offers a detailed summary of the advice offered by these speakers.

College Admissions – Expert Advice

by Florri Levy and Michelle Herman

Scott Farber and his colleagues at A-List, a commercial company that provides tutoring services for standardized tests, as well as assistance with college admissions and other services, take the standardized exams repeatedly, so that they are very familiar with the tests and can tutor them from personal experience. Below is a summary of his recommendations.

- Beginning in 2009, the College Board will be offering score choice for SAT tests and SAT IIs, which means that applicants choose which scores to submit. This will be effective retroactively. The ACT already has score choice.
- The SAT is administered in January, March, May and June. PSAT scores come out in December, but Farber recommends that students sign up for the January SAT even before getting those scores. The idea is to take the test as many times as needed, as early as possible, to avoid having to take it during the late spring, the season for taking SAT subject tests and AP exams, or in the senior year.
- It is recommended that students take at least three full-length practice exams (preferably proctored) starting in November of the junior year. All of the math on the SAT will have been covered by the end of 10th grade, although there is some more advanced math on the ACT.
- As additional preparation for the SAT, Farber suggests students learn a few vocabulary words every day.
- He recommends taking the SAT subject tests, required by most competitive colleges, in May or June. Students should talk to the teachers about which ones to take and the optimal time to take them.
- Comparing the ACT to the SAT:
 - The ACT does not have questions requiring vocabulary skills, which may help students with weaker verbal skills achieve better scores.
 - Points are not taken off for wrong answers on the ACT as they are on the SAT.
 - The ACT may be used in place of the SAT. At some colleges, the ACT may even be submitted for both the SAT I and SAT subject tests.
 - The ACT math includes more trigonometry and esoteric problems. This may benefit strong math students.
 - The ACT has a science section that is mostly data analysis and quantitative analysis.