

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.

- Farber recommends that students try a practice SAT and ACT before choosing one over the other. He recommends taking the writing portion of the ACT, since most competitive schools require it. Many schools accept the ACT with writing in place of SAT and SAT subject tests, but check with individual schools.

Based on his experience as an admissions officer at Yale for two years, Michael Motto said that applications officers look for a story line when they review applications: Who is this person, what makes him/her tick? What does he/she offer the school and vice versa? The most important question for Motto is how applicants have met and exceeded their potential in whatever context they come from, whether it's one of privilege or hardship. He then broke down the components of the application:

- Transcript: What courses did the student take and were they rigorous? Has the student challenged him- or herself? What was the trend of the grades through the four years? (Ninth grade grades count less, and senior grades do count a great deal.)
- Test scores: Students don't need perfect scores on the SAT or ACT. In fact, perfect scores will lead the officer to scrutinize the grades to make sure they measure up. Motto recommends taking the SAT more than once.
- Extracurricular activities: How long has the student been involved? Has he/she tried a number of different activities and eventually moved into leadership commitments? Schools like a well-balanced citizen/scholar. Math and science research are always attractive.
- Personal statement: This is an opportunity for students to tell something separate from the other qualifications. They can use a family hardship story if it illustrates growth, commitment and depth. Motto recommends being very descriptive—talking about what the student loves—and then making a statement. For example: "Being a team player is important to me and explain' or 'school spirit is important to me because ..."
- Letters of recommendation: For the very select schools, these include two from teachers and one from a school counselor, and they are vital. (Students should provide sufficient input for these to be helpful).
- Interview: Not usually required, but if offered you should take advantage of it. Applicants shouldn't go in looking to impress the interviewer with a long resume. Instead they should go in looking for answers after having done their research about the school, and then explain why the student is interested in the school. "The interview is a two-way street."
- Most Ivy League schools are need-blind, which means that the admissions officer never even sees a financial statement. The early applicant pool is smaller, but Motto does not recommend playing it as a numbers game.

Steven Goodman, an educational consultant and author of *College Admissions Together*, began by saying that there's nothing wrong with Harvard and Yale but there are other schools; the goal is to find what's right for the student. The family also needs to establish its priorities: Are they maximizing financial aid? Prestige? Geographical area? He took a more cynical stance than Motto's, saying that the admissions process is designed to keep you out and that it's your job to make the process work in your favor.

A few recommendations for parents:

- Never use the term "we" when discussing the applicant. The parent is not applying, it's the student. Assess what you are looking for: For example, does cost matter? Is prestigious name a factor? Is location important?
- If your child is a procrastinator, you can help by getting him/her excited about the process and the outcome. When they are excited, they will drive the process.
- The student needs to distinguish him or herself from others. How is he or she different? What does the student bring to the table?
- If financial aid is a major concern, consider applying to schools that are not

typical for Stuyvesant applicants.

- The most powerful peer pressure comes from parents. Don't be embarrassed to say that your child is taking a year off or attending a lesser known college. Only half of college students graduate in four years, and 54% take six years to complete their degree. It's important to have the courage to choose the school that's the right fit for your child.
- And finally, pick the right "fit" for the student.



The Importance of Extracurricular Activities: An Interview

by Inna Deshkovich

I sat down with my son's college admissions counselor, Steve Schwartz, to discuss the role of extracurricular activities in the college admissions process. The following is an edited version of our conversation.

Inna Deshkovich (ID): Why should children devote time to extracurriculars? Wouldn't this take time away from classwork? Grades should come first!

Steve Schwartz (SS): Of course top grades are necessary for admission to first-tier colleges, but grades alone no longer guarantee admission. In fact, many students believe that their grade point average is given more emphasis in the college admissions process than it actually is. Most applicants to selective universities are academically qualified, but there are simply not enough spots available. Students looking for an edge should seek to distinguish themselves through their extracurricular activities. These activities provide another set of criteria by which admissions committees make their decisions.

ID: Is it better to join several clubs or to focus on a few?

SS: An ability to demonstrate lasting dedication to a few meaningful extracurriculars, rather than mere membership in many, can make a significant difference. Students should aim to demonstrate a significant contribution to their school or community and the ways in which their participation or leadership has influenced themselves on an individual level.

ID: Is it really necessary to obtain a top leadership position in a high school club? Everyone is competing for these positions at Stuyvesant!

SS: I understand your concern. It can be extremely difficult to gain the top leadership positions in school clubs when there are so many other qualified candidates. I recommend that students at Stuyvesant pursue their extracurricular passions outside of the school environment in addition to those organizations within the school. Opportunities abound in community organizations, nonprofits, internships, and the Internet. A student who wants to make a substantial impact on his or her community should think about a problem or need and how it can be addressed. Some common methods are to launch innovative fundraising campaigns for worthy causes or to mobilize a group of peers to tackle it head-on. Teachers, parents, friends, and college counselors can help to plan these types of endeavors. Founding a community organization, a nonprofit, or a school club can demonstrate leadership and organizational skills that indicate ambition and future success. These are traits that admissions committees seek in applicants.

ID: This sounds like a significant investment of time and effort. How can a student start an organization while excelling in classwork?

SS: Of course, taking on any of these challenges is not easy, but neither is getting into a top college. Through adequate planning and efficient use of summer and winter vacations, high school students have the ability to accomplish a great deal without detracting from classwork or grades. The Internet is not just for MySpace and YouTube; researching a topic and finding communities of students around the world with similar interests can lead to collaboration and skill-sharing on any topic.