

COLLEGE ADVICE: UNDERSTANDING WHAT ADMISSIONS OFFICERS LOOK FOR IN A STUDENT'S APPLICATION

by Gerry Khermouch

At the March PA meeting educational consultant and college admissions advisor, Michael C. Motto, offered a quick survey on some of the reasons the college admissions process has become so “insane,” and provided practical advice on how best to navigate it. Motto, a Yale graduate, spent two years as assistant director of undergraduate admissions there, a period during which he read 2,500 applications, essays and all. A number of Stuy students have been among his clients as a college advisor.

Motto offered some of the reasons behind the application insanity. Much of it is simple arithmetic: rising numbers of graduating high school seniors, more applications from each senior (thanks in part to broadening acceptance of the Common Application, by which students apply to multiple colleges at the touch of a button) and universities' outreach efforts to diversify their applicant pool.

In trying to stand out amid thousands of rival applicants, students need to focus on both the informational and aspirational components of their application planning. The informational part is straightforward enough: sift through the information that can be gathered from college tours, visits to guidance counselors, college guidebooks and consultants like Motto. “Information is in abundance,” he said, “but I want to encourage you to think about the aspirational piece.”

The aspirational aspect, which can be long and tedious, asks the student to dig into his or her particular strengths and goals. “Students who do best are those who have some sense of what they bring to the table”, some sense of what they're going to do with their skills and talents. Colleges are seeking leaders, “and there are many different ways of demonstrating leadership.” It's the student's job to ferret these out of his or her own experience and convincingly communicate them.

In reviewing different parts of the application and answering parents' questions, Motto offered nuggets of advice on several key issues. Some were quick asides. For example, students should come across as reasonably well informed about what's going on in the world. He urged parents to encourage their children to read the newspaper. Most interviewers would be highly critical if, for example, the applicant had no idea that something of great significance was going on in Middle East today. On another point, Motto assured parents that there's no stigma on students who state on their application that they're still undecided about their future major. “Perfectly fine,” he said. “Universities recognize that students will change their mind a lot throughout the course of their undergraduate study.” Strong grades will assure admissions staffers that the student has the talent to be successful at whatever he or she chooses to do. But even if naming a specific major isn't important, students do need to know generally what subjects interest them.

Here are Motto's views on some of the more fundamental issues of how students should construct their course mix, what non-academic experiences they should accumulate, and the weight of the essay in the overall package.

The course mix: rigor required. Be thoughtful in planning your class schedule, Motto advised students. Take courses that lead to junior and senior year electives in areas in which you are strong. You don't have to excel across the board, but you do need to demonstrate that you've attained excellence managing a demanding schedule. That's particularly true if you're not a strong test-taker. However, don't think that you can compensate for low grades with high test scores. That just tells admissions officers that you're lazy.

Personal qualities: consistent commitment, not empty resume-building. Page four of the Common Application includes a small section for listing academic honors, followed by three-fourths of a page asking about a student's non-academic activities. That suggests the answer to some parents' remark that, “My child doesn't do very much—that's OK, isn't it?” No, it's not OK! Colleges are looking for leadership, commitment and maturity, as reflected in those activities. That doesn't mean an endless recitation of activities on the one hand, or a smattering of activities that the student began only in junior year on the other. Admissions committees are seeking consistency, and that's best demonstrated by a select group of activities to which the student demonstrates deep and consistent commitment. Commitment doesn't require outstanding accomplishment, on the level of making the varsity sports team. “Don't throw up your hands and say ‘I'm not a concert-level pianist.’”

The essay: subjective, yes, but that's its strength. Motto took issue with the assertion of a prior Stuy PA guest, Columbia University admissions chief Peter Johnson, that the essay is losing weight in the evaluation process because it's subjective and too easily corrupted by undue outside help. “I want to put forth the idea that the essay is critical precisely because it is subjective,” Motto declared. In his view, the essay is a student's opportunity to “tell something about you that is thoughtful and meaningful, important and deep. To miss that opportunity is a big mistake.” To write a successful essay, though, requires digging hard to come up with a truly personal statement, rather than a rehash of one's resume. He cited the storylines of several essays written by Stuy clients of his, including a shy student who blossomed by pushing himself to excel in theater and a math- and chess-obsessed student who came to view chess not just as an important activity in its own right but as a way of understanding the world. Parents need to encourage their kids to be thoughtful and self-aware—“if they get that right, it will be an invaluable part of the application.”

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