

Q & A from “College Admissions: Perfect Storm of Expertise” Presentation by Robin Mamlet & Christine VanDeVelve sponsored by Paly PTSA on Oct. 6, 2011

Financial Aid

Are schools really ‘need blind’ when they say so? And if they don’t, should I assume they are not?

Yes. No--some might be more “need sensitive” or “need aware” during some part of the application cycle than others; inquire with the admissions office.

What is the dollar amount in terms of net wealth that makes applying for financial aid not a worthwhile exercise? Is the student’s net worth considered (from a trust fund inheritance)?

There isn’t an income cut off. The federal methodology for applying for need based aid via the FAFSA asks for a student’s and his/her family’s income and assets. It also uses information about the size of family, the age of the parents and how close to retirement, and the number of students enrolled in college to determine the Expected Family Contribution (EFC). If the EFC is close to the Cost of Attendance, then the student is unlikely to be eligible for federal or state aid. However, colleges also use their own institutional methodology for determining need and offering aid. There might be forms required in addition to the FAFSA that ask more detailed questions about a family’s financial background. Because colleges each use their own method to determine your family’s ability to pay, you will find that the amount each college will cost once financial aid is taken into account may differ significantly from college to college. Use colleges’ NetPrice calculators to get an estimate of the aid award for a student from a specific college.

Admissions Process inside universities

If a student has had a very unique, ‘out of the box’ accomplishment, what is the best way to educate an admissions team about how deep and time consuming this endeavor was?

The student will have the opportunity to list the activity and a brief description, as well as indicate the number of hours/wk and wks/yr he participated in it, in the Activities section of many college applications. The Common Application asks students to provide a short answer and elaborate on one of his activities. And, if the college application includes an essay, the student might want to write about the activity. Some college applications, however, do not offer these opportunities nor accept letters of recommendation which is a sign that such an activity is not considered an important part of the application review process.

What special attributes are needed to get into the top 10-15 colleges?

There are no specific attributes that are desirable for all—nor most, nor a group of-- colleges. Some colleges value leadership; others service, etc. Reading the mission statement of the colleges under consideration will give you an idea of what is important to each institution.

GPA’s from different schools are really worth different amounts. Some students from strict schools have lower GPA’s. What do you think about this, and how do you balance the true value of GPA’s. A GPA from an easy school may not be as good as a lower GPA from a strict school.

Colleges have access to a high school’s school profile (and perhaps historical data from previous application cycles if it’s a college that often receives applications from a particular high school) which provides important contextual information with which to evaluate a student’s transcript (course selection and GPA) and the high school to compare the student to other within the high school and the high school to other high schools. Paly’s

profile: <http://www.paly.net/info/profile.pdf>. Paly gives a profile to every college that visits our campus. In addition, we direct colleges to it with each official transcript sent as part of the application.

UC schools acceptance rates in 2011 seem to be averaging a 3.8 GPA. Are UC schools unrealistic to apply to?

That depends on the student—not only the student’s academic profile but also their interests and preferences since the offerings on each campus varies. To learn more about UC admissions data, consult the UC stat finder: <http://statfinder.ucop.edu/> or <http://www.universityofcalifornia.edu/admissions/>

Are schools willing to give students with learning differences more leeway when they read their apps?

Legally, colleges cannot discriminate against a student who discloses a learning disability as part of the college application process. The admissions folks really see themselves as counselors so there's no stigma associated with having an IEP or 504 in and of itself. Students are not required to disclose their learning challenges in their college applications—but can be useful contextual information for colleges to have when making an admission decision.

Essays

How long should the essay be? Should applicants absolutely stay within the 500 word limit for the common ap essay or is it ok to exceed the limit by 50 to 100 words?

Students should follow directions when completing college applications. Some applications will truncate responses that exceed a word count or character limit—so students should always preview an application before submitting it.

How can admissions committees read thousands or tens of thousands of essays and make useful differentiations and conclusions from those?

The essays convey a tone or “voice” and reveal student’s personal attributes; in other words, they create an impression which complements the information presented in the rest of the application.

The student ‘resume’

Not all students are developmentally at the same place. What if your child does not have long-standing passions or leadership resumes?

There is a place in college for students whose interests and passions are still emerging and for shy students too. Having many or budding interests (even individual pursuits like reading or drawing) is important; not being interested in anything could be more limiting but some colleges are less interested in those attributes. Reading a college’s mission statement can be useful to see what they value and offer in terms of the educational philosophy.

Is there a consistent way that + and (-) grades are weighted? E.g. is a B+ 3.25 and an A- 3.75? Do the UC schools care?

Every high school has it’s own grading key which is shared with colleges (at Paly, it’s part of the transcript package sent with applications). Colleges commonly evaluate different grading systems from different schools. Whether or not they make distinctions between an A or an A- is entirely up to their admissions policies—and is not something the public is typically privy to. The UC application requires students to report their grades and, when doing so, choose course grades from a drop-down list that does not include pluses and minuses

Students with special needs

If a student has a learning issue which is mild (no IEP or 504) should he/she mention this on the college application?

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Choosing colleges

How do I find a college that would be suitable for my student - a 'good fit'?

Research. Students should look for schools that fit their needs and preferences: academically (majors, level of rigor, learning style/environment, # of requirements, etc.), socially (Greek life, clubs and organizations and activities, size, location, weather, etc.), and financially (colleges with a "low" Cost of Attendance or a COA you can afford, colleges that offer a financial aid award that makes the COA more affordable, etc.).

What do rankings (e.g. U.S. News & World Report) tell us about a college?

The factors that influence the U.S. News & World Report rankings are: the number of applications a college receives (the higher the better ranking), the percentage of students admitted (the lower the better ranking), and the prestige the college is given by other college presidents.

What about college for kids who get Bs and Cs? Other than community colleges, what 4 year colleges exist for this student?

There are some. There are several books in the Paly C&CC that can help identify these colleges. And, the Maps section of Naviance that highlights groups of colleges might also help.

Misc.

How do you treat the surge of Asian student applications? Do you decline more Asian students to balance the diversity?

It is illegal to discriminate on the basis of race. Many colleges even run their admit numbers by race prior to finalizing their decisions, simply to be sure they have not inadvertently discriminated against one race or another.

Should college admissions books be read by parents and students? Is your book too heavy a topic for high school students?

Both. No, not at all; it's very straight-forward and topical.

For answers to other questions, consult Robin and Christine's book, "College Admissions: from Application to Acceptance" or their blog: www.collegeadmissionbook.com or check out a DVD of the presentation from Paly's CCC.