Making Good Choices: Helping Students Avoid the Race for Rigor

Greg McCandless
Sage Hill School
Today’s Agenda

- Q & A
  Really matters.
  A discussion of the college admissions process and what matters.
  A discussion of the college What Not To Do!
  Resources and Idea Sharing.
  My Institution’s Challenges and How those might relate to the work that you do with your students.

- My role as Dean of 9th and 10th Grade College Counseling.
  Who I am and what I do in...
Who Am I and How Did I Get Here?

- Former College Admissions Officer. Worked in the admission offices of Whittier College and Harvey Mudd College.
- For the past eleven years I have served as a high school educator in the following roles:
  - Associate Director of College Counseling
  - Director of College Counseling
  - Dean of 9th and 10th Grade College Counseling
  - English Teacher
  - 10th Grade Lead Class Advisor
  - Past-President for the Western Association for College Admission Counseling (WACAC)
- Former College Admissions Officer. Worked in the admission offices of Whittier College and Harvey Mudd College.
What Does a Dean of 9th and 10th Grade College Counseling Do?

- Works solely with 9th and 10th Grade students and families.
- Serves as an academic and extracurricular advisor.
- Meets with 9th Grade students in small groups in the spring.
- Meets with 10th Grade students and their parents for an individual meeting in the fall/winter/spring.
- Serves as a resource for all questions related to college counseling.
- Meets with 9th and 10th Grade Advisors prior to spring advisor/advisee conferences to consult on students’ course schedules for the following year.
- Meets with 9th Grade students and families.
- Works solely with 9th and 10th Grade.
AP and Course Scheduling Challenges at Sage Hill School

- Access to Accelerated and AP Courses:
  - Competing with the public schools.
  - Wanting too much too soon.
  - Limited weighted class options in the 9th grade years.

- Oversubscription:
  - Pleasure faculty, students, and parents.

- Grade Inflation:
  - Why are you taking this class?

- Passive vs. Active Learning:
  - Burnout
  - School/Life balance

- Articulating a placement process that faculty, students, and parents:
  - Limited weighted class options in the 9th grade years.
  - Competing with the public schools.
  - Access to Accelerated and AP Courses.

- Faculty Fatigue:
  - Competing with the public schools.
So what are some things that have worked?
The Four-Year Academic Plan

During my advisory/homeroom meetings with 9th and 10th grade students in the winter/spring, we fill out a Four-Year Academic Plan. We focus on classes for the following high school career:

- Curriculum Night for 9th Grade Parents
- We revisit this form during the 10th grade Family Meeting, as well.
- Students take over a typical four-year high school career.
- We give them some context regarding the average number of weighted courses SHS students take over a typical high school career. I make them listen to my philosophy about course selection AND I give them an idea of the sheet as they would like, including coursework/academic goals.
- Before they start filling it out, however, I make them listen to my philosophy, including coursework/academic goals. I make them listen to my philosophy, including coursework/academic goals. I make them listen to my philosophy, including coursework/academic goals.
- We revisit this form during the 10th grade Family Meeting, as well.
- Curriculum Night for 9th Grade Parents in February.

(And offering context when possible)
1. I want students to challenge themselves.

2. I am not a huge fan of a student taking a really hard class in a subject that they do not love. Often this takes time and energy away from other things that matter more.

3. A student should play to their strengths.

4. **But**, I am also inherently interested in areas they are most interested in.

5. I always steer it back to the number of hours in a day.
The Context I Give

When Advising Students on Course Selection

1. I give them the average number of weighted courses (honors and AP) that this year's seniors will graduate with at the end of the freshman year.
2. I give them a typical "trajectory" for how this average works out over the four years.
3. I give them the average weighted cumulative GPA of their class at the end of their junior year.
4. I give them the average weighted GPA of their class at the end of the sophomore year.
5. For sophomores, I give them the average number of weighted courses their class has this year. For seniors, I give them the average weighted GPA of this year's seniors.
The GPA Quartile Sheet (aka Making Data Work For You)

- We started using these with our juniors and seniors many years ago but have
  found them to be particularly helpful with our seniors.
- We use three years of data to give more depth and breadth to the conversations.
  Also gives more perspective.
- We started using these with our juniors.
- We have found them to be particularly helpful.
- We use three year's worth of data to give them a concrete goal to shoot toward.
- These are particularly helpful for lower-performing kids who might be a bit overconfident.
- They are a huge pain to create, but ultimately worth the effort.
- They are particularly helpful in our conversations with 9th and 10th graders.
- We use three year’s worth of data to give the grade families as well.
- These are particularly helpful for lower-performing kids who might be a bit overconfident.
- They are a huge pain to create, but ultimately worth the effort.
The GPA Quartile Sheet

XX

Dear College板

We have compiled the following information to help you make an informed decision about which colleges to apply to.

1. Selection of Colleges

   - GPA
   - SAT/ACT

2. GPA

   - Oxford College of Liberty University (CA) - 2.1
   - Vanderbilt College (OH) - 4.2
   - Northwestern University (IL) - 3.0
   - New York University (NY) - 3.2
   - Middlebury College (VT) - 4.0
   - American University (DC) - 2.2

3. SAT Average (600 Scale)
   - 1332

4. ACT Average (36 Scale)
   - 27

5. Students who have applied to the three schools are:
   - 2016 - 2018 across all fields

Good luck with your college search!
My goal is to develop a worksheet by which students can calculate the average gross number of weekly homework hours they are signing themselves up for when enrolling in a particular set of classes, as it relates to academic success. This will be paired with an article on the role of sleep and wellness.

The challenge is going to be how to best gather this information.
What NOT To

DO NOT build (and/or support) a culture of ambition rather than value-based reasoning.

DO NOT forget about the “psychology” of a transcript.

DO NOT (unintentionally) encourage burnout.

DO NOT refuse to acknowledge that this process is scary and stressful.

DO...
And now a little bit about selective college admissions...
What Matters in Selective College Admissions

The Tangibles

● The Transcript.
   ○ The GPA.
   ○ Class Rank/Overall rigor.

● Standardized Test Scores.
   ○ SAT/ACT
   ○ SAT Subject Exams
   ○ AP Exams
   ○ (and how do they validate/invalidate your school’s curriculum?)

● Extracurricular Commitments
   ○ Quality vs. Quantity
   ○ A word about leadership.
   ○ Do you fulfill an institutional need that school has for that year?
   ○ Do you come across as someone they want
     Personal Qualities
     pursued?
   ○ Why did you pursue the activities you took?
   ○ Why did you take the classes you took?

The Intangibles

● Authenticity!!!
   ○ Why did you take the classes you took?
   ○ Why did you pursue the activities you pursued?

● Personal Qualities
   ○ Do you come across as someone they want
   ○ Do your teachers like you?

● Do you fulfill an institutional need that school has for that year?
   ○ Are you a match for that institution and have you demonstrated that accordingly in your application?

The Transcripts

● What about leadership.

● Extracurricular Commitments
   ○ Quality vs. Quantity
   ○ Do you come across as someone they want
   ○ Do your teachers like you?

● Do you fulfill an institutional need that school has for that year?

● Are you a match for that institution and have you demonstrated that accordingly in your application?
One last thing…

never forget the power of words.

I have never had a student come back to me and tell me that they wished they stressed out more. Recent surveys show that a vast majority of college freshmen say they most often the opposite: Recent surveys show about college while in high school. In fact, it is tell me that they wished they stressed out more. 5. will have with their child. They will set the tone for the relationship they before their child leaves the nest. Ultimately, 4. of humor. As much as you can, have fun and keep a sense process but not to insert themselves into it. 3. It is the parent's job to be supportive of this. 2. Their child only gets to do high school once. 1. As their child only gets to do high school once.

parents by pointing out the following things:

I always close any presentation I give to process: I always close any presentation I give to students (and parents) about this theme that at the end of the day, they are educators. If guidance counselors, and administrators is to remind one way to give the power back to your teachers.
Questions?