

Addressing the Competitiveness of the College Admissions Process

Over the course of the last few years, a number of parents have expressed anxiety about the increasing competitiveness of the college admissions scene. What, they ask, is the school doing to respond? Their anxiety frequently centers around several perceptions. First, they note that the increasingly intense competition for places at “elite colleges,” and especially for a place at The University of Georgia, has grown increasingly keen. Some parents wonder if the rigorous academic environment at SCDS could be hampering their child’s chances for college admission. If SCDS weren’t so challenging and the grading so rigorous, perhaps their child would have higher grades, a more competitive transcript, and a much better chance of admission to a “top school.” This leads some families to speculate about whether their son or daughter ought to take a less demanding course of study and, presumably, get higher grades. In other cases, families even wonder if they would have a better chance of admission if their children attended a less demanding school.

The second concern focuses on the role of the college counseling office itself. Are the school’s counselors doing all they can? Are they representing the credentials of our students aggressively enough? Do these colleges understand how rigorous the SCDS curriculum really is? Do they know that a student with a B at Savannah Country Day would probably earn an A at a less demanding school? In an effort to give their children “an edge” in a competitive world, some families are contracting with private admissions counselors with the belief that they will represent their child’s interests more proactively.

In truth, the college admissions market is increasingly competitive. It stems, in large measure, from factors beyond Country Day’s control. The largest of these is demographic. Students currently applying to college are part of the “echo boom.” They are the children of the “baby boom” generation, and are applying to college in larger numbers than at any time in history. The numbers of students applying to college have increased at a much faster rate than available spaces, and so the competition has become increasingly keen.

Moreover, this is a much more diverse group of applicants. In 1970, women made up only 40% of students enrolled in college and minority students only 14%.

Today, women constitute almost 60% of undergraduates, and as our recent Creative Minds speaker Dan Kindlon reported, a new generation of “Alpha Girls” comprises nearly 50% of all those enrolled in law, business, and medical schools. Minority enrollment now accounts for 31% of the total undergraduate population. The trend means vast numbers of talented young people who previously had little access to professional education now do. In the long run, our nation will profit immeasurably from this wave of better educated people, but it also means something we all feel, that for the individual applicant, admission to college is much more competitive than at any time in our history.

These factors are particularly acute in our part of the country. The wave of new applications first hit Southeastern schools with a national reputation. As the competition for spots in Ivy League colleges grew more acute, schools like Duke, The University of Virginia, The University of North Carolina and Emory saw huge increases in applications from the Northeast corridor and other areas of the country. The last decade has seen other Southeastern schools garnering national exposure and interest. Schools like the University of Richmond, Elon, Furman, and Wake Forest have become “hot tickets” on the national scene. In our area, this situation is complicated even further by the investment that Florida, Georgia, and South Carolina are making in providing public funding for education. Georgia’s *Hope Scholarship* program, along with Florida’s *Bright Futures* and South Carolina’s *Palmetto Scholars* initiatives, mean that the public universities in these states are now capturing many academic stars of the state. Some of the state’s most talented students, looking now at the need to fund graduate school after their undergraduate experience, are opting to stay in-state as undergraduates. As a result, in just the last six years, the admit rate at The University of Georgia, for example, has dropped from 73% to 52%, and predictions are that it will continue to drop in the next five years.

So how does SCDS respond as a school community to this added pressure our students are under? At a recent meeting with The University of Georgia’s regional representative, one of our parents asked the question that was on everyone’s mind. “SCDS is a very competitive school,” she said, “with many talented students. My child is enrolled in several advanced classes. Would he be better to stay in these classes and risk a B or transfer into regular classes where he could do better?” The answer was

unequivocal, if not particularly helpful: the admission office of a competitive school like Georgia expects both. A student must enroll in the most demanding course of study appropriate to his talent, and he must excel in those classes. In other words, you need an A in the AP class.

In the last several years, Tom Bonnell and Mary Beth Fry have met repeatedly with Admissions Directors and representatives not only at UGA, but from competitive schools throughout the country. The message from those professionals is equally clear and equally unequivocal: **The rigor of our academic program and the superb performance of our graduates in college is our greatest single asset in the college admissions process.** Though AP scores are not part of an individual student's college application, colleges track carefully the performance of students on AP exams in the school's academic profile. They look even more carefully at the college performance of our graduates in their own institutions. In Georgia they look particularly at the Hope Scholarship retention rate. They know it is one thing to earn a Hope Scholarship on the basis of one's performance in high school classes which, in a state as large and as diverse as Georgia, may be much easier in one school than another. It is quite another to have the academic skills to hold on to that B average (or better) through all four years of college. The reason is obvious. There is no greater predictor of a student's capacity to do college level work than a student's performance in college-level courses.

Our students' "pass rate" on AP exams, which has averaged over 87% for the last five years, is one of the most competitive in the country. Our graduates' Hope retention rate, well over 90%, vastly outdistances the state average of 40%. Finally, our students' superb transcripts at some of the nation's most demanding colleges tell admissions offices around the nation what they need to know. that SCDS students, as a result of the rigorous training they receive, are ready to compete on the big stage. **It is for this reason alone that SCDS's college admissions record is the best in our part of the country.** College admissions professionals read our profile carefully; they know the high expectations our grades represent and they recognize the difference between our curriculum and those of other schools in our area.

Our students achieve at a very high level. Still, in this increasingly competitive world, some of them are denied admission to colleges where they are thoroughly

prepared to excel. Unfortunately, that is a reality of the current market. If a school like Emory accepts just 27% of the 15,000 students who apply for roughly 1200 spots, and many less qualified students, knowing those grim realities, aren't even applying, clearly this means that hundreds of superbly qualified students from all over the country are applying to schools where they can clearly do the work, but where they have little statistical chance of admission. So what is our college counseling office doing to respond to these realities? What is the school doing? What can parents do?

Let's take these up in order. As for the college counseling office, they are doing exactly what they should be doing: they provide expert counseling to students and to their families to ensure that, as they approach the most significant decision of their lives to date, our students make their choice only after fully understanding themselves and their learning needs. At its best, as it is done by SCDS Counselors Mary Beth Fry and John Burnette, the college counseling process is a process of self-discovery. Our students begin to think, many for the first time, about who they are and what they want to do with their lives. They think about their goals, career and personal, and they identify the skills they will need to acquire to achieve them. They think about the courses they want to take. They think about their learning style, what has worked for them here at SCDS and what they will need to be even more successful in college. All of this thought, all of this research, all of this counseling is designed to help them find their "best fit college," one ideally suited to helping them grow as people.

When parents experience frustration with this process, it may result from a misconception of the role of a college counselor. As the admission scene becomes more competitive, some families see the counselor as a kind of public relations coordinator, someone whose job it is to "package" an applicant to make him or her as appealing as possible. The fallacy of this approach is best articulated in a piece called "The Search for Authenticity," written by Bruce Poch, Dean of Admissions of Pomona College in Claremont, California. Poch likens the college admissions process to dating: "It's about finding relationships that will work" and says that his job is made harder "because so many students...seem to work under the management of handlers. Perhaps it's their parents who help to initially develop the college list. Then, a tutor works on test preparation while a consultant concocts the "perfect" extracurricular résumé." Poch

points out that packaging the applicant doesn't result in the success one might expect. "The odds are small of guessing exactly right about what any individual admissions office [really] wants." He advises parents and schools to set up the process so that "the students [who apply to college] are really who they appear to be." Otherwise, he warns, the marriage [between student and college] will be based on a shaky foundation. "Perfect behavior on a first date (perhaps an interview or application papers) may lead to a second chance, but ultimately the real person is revealed, and that revelation indicates whether a happily-ever-after experience lies ahead."

Accordingly, our college admissions office seeks to be as authentic as possible. It seeks to provide students and their families with the tools they need to think through what they need and what they want in their next school experience. Once students have identified what that is, the office works proactively with students to help them articulate the match they perceive between who they are and what that college provides. In ninth and tenth grades, this takes the form of small group advisory sessions focused on program planning and the careful selection of courses and extra-curricular commitments. Beginning in the winter of junior year, it is an on-going dialogue that is carried on in multiple one-on-one meetings over a ten-month period. Depending on who they are and how they work best, students get as much help as they need in thinking through who they are and what they want, researching schools that meet their learning needs, strategizing for college visits and interviews, developing a judicious list of schools, selecting a course of study for senior year, and crafting an application and refining an essay that reveals one's authentic self as fully as possible.

At the same time, as an academic institution, SCDS has intensified its efforts to maximize the chances of students' academic success. We have done this in several ways. First, have drafted a "Statement of Teaching and Learning" to ensure that teaching at this school focuses on those skills and competencies most clearly related to success in school and in life and that our curriculum and pedagogies reflect the latest research. Second, we increased communication among our teachers to ensure that the skills required in upper level courses are thoroughly taught in earlier grades and we eliminated unnecessary redundancies. This year, we held more frequent faculty meetings to ensure that teachers particularly skilled at teaching certain concepts pass on their expertise to departmental or

grade level colleagues. Third, we provided more faculty training in differentiating instruction to better meet the needs of students with alternative learning styles. Furthermore, we broadened course offerings, providing alternative tracks to maximize student's chances of success and providing greater access to advanced courses. Finally, we provided more structure for students at school. The Stay 'til Four program provides more access to after school tutoring. The Upper School added a Learning Lab and a Writing Lab to provide more support for students. The Middle and Upper Schools vastly strengthened their advisory systems, providing each student with an active advocate at school to help with goal setting, study skills acquisition, and problem solving. The Upper School developed effort marks and study skill rubrics to provide students and their families with more feedback about their approach to work.

Clearly our students face a competitive challenge that is unique to their generation. The college admissions office has added personnel to increase access to the counselors, adding a host of test preparation programs, as well as programming for underclassmen to help them and their families make informed program choices as early as possible. As a school we are intent on preserving the rigor of our program, our greatest competitive advantage, and supporting all of our students in learning more effectively.

The depth of this challenge calls for an even more focused team approach. Everything we know now about the college admission scene tells us that the situation is likely to become even more competitive and that we need to be even smarter about the choices we make on our students' behalf. In this climate, the academic transition to Upper School is more important than ever, a new reality that creates new challenges for us both as parents and as teachers. As a school, we feel great ambivalence about this. Earlier generations grew up in a world where childhood was precious, and none of us wants to create undue stress in kids' lives. Their time with family, their time with friends, and their freedom to pursue their interests, athletics, and hobbies is a critical part of growing up. Ironically, ten years ago the school was hosting workshops for parents on how to help students learn to relax and to lower the academic pressure on them. We wish we still lived in a world where that could be our message to everyone. However, because we care about our students and we want them to have the widest possible range of

opportunities in this increasingly competitive climate, that means preparing students to put their best foot forward academically from the first day of ninth grade.

Fortunately, most kids are well positioned to do this. This is a fourteen grade school; our Upper School faculty has a good feel for what students have done in Lower and Middle Schools. Most of our students arrive in ninth grade accustomed to demanding work and blessed with good study habits. However, in recent years, some of our students have come into Upper School so overburdened with athletic and extra-curricular obligations that they can't possibly do their best work. Here the school and families must work together. We must help our students make some smart choices, focusing their time and energy on a few things they do well, rather than stretching themselves too thin, especially with travel teams that make excessive demands on time and family energy. In other cases, students have yet to develop the self-discipline to do their best. In those cases, we need to work together, helping students, from the early grades on, develop good work and study habits. We need to provide places and time for focused and committed work; we need to reward progress and provide additional structure when needed. We, parents and the school, need to communicate actively with each other about what's working and what's not. Finally, we need to help students structure their lives, eliminating unnecessary stresses and distractions so that they can do their very best work from the beginning.

Clearly there is a great deal at stake here. SCDS is as deeply committed as it has always been to giving our students every advantage. We are grateful for your input and for your support as together we continue to refine our efforts to support our students in this important process.