What I Wish I’d Known about the College Admissions Process

This parent panel was presented by the Pearce Excellence in Education Fund on Tuesday, October 25, 2016.

Our parent panel included:
Frank Lozada. Father of Nico, soccer player at Brown University in Providence, RI and Anna, a senior at Pearce. Also want to add that he’s a TCU professor.
Kate Swiney. Mom of 2 kids at Texas A&M: Joe, a sophomore and Sarah, a freshman. Jenna JJP freshman.
Diane Laner. Mom of Morgan at Rollins College in Winter Park, Florida and Sami at University of Kansas in Lawrence, KS.
Terry Greenberg. Mom of Claire at Oklahoma City University and Evan at the University of Southern California.
Julie Andrews. Mom of Catherine, OU graduate; Caroline, Texas A&M sophomore; and Jack, Pearce freshman.
Suzy Harmon. Mom of Bradley, American University grad; Zach, UT Austin junior; and Lindsay, Pearce senior

Through a moderator, our parent panel was asked a series of questions. We’ve prepared a brief summary of their answers. As we indicated that night, their answers on based on their experiences with their kids applying to the colleges that interested them. Your experiences might be different because you have different kids with different interests, and because the process might have changed in the years since their student applied. With that caveat, we still feel our panel provided great advice! At a minimum, their comments should give you ideas for further inquiry in your own student’s college application process. We have also included a little bit of information that we didn’t have time to get to during the program that night. Look for that in blue font!

Standardized Tests: SAT and ACT

SAT v. ACT: Colleges don’t prefer one test over the other. You should submit test scores from whatever test best suits your student and will allow him or her to get the best scores. You can figure that out by taking practice tests online, taking practice tests in books you buy, or by getting evaluated at a test prep service. Some kids take both tests, but parents were encouraged not to take a real exam for practice or to figure out which test your student prefers. Some colleges require a student to submit ALL test scores from ALL SAT and ACT tests taken.

Test Prep. Everyone on the panel had their student do some kind of test prep for the SAT and/or ACT. One student just practiced old tests online for free. Parents also used and liked Huntington Learning Center (214-363-9500), What’s the Word or Slingshot, and Kaplan. RISD offers test prep for the ACT this spring on 3/25/17, 4/1/17 and 4/8/17. You’ll get 2 days of instruction and one practice ACT for $40. Students who enroll in the College Transition Class at Pearce will also get some test prep. Your student’s score can make a big difference in whether he or she gets admitted and/or gets merit scholarships.

Superscore: If your student takes the same test more than once, some colleges will “superscore.” This means they will take the top score in each category and use those scores to create the best composite or total score for your teen. You’ll need to check with each college to see if they superscore and if they do it for both the SAT and ACT. In the past, some colleges were willing to do it for the SAT but not the ACT. But more schools are now doing it for both.

Testing Dates 2016-2017:
http://www.edline.net/files/_VVE0t_/312aaa68d014f1b43745a49013852ec4/SAT_and_ACT_Testing_Dates_2016-17.pdf

If you student doesn’t excel at standardized tests, consider applying to schools that either don’t require these types of test scores or deemphasize them. For a list of those schools, go to a website for Test Optional Schools:
http://www.fairtest.org/schools-do-not-use-sat-or-act-scores-admitting-substantial-numbers-students-bachelor-degree-programs

How do you know if your student’s scores are good enough for the school he or she wants to attend? First you should go to that college’s website or www.collegedata.com. Each college publishes the test scores for the middle 50% of freshmen students admitted the previous year. If that college lists ACT scores of 28-32, it means students with the lowest 25% ACT scores, got a 28 or lower. Students will the top 25% of ACT scores got a 32 or higher. It doesn’t mean you can’t get in if your score is lower than 28 or that you’re guaranteed to get in if your score higher than 32, but it gives you an idea of your chances and whether you should try to take the test again to raise your score. You can also check scattergrams on Naviance to see how Pearce students have fared when applying to that school. The scattergram shows the test score and GPA for students (unidentified) who got in to specific schools. However, students are more than just numbers so it’s hard to know exactly why a Pearce kid was admitted. Also, if you have a sample of 1, that doesn’t really give you an idea of how your student would be considered.

Timing. Students need to take the test(s) their junior year. Most students take it in December or January and then decide if they want to take it again. It’s OK to just take it once if you’re happy with the score. One and done! Panel
recommends timing the test so the student takes it as he or she is finishing the test prep. If your child has a lot of extra-curricular activities during school, consider doing test prep the summer before junior year and then taking the test in the fall of junior year. RISD has traditionally paid for every junior to take the ACT in April.

**Selecting Colleges that Fit your Student**

Our panel tried to find schools that fit their interests by searching the internet, reading books (*Colleges that Change Lives* by Loren Pope, *Fiske Guide to Colleges*) and a few parents hired counselors. Good criteria to consider includes geography (do they like the cold? How far from home?), urban/suburban, size, athletics (both as an athlete or spectator). Kids often don’t know what they want they start visiting schools. Take tours of local colleges to help your student start to figure out what they want in a college. Parents: try not to interject your idea of what college should be, but think about how your child learns. Would they do well in an auditorium size class? Would they do better if professor knew by name? You do want to make sure the college has the program your child is interested in right now, but don’t get too invested in what they want to major in... kids often change majors. Do think about how hard it is to switch majors or colleges within the university. Some schools make it easy while others make it very hard.

College Fairs are a good place to start. RISD has a good one. Encourage your student to visit with the college reps who come to Pearce. This may be the best time to meet the rep one-on-one and get personal info. Make sure your child give the rep his or her name.

If you have the time and resources, try to visit your student’s top choices for college. Tours give you a sense of the college in a way that the website can’t. Also, many colleges are looking for “Demonstrated Interest.” They want to know that you want to go to their school. If you can’t afford to visit, try to see their rep at a college fair or at Pearce or at an info session some schools hold in local hotels. You can also sign up for emails but make sure your student opens them!

**Applications**

Common App ([www.commonapp.org](http://www.commonapp.org)). Many schools accept the “Common App.” You only have to enter your biographical information once for these schools. Your student will also have to write one personal essay for the Common App and then each school can also request that your student write supplemental essays. Be careful though because many schools don’t change their supplemental prompts until August. If it doesn’t specify what year the prompt applies to, email the admissions department at that school to confirm before asking your teen to write the supplemental essay.

*Apply Texas Application* - Has 3 essays: A, B and C. Traditionally C is “optional” but do it!

Application Essays. In Texas you can start sending in your application August 1st before the student’s senior year. Encourage your student to apply by August 1st if possible, and if not, as early as possible. Get a fresher read from admissions dept. and you have a better chance of getting into the more selective colleges within the university.

If you have multiple essays to write for different colleges, look at all the prompts. See if there are similar prompts that could possible use the same essay with only a few changes. This will save your student time.

Have a second set of eyes look at the essay. Pearce English teachers are great at this.

Try to have your student write as many essays as possible over the summer.

**Applying to Fine Arts Programs:** This is a 2 step process. You have to be admitted to the university then you have to be admitted to the program. Try-outs may not be until spring so you may not find out until April. This is hard if you have to commit in May. If the student is interested in music, contact the professor(s) that teach that instrument. Ask what kind of music he asks the kids to play the first year and start learning that type of music senior year. You’ll know if student has the skills for that program. If your student is an artist, save all his work from freshmen year forward. You may need it for an application portfolio.

**Applications for Athletes.** You’ll know if school is interested if they ask for an unofficial transcript or for counselor’s name. If they really want you, they will reserve a spot and then walk the student through the admissions process.

**Resumes for Students.** Keep a binder from when your student starts 9th grade. Write down all their activities, including community service and how many hours. Write down any honors as well. Schools like to see a few activities that you’ve done consistently. It shows commitment. If started doing in junior high, can include those years on the resume as well.
Even better if student can show leadership in those areas. A few more activities to be well-rounded is great. They don’t really like a ton of activities that were just done on a superficial level.

Strategies for getting into a particular college. At large universities, students will not only apply to the university but also to the college for the area they want to study. For instance, at UT students will apply to UT but also indicate which college they want such as engineering, business, etc. But, some of the colleges are much harder to get into than others, so students will sometimes apply to colleges that are easier to get into so they can at least get into the university and then try to transfer to another major later. The example given was a student who didn’t think he could get into UT Business School so he applied to an easier school at UT. The panel warned that there’s no guarantee the student could transfer once he got into the university. That’s a risky strategy.

The Undecided Major. Colleges understand that students may not know what they want to study and that students frequently switch majors while in college. But, you might miss out on scholarship money if don’t pick one to start. Rarely are scholarships set up for “undecided” majors.

Interviews. Many schools offer interviews. Some are mandatory and others are at the student’s request. Some interviews can affect the student’s acceptance and others are informational for the student’s benefit and are not reported back to the admissions department. Parents need to research each school to find out about interviews. Requests to interview frequently should be made before the application deadline. The school will usually wait for YOU to ask; they won’t necessarily contact you. You must do the research. Also, prepare your student to be interviewed. Practice. Don’t send them in cold. Other students will have practiced and you want a level playing field.

Timing to submit application:
Rolling Admission means the school reviews applications as it gets them and admits students as it finds ones they like. The later you apply to a rolling admission school, the fewer spots will be available.
Early Decision- You can only apply to one school early decision because it is binding. If the student gets in, he or she MUST withdraw all other applications and go to that university.
Early Action- You can apply early in the fall and the student will usually get an answer by the end of December.
Regular Decision- Applications are frequently due in January or February and you’ll get an answer in March or April.

Transcripts: Pearce and Dual Credit Institutions If you are requesting a transcript from Pearce, you need to turn in a blue request form to the counselor’s office AND request the transcript on Naviance. Also, if you have dual credit such as from Richland College, you will need to send a transcript from that college too.

Waitlist. If your student is put on the waitlist at a school he or she really wants to attend, don’t just sit back and wait to hear. Let the admissions officer know you really want to attend the school and will accept if given an offer. If your students has additional accomplishments or honors that weren’t listed in the original application, send an email updating your application.

FAFSA (Free Application for Federal Student Aid): Everyone should apply for financial aid through FAFSA. https://fafsa.ed.gov/ Even if you think you won’t get it, some scholarships won’t consider students unless they have filed a FAFSA. FAFSA opens October 1st for parents to fill out and file. Have to reapply every year.

Scholarship Opportunities posted at Pearce:
http://www.edline.net/files/_VVFbt_/fc0c0360caba897b3745a49013852ec4/Scholarship_Opportunities_-_October_24_2016.pdf
Many local scholarships don’t have kids apply, so make sure your kid applies! Not all are need based.