

Making Good Choices:

Helping Students Avoid the Race for Rigor

Greg McCandless
Sage Hill School

Today's Agenda

- Who I am and what do I do in my role as Dean of 9th and 10th Grade College Counseling.
- My institution's challenges and how those might relate to the work that you do with your students.
- Resources and Idea Sharing
- What Not To Do!
- A discussion of the college admissions process and what really matters.
- Q & A

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).

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.
- Meets with 9th and 10th Grade Advisors prior to spring advisor/advisee conferences to consult on students' course schedules for the following year.
- Serves as a resource for all questions related to college counseling in the 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 and 10th grade years.
 - Articulating a placement process that pleases faculty, students, and parents.
- Oversubscription:
 - School/Life Balance
 - Burnout
- Passive vs. Active Learning:
 - Why are you taking this class?
 - Students not playing to their strengths.
- Grade Inflation:
 - Faculty fatigue.
 - Students' inflated sense of abilities/talents.
 - College Admissions Consequences.

**So what are some things
that have worked?**

The Four-Year Academic Plan

(And offering context when possible)

- 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 year, but I also ask them to fill out as much 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 about course selection AND I give them some context regarding the average number of weighted courses SHS students take over a typical four-year high school career.
- We revisit this form during the 10th Grade Family Meeting, as well.
- Curriculum Night for 9th Grade Parents in February.

Mr. McCandless, Philosophy Regarding Course Selection

1. I want students to challenge themselves. I want them to push themselves in the curriculum and add rigor, but only in so much as it makes sense for them. This is not a one-size fits all experience.
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. Find rigor (particularly early on) in the areas they are most interested in.
4. BUT, I am also inherently interested in balance. Taking on too much at the expense of extracurricular activities, personal health and wellness, etc. does more harm than good.
5. I always steer it back to the number of hours in a day.

The Context I Give When Advising Students on Course Selection

(with full acknowledgment that with a smaller student population and access to more data, this is a privilege I have that others do not...)

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 year.
2. I give them a typical "trajectory" for how this average works out over the course of four years.
3. I give them the average weighted cumulative GPA that this senior year class had at the end of their junior year.
4. I give them the average number of weighted courses their class has this year.
5. For sophomores, I give them the average weighted GPA for their class at the end of the freshman year.

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 in our conversations with 9th and 10th grade families as well.
- We use three year's worth of data to give more depth and breadth to the information.
- These are particularly helpful for lower-performing kids to give them a concrete goal to shoot towards and it also gives some perspective/reality to those that might be a bit overconfident or unwilling to accept the nature of highly selective college admissions.
- They are a huge pain to create, but ultimately worth the effort.

2016 - 2018 Sage Hill School

Senior Cumulative GPA Range: 3.95 - 3.59 (Average GPA: 3.80)

ACT Average (36 Scale): 29 SAT Average (1600 Scale): 1332

Below are colleges where at least two Sage Hill students have applied within the range of the above credentials in the past three years. This is a list to give you perspective but not a guarantee. Please note, depending on where a student was within the range, some of these colleges were "reach: schools, as well as "possibles" and "likes: ". We hope you use this as a launching-off point as you begin your college search. The first number after the college represents how many students from this quartile applied. The second number represents how many were admitted.

American University (DC) - 2,2	Miami University, Oxford (OH) - 3,3
Arizona State University (AZ) - 2,2	Middlebury College (VT) - 2,0
Babson College (MA) - 9,4	Mount Holyoke College (MA) - 3,3
Bard College (NY) - 3,3	The New School (NY) - 3,2
Barnard College (NY) - 4,0	New York University (NY) - 36,16
Bates College (ME) - 3,1	Northeastern University (MA) - 20,13
Boston College (MA) - 14,2	Northwestern University (IL) - 10,0
Boston University (MA) - 29,12	Oberlin College (OH) - 4,2
Brandeis University (MA) - 3,2	Occidental College (CA) - 6,3
Brown University (RI) - 5,0	The Ohio State University (OH) - 2,1
Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo (CA) - 6,4	Oxford College of Emory University (GA) - 3,2
California State University, Fullerton (CA) - 5,5	Pace University, NYC (NY) - 4,4
California State University, Long Beach (CA) - 4,2	Pepperdine University (CA) - 9,5
California State University, Los Angeles (CA) - 2,2	Pitzer College (CA) - 6,3
Carnegie Mellon University (PA) - 6,0	Pomona College (CA) - 3,0
Case Western Reserve University (OH) - 8,7	Princeton University (NJ) - 4,1
Clarkson University (NY) - 9,10	Dartmouth University (NH) - 4,4

The GPA Quartile Sheet

Hourly Homework Calculator

(this is a work in progress)

- 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.
- This will be paired with an article on the role of sleep and wellness as it relates to academic success.
- The challenge is going to be how to best gather this information.

What NOT TO DO...

- DO NOT build (and/or support) a culture of ambition rather than value-based reasoning.
 - What are the messages your school is sending students and families?
 - Are you talking out of both sides of your mouth? (I know we do, sometimes.)
- DO NOT forget about the “psychology” of a transcript.
 - The GPA is one thing, but what story does the transcript tell?
 - The trend matters.
- DO NOT (unintentionally) encourage burnout.
- DO NOT refuse to acknowledge that this process is scary and stressful.

**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.
 - Eligibility
- 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.
- The Writing.

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 on their campus?
 - 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.

One way to give the power back to your teachers, guidance counselors, and administrators is to remind them that, at the end of the day, they are educators. It is their job to educate students (and parents) about this process. I always close any presentation I give to parents by pointing out the following things:

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

Questions?



mccandlessg@sagehillschool.org