



## **Discussion of College Admissions with Jeff Selingo and Ned Johnson**

Wednesday, December 2, 2020  
Zoom Webinar

### **Welcome and Opening Remarks**

PCW President, Frazier Schulman, opened the event, welcoming attendees, and providing an overview of the PCW. PCW Vice President, Suzanne Dowd, introduced the program's speakers:

- ❖ **Jeff Selingo, New York Times best-selling author of newly released book, *Who Gets In and Why: A Year Inside College Admissions*.**
- ❖ **Ned Johnson, founder of PrepMatters and co-author of *The Self-Driven Child: The Science and Sense of Giving Your Kids More Control Over Their Lives*.**

### **Introduction**

- Johnson reminded parents of the serenity prayer because there are parts of the college admissions process that can be controlled and others that cannot.
- Selingo explained the context of how and why college acceptance rates have become so competitive in recent years:
  - devices and travel conveniences increasing nationalization and internationalization of colleges,
  - the convenience of the internet and Common App driving increased college applications (one third of students apply to 8-10 schools), and
  - the thought (somewhat of a myth) that career opportunities are scarce and going to a selective school are a "pathway to job success."
- Selingo explained that the top 100 selective schools accept fewer than 50% of applicants, but the average acceptance rate at US colleges is 65%.
- Data does not suggest that a student needs to go to an elite school for success; therefore families should broaden their minds and lists to explore a wider selection of schools.
- Johnson quoted a teacher: "It's not great schools that make great students, it's great students that make great schools."

- Parents must remember that college is big business.

### **What happens in college admissions offices?**

In researching the book, Selingo was embedded in the College Admission offices of Davidson College (NC), Emory University (GA), and University of Washington (WA):

- Each university has constantly changing priorities (determined by the Board of Trustees) -- in-state/out of state, geographic diversity, specific majors, full pay vs. lower income students, gender, racial, and socioeconomic diversity, etc.
- Depending on what a college is looking for, a student may automatically have a 0% or 100% chance of being accepted.
- Some schools review applications with a “need aware” approach and may deny a qualified student because of lack of award money.
- Students should not try to guess what a school is looking for, but instead develop, be authentic, and do things in high school that are meaningful to you.
- There are exciting things going on at colleges (research, academic programs, athletics, activities, etc.), and schools want students who will take advantage of what they have to offer.
- Colleges say they look at a range of application section (grades, SATS, activities, essays, recommendations, etc.), and it the application is scored subjectively and inconsistently.

### **How do students find colleges that are a good fit?**

- Create a broad and balanced list early -- big/small, public/private, importance of sports, academic stretch/good fit/where you may be above average.
- Focus on what your student wants in a college experience before focusing on the brand names.
- On college tours (including virtual), ask to sit in on a class, meet a professor, etc.
- Selingo describes colleges as buyers and sellers:
  - Sellers (50 or 60 schools) are the big-name schools who do not provide an abundance of financial aid.
  - Buyers are the remaining good-caliber schools who may be able to provide more financial aid and incentives.
  - Most schools put a common data set on their website with information about financial aid, need based and non-need based, which should be discussed by a family early in the process.
- More information about college financial planning will be covered at PCW’s February 10th program with Ron Lieber and a discussion of his new book, *The Price You Pay For College*.
- Rely on high school college counselors for learning about various colleges and which may be an excellent fit.
- Look for undergraduate research and work skill development as employers are looking for students with broad education and project-based skills.
- A predictor of success is intrinsic motivation, wanting to work hard, achieve good grades, and self-determination which require:

- autonomy - independence and individuality - getting to choose what you do,
- competence - acquisition of the needed skills, and
- relatedness - being connected to a professor or advisor.

### **How has the admissions process been impacted during the pandemic?**

- Regarding testing, 500+ schools have gone test optional, and still, at most schools, between 50 -70% are still submitting scores. It is not detrimental not to submit scores. Schools will look more at grades, essays, recommendations, and will likely turn to high schools that they already know well.
- If test scores are great, submit them, but do not submit scores that are not stellar or if it does not cast a good light.
- Colleges are likely to more readily accept Early Action and Early Decision and may be a little more generous to full pay students.
- Regarding concerns of students who took a gap year, most colleges will increase their freshman class to keep overall enrollment at a preferred level.
- Demonstrated interest will matter a lot this year! Show a school how much you want to attend. Leave a digital breadcrumb trail by emailing, participating in Zoom meetings, exploring websites, and attending virtual open houses.
- Johnson suggested setting up a separate email account to store college information.
- Colleges review applications by geographic region. Each high school's profile which will explain academics, AP courses available, rigor, and changes made during COVID.
- For seniors and their activities, most of their high school experience had occurred before COVID struck. For current juniors, colleges will have to determine how they evaluate the students next year.

### **Speakers' takeaways:**

#### **Advice to students and parents applying to college during a pandemic**

#### **Ned Johnson**

1. Society needs to argue forcefully against the idea that only students who are in the top 10% will lead a successful life. It is what many students believe, but it is not supported by evidence and is a terrible message for kids because it makes them obsessively driven or makes them feel like it's an unattainable goal. High school is four years of their lives, it's not a four-year audition for college. It is four years for them to develop themselves as people, as learners, and as joyful, motivated adults who are tolerant of stress.
2. There has to be a mental mind shift from "I have to do this" to "I want to do this." The goal of getting through this pandemic is not for our kids to be the most disciplined or the most productive, but to come out of this period psychologically whole.
3. The next four to eight years of education are an opportunity for young people to truly develop themselves for lives that will be successful and meaningful.

### **Jeff Selingo**

1. Balance is very important. Create a balanced list of schools - academically, socially, and financially. Remember there really isn't much of a difference between the top 10 or 20 schools. Create balance in terms of your time. Set aside family time for the college search once a week, not every day of the week. Enjoy this time!
2. Make sure the college search is a learning process. In the end, college is the staging ground for life. It is one of many stops you will make along the way, but it is not the only one and it is certainly not the most important decision you will make in your lifetime. Understand that your initial college list may change over time.
3. With regard to COVID, understand that everyone is going through a pandemic right now. Admissions officers understand the changing circumstances and have tremendous empathy. Colleges are looking for students who demonstrated adaptability and pivoted toward successes. Students are going to have to manage ambiguity throughout life, so talk about lessons learned and opportunities for change these past 10 months.