



*a podcast about
how we learn,
how we teach,
and how they overlap*

Episode 30 - Applying For College With The College Spy

Adam: Hi, I'm Adam Sanford. I'm an academic life coach and professor in Los Angeles.

Dinur: And I'm Dinur Blum. I'm a college professor in Los Angeles.

Adam: And this is Learning Made Easier, a podcast where we discuss how we learn and how we teach and how they overlap.

Dinur: Welcome back to Learning Made Easier. This is Episode 30, How to Apply for College. Today, Adam and I are interviewing Michelle McAnaney of thecollegespy.com, to give you some tips and tricks for managing this big step in your educational process.

Adam: So, hi, Michelle.

Michelle from The College Spy: Hi!

Dinur: Hello.

Adam: Good to see you. So, Dinur and I were - we were going through our list of all of the different topics that we wanted to cover, and when Dinur said, "We should have one on applying for college," I'm all, "I know somebody! We should probably have them on as a guest!"

So, like all of our interviews, you know, we have some questions, but we're pretty informal, and if you find that something is taking you down a path you want to talk more about, we're totally cool with that. So, I guess we'll just start out with: What do you wish you'd known when you first started out as a college consultant?

Michelle from The College Spy: What do I wish I'd known... I knew I'm going to snap my fingers like that.

What do I wish I knew when I first started out as a college consultant? You know, I think, because my background is high school guidance, I would have liked to have known more about individual colleges. And I think that's a big difference between educational consultants and school counselors, is that educational consultants have - they have the time to go and visit a lot of colleges, which now I've done. But back when I first started, you know, I had 10, 15 colleges under my belt as a school counselor. And so, because I work nationwide, virtually, online, so I need to know colleges that are regional to my students all across the entire country, not just kind of where I'm living, like when I was a school counselor.

So that's, I think that college knowledge, those details about specific schools so I can help kids find a good fit. That's what I wish I had more experience with. And that takes time cause and travel and money.

Dinur: So what sort of details do you mean?

Michelle from The College Spy: Well, we have, in the United States, about 4,000 colleges. You know, it's impossible to know them all. But details like, you know, if I have a student who's interested in a specific major, it, you know, it pops right in my mind: "Oh, go to this school and this school, this school, and look up the details for them," as opposed to having to look up which schools, for example.

Or even something that's less concrete, like easy to find out about. Like, you know, where's such and such major, such as campus culture, you know. If you've been to the college, you know, what it feels like, and when you meet your students and you get to know them, even know in your heart and in your head, "this is a good fit for you. You would like this school over this school."

And you really can't get that information without standing on the campus.

And that's what I tell my kids: "You've got to go visit, you've got to stand there, so that you could feel, is this a good fit for me or not?" There's only this, there's just so much information that you can get online.

Adam: Right. I can imagine that the difference between, say, MIT, and the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, and Occidental College, they're all very, very different. And now that you mention it, the idea of fit is more important than I think a lot of parents and a lot of students probably think about. Because, I mean, for example, I had a friend in high school, I remember he said he wanted to go specifically to UNLV, and I said, "Why? What are you majoring in?"

And he says, "It's the party school. I want to go because it's a party campus."

And I'm like, "Do your parents know that?"

And he says, "No. I told them I'm going for electrical engineering, but I'm going because it's a party school."

So there may be students who are looking for a very serious school that is academics first, athletics may be secondary. Have you ever found that you've got students who want to go to a school because of their athletics program? Even if they're not an athlete? I mean, give us some interesting stories about the fit thing, because I think that's a lot more interesting than I realized it was going to be.

Michelle from The College Spy: Yeah, it is. It is really interesting and I don't think the students and the parents necessarily know it until they start visiting and start having that experience for themselves. Yeah. I have students who want to go to schools because of the athletics, you know, they want to go. What they'll say is that they want to go to a school with a lot of school spirit. And we have to narrow down: what does that mean? Because I mean, like, for example, a small school like Colorado College has a lot of school spirit, but not in the same way that say Penn State does or Syracuse University. So it's like, well, what does that mean to you? That kids have a lot of pride in their school, or that, you know, you're painting your face orange and you're in a huge stadium.

They'll look at me and say, wow, you know, usually the answer to that one is painting their face orange. But that same kid really needs to go to a small school with a lot of school spirit, and feel the difference, and understand that kids take pride in their college almost wherever they go. They're proud of being there.

What I try to do with fit is, you know, listen to kids at the beginning and go through, these are the details of what, what types of things could qualify as factors for fit. And then kind of talk to them about: "Well, you think this is what you want, but you haven't had the experience going here."

So, like, I'll have a student who will say, "I don't want to be anywhere rural, I want to be somewhere urban." And it's like, well, have you been somewhere rural before or the other way around? No, they haven't visited. They haven't visited a city. They're not experienced with that, for example.

So it's like, well, you need to go to get that experience, because they're only 16 or 17 years old, you know? They're not necessarily - I'm saying some kids are worldly, but a lot of kids aren't, and just don't have those experiences to be able to say, when we go through my list of college factors, you know, to consider for fit. A lot of them are, "I don't know. I don't know why that's important to me." And so that's what we talk about is kind of like, well, what does this mean for you?

Another example would be a, that a lot of people don't think about is academic calendar. So you know, we have schools that are on semesters, schools trimester, quarter system, the 4-1-4 system, where you have that January term, and you take a different number of classes, or it's four classes or five classes or sometimes three. And for some students they'll just adjust. It doesn't matter. It's not high on their criteria. But for other kids it really matters whether they're taking four classes and diving deep into the subjects or taking five and it's maybe a little bit shallow - well, not shallow, but you know.

Dinur: More surface learning.

Adam: Yeah. More just "get a survey of the idea." You know, and this is, this is telling me that teachers, you also need to hear this, because people who listen to our podcast, we have the student listeners and we have teacher listeners. We also have parent listeners. We're trying to grow that audience.

But teachers, one of the things that it looks like we need to be aware of is, if we have a student who isn't a local student, they didn't, like, grow up next door to this college and that's where they went because that's where mom and dad told them to go - we need to be aware of those cultural differences.

You know you mentioned the rural-urban split. I remember interviewing at a state college in Wisconsin, but it was a very small state college, and it pulled from a rural area. And I was kind of shocked when I went there cause I'm a total urbanite and I grew up in the LA Basin, and then I go to this small college in Wisconsin and all the kids are farmers or miners or, you know, they're from working class, working communities, or hardworking, physical-working communities, blue-collar communities.

And some of them, when I tried to use examples of feeling alienated or feeling isolated, my examples didn't land, because they never lock their cars. They live out in the middle of nowhere. There's no reason to lock their cars. You know, I was using an example of "you lock your car and then you go back and check and make sure it's locked," and they're all, "oh, you're from California."

And I mean, it wasn't contempt, exactly, but it was this feeling of I don't connect with these kids. I don't connect with them at all, because their concerns are not my concerns. And for them, coming to this town of 30,000

people - for them, they saw that as like going to New York City. That's how big of a change it was for them. And it was really hard for me, even as a sociologist, to wrap my mind around that. To say, going, you know, just just going to a small town for someone who's lived out in a town of 472 people is an enormous step.

Dinur: I remember for me, I had sort of the, I had the same experience of culture shock as some of my students, but from opposite directions. This was when I was out in New England for my master's program. So I grew up in the San Francisco Bay area. I'm used to seeing a lot of different ethnicities, a lot of different races. And when I got out to New England, it was by far the whitest place I'd ever been to. Some of my students said that was the first time they ever encountered anyone who was African American. And at first, I was shocked, like "how do you go through 18 years of life and not -" then I realized, I'm like, "wait, you live here? I get it. You might not really see anyone. It's a very homogeneous state and region.

Michelle from The College Spy: Yes, yes. Yeah. And then there are some kids who are looking for the opposite of what they know, on purpose. And that's, you know, worth taking some time to explore with them before recommending colleges is kind of like, well, how serious are you about that, and how good you are at adjusting to what you're not familiar with?

Because although some kids might want to go some - you know, it's a, it's a lofty goal. It's something to be commended, to try something different. But that's gonna be your home for four years, and we want you to be comfortable. So how is that going to work for you, and is it gonna work for you?

And my job is to, really, spend enough time with the students and the parents and know: what are their goals, what are they looking for for themselves? And giving them information, like, this is what you need to be thinking about to look for for yourself. These are the different factors. And I have a list of, I don't know, 40, 50 of them that I go through with kids. I'd be happy to share with your readers if you have a spot that you can -

Adam: Yeah, we can put it in the show notes.

Michelle from The College Spy: Yeah, yeah. Put it in the show notes, I'll send it to you.

It's really very interesting, the conversations that, that we have. And a lot of times I'll, okay, we're going to look for a college and that's what we're doing. That's what you're hired to do as an educational consultant. But a lot of times you're helping kids really discovering who they are, what they care about, what's important to them. It goes a little bit deeper than that. And then we've to bring it back to college admissions again. So it's fun, it's fun work.

Adam: And, and I suppose that the next obvious question is, so that's working with students. What about the parents? When you get Mom and Dad, they want their child to go to Harvard or Yale, and that's it. That's that. And their kid wants to go to Occidental College in California, and maybe, partly, because they really want to get away from Mom and Dad and try to strike out on their own.

I mean, I've opened up a second company. I mean I've got my Undergrad Made Easier; it's aimed at college and high school-going-into-college students. But I realized that sometimes, the parents need a lot of help. And so I started the second company called The Empty Nest School, which I'm working on building up, for parents. And one of the things that I find, when I'm coaching certain students, especially the parents who really have - the parents have their idea of what their child's going to do, and then when their child isn't doing those things or isn't interested in those things, it can cause huge problems. What do you do when Mom is insisting on Princeton, and the student is going, "Mom, I have no interest in Princeton. I want to go to Occidental College,"

or, "I want to go to Colorado College and I want to go to some small town. I'm not interested in the Ivies!" What do you do when that happens?

Michelle from The College Spy: Yeah, I think the first thing is important to realize is that I say almost every single parent I've ever worked with in my career because their kid's best interest at heart. So you know, coming from that place, I try to help there be a bit of a meeting of the minds and usually it's guiding with education.

The kids need to learn: Well, what does it mean to go to Princeton? Hey, to go to Princeton, and see it, and be able to express - well, first of all, be open minded. It's a great school for them if they got in they'd be certainly very lucky, 'cause it's not easy to do. So, no matter who you are or what your potential credentials are, it's important for kids to be able to express your parents what it is about those elite colleges that is not a good fit for them.

And then it's important for parents to go and see Occidental, Colorado College, whichever ones there are and kind of see, well, what is the value here? And I think you know with those hidden gems, highly selective liberal arts colleges that a lot of families don't know about, especially. They don't know about them outside of their region - like, West Coast people don't know Swarthmore. East Coast people don't know Willamette, for example. You need to go there to realize why they're special, and what your kid is going to get out of going there.

A lot of times it can help parents to seek out additional information about the alumni network at a smaller college that they aren't familiar with as being elite, and also to seek out information from the career center, 'cause they want the best for their kids. They want their kids to be really successful. How are they going to do that coming out of this particular school?

And then the way I help, oftentimes, in the end, is these colleges are very selective, and you've got to apply to a lot of them, 'cause you want to make sure you get at least one of them. Send one off to Princeton and send one off to Occidental. See what happens. See what merit aid, if you can get it, if it's coming from that particular college, you know, what are you getting back? Which makes the most sense.

And I often explain to both students and parents that a lot changes between the time your application is due, and when you have to make that decision in the spring. So opening up options makes more sense than closing them down, when you're sending out the applications. Better to have it put in and reject them and not go, than to say, "okay, we're only applying to these eight Ivy schools and that's it." Which is just a poor idea. They're so difficult to get into really, you need to cast the net wider.

Adam: The putting the eggs all in one basket syndrome.

Michelle from The College Spy: Exactly. Exactly. Yeah. Yeah. I haven't really had too much difficulty convincing people of that. Everybody's, in some way, are on the same side. And I try to make that clear between students and parents. So we, you know, we all want what's best for the student. Then it's kind of like, "Well, let's get those applications out there and see what comes back, and then make that decision."

Dinur: So, that kind of ties into what I was curious about. If a student comes to you and they say, "I really want to go to college, but I don't know where to begin, I don't know what I need to do, I'm lost." So what kind of advice can you give students like that? And I know you mentioned go and visit at schools, but if they don't even know what kind of school they're looking for, is it just "visit any school and try and get a sense," or what do you tell them?

Michelle from The College Spy: Well, I'm going to try to find out about the student a little bit, so that I can advise them which schools to start with and then debrief with them. Okay. "What is it about this school that you liked? What didn't you like, what felt comfortable, what didn't feel comfortable?" And then as I gather more information from the student about what their experience is like on campus, because I've been to so many colleges, "Oh, this is the next one I want you to go see." And then we can start to help them figure out which schools are going to make their short list. And that's really the best way to do it.

I find kids can go online, they're very savvy online, but the information isn't become as meaningful if they have no place, no reference, no place to start until they actually go and stand there. So for example, you know, right now I'm working with a student who's interested in biochemistry, and potentially going into public health (and public health is a field that undergraduate programs are picking up on, where it had been mostly masters' degrees. Now there are minors and majors popping up for public health). She has a focus, she knows what she's looking for. So it makes it easier. But for a kid who, like you said, does not know where to start at all? It's really taking a look at some schools that aren't too hard to get to, they're close to home, and then debriefing them and saying, "Well, what did you like? What didn't you like and why?"

And this - and that's really hard for some kids, they need to be taught: "this is what I want you to be looking for." I give them a paper, like a checklist. "These are the criteria that you're looking for when you're on campus." Looks like they're on a field trip with, like, a scavenger hunt, to make sure they pay attention. Otherwise they're not sure what even to look for when they're at the campus and their memory of it isn't always detailed, okay, or as detailed as I would like it to be, to help recommend.

Dinur: Do you ever have students sit in on a few minutes of a lecture to get an idea, in that sense as well? Or is it more: find the library, find the student union on campus, talk to a few students.

Michelle from The College Spy: All of those things are a good idea. Usually, when I have kids do is go to the info session that's given by the admissions office, and take the tour. Some schools will offer sitting in on a lecture, eating in the dining hall with a student. But not all do. In fact, I would say most don't offer that right up on there, online, for everybody. But if you ask, sometimes they'll arrange it for you. But the more I think as a family to do on campus, the better experience they're going to have.

Often times their parents and kids want to do is if they're in an area, is maximize their time there and hit two colleges in one day. So if you do the info session and tour in the morning at one school, travel, info session and toward another school. And that can be kind of difficult for people to get all information they need to really get a sense of the campus. And also it gets mixed up in their mind. Almost like when you see too many houses, when you're looking to buy one in one day and you're like, where was I? What did I see? You know, that same type of thing does happen.

But you know, families have limited resources, and if they're in a certain area of the country, they're gonna want to hit a couple of schools. So the more they can do on campus the better.

Dinur: Gotcha.

Adam: These are two questions, but they kind of dovetail, so, you know, I'm sure you can find both in the, in the same answer. What are the three biggest misconceptions that you see applicants and parents having about the college application process, or about the college that they want to go to, and what are the three biggest mistakes that you see applicants making?

Michelle from The College Spy: Well, I would say misconceptions. Well certainly there's, you know that there's only 50 wonderful colleges in America, and they are listed in the US World and News Report. That is not true. Well, 50 of those might not be the best for a specific student. It's number 51 that's going to make the difference and be the right school for them.

Some families, it doesn't work for them. It's just important to them to have that elite school. That's part of what the fit is for that family, perhaps, and that's okay if they can get into it. They're wonderful schools, but that is a big misconception.

Standardized testing is something that people put too much concern and too much weight into when what colleges are looking for - when they're looking for a student who's going to be successful on campus, they have found that the best evidence is academic rigor and GPA. So they're looking at how hard are classes have you taken in high school and how well did you do in them?

And standardized testing is next to that is less than, and you can find out this information how important standardized testing is, if you go to the common data set, which is published by almost every college in America - some of them don't follow those yet, but most do - and they'll check off how important standardized testing is, how important the essay is, academic rigor, grades, and they'll rank that for the student. So that's one thing. I think there's a lot of anxiety around standardized testing. Yes, kids should study for those tests and they do matter but not, not as much as their grades.

Adam: I have shocked students by saying "I have a Ph.D. and I never took the SAT."

And they say, "What?"

And I say, "Yeah, I went the community college route, and then I transferred."

And they say, "You never took the SAT?"

I'm all, "Nope! My SAT score is zero, 'cause I never took it."

They look at me like I've, you know, 'cause the idea of not taking the SAT, for a lot of college applicants and college students is unthinkable. It's the thing parents hammer on. It's the thing that teachers hammer on and - and I've got, I've got a whole screed on my own about the standardized testing debacle in this, but I'm afraid I interrupted you. I'm sorry. Please.

Michelle from The College Spy: Oh, that's okay. I wanted to add that a mistake that families make often is they put a lot of weight on the sticker price of a college, and make their about a college being too expensive based on the price that's listed as "this is how much it costs to go to this college," when the truth is, most students don't pay the sticker price. They get merit aid, which is also called discounted tuition, which entices the students to go.

So you know, I always tell families, "You don't know what college costs for you until you have applied, been accepted, submitted the FAFSA and/or the CSS profile, if necessary, for that particular college, and get a financial aid package back."

"Oh, I'm never going to qualify for aid!" No, but your kid will, because if the college wants them, they're going to lower the price of tuition for that student to attend the school.

I like my families to make smart financial decisions. You know: apply to the state colleges; apply to schools that are going to give you a lot of merit aid - and those are schools where you're going to be closer to the top of the class; and also apply from reach colleges and see! Maybe you will get a bit of aid, and it, and it could work for your family as well.

If everybody's saying, well, every situation's a little bit different, but parents do need to understand that many, many students do not pay those sticker prices, and oftentimes it's the private colleges that are so expensive that have the endowment to give a larger merit aid package to students. Oftentimes the private schools can be cheaper than state schools.

Adam: Yeah, because state schools, all they've got is the Pell Grant and maybe one small scholarship or something.

Dinur: Now, on your website, which again is thecollegespy.com, you say that you fight for, you advocate for your students and we're kind of wondering what sort of things do you advocate for your students? What do you fight for them for?

Michelle from The College Spy: Okay. Anything that I see that needs to be fought for, that is appropriate for my role. And sometimes it's my relationship with the family. Sometimes it's my knowledge about schools. It could be lots of different things like - let me see if I can give you some examples. For example, I work with some students who I think have undiagnosed learning disabilities, or ADHD. And I will work with their parents and talk to them about the school system: how it works, how to ask for that type of testing, and explain that when you go to college, if you can get an accommodation for a disability - those do exist. Some students have extra time, or taking tests in a private location, a scribe, these types of things. And if I think that a student's going to benefit from that, then I will encourage the families to follow up on it.

And a lot of that work, that advocating work, is teaching kids, and parents, how to advocate for themselves and how the - how the school system works: who you need to talk to and what you might need to say to make a difference. So yeah, if I have a family that's a little shy - you know, a squeaky wheel gets the grease! - a little bit shy, or "Oh, we got this teacher again. They weren't so good last year." No! Your spy, here, says go to the school counselor, and insist that you, you make the change, because you're likely to get one if you ask for it!

Things like that that come up, and sometimes they are things about mental health as well. Students who have anxiety and depression because I'm having a close relationship with the student, I can point that out to mom and dad and say, you know, "I have some concerns that so-and-so has low energy, or I seems extremely nervous," you know, and I work with lots of different kids, and sometimes parents don't realize it's a little bit unusual, or that there's help available. I put the school counselor hat on just a little bit, and then I take it off again and go back to being an education consultant. And I think I can't help it cause I care.

Dinur: How do the parents and students take it when you tell them, "Hey, I think you might be dealing with X." Do they take it pretty well? Are they defensive because they're worried about what this means? Or are they more accepting?

Michelle from The College Spy: The parents I've worked in are accepting in the sense that they've been appreciative. Like, "Yes, thank you. Let's have a conversation about this. I want to talk to you about this." And there are some families who don't follow up, and that's okay, that's their choice. But if I can give them the information that they need to follow up, if they choose to, if it's right for them and for their child, uh, you know, I feel that I've done their job, especially the academic piece and learning disability piece of it.

You know, I gauge my relationship with the family as well, because I'll work with families for two years, usually starting junior year and, and through senior year. So they know that I have their child's best interests at heart and that I'm concerned. And I think you can't say that the parents don't already know. They know their kids the best.

So you know, as a school counselor, I think they say that, that "the job is a mile wide and an inch deep" and you can't touch the lives of every single student. And so it's those kids in the middle that often sail through high school. So without somebody saying, "hey, you know what, I'm paying attention to your kid." So for my clients I'm paying attention to them and I'll have conversations with parents saying "this is what I'm worried about." But more often than that I'm having conversations saying "this is what I'm proud of, you know, x, y and z." So wonderful.

Adam: That sounds kind of like coaching, actually. Cause I've had students - I've had several clients where I've gone to Mom and Dad and said, "You know, Johnny really seems to be having trouble with this thing. Have you had him tested for that thing?" And only once have I gotten the parent who got up in arms and you know, had umbrage. And they were an ethnic parent who their particular ethnic group is extremely down on anyone having any problems and not just fighting through.

Yeah, sometimes it shocks me, but, you know, I had a colleague tell me that when he was working as a learning disability specialist, he had one professor tell him, "I will not give this kid accommodations even if it's against the law to not do it, because I have ADHD and I had to work my way through my PhD with no help, so he has to," and when we run up against those kinds of attitudes, sometimes I just want to throw my hands in the air and go, "oh my God, how am I supposed to help these kids when you won't let me help these kids?"

But it sounds like for the most part, you're able to develop a relationship with the parents as well as the student and say, "Mom, Dad - there's a thing. We should look at that."

Are you familiar with William Derisiewicz's book *Excellent Sheep*? Have you read that?

Michelle from *The College Spy*: No, I have not.

Adam: So I recommend it. And he is, uh, he was a professor, I believe at one of the Ivys. I can't remember which one.

Dinur: I think it was Yale.

Adam: Yeah, I think it was Yale. And he was seeing these kids who are the top tier of the top tier of the top tier, whose parents pushed them to go to an Ivy, and he writes about them coming in with like nine different extracurricular activities, and they're doing a lot of different things to increase their, basically, their marketability to the colleges and that they don't dive deep into anything. So they're in five clubs, and there's no connection between the clubs, and they're doing six other extracurriculars, and they're on a sports team, and they were in the boy scouts, and they did this, and they do that. And you know, the resume is seven pages long and they're only 19 years old.

But they're also, they don't react well to anything that requires them to act intrinsically, meaning that they're not motivated from the inside. All their motivation is exterior. And, is this a common problem among students? Because I'm sure you haven't worked only with students who want to go to elite colleges. I mean, you've

worked with students who may be in more modest circumstances, but how do you get these kids to show their interests and their passions? Not just, "I did these nine extracurriculars" in a way that would translate to the college saying, "yeah, you're, you're a prospect that we want."

Michelle from The College Spy: Well, oftentimes students will, and parents will, hire an educational consultant junior year of high school. So a lot of what they've been involved in they've already been involved in - they're committed to. So it's a little hard. If I have the opportunity to advise a student starting freshman year or earlier, um, first of all, I'm cheering. That's great. There's a balance.

This is what I tell families. "I'm going to give you the best advice for college admissions and we're also going to talk about what's best for your child from your point of view. Because sometimes those things conflict and you're hiring me because you want my expert opinion on college admissions and I will tell it to you, but we have to remember your student's a person."

So, what colleges are looking for these elite colleges is where they used to want "well-rounded" students, when we went to school - now they are looking for "pointy" students, students whose activities connect around a theme. So if you love sports, your volunteer activity is going to be helping children with disabilities play your sport, for example, as opposed to volunteering with animals, so that there's a theme. So that's what they're looking for.

But I think, in general, elite admissions officers, they think - even more than that, what they're looking for is authenticity. And they can tell from the essays, and from the letters of recommendation, and how you say you spend your time, they want a kid who authentically really loves what they're doing and is passionate about it and excited about it and is going to make them proud to call that kid an alumni. And they can tell in the application. So if I have a student that's doing things that they're not excited about, that's not okay from a college admissions point of view, and that's not okay from a human development point of view. And I'm going to try to help the family understand that, so that the student can ultimately meet their admissions goals, and also enjoy their lives, and try new things, and do all the things they're supposed to do as teenagers.

Adam: So it's not just the parents saying "you will be an accounting major" or "you will go to medical school." That's something that you actually work to talk to these parents out of if the child's not interested?

Because it sounds like you're saying, you know that parents, even now, I know, I mean I know that this was more common when, you know, when we were going to college in the eighties and nineties but that parents even now will tell their child, "you're going to go to college and you're going to be a lawyer," or "you're going to be a doctor," or "you're going to be a businessman," or "you're going to be a -", and then you've got a kid who's really just wants to be an art student, and they have absolutely no interest in numbers, but Mom and Dad want them to be an accountant.

How do you talk the parents - how do you, how do you get them to understand that's not gonna fly today? Because they need to see that what your child was doing for their extracurriculars is something that they're passionate about, that you have a pointy student. I like that term, by the way, that the difference between well rounded and the pointy, you know, because you're supposed to get well-rounded when you come to college. That's, that's why we have general education classes. So how do you talk to parents who really have a set, "this is the way my child's life will be," when you can tell that that's not actually what's going to work.

Michelle from The College Spy: Yeah, that's, it's a challenge. That's a real challenge. I think I don't come across it much, or it dissipates over time. I think when the parent starts to let go somewhat as the student gets older and they haven't won the battle. You know, some of it is college knowledge.

So for example, in the example that you gave, I would encourage that family to get in touch with Savannah College of Art and Design - SCAD, in Georgia, because their focus as an art school is how to get a job and also to learn about what are the jobs in art. You're not just a starving artist. There's so many even business jobs that involve art. Right. So trying to have them understand that there's a spot for your student to get a job, make a good living, take care of themselves and pursue their passion. That's one thing I would do.

The other thing I would do is make sure that the student who's rejecting accounting - although it's not such a far stretch for an art student to want to reject accounting - but in his case, but yeah, just knows what accounting is and what it involves. Did they do a job shadow? Can we set up one for them? You know, find out what it's about before you just say "no," so your parents can see you're considering what they're saying and you're hearing them, and then you guys can have that conversation better. That's what I would try to do. If it's a dance, that's a dance, that's fine.

Dinur: Now, you had mentioned the personal statement, and that colleges can tell if a student is authentic by how they come across on that. And Adam and I are curious what sort of problems you see students having on these essays, and how you help them with it, because it's hard to market yourself in a specific, yet kind of vague, way to address what colleges are looking for.

Adam: Especially when you're only 17.

Michelle from The College Spy: Right? Well that's the first thing, when you're 17, your writing must sound like a 17-year-old's. If it doesn't, the colleges know you didn't write it. So like, if they put, let's say, if a kid sends me an essay with double spaces, no. Kids don't do double-spaced. Parents do double-space, right? Yes. You know, and I - and I help families understand this before they start writing essays, it's supposed to sound like a 17 year old writing, you know. And the essay is the opportunity to write about something that isn't part of the rest of your application, and to let college admissions counselors know a little bit about you as a person. Colleges are caring more and more these days about character, and different personal qualities of students as they're building their freshman class. I teach students how to tell a story about themselves that demonstrates their character.

Adam: That sounds kind of like what Simon Sinek calls "Finding Your Why." You have them write about their - you have them write about their why. You know, "this is why. This is the center of - this is sort of my guiding thing." That sounds - that sounds like what you're talking about. Am I 0 am I in the right ballpark?

Michelle from The College Spy: It can be their why, but that is so big for some students that they wouldn't even be able to, you know, so it's more like - and some students, you could read their essay like that. You find the why right in there. But I present it more like: What qualities are important to you about yourself? What do you care about? What qualities do you think admissions need to know in order to really understand who you are, and what you're made of, what you're about.

And then let's tell a story about that. And the story can be something very small: "I was walking around down the street one day and the dog walked by and I made eye contact and somebody..." whatever. It doesn't, you know, the actual topic doesn't matter as, as much as, you know, what does it say about you? What did - why does this topic matter?

Adam: How much personality can you put into what you're saying, so that they see you as a person, not just a number.

Michelle from The College Spy: Yes, exactly. You know, and - and I think that for students on the borderline, where it's like, well, we could accept this kid or we could accept that that other kid, the essay matters. Um, and I, and I do think that admissions counselors, they do read these essays to get a sense of the student and what they're about. I find that kids, they care about their essay a lot. They don't just write it and just, it doesn't matter, let me just hand this in. It's personal to them. It matters to them what they put down. They don't want you to change it. "No, it has to say this. This is what I mean." I'm like, "is this what you want? This is the message you want to send?"

This is one of the best parts of the application, to help a student in a way that's it's really fun. You really get to know them well. There's a product there at the end where you could say, "hey, aren't you proud of this? You should be, and I think admissions counselors are going to be impressed."

And that that's one piece of it. The other thing I wanted to mention is that a lot of colleges have a supplement essay, which is usually a version of "why do you want to go to this college?" And that is a really important essay to write, because, you know, colleges, they need to accept students who are going to attend. They don't want to accept students who are going to pick somebody else. They want to accept the lowest amount of students out of their applicant pool to fill their class so that they stay high in the rankings. So you need to really convince them that you're interested in their college. You're not just applying there as a safety school or just because everybody who applies to Boston College applies to Boston University, for example. Exactly true. But you know that piece of it is also important - that demonstrated interest in those essays can make the difference between getting in and not getting in.

Adam: So, was there anything we forgot to ask you? We've covered a lot of ground, and I've got to say I found this fascinating, but there's always going to be something that we probably forgot to ask. So is there anything that you think we should've asked you that we didn't?

Michelle from The College Spy: I think maybe I just want to expand, just for a second on the piece I was just talking about with the essay and demonstrated interest if that's okay.

Dinur: Go for it. Absolutely.

Adam: Yeah, go ahead.

Michelle from The College Spy: It's currently: colleges really care about demonstrated interest. Most of them do. Some say they don't track it, but many do and students need to do certain things to show that they're interested in attending a college, or they'll get rejected. Not because they're not qualified, but because the university can tell, based on their data that if we accept this student, they're not going to come. So why accept them? It's just going to lower us in the ranking. Right?

So you know, students really need to be opening emails that are sent to them from colleges and reading them. Um, they, uh, need to be asking questions at college fairs and putting down, you know, the card that said they spoke to such and such representative at the college fair. They need to attend the representatives - reps come to high schools to market their colleges. And I need to go to those sessions and meet with those people. Send a followup email when you visited. Visiting is huge for demonstrated interest and then sending a followup

email, asking a question is another big thing. All of this is being recorded, and it's paid attention to and can make the difference between getting in and not getting in. So, that's, I think, an important thing for your listeners to know when a lot of people don't realize that, the importance of that. And then they say, "How did I get rejected from my safety school? How could this have happened?" And it's like, "well, you were never going to go there, and you knew that."

Dinur: So, on this show, we are all about promotions. So where can our listeners find you?

Adam: Yeah, give us all your "find information."

Michelle from The College Spy: Sure! Well, definitely go to my website, www.thecollegespy.com. They can find me on LinkedIn. They can find me on Twitter, I'm @thecollegespy, at Instagram, @thecollegespy, and Facebook, @thecollegespy. So I am everywhere.

Adam: Is there an email address you prefer people to email you if they want to talk about your services?

Michelle from The College Spy: Yes. Well you can reach me through the website, or you can email me at Michelle, with two L's and an E at the end, at [thecollegespy.com](mailto:michelle@thecollegespy.com). (michelle@thecollegespy.com)

Adam: So that's what we have for you in Episode 30. If you're finding this podcast helpful, please share it with your friends! We're always hoping to get new subscribers, so we can help more people. You can find us on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, and Android. We're hosted on Blubrry.com. Also, we'd appreciate it if you wrote a review of this podcast on Apple Podcasts for us.

Be sure to join us next week for Episode 31, where we talk about kickstarting college: non-academic norms for first-years and transfers.

Adam: You've been listening to Learning Made Easier, a podcast about how we learn, how we teach, and how they overlap.

Dinur: We want to say thank you to all of our supporters on Patreon, who make this podcast possible.

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Dinur: We look forward to seeing you next week!