A JOURNEY OF SELF-DISCOVERY

COLLEGE ADMISSIONS AT NEWARK ACADEMY

BY JEFF VINIKOOR
College admissions occupies a uniquely important and often highly emotional part of the high school experience. Even the most mature seventeen and eighteen year olds struggle to marshal the wisdom and fortitude needed to remain composed during the complex years-long process, the outcome of which is inherently uncertain and public. Indeed, helping students — and, sometimes, parents — manage the range of emotions accompanying what Newark Academy’s Director of College Counseling Kerry Winiarski calls “the college admissions rollercoaster” is a task she and her team take quite seriously.
“WE FOCUS OUR ENERGY
not only on helping students find and get into the colleges and universities that best fit their interests and needs but also on helping students build the skills to be their own best advocates and to be effective decision makers,” says Kerry, who came to NA in 1994 after working at Ohio State and Duke universities. “The extent of each student’s growth, through the process of self-discovery enabled by our program, speaks to the quality of our work.”

>>> THE PROGRAM
Comprehensive by any measure, the college counseling process at NA engages students and their parents in a carefully designed program. During junior year, each student is assigned a college counselor. A required sequence of workshops, which appears on each student’s schedule of classes, covers the nuts and bolts of the admissions process – from understanding the differences between early action, early decision and regular decision application plans to getting the most out of a college visit. These workshops are supplemented by optional evening seminars and roundtables, many led by nationally recognized experts and leading practitioners in the fields of college admissions and financial aid. Students can also take advantage of practice interviews, summer essay-writing workshops, on-campus visits by representatives from more than 100 colleges and universities, financial aid counseling sessions, and more.

Each spring, seniors who have completed the process speak with juniors about the lessons they’ve learned. “That conversation is a perennial favorite,” recalls Associate Director of College Counseling Kerri Speck. “It’s a visible reminder for the juniors that the process does – as we say it will – ‘all work out in the end.’” Kerri began counseling at NA in 2014 after 12 years “on the other side of the desk” as an admissions officer at Muhlenberg and Lafayette Colleges. “Understanding the nuances of the reading process and having a historical perspective on the changing admissions landscape,” she says, “provide a level of credibility with students and parents here at Newark Academy.” And as a parent who has seen her own children go through the admissions process, Kerri empathizes with the parents of her students. “I appreciate the anxiety that surrounds this process and work to do my best to keep all things in perspective.”

Associate Director of College Counseling Jessica Cohen, also brings an empathetic approach to her work. “I still vividly remember the emotions involved in my own admissions process,” says Jessica, who worked for six years as an admissions officer at Lafayette College, her alma mater, before joining the NA staff in 2013. “I try to remember my experiences as a student in order to relate to the excitement and anxiety my students are feeling, especially when emotions run high.”
ATHLETIC ASPIRATIONS

The College Counseling team has crafted a counseling process that respects the talents, interests and needs of each student. Among the students who require the most individualized counseling are those with collegiate athletic aspirations. Governed by the NCAA, the athletic recruiting process is remarkably complex, and each sport and division has unique protocols. The College Counseling Office works closely with the NA Athletic Department and its coaching staff to educate, guide and advocate for student athletes.

The recruiting process for wrestler Steve Bonsall ’16 began during his junior year and was, at times, grueling. “I went to camps, met with coaches and spent a lot of time touring schools and getting a sense for the programs and teams at every university on my list,” recalls Steve, who, during his freshman year at the University of Chicago, led the wrestling team in victories with a 33-14 record and was named All American. For basketball player Jocelyn Willoughby ’16, Steve’s classmate, the process began much earlier: she received her first offer, from a Division I university, during the summer before her freshman year of high school. Yet Jocelyn remained uncommitted until the late fall of her senior year, seeking the college that could best meet her interests both in the classroom and on the court. While her recruiting process was long – “I could probably write a book on the whole experience,” she jokes – it proved successful. She chose to attend the University of Virginia and, last year as a freshman, started at guard for all 33 games of the season; she was also named to the ACC All-Academic Team and is co-captain of the 2017–18 UVA team.

Athletic Director Ted Gilbreath, who played lacrosse at Hofstra University, has seen the demands on recruits increase in recent years. “An accelerated timeline and the proliferation of services trying to profit from the pursuit of college athletics put immense pressure on athletes,” he observes. Despite the pressure, “recruited athletes have the chance to continue doing something they love and, perhaps, the opportunity, because of their athletic prowess, to gain admission into a school that might otherwise be a reach.” Still, he warns of “broken hearts” if the process doesn’t work out or if a student chooses a school solely because of sports and then discovers it’s otherwise a poor fit.

ARTISTIC PURSUITS

Aspiring collegiate artists also face distinctive opportunities and challenges during the admissions process. Many seniors seek out colleges that particularly celebrate the arts and allow them to continue to develop their artistic sensibilities and technical skills. They also highlight their artistic accomplishments as applicants. Along with the College Counseling Office, Arts Department faculty members work closely with these students throughout the application process as they hone their craft and prepare portfolios and audition materials.

The process of preparing a portfolio helped filmmaker Bailey Galvin-Scott ’14 narrow his college search. While putting together his reel, which featured “introspective and heartwarming pieces as well as flashy, stylized films,” Bailey realized that he wanted to attend a film school that would allow him to, as he puts it, “explore story and self-expression through film.” He chose to attend Emerson College, where he is majoring in visual media arts with a focus in cinematography. Jazz bassist Shaan Pandiri ’17

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– Ted Gilbreath, Athletic Director
ranked artistic opportunities alongside academic rigor and location in evaluating prospective colleges. “I wanted to attend a school that offered me a structured way to engage with music, a thriving jazz scene so that I’d be able to find like-minded students, and a location that would allow for me to readily see live jazz,” says Shaan, who supplemented his college applications with audio recordings that showcased his musical talents. Shaan chose to attend Columbia University, where he is planning on majoring in history or political science. He is also participating in Columbia’s elite Louis Armstrong Jazz Performance Program.

“Students who choose to submit art portfolios,” notes Arts Department Chair Elaine Brodie, “often spend months creating stunning testaments to their talents, whether as visual or performing artists. These portfolios can be powerful recruiting tools.” While nearly a dozen seniors prepare art portfolios each year, only a handful pursue a primary major in the fine arts or apply to study in art schools or conservatories. This may be in part because, as Elaine observes, “those who aspire to play the sax, dance or paint for a living may struggle to make ends meet, regardless of their talent.” Nevertheless, Elaine and her colleagues are delighted to inspire and to support students no matter their artistic path. “We hope the lives of all Newark Academy graduates are enriched by art, in college and beyond,” she says, “whether as professional artists, amateur artists or patrons of the arts.”

TIMELINES AND BUDGETS
Applicants with special talents – athletic, artistic or otherwise – are often encouraged or, in some cases, required to submit binding applications early in the admissions process. Yet in recent years, pressure has mounted on all students to submit a binding early decision application to their first-choice college. “With each passing year, the admissions timeline becomes even more rushed,” observes Kerry, noting that the number of schools that accept applications even before Labor Day has increased in recent years. Because some schools enroll half or more of each incoming class through the early decision process and because the admission rate is often significantly higher for students in the early applicant pool, many students fear missing out on the sometimes real advantage of applying early. Indeed, among the NA class of 2017, two-thirds of students submitted an early decision application.

In addition to supporting students through the college search and application process, Kerry and her staff help families consider how they will fund the cost of higher education. With tuition, fees, and room and board at some private colleges and universities nearing $70,000 per year, finances weigh heavily on the minds of many families. College Office Manager and Financial Aid Coordinator Mary Ellen Weinel supports these families as they navigate the financial aid application process and as they evaluate – and sometimes appeal – financial aid offers. Because, as Mary Ellen notes, “understanding the financial commitment of a college education can be daunting,” she works individually with families to discuss financial aid needs throughout the process. For example, so that students who are considering taking out student loans understand the financial impact of their choices, Mary Ellen prepares personalized budget forecasts that illustrate the impact of debt on life after college graduation. In recent years, she notes, “more and more families are seeking information about financial aid, both need-based and merit-based,” making her analyses all the more important.
INVITING NEW SPACES

At the beginning of this school year, the College Counseling Office moved into a newly renovated suite. It consists of private counseling offices as well as a large common space with tables and couches.

The layout creates opportunities for conversation and collaboration—“two key ingredients,” says Kerry, “in the counseling process.” The common space is also surrounded by a wall of windows, a design that Kerry considers especially fitting. “People often think we are the keepers of a secret formula,” she jokes. “The windows invite the community into our offices. They help demystify our work.”

The windows also reflect an authentic connection between the college counseling process and NA’s educational approach. “Throughout the college process, we ask students to reflect on their strengths and weaknesses, to problem solve, to show resolve,” says Kerry. And those, she notes, are among the character traits and habits of mind that NA students develop over the course of their entire educations here—in classes, on fields and courts, in studios and concert halls, on immersion trips, and through community service. “Newark Academy students are so well prepared to undertake the college process,” Kerry says. “Our job is reminding them of that.”

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~ Kerry Winiarski, Director of College Counseling
Peter Gruenberg ’81 and Carly Gruenberg ’12

THE MOCK INTERVIEW

“In my day, with no Internet to do research on schools, we relied heavily on a handful of college guide books,” recalls Peter Gruenberg about his college search. The admissions process today, he notes, has become much more competitive and intense, as students and parents have access to an overwhelming amount of information. To help students prepare for one aspect of the process, the admissions interview, Pete has, for many years, served as a mock interviewer at an annual evening workshop for Newark Academy juniors, hosted by the NA Alumni Board of Governors.

Students who choose to participate in the workshop partake in two half-hour one-on-one interviews. During each interview, the first 20 minutes are spent in conversation, as the alumni volunteer asks questions that allow the student to practice articulating the messages and themes they seek to convey as applicants. The final 10 minutes are devoted to feedback, with the alumni interviewers coaching the students as they polish their speaking and self-advocacy skills and hone their responses. The approach helps students leave the workshop feeling more confident discussing themselves. “The interviewers also aim to help students calm their nerves,” says Pete. Not surprisingly, many students take advantage of the opportunity. Last year, more than a third of the junior class participated.

Last spring, Pete’s daughter Carly participated in the event as an interviewer. “I loved coming back to the school, meeting students, and seeing how Newark Academy has changed,” says Carly, who recently graduated from Hamilton College and worked as a political field organizer for the Phil Murphy campaign for Governor in New Jersey. She was impressed by the juniors she met and found it rewarding to help them improve their interviewing skills.

Carly also enjoyed joining her father as a volunteer, and she plans to continue giving back to Newark Academy. And Pete, who has served on the NA Board of Governors since 2013, is delighted to be volunteering side-by-side with his daughter. “I hope she’s inspired to stay active in the Newark Academy community,” he says, “and to be a catalyst for involving others.”
Nicole Curvin ’86, Director of Admission, Middlebury College

As a student at Newark Academy, Nicole Curvin valued the ways in which her teachers and coaches cared about her as an individual; in particular, she remembers Joe Borlo and Arlene Jachim helping her become a more confident student, field hockey player and friend. “I was a quieter student most of the six years that I spent at NA,” she recalls. Still, she notes, “I felt seen and valued.”

She describes her senior year as particularly fulfilling. “Working with students as they decide what they value about an educational and residential experience has proven particularly fulfilling,” Nicole says. When she talks with high school students, she urges them to go beyond the familiar when choosing a college, to keep an open mind about their futures. “You may want to pursue a very different academic or personal path than you are on right now,” she advises. “Look for a place that will push you outside of the realm of what you already know.”

Amanda Addison ’06, Associate Director of Admission, University of Pennsylvania

When Amanda Addison was a senior at Newark Academy, she became fascinated by the college admissions process. Because her parents follow non-traditional paths to post-secondary education, Amanda put a lot of trust in the NA college counseling staff, relying heavily on them for their savvy and support. “They quickly became my closest mentors,” recalls Amanda, who attended the University of Pennsylvania and is now an associate director of admissions there. “They helped make the college admissions process a meaningful one for me.”

One of the most worthwhile aspects of the process for Amanda was the opportunity to reflect on her experiences and values. She vividly remembers her application essay, in which she described a family gathering to bake Jamaican black cake for her uncle’s wedding. “The essay detailed how multiple generations of family members gathered in my grandmother’s cramped kitchen to make the cake,” recalls Amanda. “From my great uncle yelling in Patois, to my mom, with her flour-free hands, offering direction while sitting in the corner, to my grandmother running the show, the essay allowed me to give the admissions committee a ‘slice of my life.’” Amanda even brought in some Jamaican black cake for her college counselor to try.

At the same time, Amanda faced challenges during the process. “The pressure that my peers and I felt sometimes came to a head in unfortunate ways,” she notes. In particular, she remembers a handful of hurtful comments that diminished the achievements of her black friends, comments which she wasn’t able to process fully at the time. “While the terms ‘microaggression’ and ‘privilege’ are common nowadays, that language was not yet widely known in high schools when I was a senior,” says Amanda. “It wasn’t until I took a course during my junior year at Penn that I had the language to describe the subtle and not-so-subtle put-downs I received.”

What Amanda learned during her senior year at NA – both about the admissions process and about herself – has played a significant role in her life since. Indeed, the lessons continue to inform her work as an admissions professional. In that role, she advises applicants to be true to themselves throughout the process and to use the application to tell their story. But she also reminds them to maintain perspective. “Please, enjoy high school,” she tells them. “It only happens once, and you don’t want to miss out on your senior year because you got caught up in the college process hysteria.”

Over her decades-long career, Nicole has seen the field evolve in exciting ways. In particular, she appreciates how the application process has become more efficient; when she applied, each college had its own set of requirements and forms, completed on a typewriter and mailed with a stamp. At the same time, she is concerned by the extent to which admissions has become “a high-stakes endeavor with yearly rankings and constant media focus.” She worries about the stress students and families face in applying for and financing a college education. Nevertheless, Nicole feels lucky to counsel students during an important transition period in their lives. “Working with students as they decide what they value about an educational and residential experience has proven particularly fulfilling,” Nicole says. When she talks with high school students, she urges them to go beyond the familiar when choosing a college, to keep an open mind about their futures. “You may want to pursue a very different academic or personal path than you are on right now,” she advises. “Look for a place that will push you outside of the realm of what you already know.”
The Cafeteria is Actually Our School Gym:

Brittney Tong ’16

Now a sophomore in the Olin Business School at Washington University in St. Louis, Brittney Tong chose to write her Common Application essay about her identity. “I wrote about the unhappiness and struggle I felt with being stereotyped as ‘just another Asian girl,’” recalls Brittney. “I also wanted to show that I am willing to face the struggle head on and figure out how to accept my identity.” Here is Brittney’s essay:

The cafeteria is actually our school gym: a school gym that reeks of bleach and day-old meatballs. “Excuse me!” I squeaked as I pushed my third-grade self through the crowd. I giddily fast-walked — no running allowed — towards my assigned table and squeezed between my classmates, quickly sitting down before the wave of hungry children filled the cafeteria.

As I looked around, mindlessly chattering with my friends, I waited for those around me to take out their brown-paper-bagged lunches before I stealthily slipped my bright purple and yellow Dora lunchbox out from under the table. While other parents had packed their kids Oscar Mayer's Lunchables and triangular-cut peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, my mom had prepared for me homemade pan-fried, pork-and-leek-filled dumplings in a bulky glass container.

As soon as I opened the lid, an odor, though familiar to me, drifted unpleasantly towards the other students. I dug my fork into a dumpling and stuffed it into my mouth. It was delicious. I grew up eating these, loving the way the crispy skin perfectly complemented the rich taste of the meat.

“What’s that smell?” I heard murmurs. Their faces scrunched up in disgust when they saw the foreign food in my bowl. “Is that coming from you? What is that?” they asked.

I placed the lid back on the container and hastily crammed it into my lunchbox. My cheeks burned red as they stared at me, nauseated. Their whispers were sewn with ridicule. And all I did was sit there, speechless, clutching the purple handle of my Dora bag, my stomach grumbling as I watched everyone else finish their lunches.

Even at the age of seven, I was acutely aware that I did not want to be different. I made the active decision to put away the dumplings, something that made me happy. I dug my fork into a dumpling and stuffed it into my mouth. It was delicious. I grew up eating these, loving the way the crispy skin perfectly complemented the rich taste of the meat.

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Even at the age of seven, I was acutely aware that I did not want to be different. I made the active decision to put away the dumplings, something that made me happy. On Sunday nights, I tagged along with my mom to ShopRite, tugging on her shirt as we passed by the frozen meats aisle, imploring that she just had to buy me one of those coveted Lunchables that all the other American moms bought for their kids. This progression continued so far along that, in middle school, I asked my mom to give me money each week so that I could buy the school lunch and eat the same greasy fries and chicken tenders that everyone else ate.

For a long time, I resented the Asian side of me. To a large extent it was because it made me feel like an outsider. But, at the same time, it was also because I did not understand the culture. Much of my perception was and is still based on stereotypes. I get disappointed when I struggle in math and science because Asians are supposed to do well in those subjects. I get annoyed when people tell me I’m too loud or aggressive because Asians are supposed to be passive and compliant. I get embarrassed when people hear my middle name because I believe that, in their minds, it allows them to justify these assumptions.

When people hear “Brittney Yinan Tong,” I feel that I am no longer the girl with the bubbling personality and contagious laugh. Instead, I am just another Asian girl whose name the teacher always has trouble pronouncing. For this reason, I have kept my middle name hidden, not because I am embarrassed of being Asian but because I do not want it to label me as a stereotype before I have the chance to define myself. I do not want it to prevent me from becoming an independent entity.

I am still constantly struggling to understand how the Asian part fits into my identity. However, I am willing to confront this struggle and determine what it means to have such a culture. This is in no way a conclusion of who I am.”
Abe Ratner ’15

When you read this essay by Abe Ratner, you’ll smile. His coming-of-age story is at once humorous and poignant. “I wanted to choose a topic that wasn’t too overwrought, that maybe could stand out because of its comparatively lower stakes, but could still feel like a complete story and convey some amount of personality,” recalls Abe, now a junior at Northwestern University studying radio, television and film.

ONE OTHERWISE NORMAL NIGHT THIS PAST SUMMER, my Dad got stuck in our garage. I would have thought that nowadays it would be impossible to physically, materially get stuck in an actual garage — that there’d be some sort of commercial or institutional tool for handling that situation, like a special drill, or a government hotline. As it turns out, there is neither of those things. If you’re a five-foot-one, 50-year-old woman (my mom) and your husband (my dad) gets stuck in the garage, well, you go and get your oldest son (me). And you say: um, please deal with this.

And therein lies the importance of this particular episode in the life of my family, however small. It occurred to me as I shuffled downstairs to save my dad from himself that I should not be deceived by the situation’s apparent lack of urgency; this was an oddly meaningful marker of change. In a way that I wasn’t only a few years ago, I was “the guy” now. I was at the very least, slouching into it, even if in a process almost entirely catalyzed by forward momentum and hardly at all by will. But that’s fair to expect, I’m sure; these things are gradual. You turn thirteen, and you start doing laundry; you turn seventeen, and suddenly you’re the guy getting people out of garages.

This was easier said than done, in this case, because this particular garage was misbehaving in a serious way. The door had gotten severely jammed on one side, so much so that it was stuck in place, nearly entirely closed, with my Dad inside. Tugging on the handle, in the middle of the door, proved pointless. It was only after a good fifteen minutes of prodding and poking that, ingenuity and brute strength on equal display, I thought to give the door a shove with my shoulder on the lower side. It shot up, and the whole thing leveled. I grabbed the underside with both arms and raised it until the garage was open. Out came my dad.

The end of the episode is this: whatever my dad was doing in the garage (and I didn’t ask, in the interest of putting the whole incident behind us), he wasn’t done. He was staying outside. My mom, who was feeling social in the aftermath of all the excitement, wanted to stay to chat with him. Two parents both in the vicinity of our newly violent garage seemed like a cause for concern.

I quite urgently had to go back inside to keep watching a television show but I was very genuinely caught by a sense that I was somewhat in charge of this situation. This seemed like a decent compromise between responsibility and television. With that, I abdicated adulthood as quickly as I’d accepted it. I’ll take it on again later, maybe.

So to my mom I said, “I’m going back inside; please don’t let my dad die.” I stand by this as a decent compromise between responsibility and television. With that, I abdicated adulthood as quickly as I’d accepted it. I’ll take it on again later, maybe.