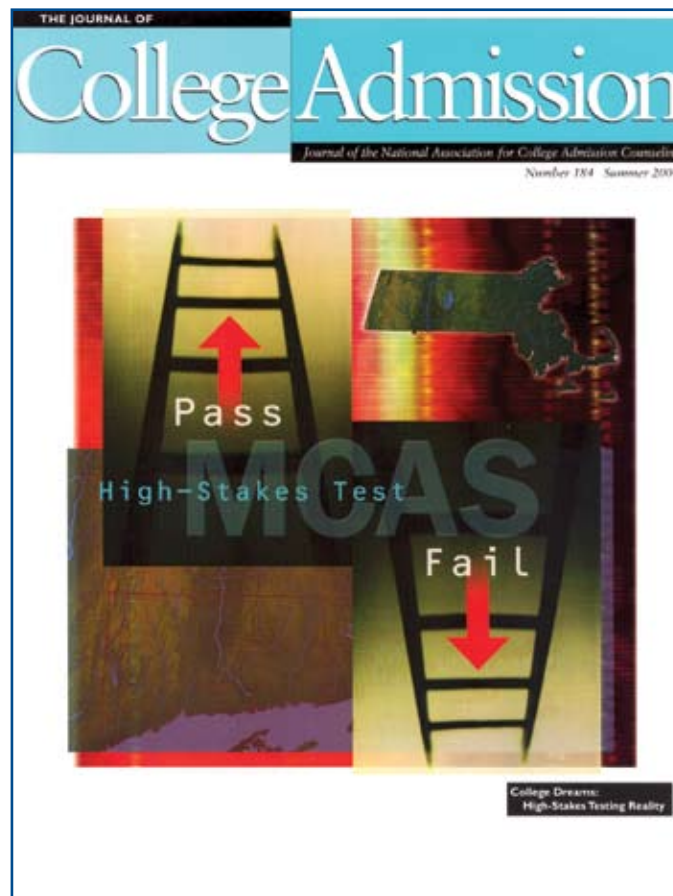


The Pleasure, Privilege and Agony of Application Reading

By Kelly Herrington
Director of Colleges and Career Services
University Preparatory Academy, WA

They tell me their greatest accomplishments. They discuss their life goals. They share who inspires them. They address their weaknesses. They cause laughter. They create a few tears. They make me proud.

Number 184 Summer 2004



I am not their teacher. I am not their parent. I am not their coach, sibling, grandparent, best friend, or religious leader.

I am an admission counselor and they are my applicants.

Every winter, clad in my pajamas and consuming numerous bowls of Cheerios, I sit at a small desk in my apartment, and I am inspired. I enter a world at the apex of hope, hard work, resiliency, accomplishment, and promise.

I suspect for thousands of college applicants, the image of slightly disheveled "20-something" trying not to spill his milk on their admission folders is unsettling.

Perhaps they envision a genteel woman or distinguished man sitting in front of an oak table carefully examining their applications. Reality, of course, paints a different picture; but have no fear, for on this canvas these prospective college applicants will find an admission counselor who is both humbled and left cheering by what she sees. Each applicant has a voice and story that is an honor to hear.

"Reading season," as this time of year is called, allows admission counselors to witness the beauty of the educational process that produces not only outstanding students, but altruistic, artistic, athletic, and creative young men and women.

BE PASSIONATE:

These lessons of hope, unity and people working at their best, this is what matters, not the college a student attends. It is the work-ethic, mentoring and kindness these students will bring to college and their lives afterwards that is remarkable.

I learn about students like Sarah, a young woman whose counselor describes her as a combination of “Jane Goodall, Mother Teresa, Diane Sawyer, and Jodie Foster.” I read essays from students like Matt whose opening sentence begins, “The person I admire most in my life is a convicted felon.” (This line, I must confess, causes me to choke on my Cheerios. For clarification, the convicted felon is an international human rights advocate and Matt’s ultimate career goal is to become a human rights lawyer). I review transcripts from college interview reports where students like Dave have their classroom experiences “transformed” by teachers who “dress up as Einstein to make physics cool.” I smile when students such as John send articles about contests they win. “The 600 crazed students crammed into the gym were incredibly loud,” John explains. “Cheers of inspiration could be heard. The training was endless, but the war would be decided in an instant. I vied for the crowd’s undivided attention and nothing would stand in my way. In two short minutes, I stood up and proclaimed victory. I won East High School’s Pie Eating Contest.” Students like Sarah, Matt, Dave, and John are ambitious, funny, hard working, kind, and well-educated. Most importantly, through reading their folders, I see students, teachers, communities, and families at their best. I am lucky.

This good fortune, though, does not last as long as it should. The culmination of reading season begets “decision time,” the period when an applicant is notified of his or her acceptance or rejection. Whereas a few weeks prior my pen was put to paper to summarize a student, my face is now pressed to a phone encouraging that student to matriculate.

Through this lamentable focus on numbers, stress, rejection, and even blame, the important message of the college process is erased. The exhilaration of witnessing students, teachers, communities, and families, at their best—the part of the college process that should be highlighted—is hermetically sealed in the applicant’s file, now one of many folders in a large cold file room.

This good fortune, though, does not last as long as it should. The culmination of reading season begets “decision time,” the period when an applicant is notified of his or her acceptance or rejection. Whereas a few weeks prior my pen was put to paper to summarize a student, my face is now pressed to a phone encouraging that student to matriculate. My pajamas are replaced by uncomfortable business attire. The delight I found in students and educators is quickly forgotten. Parents force their children to make frantic last-minute visits to campuses before deposit deadlines. Principals proudly taut the number of their students who were admitted to prestigious universities, thereby ignoring and devaluing the majority of their pupils. Admission deans rave to their trustees about the increased SAT averages in the admitted applicant pool, yet gloss over the artistic, creative leadership abilities not measured through standardized test scores. Newspaper journalists run articles about the stress related to making “one of life’s most important deci-

I would love to cram
the panicked parents,
the “sensationalist”
news media, the scared
students, and the SAT-
obsessed admission
deans in my apartment...
I want them to hear the
amazing voices of today’s
college applicants.

sions.” Television reporters address the rejection involved with the college process. Even more unfortunate, parents of the students who did not receive the news they desired often look outward rather than inward at themselves or their child for someone to fault.

Through this lamentable focus on numbers, stress, rejection, and even blame, the important message of the college process is erased. The exhilaration of witnessing students, teachers, communities, and families, at their best—the part of the college process that should be highlighted—is hermetically sealed in the applicant’s file, now one of many folders in a large cold file room.

During the dreaded month of April, I long to return to the cocoon of my apartment with my bowl of Cheerios full and my sense of perspective intact. Most of all, I want to invite the world to join me. I would love to cram the panicked parents, the “sensationalist” news media, the scared students, and the SAT-obsessed admission deans in my apartment. I want them to sit down and read the applications of the students I have spent several months admiring. I want them to hear the amazing voices of today’s college applicants. I want them to feel at the visceral level the same hope that I do. I want them to see what I love about my job; that is, it reaffirms the power of education, reminds me of the many involved with fostering student success and reiterates the importance of celebrating the totality of the experiences that lead to college matriculation.

If they were to do this, then they would learn that it is not about gaining admission to a “brand name college,” it is not about saying to other parents, “Billy was accepted at every ‘top tier’ university,” it is not about colleges promoting improved SAT averages or principals proclaiming to the world where their students were admitted. It is about the compassion, determination, and academic excellence schools and communities have fostered in their pupils. Given this foundation, it is about who these students will become. These lessons of hope, unity, and people working at their best, this is what matters, not the college a student attends. It is the work-ethic, mentoring and kindness these students will bring to college and their lives afterwards that is remarkable. These are fleeting factors in students’ lives. Colleges’ admission decisions and the public frenzy around these decisions certainly are.

All college applicants are valued and
heard when they apply, regardless of
the admission decision that is rendered.

The students whom I must reject are
often some of my personal favorites. With
that in mind, if you know a few college
applicants, please congratulate them not
on where they are headed in the fall, but
on what they have accomplished and will
achieve in the future.

All college applicants are valued and heard when they apply, regardless of the admission decision that is rendered. The students whom I must reject are often some of my personal favorites. With that in mind, if you know a few college applicants, please congratulate them not on where they are headed in the fall, but on what they have accomplished and will achieve in the future.

Perhaps, if you are in town next winter during “reading season,” you could stop by my apartment. If you would like, you can wear your pajamas. I will put out an extra bowl and a spoon. Better yet, in honor of John, we will have pie. Apple or Cherry? You bring the ice cream!