



Northfield Mount Hermon School

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Junior Parent Newsletter
April 2008

Poet T.S. Eliot is often quoted for his famous opening lines to *The Wasteland*-
“April is the cruellest month, breeding lilacs out of the dead land.” In the college process, it can be cruel, because the process has begun in earnest for your children. They are surrounded by senior and postgraduate friends who are getting news, both good and bad, and some of it incomprehensible. They are really looking ahead, with Student Leader selections, course sign-ups, and plans for summer college visits. In the middle of the month, in a kind of supreme irony, our taxes are due. The cycle finishes with college deposits sent in for seniors and postgraduates and May Day.

With May Day just around the corner, and bells going into the carillon in our new Arts Center just outside my window, the future looks inviting and bright. Part of that enthusiasm comes from a very good college counseling session our office hosted during Family Days a few weeks ago. I write to give those of you who were unable to attend a synopsis of the meetings and workshops.

On Friday afternoon, we were happy to host a presentation by Dory Streett, a senior admissions officer from Colby College who is also a former NMH parent as well as a former college counselor. She has a wealth of experience and wonderfully varied perspectives which she shared with the audience. She was candid and humorous while being realistic. In short, she confirmed what the press has been reporting for the past several years- the college process today is very different than it was twenty-five years ago (“I am pretty sure none of us could get into the college we attended in today’s climate,” she noted) Even more noteworthy, perhaps, the process is different today than it was five years ago! Part of it is the demographic “bubble” of more college- eligible 18 year olds in the population, but another important factor is the increase in international applications. There are more students applying to college than ever, and more of them are applying to more colleges, partly due to the Common Application and the ease of applying via the internet. These two factors lead to a very challenging climate. There is some debate as to whether the crest of the demographic wave has passed. Even if it has, the change in demographics will not be significant enough to have any impact on the admissions decisions in the next cycle.

Dory shared that the process can be wonderful for the family, as you get a chance to have important discussions and plan trips to some great places (Waterville, Maine among them). It can also be challenging as parent perspectives and expectations can be different from the children’s ideas. Nevertheless, she generously complimented the NMH counseling staff as being experienced and professional in managing all of the elements of the process. She also emphasized the real “human” factors that exist in Admission Offices even in the face of a daunting number of admissions. Dory wanted all in attendance to know that every effort is made to get to know each applicant well, as their principle job is to build a community through their work.

She opened the floor to questions:

- Early decision vs. regular decision? The pools are equally competitive at almost every school, so you will not gain an “edge” by doing so. If, however, your son or daughter knows for sure that a particular school is the right place for them, by all means indicate your preference through an early application.
- How much attention does each application get? Dory answered only for Colby in saying that there were three readers, with the first reader spending about 20 minutes on the folder, with each succeeding reading reviewing more quickly.
- Is there a “cut-off” for either GPAs or SAT scores? No cut-offs, as they look at each candidate, but the average admitted student had an A- average with about a 700 score on the critical reasoning and math sections of the SAT.
- What about geographical diversity? Does it matter in the admission process? Dory said again that the answer to every college question is “it depends.” So, too, with this question. Students from New England may have a slight advantage in the “fly-over” states, as schools in Wisconsin and Iowa are also looking for geographic diversity just as Colby is. Look broadly was the short answer.

- Which is better, more rigor in the curriculum or more extracurricular activities? Neither. You need to take the most challenging courses you can take for you at school, but no one really wants a "professional student," so you should be involved in other areas of school life, too. Do it because you love it.
- Parental or sibling legacy? "It depends." For some colleges, it matters quite a bit; for others, not at all.

Dory left to much applause and the college counselors introduced themselves, with short vignettes about their work at NMH, their own college experience and the joys and challenges of our own children. Sarah Kenyon then led the crowd in a College Process Bingo game. The grid was a series of answers to questions and you had to get bingo!

Some samples: 743 (the number of valedictorians rejected by Brown this year)

38,000 (the number of applications at Northeastern this year, for a class of 3000)

early action (the application process that results in a non-binding decision for the applicant, known as early as December 15th) We had several winners.

Some of the hand-outs available at the end of the session are attached to this memo.

The next morning, the counseling office hosted three question and answer sessions. The first was on the role of athletics in the college process; next, on the role of the fine and performing arts in the process and finally, a PowerPoint presentation from Michael Ellison at Amherst College. That presentation is also attached to this memo.

Our Athletic Director took questions on the role of athletics. In sum, it is essential for your student/athlete to be realistic about their ability to contribute at the collegiate level as well as be sanguine about the college coaches' interest in you. Our office keeps open important lines of communication between coaches and college counselors as well as college admission offices and college coaches. It helps that we have three coaches on our staff. In general, a recruited athlete has a slightly better chance to gain admission because he or she has an advocate inside the system. The more highly recruited, the better your chances.

Our Department Chairs for the Visual and Fine Arts (Phil Calabria and Shelia Heffernan, respectively) took questions for the next session. Phil was very clear about the distinctions between a student who wanted to study art within a liberal arts curriculum as opposed to the student who wanted to go to art school. In most cases, for the student with high artistic aspirations, a portfolio is a must, and his department helps manage that important detail. Again, communication is a key, for he knows several art teachers at colleges that attract a lot of NMH applicants. Phil can be a realistic critic of the level of talent that is required for the most selective colleges and the most selective art schools. Sheila followed with her own very fresh stories from the college road tour, as her son is a member of NMH '09 and has just finished the process. As a talented saxophonist, he had many auditions, and "depending" on the school, this can be a make or break moment. Some of you will have read last Sunday's *Education Life* magazine with a feature story on a student trying to gain admission to Carnegie Mellon's extremely competitive drama program. DVDs of performances in musicals or dance should be included in the application for students who wish to highlight that passion.

Finally, we had a whirlwind presentation on the ways in which financial aid is calculated at both private and public colleges and universities. In general, it was recommended that you not eliminate schools from your prospective list because they were too expensive, because some of the wealthier schools are more generous with aid. Still, it was always important to look closely at your own state school to compare prices in the event of an accepted application. The on-line resources at FAFSA and the College Board (for the Parent Profile) were highly recommended. There is even an on-line calculator to estimate what your family contribution could be.

For parents who attended all sessions, it was quite a wealth of information. Be assured that all of it is available to you through the many resources we have here in the NMH college counseling office. In particular, the Naviance website has a long list of links that will help you with many of these details.

Next, from our office, will come to you a "snail mail" letter with your son or daughters preliminary college list, as well as some general estimations from your college counselor as to the particular selectivity of the college. Please remember that each of the schools on the final list should be schools that are "good," that is schools that are a good fit for your son or daughter and where they would be both happy and proud to matriculate. An acceptance letter from a "likely" school must be as exciting as a similar letter from a "far reach."

Thanks so much to all who made the effort to come to campus for our Family Days program, and, as always, we are available by phone or e-mail to answer questions for you.

Our April has given way to a balmy spring with lots of daffodils and budding forsythia. May (and graduation) is just around the corner. We look forward to working with your children, knowing too well that their own "April" is closer than you think.