



Avoiding the Parent Trap: A Common-Sense Approach to College Admission

In this episode, admission experts—from both the high school and college sides of the desk—offer tips to help parents ensure their students remain the focus of the college admission process. The panelists discuss ways parents can help their children not only get into college but through it. Offering empathy and a common-sense approach to applying to college, the panelists share ways parents can be effective, supportive partners throughout the process.

The episode features **Ashley Pallie**, associate dean of admissions at Pomona College (CA); **Jami Silver**, director of college advising at the Kingswood Oxford School (CT); and **Sharon Williams**, college counselor at the University of Chicago Laboratory High School (IL). The conversation is moderated by Juleyka Lantigua-Williams.

-
- Ashley Pallie: Hello, and welcome to the College Admissions Decoded podcast, an occasional series from the National Association for College Admission Counseling, an education association of more than 15,000 college admission professionals at both secondary and post secondary schools, who support students and families through the college admission process. I'm Ashley Pallie, senior associate dean of admissions and director of recruitment at Pomona College in Claremont, California. I'm joined today by my colleagues and fellow NACAC members, Jami Silver, director of college advising at the Kingswood Oxford School in West Hartford, Connecticut. Hi Jami.
- Jami Silver: Hi, Ashley. So good to be here.
- Pallie: And Sharon Williams, one of the college counselors at the University of Chicago Laboratory High School in Chicago, Illinois.
- Sharon Williams: Hi Ashley.
- Pallie: Welcome Jami and Sharon. Let's get started. Parents have a critical role in helping students to navigate the college admission process. Parent advice, direction and reassurance throughout the long and stressful experience can be key to students making the right choices. Going off to college is a rite of passage

in our society, where starting with the college admission process, students make big steps toward adulthood, independence and making their own life choices.

And it can be a rite of passage for parents too, as they learn to let go. We've all heard about and mostly understand, the lengths that some parents will go to for their children, but the college admission process seems to bring out behavior among some parents that surprises even some seasoned college admission veterans. We'll talk about these ideas and more in today's podcast. Moderating our conversation is Juleyka Lantigua-Williams, a veteran journalist with more than 20 years of experience in print and digital audio and film at organizations like NPR, The Atlantic, and Random House. Juleyka, I'll turn this over to you.

Lantigua-Williams: Thanks Ashley. Welcome Sharon and welcome Jami. It's so good to be here today. So I've had a chance to talk to quite a lot of folks within NACAC, and outside of NACAC, about all of the different aspects. But I have to say today's conversation is the most relevant to me. I'm a big sister, I'm an aunt, I'm a godmother. And so, I'm really excited to hear from you, the pros, about how we can just make this process more useful, more friendly, less painful in some cases. So let's start right at the very beginning, right? Because, we're focusing a little bit on how parents can be overzealous in the college admissions process. So Sharon, can you tell me a little about, from your experience, how you've experienced parents being overzealous?

Williams: Well, I do have probably more stories than I care to share. I think most recently was a parent who said to me that, "My child is sensitive and he cannot attend a college that he would be too embarrassed to tell his friend group where he was going." My response was basically, "So you're going to allow the opinions of 17 year olds to determine what's best for your child?" So we had to have a conversation about that. But I think a lot of what I think drives some of this, is that for some parents, they see where their child goes to school. The cache of that identity, in some shape or form, is a hallmark of who they are as a parent. And so, we really have to ask the question, are we looking at what's best for your child or what makes you look best at the weekly potluck? And so, I think in our work, whether we are parents or whether we are professionals, we need to keep the students centered in this work.

Lantigua-Williams: Wow. So a little bit of trophy hunting.

Williams: Exactly.

Lantigua-Williams: On the parents side. Ashley, you're nodding vigorously.

Pallie: I am, yes. I think that in so many ways it's a moratorium on how well you've done as a parent, that you can brag about where they've gone. It's so interesting, because you hear parents getting congratulated, "Oh your child got into Yale. Oh congratulations, you must have done a great job." And that

somehow the name of the institution says how well you did, not even how well your child did, but really how well you did as a parent. And that's a badge of honor that you get to carry.

And if you can't brag, or if your child ends up at a school that is not something that everyone else knows, they're like, "Oh, well I thought they were smart." Or, "Oh, I'm sure that, that will work out." Or, "Oh, I've never heard of it before. I thought he was a valedictorian." Right? These little cutting remarks in communities that just make this all mean more.

Silver: Well, I agree with what everybody is saying. I also think that there's a component of fear that comes in from the parent perspective, right? The fear of judgment, the fear of failure, the fear of, "Am I a good parent?" And that's a real feeling. I think about the parenting ideal of, when you meet chaos with calm. Our kids are really nervous through this process. They too see this as a badge, they too have these challenges.

We get so many different messages by so many different people, and then you get it from the people who are supposed to love you best. If we're meeting chaos with chaos, or fear with more fear it doesn't bode well. It doesn't create resilient, independent young people that we are hoping to, and really caring about going onto these post secondary institutions.

Lantigua-Williams: But what do you say to the parent, for example, who says, "I went to X, Y, and Z and my kid is going to go to X, Y, and Z also"? But the child might actually not be strong enough as a candidate to get to a place like that. Because as we know, legacy admissions really drive a lot of this trophy-seeking kind of admissions culture. And so, how do you have the conversation with a parent who says, "Well yes, I understand why this is important to you, but let's really figure out where your child will thrive based on who she is today?"

Williams: I think that's where data really comes into play, or at least is helpful in that conversation. And so, a lot of the tools that we have at our disposal now, where you can show a parent the scattergrams that show the history of your particular school with a particular college that they're interested in, in terms of sort of the aggregate numbers we're looking at—the basic GPA, test scores and so on. At least to give them a ballpark of, this is where your child fits in. But to also help them be realistic that when we say, "This school has an admit rate of 8%." That there's a really good chance you're in the 92.

Lantigua-Williams: Right, right.

Silver: Ashley, in the introduction, made a comment about how this independence starts in the college process. It starts well before. You could see these patterns in middle school. You could see them in elementary school, but these are families who have designed their entire parental structure, potentially to do

right and to get into college, or to have success in a particular vein that is quite, I don't want to say superficial. It is based on metrics that society has said are of that external-

Lantigua-Williams: So it's external?

Silver: Yes, external. And so, I think it's stepping back when thinking about students and thinking about when you have a family who says, "Well I want my kid to go where I went. He's done all of this stuff," or, "she has done all of this stuff to warrant that." You say, "Yes, they have done really wonderful things, and they still may not get in, and that is okay." The challenge is, have you done that for the college or have you done that for yourself?

Williams: I think it's shifting the narrative from getting in, to getting through. And so really focusing, as you said, on the child and what is the best experience? What space is going to provide the best opportunity for that student who, as part of this process, is determining who they are and who they want to be. And which space is going to provide the best place to help them grow into that individual? I think when we shift it from 'where am I going to get in' to 'who am I going to be when I get out' I think that can help shift this idea of the numbers, and really focusing on the experience, and the other things that are such a critical part of a successful college experience.

Pallie: There's a lot of fear that my kids are not going to live the "American dream", or do better than I did. So there must be specific colleges that are going to help them. So college is really hard to get into, that general message, isn't true. 1% of colleges are really hard to get into, most colleges are not. But we really care about that 1% as a society.

Lantigua-Williams: So what's key for a family when they're having their college conversations at home? How do we help them strike a balance between what is nice to have, versus realistic to have?

Silver: It's not even just talking solely about college. These conversations can start earlier, and asking your kid, what is it that you do and why do you do it? What do you love to do? And asking these reflective questions, because no longer are colleges actually asking, kind of, the what solely, they are asking those reflective questions as well. That's a part of the process. And our students aren't always equipped to answer that, because they've been box checkers, right? They've been doing things to get in as opposed to what matters.

And so, as the parent, it's asking those questions, 'what is it that you do and why you like to do it?' And I think when you get to those reflective questions, you start thinking about fit. You start thinking about colleges that have what you are interested in. They have kind of the environment, and the community, or the major, right? The kids for whom come best in the process, for our experiences,

have an idea of who they are as individuals. Not solely just who they want to become. I think they have a self identity as well, and that to me is key, in kind of what's our role as parents?

Williams: I'd agree with Jami wholeheartedly, that the college process, I think as you're raising a child, is only one piece of this trajectory. One of my mantras is 'always start with the end in mind.' Your end is not them getting into college. Your end is raising productive, kind, intelligent, supportive adults. And so, thinking about college as a part of that process is one thing. This checklist drives me nuts. 'I'm doing this because it's going to look good on my college applications' should not be a part of any family narrative. It really should be your why. Why are you doing ballet? Why are you doing soccer? Why are you going to leadership camps?

And how does this help shape who I am? How am I growing as a person? Because if you can't say, "I'm doing this because I love it." For whatever positive reason, take it off the plate. Because all that we're ending up with is these oversubscribed, stressed-out children who come into our offices, and before we can have a conversation about, let's finish building your college list, I've got to pull out my Kleenex, because they're stressed out that my mom wants me to apply to this one more honors college that I know I'm not going to get into.

Lantigua-Williams: What you just said really compliments Jami's point about understanding what your child wants, but more importantly, understanding who your child is. Do you have different conversations with the students than you do when the parents are there? And how are they different? And then, how do we help them, the kids, to be able to have an honest conversation, as honest with their parents as they are with you? Ashley, you're nodding vigorously again.

Pallie: And my conversations likely look different than the college counselors here. It's little things, like when parents walk up to a college fair table with their child and the child kind of just goes and stands behind their parent, a little off to the side as the parent completely takes over the conversation. And my job is to kind of try to glance around the parent and say, "Hey, you back there, this process that is meant for you, come forward. I want to hear your voice." Right? Or when parents are visiting with their children on campus, and turning and physically facing a student and saying, "So tell me, what are you interested in?" And the hard part is, because of the college admissions process, many of them don't know, right? And they are doing things in order to get them in, but not necessarily doing things because they love them.

Williams: I mean, I think it's important that a family is, yes you have the conversation that college comes after high school, if that's what's appropriate for that child. But when I have had freshmen, when I was teaching, I'd have freshmen coming into my classroom identifying, "I'm going to this college, I'm going to that college."

And I'm thinking, you haven't even taken your first class in high school yet, so let's put that on the back table.

I once had a student when she identified an Ivy League school that she wanted to go to, and I said, "That sounds great. We'll work to expand the list." And she looked at me and she said, "Ms. Williams, you're a dream killer." So yeah, I carried that for a while. Fast forward four years, as she grew and got involved in a variety of things, she's at an amazing school that fits who she became. So I think taking names of colleges off the table, particularly at an early age, I think is a really important part of the conversations that happen at home.

Lantigua-Williams: So I want to just address the elephant in the room, which is, this feels very much to me like a middle-class and upper class process.

Pallie: Absolutely.

Williams: Perhaps the differences that privileged, in this community, that they have the access and the resources to be more engaged on a regular basis. And they're the ones who tend to call us inevitably, and email us at 10 o'clock at night. On the flip side, though, working with first generation students, part of the challenge is that those parents, they only know what they hear. They only know what pops up in the newspapers, and so their sphere of what colleges they should be looking at is limited.

And so, they too can be pushing their kids to a smaller number of colleges, because those are the ones that are going to elevate this first generation. And there's even more pressure on those students. I've worked with students who come from first gen families, where they're not just the first generation in their family, they're the first kid in the project. They're the first kid on the block. And so, they come to college with this pressure to succeed for the community.

Silver: I often find when I'm working with first generation low income students, when you're talking with families, they are more open to thoughts about what post-secondary looks like, not just college as well. And the opportunity to have discussion is really valuable, or they want to know the different types of colleges out there for those families who have not really thought about which colleges, and I appreciate the back and forth. At the end of the day, Juleyka, I think you said it, these families know their kid best.

And I think that when we are working with families, we're saying to the kids whether they're first gen, low income, affluent. Ultimately they are parents, and they know their kid best. And so, let's focus on that. The other stuff, like the college rankings, where I'm going to college, what should I do in the application process, is everything else. We need to kind of bring it back to, who is my child? And empower families to know that they actually play a role in this process, that they know their kid best.

Lantigua-Williams: All right, so let's be very specific. When is it most effective, most appropriate for a parent to play a role in this process?

Silver: I mean, I would say that it is imperative for families to play a role in financial aid. They often have all of the tools, they have all the forms, they have the money and or income. Even if they don't have the money, they have-

Lantigua-Williams: The information necessary.

Silver: All of the information that they need to fill out. That is an opportunity that I think lifts weight off of families, and lifts weights off of kids, to be able to focus on the why. Because the financial aid process is so convoluted, the students that end up doing that on their own, which are often first generation, low income students, they are the ones who bear an even bigger burden.

Williams: I would concur, not only with financial aid, but financing college in general. I think when we think about middle-class families who don't necessarily save, or didn't do a 529 plan or what have you. Having a real, honest conversation about what is available to pay for college, and being honest with themselves about the fact that, this is what we have, this is what we can afford. We're going to have to look at schools that offer merit scholarships, which is going to cut out the top 10 that they normally come to, because they don't give merit scholarships. So being really realistic about, and open to understanding what are your real options and having those conversations early, I think is important.

Pallie: I would also say with that, visiting lots of different schools, even early on. Just let's go see, you don't know if you like big, you don't know if you like small, you don't know if you like weather, different types of things, right? Just let's get in the car and let's just go walk around college campuses and get a feel, right? I think that, that starting a little bit earlier, we see a mad rush in the spring of 11th grade, but then there's hundreds of other people around, and it's nerve wracking and all of that stuff.

We're seeing more people starting to come in the fall of junior year, or in the summer before junior year. And it's very hands off, more just, I'm just going to walk around and see what this feels like. Do I like this idea of college? Do I like how this one kind of sits in my gut? And so, that's a good place for parents to show up.

Lantigua-Williams: So the three of you brought up first generation students, which I am one of them. We immigrated from the Dominican Republic, and I was the first one to go to college in the United States, I have three other siblings. And before I could fathom the idea of going away to a college, I had to deal with some serious cultural barriers to that because I'm a girl in a traditional Latino family. And we don't leave home until we're married, stereotypically speaking.

Many immigrant communities are very reticent to allow their very smart, very hardworking students to leave the home, especially if they're young girls. And that's a different type of helicopter parenting, in my eyes. So how do you navigate that when you have to have those conversations with parents?

Pallie: I put a lot of that on the colleges. I think that we have an entire team of people where, first off, we spend a lot of time doing that research and making sure everyone in our office can speak to those families, no matter what backgrounds they have. So it just can't be the person of color in the office, or the first gen person, right?

Williams: Thank you for that-

Pallie: Anyone should be able to step into the spaces.

Williams: I think it's important as we do this work, in counseling families, help them understand what questions to ask when you're on a college campus. So beyond the admissions getting in piece, how are you going to support my child, and what are the resources in place for safety? What are you doing about colleges that have the blue light phones? Or now they've got the apps or what have you. How are you supporting them academically? How are you helping them choose a major? Really helping them know what questions to ask, and where to go for those resources, both parents and students, is important.

Pallie: I would also say, I think what's really important, is recognizing that in these communities, that's a cultural lens that we have to understand the family's from. And we're not saying that they need to conform to a very specific understanding of this process. We should respect immigrants experiences, and different cultural nuances. Those are important, those are valid. We're not saying that a child needs to come and assimilate to, well this is what it's supposed to be, and you can major in English.

Who cares about being a doctor? Just confront your parents. That's not respectful either. Right? And so really kind of helping students navigate it, helping families navigate it, and coming to a place where both students and family feel comfortable and confident. Parents at the end of the day, they want their kids to be happy. And so, just helping them understand what happiness can look like in lots of different ways.

Lantigua-Williams: So what steps can parents take earlier than junior year to reassure themselves that they are really preparing their student to be an independent thinker, an independent decision maker, while still filling their need to feel involved, and knowledgeable and like they're contributing to the preparation, and ultimately the decision about college?

- Silver: I think that there's a component of loving the child you have, not loving the child you wish you had. Understanding and knowing who you have as a child, is essential in this conversation, and recognizing that, I think. You're not conforming somebody. You are actually trying to see where they can thrive.
- Williams: I think having them involved in a variety of activities that they choose to be involved in, allowing them to go to sleep away camp on their own, giving them the space to become independent early on, is important. It's also really important how you react to failure, or not so much failure, but disappointments early on, will shape how they will react to the possible disappointments from the college process.
- Lantigua-Williams: So here's a scary question. Does an overly involved, AKA helicopter parent, negatively impact an admissions decision? Ashley?
- Pallie: 100% that conversation is happening in admissions offices, probably not as much in admissions offices as it is in dean of students offices, where that, so they just inherit a parent who hasn't learned to let go, and has not learned to teach their child any independence, right? So for us, at my specific institution, no. Honestly no. Do I know for a fact that, that's happened? Has that happened at other places that I know? Absolutely. Where we actually sit around and we say, "Well, this parent has called us 20 times," or, "they show up every single week," or-
- Lantigua-Williams: They show up?
- Pallie: Yes. Or we have a parent who has spoken to every single person on the team, for at least an hour, right? And at what point do we cut it off? So we've created different mechanisms to cut off parents, and I think that, that helps we don't have as many instances of a parent overstepping, because we don't allow it as much. But absolutely it's happening. So yes, it can hurt. It can hurt children. I'm sure they know of instances where it has.
- Williams: I mean I've had reps from other selective colleges tell us, particularly when they're looking at a student's resume or activities, that they can kind of spot when it's a parent manufactured activity, and they'd rather see students do things that are organic, that they went out into their community and discovered a need and created a service opportunity. As opposed to went on a fully funded European service trip, or something of that nature. Or they had an internship in a law firm that just happens to share the same last name. So helping students again, sort of create their own experiences can definitely help them. And in those selective places where they've got a thousand applications for every spot, that becomes really important.

Silver: When you asked the question, can a helicopter parent hurt a student? While maybe they are not overtly hurting in your office, Ashley, it's going back to the question, right? A kid who is oversubscribed, and a box checker who can't reflect, are absolutely not popping to the top at some of these most selective institutions. And so you're finding that the kids aren't necessarily understanding why they do the things that they do, they just do them. And so when you think about it in that way, yeah, the authenticity of a kid, and their experience, absolutely it gets impacted in their overall process.

Lantigua-Williams: Right, because they can't articulate why they're doing things-

Silver: Why they're doing it, yeah.

Pallie: Oh, I'm sorry, go ahead.

Williams: Or they also don't have the basic social skills to understand how to navigate certain social situations. And so, the majority of them are coming into perhaps a roommate situation, where they've never had to share space before, and they're used to a parent who will call that bully parent or what have you, even that may not even be a bully situation. But, you hurt my child, I'm going to call the school, I'm going to call the parent. And they don't learn how to navigate some of those challenges, and it's important that they're developing those soft skills as well.

Pallie: Speaking exactly to that. There have actually been a couple of studies about helicopter parents, and the impact that that's had on kids. And so there's higher levels of depression, and anxiety, and a dissatisfaction with family life. And we're seeing that helicopter parenting is actually hurting children, even beyond the college admissions process. It's less about, did I get into the right college? But, can I actually be successful as a human being? Have I learned to be autonomous? Am I confident in my abilities? Do I feel loved and cared for?

And so much of this, is when you push everything that could hurt your child out of their way, you're also teaching your kid that they can't handle it. And so, what they are internalizing is, oh well my mom has to be the one who steps in, my dad. I can't do this on my own. So then it's crippling their ability to be successful when they do have a roommate conflict, or when a professor says, "You're late." No, the answer's just no, that is an F.

Williams: And it also can damage the relationship with the parent, because they also then come to think, "You don't believe in me."

Pallie: Absolutely.

- Silver: Yeah, so I just was going to say that there's some great white papers and research done out of Stanford, from the Challenge Success organization. And I think that some of that information is about kind of social emotional learning, which I think we've all kind of hinted at. And ultimately, I think Sharon made the comment earlier. We want our kids to be happy. We want to raise happy, thoughtful, empathetic adults who are going to go on and change the world, and do things better than we have.
- Lantigua-Williams: Thank you, Ashley. Thank you, Jamie. Thank you, Sharon. This was an exceptional conversation. I thoroughly enjoyed it. I have a seven and a nine year old, and now I have to rethink some of my parenting.
- Silver: Don't we all?
- Pallie: College Admissions Decoded is a podcast from NACAC, the National Association for College Admission Counseling. It is produced by Lantigua-Williams and Co. Paula Mardo is our sound engineer. Emma Forbes is assistant producer. If you'd like to learn more about our guests, our organization and the college admission process, visit NACACs website at NACACnet.org.

CITATION

National Association for College Admission Counseling. "Avoiding the Parent Trap: A Common-Sense Approach to College Admission." *NACAC College Admissions Decoded*, National Association for College Admission Counseling, November 20, 2019.

Produced by

The logo for Lantigua Williams & Co. is a black square with the company name in white, serif font. The text is arranged in three lines: "Lantigua", "Williams", and "& Co.".

**Lantigua
Williams
& Co.**