What Colleges Are Looking For: Facts & Myths About the Application Process

The college admission process can be long, bewildering and anxiety-producing for students and their families. Many are looking for the secret formula for getting admitted to the “right” school where a student can grow, learn and thrive. How does a student find that right school? And what are colleges really looking for in an applicant? What really goes on “behind the curtain” when college admissions offices consider a student’s application?

In this episode, two experienced professionals take on these questions and try to separate some of the facts and the myths in the college admission process.

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Rick Clark: Hello, and welcome to the College Admissions Decoded podcast. I’m Rick Clark, Director of Undergrad Admission at the Georgia Institute of Technology. I’m joined by my colleague and fellow NACAC member, Brennan Barnard, Director of College Counseling at the Derryfield School in Manchester, New Hampshire. Together, we’ve written a book called The Truth About College Admission: A family guide to getting in and staying together, published by the Johns Hopkins University Press. Welcome, my friend.

Brennan Barnard: Thanks, Rick.

Clark: The college admission process can be confusing and filled with anxiety for students and their families. Many people believe there's a secret formula for getting admitted to the right school where a student can grow, learn, and thrive. How can students find the right school for them? And specifically, what are colleges really looking for in an applicant? What really goes on behind the curtain when college admission officers consider a student's application? With today's discussion, we hope to begin to answer some of these questions and to separate some of the facts and the myths in the college admission process. Moderating our conversation today is Juleyka Lantigua-Williams 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. Lantigua-Williams, I'll turn this over to you.
J. Lantigua-Williams: Thanks, Rick. Welcome, Brennan. It's really good to be here. Thank you for my copy of the book. It will be duly annotated and highlighted soon. So, I want to focus in on how families can sort of drown out some of the noise and have an essential conversation, a healthy conversation, about college based on your findings and in your work.

Barnard: We really, at that kind of outside of the book, we really try to outline the wedges that get between parents and students in the college experience, and those can be anything from finances to lack of communication, just to kind of time together. And so we really highlight this idea of having authentic, honest conversations from the very start about what's it going to mean to finance a college education, what are some of the hopes and fears that both the student has and the parent has. To articulate those hopes, those fears, those expectations at the outset so that they're all on the same page and they can kind of move into the college admission experience and have a meaningful search that is connected as a family.

Lantigua-Williams: Okay.

Clark: Yeah. I think that is probably one of the things that both Brennan and I, as well as a lot of our colleagues kind of bemoan is watching families sometimes be divided through this process and unnecessarily so. Because if you really get talking to parents, they want the things that you wanted for them when they were three and the things you want for them when they're 13 and 23. You want them to be happy, you want them to have friends, you want them to have opportunities, but somehow along the way, there's a disconnect. And so what we try to do at the end of each chapter is provide basic questions for families that will help them to just have these conversations, just facilitate conversations.

Because when it's all said and done, and I think we see this on both the secondary as well as the higher ed side, they're actually not as far apart as sometimes they may seem. And if you can just sort of facilitate a couple basic questions, all of a sudden, you really do see that synching back up and that unified dialogue that is sometimes difficult to get to without someone else kind of bringing you along, and that's really the goal in a lot of ways of the book.

Lantigua-Williams: So what is a key question to begin with?

Barnard: Why? Why are you going to college? Right. Why are you going to college? Why? What are your hopes for the experience you want to have there? We talk about that as kind of the foundational question because too often, students start the college search just saying, where do I want to go, where can I get into, and haven't even stopped to think, okay, what do I want out of this and what's the reason for me even pursuing a college education?
Lantigua-Williams: But sometimes, the answer is, because everyone in my family went to college, because my parents told me I have to go to college.

Barnard: I'm on the treadmill, right?

Lantigua-Williams: Right.

Clark: Sure. And that is so true, but it’s still such an important question because.. We kind of parallel it to trying to walk before you crawl. You need to answer why in order to answer where. And yet, in a lot of families and communities and schools, it's not that way. That at the beginning, people are wearing the same hoodies around and they got the same list of schools and they see these places playing football on Saturdays and it’s just sort of part of their everyday experience, and they don't stop to say, but for me, why am I going? What do I really want to get out of this? And that is such a fundamental question to answer and to ask each other. And there again, a great opportunity to come together. Really honestly, parents, why do you want your son or daughter to go to college? And same on the other side for the student to answer it.

Lantigua-Williams: So I love that you talked a little bit about there is an implied culture around how we go about getting into college. Talk to me about some of the myths surrounding what it's like to think about college, what it’s like to apply for, what it's like to get into college that really have to be exploded.

Barnard: Yeah, yeah. We really need to kind of blow up the whole paradigm around it, right? Yeah. I mean, I think one of the biggest myths is that there's this kind of subset of highly selective schools that will somehow guarantee success, right? And then, so we ended up fixating on this, whether it's rankings or these kind of external indicators of where you should go. And we ended up focusing on these schools where there's so many great schools in this country that would be great fits for students. And somehow, the conversation gets really restricted to those schools. And I think one of the biggest myths for students is that, that this has to be an overwhelming experience, and for parents too. I talked with a lot of my rising seniors when they’re juniors, and they have this perception that this is going to be a painful experience, right? This is going to be...

Lantigua-Williams: They're bracing.

Barnard: Right, right. I just gotta get through this, right? And we're really encouraging students to say, this can be a joyful experience. This is about thinking about your future and what you want and how you're going to achieve those goals. And this doesn't have to be something that's a complete slog, right? This can be something that can be a real chance to identify who you are, kind of get in touch with what your hopes are and your identity as an individual.

Clark: It's interesting too, and I've done this in presentations a lot, where you just play a little word association game to parents or to students. And you say college, and when you say
college to student or a parent, most of the time, the answers are friends and learning and opportunities and getting a job and all of these types of very kind of open, freeing terms. You just add one word to that and you say college admission and all of a sudden, it’s like what Brennan just described, it’s tension and it’s tests and it’s money and it’s stress, and all of this, one word. And so what we try to frame back is, listen, you go to college in a lot of ways to grow, to be more open. If you can grow and be more open in the college admission experience, that is possible, but it’s only possible if you keep exactly what Brennan just described, a very broad view of our vast and beautiful higher education landscape in America. And I think that’s one of the biggest myths, small subset.

The other is it’s really hard to get into college, and that’s just factually false. The average admit right now for four-year schools is about 65%. I think it was The Chronicle earlier in the year did a great list of, and we put this in the book, schools that have a very high admit rate but also a very high retention rate. So, in other words, it’s not difficult to get in, but the kids that are getting there are happy, right, theoretically, because they’re coming back. They are, financially, it’s affordable because again, they’re coming back. And so there’s so much I think that helps to reframe that right around, of course, in the media, if it bleeds, it leads, right? So everyone wants to talk about Stanford because they’ve got a 0.02 admission rate, but the truth is that’s not the benchmark really. That’s an anomaly. I mean, that’s a huge myth is that I can’t get in and even if I do get in, I can’t afford it.

And yes, college costs are high, but if you have a more broad view, you can find places you can be admitted at an affordable rate.

Lantigua-Williams: So I feel like there is a little bit of trophy hunting that happens that helps to aggrandize this myth, which is, oh, yes, my kid is going to get into that single digit admissions university and we’re going to prove just how smart and talented and wonderful my kid is and what a great job I did raising her.

Barnard: Right. Right. Such a referendum on our parenting ability, right?

Lantigua-Williams: Right, right. So how would you counter that? How would you counter the parent who clearly has this sort of mentality about their child and where this child is clearly destined to go?

Clark: Basically, what I would tell parents to do is they'd need to get out of their own little echo chamber. And we say this very specifically. The last chapter of our book, one is an open letter to parents and the other is an open letter to students. And it's sort of our hopes for how they'll go about this. And we try to just say that, listen, if you're a parent and you're going through this process, get out of your own echo chamber. Don't talk to people that are also with high school kids, talk to people who have kids in college. I've never, in all my years of doing this, heard a parent of a college kid say, you know what I wish we had done is stressed more during high school, right? And, thinking about Georgia Tech, I talk to kids all the time where we weren't their first choice. We were
their third choice. And maybe they got in and couldn't afford it. Maybe they didn't get in.

But inevitably, you talk to them in the spring of their first, and they're like, I'm so glad it worked out this way. I'm so glad it worked out. And so my thing on that is kids are like cats. They always land on their feet. And we just have to allow them to do it. And the parents sometimes just need to get out of the way.

Lantigua-Williams: But sometimes, the parents are also not just lovingly engaged with the process but also financially invested in it. And they think of it very dryly as what's my return on investment. So what data can you bring to bear? What have you found in your research and investigating that can temper a little bit of that drive to get their money's worth?

Clark: So in chapter three, Brennan alluded to this earlier, we talk about wedges. And one of those wedges is money. And one of the biggest things about money is talking about it earlier. Sitting in an admissions seat around the country, we get a lot of kids coming in, in April of the senior year, they've been admitted, they bought the t-shirt, they posted it on social media and now all of a sudden, they're having this family conversation about, oh, crap.

Lantigua-Williams: How are we going to pay for this?

Clark: I can't pay for it. That should have happened a year ago because I'm not qualified to moderate that kind of counseling situation. And so we talk about limitations. If parents will just be really honest with their kids, here are our limitations, and sometimes, families don't have limitations. They could write a check, but are they willing to? So what are our conditions? And then what are our expectations?

So regardless of you're a middle income family, upper-middle-class, one percenter or whatever it is, there could be limitations. I'm not going to pay for anything that cost more than our public flagship. My condition is that even if we could afford this, you're paying for if you choose to move off campus, all those type of things. Just respect the student enough to be part of the family and be part of the conversation, to have that conversation and a family dialogue. And honestly, that's the whole book is about this is trusting each other and being open with each other.

Barnard: And just sort of return to the return on investment piece. When I'm talking with families, I like to think of it not as return on investment, but return on engagement, right? So it's not necessarily about just buying this college education, it's about how much you're getting back from the amount you're engaging in college life and in your own education. There's lots of data, lots of research out there that show that engagement is what really matters and what kind of leads to good outcomes.

Lantigua-Williams: So let's say that a parent, a family is able to have a really productive conversation. They get on the same page. There are still things that colleges look for in particular in their candidates, right? And it varies, obviously, institution to institution,
but what have you learned about some of the fundamental attributes that colleges are looking for and how can a family best help their student meet those?

Clark: So, I mean, I've been at Georgia Tech for 16 years. I was also at Wake Forest University and Georgia State University. Very different schools. But then I also, I'm part of a bunch of associations, including NACAC. I serve on panels all the time and listen to colleagues and all, a huge range of schools talk. And so we write two chapters about this, one's the academic side and one's the extra curricular sort of out, less quantifiable side. And we kind of acknowledge, we don't speak for all 4,000 schools in the country, but here's the basics, right? And the first and foremost is where do you go to school? I mean, that's really question number one. When a college admission person opens up an application, the question is where do you go to school?

Lantigua-Williams: So geography.

Clark: And specific school.

Lantigua-Williams: And the specific school.

Barnard: Your high school. Right.

Lantigua-Williams: Oh, wow.

Barnard: Which high school do you attend?

Lantigua-Williams: Okay.

Clark: Because we spend a lot of time saying, Brennan's from Derryfield, right? Let me understand this applicant from Derryfield. What are the classes that they had available to them and what were their choices? And one thing admission people don't do a great job of, admittedly, is we'll throw out GPAs all day long. We'll talk about rigor of curriculum all day long, but we don't really talk about why. And the why behind that is, listen, when you show up on a college campus, there's an expectation that you're prepared and that you want to be pushed and stretched. And so one of the things we're looking at is you could've navigated your way through high school a lot of different ways. Did you choose to push and stretch yourself? Because when you don't have that option and a professor has these expectations, then you have demonstrated you welcome that.

You've demonstrated that, that is, it's a character trait essentially. So we say, where do you go to school? What did you take? What could you have taken? And then, how did you in those classes? So thinking about a Georgia example, you take a Metro Atlanta private school that offers all the APs and you take Southwest Georgia, very rural, down near the kind of panhandle of Florida, they may have two APs available to them. We're not penalizing that kid for where they grew up, but we want to make sure that here's a kid who took those two APs and then they went over to the community college and took
a couple extra classes. And that really shows, they did everything they could in the environment they had to prepare themselves.

Barnard: And likewise, with that suburban independent school, they're not expecting that, that student will have taken every AP available to them and that they're looking for balance within their curriculum and how many, what they've done with other opportunities. So they're not looking, did they take seven of eight APs or whatever it is. It's really...

Lantigua-Williams: It's just, did you raise your own level of difficulty basically?

Clark: Yeah.

Barnard: Right.

Lantigua-Williams: Did you challenge yourself with what was available to you?

Barnard: Appropriately. The qualitative side, again, for formulaic schools is not going to be as big an issue. Those reading kind of through holistic mission are looking at activities a student has taken part in, not just kind of a resume of activities, they're looking for impact, they're looking for influence, they're looking for engagement and they're looking for the ways that students have not necessarily been the captain of a team or the leader of this club or leader of that club, but how they engaged in something meaningfully and how have they followed their passion, passion ends up being kind of a difficult word in college admission, but how they followed their interests and how they pursued the things that really excite them. How have they made an impact on their community?

Lantigua-Williams: So let's talk a little bit about impact, right? Because they are students who have other responsibilities. There are students who have jobs. There are students who come from cultures where they're not permitted to really do anything beyond their studies. How can a student realize this impact component in how they're going to be evaluated?

Barnard: Yeah. I also work for the Making Caring Common project at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. And, I mean, this is one of the things we've really gone at in terms of leveling the playing field in college admission. And colleges, they really do honor the idea that students have responsibility. They might have to hold a full time job to support the family or they might everyday after school, be home caring for a younger sibling or a elderly relative. And that is as much of an impact and influence in the eyes of colleges than being the captain of the tennis team, right? And so that stuff matters.

Lantigua-Williams: So students should put that kind of stuff?

Barnard: Yeah.

Lantigua-Williams: Wow.
Barnard: Yeah. And the Common app just actually now has a tab that you can pull down under extracurricular activities that is family responsibilities, and so students...

Lantigua-Williams: That's wonderful.

Barnard: Yeah. But the thing is, we really need to encourage students to report those because it doesn't immediately come up for them. They don't think, this counts. It doesn't count that I care for my younger sibling. But we need to, as a counseling profession, to get this word out to students that, you know what? It matters.

Clark: At Georgia Tech last year, we added that question essentially into one of our supplemental choices. It wasn't mandatory, but essentially, who are you in your family, what role do you play and how are you looked at? And I think if I were to boil it down, a lot of times, people look at this kind of black veil of college admission, and you pull back that curtain and if you sat in committee meetings around the table like we're sitting at right now, the real fundamental question that they either will verbatim ask or they are asking in their head is, will this student be missed when they leave? And the bottom line is, you can be missed in a lot of ways. You can be missed at your job, you can be missed within your family, because like you said, you're a caretaker of three younger siblings. You could be missed because you're the star athlete. You could be missed because you're the president of a club. But you don't have to hold a title to be missed.

And so colleges, I do think, are aware of the need to build applications in such a way where they can identify that and give students an opportunity to write about that as well. But that is really at the core of the question we're asking, because a myth, again, is we're looking for all these disgustingly well-rounded kids, right, who have done it all and they've checked every box, and listen, I work...

Lantigua-Williams: They're obnoxious.

Clark: I work in a place that draws a lot of type A kids so I can see their wheels turning, and they are thinking, oh my gosh, I've played three sports and I was captain od all and I was district champion and blah-blah-blah, but I never worked. And so they're like babysat cousins sophomore year, just because they feel like they've never left a line blank and they got to fill out everything. And the truth is that we know that we live in a very specialized culture and society. And no matter what you do, people want more of your time. So if you're a musician, they want you all year round. If you're a tennis player, they want you all year round. It's harder now to do it all, right? And so we don't have that expectation.

Lantigua-Williams: So let's talk a little bit about some of the other really key elements. The visit to the campus, that, also people, I think, don't realize, it's very important just for them to get to understand what life would be like on the campus but also to show interest and to show commitment.
Clark: I'm really pleased with this. We took a lot of time, we talked to a lot of people around the country, and many of whom are NACAC members, and we said, what are the questions that you're asking in interviews? And so we have two pages of just questions that kids could do to prep, to get ready for interviews, things that'll be coming to them, right? We also write extensively about, a whole chapter on, maximizing the college visit. When you go on campus, look, you took time and paid money to get there, maximize that time, whether they're tracking it or not, forget that.

Lantigua-Williams: So what should they do when they're on campus?

Clark: Get your answers, right? We find that they ask, sometimes, I'm not going to say they're terrible questions, but they miss opportunities. And they don't sometimes know what to ask, so they end up asking really basic stuff they could've just gotten off the website.

Barnard: Do you have a biology major?

Clark: That's right.

Barnard: That's right. Yeah. They're just going through the motions. I mean, they're just kind of, I'm going to take the college tour, I'm going to do the information session. But what we say in the book is that you really need to go off the beaten track and go sit in the student center and just kind of observe and...

Clark: Appropriately eavesdrop.

Barnard: Right, yeah.

Clark: We try to talk about some things like faculty/student ratios. So faculty/student ratio is a fine number, but it's, actually, there's a lot of junk in that number too. So for instance, if Georgia Tech's faculty/student ratio is 19 to one, a kid could look at that and be like, oh, well, there are going to be 18 other students and me in my calculus class. No. That is not going to be the case because there's thrown into that or people who are on sabbatical, people that only teach graduate classes, all kinds of stuff, right? And so what we say is, look, you need to be asking, what is the most common class size, and not just that, right? So for instance, ours goes from 19 to one to between 26 and 33. So now you get a little more accurate, but then you need to ask, is that true in my major? And what's that going to look like in my first year versus my fourth year?

So take mechanical engineering at Georgia Tech, I mean, you're going to walk into a chemistry class of 120 or 130, and then, even as a senior, because that's a really popular class, you could have 50 or 60 people also in your class. Whereas if you're a physics major, you could have seven in those 4,000 level classes. But they don't know to ask that because they saw the faculty student ratio, and they think, well, that's me and 18 other friends, sitting around just having a dialogue. So those are the kinds of things we're trying to just say, ask better questions.
Lantigua-Williams: I’ve talked to other NACAC members about the role the family can play and some of them were very specific about at which precise points in the admissions process a parent, a family member, should be the most involved? And others were more open-ended, but always emphasizing how we want to let the student drive the bus. So in your research, what have you found about the involvement of parents and its impact on the admission process and the admission outcome?

Barnard: I think, again, we come back to this idea of having really honest conversations really early, not necessarily about where are you going to go, but what's this experience going to look like for us? Who's going to have what roles? What is my role as a parent going to be? And what is your role as student going to be? And where can I help you? And where can I step back? And just being really honest about those things. I mean, I do an exercise with my seniors every year in the fall just anonymously saying, what's the one thing you wish you could say to your parents but you can't right now? And it's so interesting to see some of this, I mean, everything from, ‘Guys, I got this,’ to, ‘Help, I need this.’ So it really does vary for every student.

Clark: The only thing I'd add to that is at Georgia Tech, we do something in orientation for students and it’s this idea of shifting just a couple little letters around in a word, but from parent to partner. And I think that is the goal. During high school, especially as they get into that junior and senior year, this idea that, listen, I've been driving this whole time, right? I pretty much pick the school, the house we live in, the school you go to, most of that is parent decision, but I'm going to start kind of moving to a nautical example and climbing up into this crows nest, right? You've got the wheel. I'm still on the boat, right? And I'm looking out and I see some things from my vantage point with my experience because I love you and I want to save the boat.

And if there's an iceberg or if there's a shoal or, that's kind of the extent of my nautical terms. But we also have what we call the parental pronoun test in our book, which is like, look, if you are saying, our first choice is Vanderbilt or we are taking the SAT next week, you might need to go for a walk.

Lantigua-Williams: What are some of the other concrete ways where red flags might come up in an application package for a student?

Barnard: Just the whole portfolio, not just the essay you're saying?

Lantigua-Williams: Yeah. Just in other ways where you might spot either a professional who's been hired to help the person, a parent who has sort of overstepped, things that might seem manufactured that, based on what the other things you know about the student, seem not plausible. Because there's some inflating that happens in this process, if we're all honest.

Barnard: Right. On the high school side, we need to be talking to students about what it means to be an ethical applicant and to apply with character and to not exaggerate, not say
history of family responsibilities because you have to take the trash out every Friday, right? I mean, that's not in the spirit of this, right?

Clark: I was actually thinking about, and I think we put this in the book, I'm pretty sure we did. I mean, I distinctly remember reading places where the, so the parent probably did write the essay but they're not as worried about the supplemental, and so the kid has written in there like, please don't admit me. I didn't want to apply here to begin with and my parent made me. And I'm pretty sure we did put that in there, but there's a number of examples of that and they're like, they checked my essay but they didn't check my short answer and I'm telling you, this is not where I want to go. Here's where I want to go. And so those are the kinds of things. That's kind of why we wrote the book. If you get to have just honest, easy, open conversations earlier, you don't have that kind of crazy stuff happening down the line.

Lantigua-Williams: Okay. Any parting words? Any words of advice?

Barnard: I would just say gratitude. This is an opportunity and students need to be grateful to their parents and to those that support them and parents need to be proud and grateful for the students they've raised and the young people they've brought up. And so to express gratitude for the people who are writing recommendations for you, for the people who’ve helped you get to where you are, for the people on the admission side that have admitted you and maybe you're not going to their school and you're going to another school, but really being grateful.

Lantigua-Williams: Nice. That's lovely.

Clark: Yeah. I would concur 100% on that. What I would tell families to do is around the time that schools are starting, first week of classes, if you're a junior in high school or a senior in high school, go watch the social media of all the stuff happening in that first week of classes, and what you see is people are smiling, balloons are out, it's sunny, life is good. But if you really were to talk to each individual kid there and you had gone to them a year before, a lot of them didn't expect to be walking onto that campus. A lot of them had turbulence along the way that rerouted them and shifted them in different ways and yet, here they are, they're on a college campus, they're excited about it, they're walking with friends, it's a sunny day. Life is good. And year in and year out, that's what happens.

And so I would just say that, I don't know why people don't like to be told everything's going to be okay, but when it comes to this, now that's not always true in some doctors tests and other things in life, but with college admission, actually, that is true. And I just wish more people would believe that.

Lantigua-Williams: Thank you. I really appreciate that. Thank you both. This was wonderful, insightful, funny.
Clark: Juleyka, thanks for moderating and thanks to our audience for listening. Please leave a review and rate us on Apple Podcasts as your feedback helps shape the show.

College Admissions Decoded is a podcast from NACAC, the National Association for College Admission Counseling. It is produced by Lantigua Williams & Co. Paola Mardo is our sound designer. Emma Forbes is the show's assistant producer. If you would like to learn more about our guests, our organization and the college admission process, visit NACAC's website at nacacnet.org.

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