

Preparing for College

On occasion, ISACS receives an inquiry, sometimes from overseas, regarding basic college-preparatory requirements for admission to competitive U.S. colleges and universities. What we share with those making such inquiries might be useful for our own schools to share with parents of eighth or ninth graders.

The first and most important premise of sending a child to an independent school is to recognize that there are no guaranteed "outcomes" (such as admission to the Ivy League colleges) but rather guaranteed processes (such as "stretching" young people in every way, intellectually, socially, athletically, and spiritually and also offering effective counseling on appropriate colleges). The very good "college-counseling" that occurs at our schools is effective in matching students with schools in which they will thrive. No college counselor and no school "gets" a student into a particular college or university: The student's record does that. The measure of the effectiveness of a school and its college counseling is not how many students are accepted by the Ivy Leagues but rather how many students are accepted by their first or second choice colleges. The advantage of an independent school in the whole enterprise is that it is more likely in the communities that independent schools create that students are pushed harder and farther academically and are expected to participate more fully extracurricularly, both of which do count very much in the record of achievement a matriculating senior presents to colleges.

The eighth grade is not too early in the game to begin planning a four-year sequence of high school courses and activities to make one's record attractive to colleges and universities.

In a 1993 pamphlet published by Harvard University, "Choosing Courses To Prepare for College," the president of the college recommended that the preferred transcript for the most competitive of American colleges and universities would include the following:

* 4 years of English language and literature, including frequent practice in the writing of expository prose * 4 years of math * 4 years of science (including biology, chemistry or physics, preferably at least one at an advanced level) * 3 years of history (including U.S. History, European History and one additional advanced history course) * 4 years of a single foreign language.

If your children are strong students, you should encourage them to enroll in Advanced Placement courses (A.P.), the more the better. Typically, college admissions officers look most favorably on those transcripts that reveal five or more courses per year, heavily weighted towards traditional, rigorous, year-long courses: i.e., year-long physics "counts more" than an elective such as "Physics for Poets."

Also, extracurricular involvement and leadership are key to competitive college admissions: sustained commitment to one or two activities (sports, music, the arts, publications, community service, etc.) count more than a dilettantish approach to trying a different club every semester.

I should note that scores on the S.A.T. still count very heavily for the most competitive colleges: the best way to have high scores is to read voluminously, to engage in provocative and serious discussion, and to take advanced mathematics courses.

Finally, I might add that there are around 4000 colleges and universities in the United States, all but 300 or so far less competitive in terms of admissions than the 10% everyone reads about. Since only about 1/2 of students matriculating to college actually finish within six years of beginning, it is worth commenting that the most important factor is a good "fit" between the student and the college (not between the parent's aspirations and the college). To assure that good fit, I would rely heavily on good college counseling: if you do not have it at your current school, I would seek it elsewhere, professionally.

Finally, for students studying outside of the U.S., or for students seeking an intensive learning experience outside of one's own home locale, families often consider U.S. boarding schools, at least for a couple of years, either as a junior-senior year undertaking or as a "PG" (post-graduate) year, to add the academic rigor, to give the student more time to develop and mature, and to establish the academic credentials from a school known to U.S. colleges and universities.

If you are interested in considering a local independent school or a boarding school, you may write to ISACS again for a list of very fine schools here in the Midwest, or you can access from the Internet the ISACS Home Page, from which you can find listings and home pages for independent schools throughout the country:

ISACS Home Page URL-- <http://www.isacs.org>

"Prep" schools come in many colors and stripes, but all are committed via their missions to help young people to grow significantly, so that their graduates are "prepared for college and for life thereafter." Our data shows that to an extraordinarily high degree our schools achieve their mission.

----- Author: Patrick F. Bassett, Winter '97 ISACS Newsletter Insert.