NYSAIS Counselor Conference at Mohonk
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May 14, 2019

(We added our descriptor download to our collective notes from the ACCIS writing retreat we recommended. Thanks to all for your enthusiastic participation and valuable contribution.)

Academic:
Generous learner
Fences with ideas
Intellectually hungry
Grapples with texts and topics
Embraces complexity
Elevates class discussion
Challenges teachers and peers to think outside the box
Community service resilient
Excels across curriculum
Moves class discussion forward
Inhabits the life of the mind
True intellectual
A scholar
Love of learning for its own sake

What if they are the middle of class?
Persistent
Worker bee vs. lover of ideas
What he lacks in skills, he makes up for in will
Creative and collaborative
Willing to ask for help
Regularly meets with teachers
Self advocate
Takes feedback well
Maintains perspective
Listens carefully and seeks help
Strong work ethic
Open to growth
Demonstrates growth mindset
Respected by teachers

Community:
Changemaker
Impact player
Pro-social leader
Zippy
Effervescent
Energizer bunny
Charismatic and relatable leader
Proactive activist
Genuine passion for social justice
High EQ
Selfless leader
Genuine concern for others
Good listener
Go to person for xyz
Creative problem solver
Made lasting impact
Created legacy
Compelling public speaker
Reliable
Extracurricular footprint extends through all four floors of our space
Mobilizer
Kid behind the kid who gets credit
Glue that brings a project together
Student you want in the dorm
Kid everyone wants to be their own son or daughter
Kid I wish I had the guts to be in high school

That kid who is harder to write for:
Late bloomer
Fashionably late
Hit stride
Work in progress
Didn’t peak in high school
Has yet to exhaust his full potential
Someone worth investing in
Singularly focused
Didn’t succumb to getting involved in everything for the sake of college

We also promised to share the information we brainstormed together about gathering information for the letter. Here goes:

Interviews with departments provide a ton of rich information - 2 hour meetings
When doing it by department, you learn of the trajectory of each student
Attend school events (try to attend a bit of everything if you can)
Questionnaires for parents and students
Gather comments from teachers who teach juniors
Request a parent letter
At start of senior year, show a redacted letter and ask students to write an opening paragraph for their own letter. Ask this to be taken seriously, must be reflective to be of value
Interviews with student - starting summer after junior year - practice for the real thing, connecting with the student in a new way (I know more about them and they feel like they’ve told me things in confidence)
Peer interviews or paragraphs or letters
Coach feedback
Chaperones for major trips
Observing activities
Question on Q: Who in your class do you admire and why (confidentially)? Also allows to take the temperature of the class
Download of ideas from deans/advisors
Anecdotals or teacher comments

ANN VELENCHIK, DEAN OF ACADEMIC AFFAIRS, WELLESLEY COLLEGE

***at the end of the day, your job is to write a letter that conveys nuance and information that cannot be found elsewhere in the application? You can’t write a letter that is stronger than the kid b/c the disconnect will be obvious and you can never write a weak letter b/c of who you are as an educator.***

Similar kids in the middle; how to distinguish their voice
“Good” kid-why you want them?
Format
Johnny One-Note: How much more can you add? Should you write more?
Bulleting vs. indenting
Fresh look at how to write recs
How to write about a student who struggles?
Discipline cases
How to be an effective storyteller?
How to “sell” the apathetic student?
Getting at the essence
Eliminating bias in the letter
“Show don’t tell” phenomenon
You can’t write them in and you can’t get them in
The letter can provide nuance
When 20% of the class go to Harvard, Yale, etc? Lack of creativity from the ind. School
This process is dessert for students and parents especially from the independent schools

At Wellesley:
Read Testing, Trans, SR, Recs, Common App and essays. They want the student’s voice to be last, the student needs to have the last word.

Add peer letters?

Add anecdotal info from 9th and 10th grade teachers. Pine Crest example.

Dean Velenchik: Don’t want the student that “meets every day with teacher”= aggressive/intense learning which is not realistic in college.

Draws on writer’s specific expertise and experience with the student. Don’t rely on someone else’s anecdotes.

How does the student think?

Does not knowing where they are applying help you write? Does it decrease the anxiety for the writer?

Add attributes for the institutions that would be great fit but don’t name the colleges.

“punches above their weight”

Reiterates that student’s part about medical leave or hardship is most powerful for the committee

Start emphasizing half-credit electives that are traditional courses.

Shy is a diagnosis so don’t ever say it.

“Raises her hand and participates.”

Don’t make your letters sound like an encyclopedia b/c that’s how everyone starts to sound the same. Too much of everything and not enough of anything very specific.

The rec needs to be the highlight reel where you can show how the student stretches him/herself.

What are the student’ assets???

Don’t get in the letter with the kid. Stay out of the letter. This is not about you.
Try not to throat clear at the beginning of the letter. Jump write in or write it out and then cut before sending the letter to colleges.

The committee is okay with redacting quotes...the footnote police will not come after you.

No hyper-thesaurus

Bullets are for visual opportunities and you must use headings. Upside of bullet is quick access to information but you can’t lose nuance. When you are trying to tell a story, bullets are not helpful. Facts, quick info, and stats=use bullets.

The college application process and the data makes it so hard for kids to be a human being. The format does not allow it; it doesn’t inspire you in that way. It’s a tool... tools=checklist. The letters and essays are the only spaces where you can honor the student has a human being.

Tip: be careful about over medicalizing in recs.
Three basic categories: Physical health issues, mental health, eating disorder
When it comes to health, silence is harmful in the application especially when it’s transparent in the transcript.

Don’t say something and then with one “and” you take back your previous statement.

Stanford looks like a fancy taco bell. When when you are on campus there is no one...b/c they have negative admit rate.

Be careful when “I” is used too much in your letter...it’s not about you.

When emphasizing a student’s purity of motive, be sure to not inadvertently throw the others in the school group under the bus.

***Focus on growth in letter

Helpful adjectives/descriptors:

**Academic**
- Really smart
- Intelligent
- Bright
- Organized
- Curious
- Engaged

**Collaborative**
- Creative
- Cerebral
- Intellectual
- Reflective
- Insightful
- Synthesizes ideas
- Challenges ideas
Good listener
Active participant
Writes fluently, cogently
Empathetic
Invested
Thoughtful
Generous
Patient/Kind
Diligent
Passionate
Forward thinking
Leads discussions
Takes initiative
Extends work beyond assignments
Finds the nuances
Deals well with contradictions
Raisers the level of conversation
Makes use of support resources
Thinks outside the box
Questions orthodoxy
Unafraid to ask questions
Risk taker
Works independently
Self-directed
High potential
Growth
Intellectual maturity
Understands “grey” vs. black and white
Finds joy in ideas
Loves learning
Upward trajectory
Bold
Wrestles with ideas
Comfortable with ambiguity
Open to constructive criticism
Helpful to peers
Admits to errors
Goes beyond expectations
Passionate about particular subject
Talented in particular subject
Resilient
Worker bee versus intellectual creative type
Seriousness of purpose
Practical
Good problem solver
Ambitious
Learner outside of the classroom
Brings classroom learning outside

**Extracurriculars/Cocurriculars**

Leadership
Teamwork
Resilience
Focus
Determination
Time management
Impact in the activity/role
Mentoring
Creativity
Service
Compassion
Dedication
Passion
Initiative
Willingness to try new things
Patience
Coachability
Perseverance
Fun
Commitment
Relationship building
Role model
Humility
Magnetism
Mental toughness
Competitiveness
Gritty
Talented
Moral compass
Judgment
Independence
Zippy
Socially aware/connected
Community builder
Savvy about the world around her
Activist
Advocate
Engaged
Entrepreneurial

**Character/personality/work habits**

Risk Taker
Funny
Witty
Clever Engaging Charming Genuine Authentic Conscientious Grounded Mature Humble Inclusive Friendly Compassionate Contemplative Confident Gracious Grateful Emotive Sensitive Puts others first Unselfish Generous Thoughtful Patient Mindful Approachable Easy going Intense Empathetic Loyal Kind Trustworthy Responsible Integrity Positive Bridge builder Resourceful Upbeat Makes people around them better Brings out the best in others Supportive Encouraging Good friend Energetic Enthusiastic Exuberant Sensitive Strong willed Strong minded Determined Not a joiner Late bloomer All in Nonconformist Different drummer Cautious Emboldened Brave Intrepid Courageous Adventuresome Stalwart Confident Assertive Takes Initiative Takes control Respectful of others Leads from behind Collaborative/collegial

***problem at women’s college...women are just as competitive as men but there’s cognitive dissonance in that you can’t show it around boys. Be nice and be quietly competitive. Cause of so much anxiety amongst women? Show your desire to win or be the best.

Outline:
Overview
Observations regarding academic growth
Observations on Mary’s leadership and areas of impact:
If you use bullet points, separate by categories.