

Forest for Trees

- Anand Sridharan

CO' 2024

There is a whole world outside of science and math. Sounds like heresy coming from someone who was good at only science and math and one who made a career out of these very skills. I am typing this while re-watching Oppenheimer on a flight - arguably the most scientific movie to come out of Hollywood in a long time. But enough about me.

The forest is your last few years with your children staying under your roof and the trees are the whole process of college admissions and my central theme of this essay is 'Don't miss the forest for the trees'. The 4 years of high school is when the kids are forging friendship bonds that last for a lifetime and it is important for us parents to facilitate such bonds. It is also the time they are figuring out who they really are and what interests them. I realized I am not making a carbon copy of me but just witnessing the creation of a new individual. It is especially a challenge when your kid is very talented in things you don't fully understand. I learnt from my friends, the best thing is to let them blossom in their own way and it was the best advice I ever received. These last few years are also the time you can influence your kids on good family values. Take family vacations through the course of these years. Once they go to college, such opportunities will dwindle fast. Talk to them, see what interests them.

If you have this clarity, you can answer the famous question everyone asks you, "Is Mission High a high pressure environment". My answer is, yes if you listen to some parents, it might feel that way. If you step back and let your kid make the choices on how they would like to navigate the academically focused High school, you and your child will end up OK.

For folks like me who have not studied in the US, I suggest investing in a good college counselor, probably during the summer before Sophomore year. It is not to game the system and they don't do miracles. They give an objective view of what are the opportunities that are open for the student based on the student's academic credentials, aptitude and interest. An important function they serve is to set the expectations straight and help the parents understand the current situation when it comes to the admission process and ensure basic mistakes are not made in the admission process. A classic example of a basic mistake is not applying for a combination of "reach", "target" and "safety" colleges. From my limited experience, I feel grades are important in the admission process. They pretty much setup your reach schools and targets. In my opinion there is very little we as parents can do to influence our kids' grades. So keep an eye on the grades, don't fret over it, unless the student reaches out to you for help like tuition, there is no point. This also goes with taking Honors and APs. The student should express strong interest in the subject and have strong aptitude for the subject. Otherwise don't go for these courses. I think you end up with collateral damages.

About extra curricular activities, I learnt long ago, you don't want a jack of several trades. You want a master in one area. Otherwise extracurriculars are merely a tie breaker when grades cannot sufficiently pick students.

I notice a strong trend of people wanting to study Computer Science or related fields. As a person from this industry, I want to let you know, the world does not need only Computer Scientists. The world needs artists, lawyers, dentists, physicists and experts in countless other disciplines. When applying for colleges, don't get into the rat race for just computer science. While a chosen few will make it, a lot of you will be left behind. So match the aptitude and interest for the student with the discipline you want them to apply. The colleges are also flexible and can let your child switch courses (with some restrictions). So the choice they make can be altered as they go through their college career. My parting thoughts are, enjoy the high school experience. Watch your children grow into young adults. Give them the freedom to mature into great adults who will always cherish the experience of going through these formative years with you.

Anand Sridharan (With helpful edits from the family)

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