

403: AP, IB, Honors, Oh My! How Admissions Officers View Your High School Courses, Rigor, and School Context w/Susan Tree

SM Clips

Timestamp	Quote	Word Count
27:14 - 28:00	“What students often don't realize is that when a college sits down, and is evaluating their application, and they're looking at the transcript, they're really looking at a historical document that has a lot of context to it. So they're looking at grades nine through at least through the end of 11th grade, and possibly partway through 12th grade, depending on the time of the year. And they're looking at a student with particular academic interests, and particular strengths. So the question of AP – or this class or that class – is not looked at in a vacuum. It's looked at as part of a historical journey that a student has taken through their high school experience.”	46 sec

Show notes:

In today's episode, Tom Campbell (*CEG's Community Manager*) and Susan Tree (*a college counseling and admissions legend with 40+ years of experience*) chat about all things related to the academic part of a student's college application— which, at many selective colleges, is seen as the “foot in the door” of their selection process.

This is part 1 of a series we'll be doing around students' academic background and interests and how they factor into the admissions process. Part 2 is all about “intellectual curiosity”: a quality that many colleges actively look for in students, yet is a little more ambiguous and nuanced compared to mapping out a high school course plan.

Why these episodes?

- According to the [2018-2019 National Association for College Admission Counseling's Admission Trend Survey](#), students' grades and strength of curriculum are the top two application components that are of “considerable importance” to colleges
- During [CEG's Applying to Highly Selective Colleges & Universities Course](#), the section on academics received the most questions out of all other application components— and elicited the most confusion!

- While we aren't able to give all students and families who come to us for support individualized guidance about their particular high school (though we do offer [comprehensive college counseling at CEG!](#)), we wanted this podcast to provide the most comprehensive advice possible around academic choices

On the episode you'll hear Susan and Tom discuss:

- Why taking five solid academic courses (English, math, social studies, science and language) each year of high school gives students the broadest range of exciting college options
- How advanced course rigor (including Advanced Placement/AP and International Baccalaureate/IB courses) is evaluated by colleges
- The potential danger of "overspecialization" in an academic subject too early
- The value of demonstrating self-directedness in your academic journey— and where do to that in an application
- How admissions officers evaluate and contextualize your transcript and high school profile when making admissions decisions

5:00

Play-by-play:

- 5:33 - So... Why are we talking about planning your HS Academic Journey?
- 8:28 - What are the benefits of planning your HS experience early?
- 10:39 - What do colleges expect from students?
- 11:08 - How do you check a college website for their required HS coursework?
- 12:48 - How is it different at more competitive universities?
 - 13:14 - What if your HS doesn't offer opportunities for the classes you want to take?
- 14:44 - What is the value of self-directedness?
- 15:06 - How do I better understand how my school is viewed by admissions officers?
- 17:19 - What do admissions officers want to know about the school as it relates to your academic record?
- 19:24 - Why you should be looking at your transcript and school profile side-by-side
- 21:32 - Thinking like an admissions reader
 - 22:26 - Transcripts vs. report cards
- 23:38 - How being aware of what colleges have access to can help you be strategic
- 25:44 - How do you put your academic experience into perspective?
- 27:18 - What students often don't realize about their application evaluation
- 29:50 - How important is it to tell your own story
- 31:28 - HS Counselor Tip: Your School Profile
- 32:56 - AP (Advanced Placement) course considerations
- 35:11 - How will colleges view XYZ courses? Which course is better?

- 42:24 - Why are some independent schools getting rid of AP (*Advanced Placement*) course offerings?
- 44:00 What does Susan think about IB (*International Baccalaureate*) Curriculum considerations?
- 47:50 What if my high school doesn't offer AP or IB course options?
- 49:58 Key Takeaways from Today's Episode

Opening Script

Welcome to back to the College Essay Guy Podcast, my name's Tom Campbell, and I'm College Essay Guy's Community Manager AND a new co-host of the podcast!

I like to joke that I'm not THE college essay guy, but I am A college essay guy. (Insert Dos Equis Man meme... probably something that only the millennials tuning in may remember).

If you tuned because you wanted Ethan to do a soothing, tranquil ASMR reading of *Goodnight, Moon* to put you to sleep... you'll have to stay tuned. Because honestly, with all the stress of the college admissions process, I think that episode actually has promise...

ANYWHO... in a way, coming on to co-host the podcast is a little bit of a full circle moment for me— because it was actually by doing a podcast with Ethan back when I worked at Pomona College that we connected (shameless plug for episodes 302 and 303... yeah, I didn't stop talking so they made it into two episodes. VERY on brand). And now we work together full time, trying to bring more ease, purpose and joy to the college admissions process – one Youtube video, podcast episode, and meme at a time.

Prior to working full time at CEG, as we call it, I worked for 2 years in admissions at my alma mater, College of the Holy Cross (go saders), chased after the sunshine to work at Pomona College in Southern California for roughly four years, and MOMENTARILY embraced the rain while working as a college counselor at a selective independent school in Seattle.

On today's episode, I was honored to be joined by my wonderful colleague and friend Susan Tree, our Senior College Counselor at College Essay Guy, where we unpack all-the-things related to high school courses, how they influence a student's admissions process, and what students and families should keep in mind (especially if they're in 9th or 10th grade) around choosing classes!

Susan has spent 40 years working with young people and their families on “both sides of the desk,” as we call it, on all aspects of the college admissions process. **She started off her admissions career at Bates College**, where she helped pioneer the test optional movement WELL before the “turning of the tide” in 2020. For over 20

years, Susan served as the Director of College Counseling at a college prep day and boarding school near Philadelphia where she worked with students from around the world. These days, in addition to providing individualized college counseling to students and families as part of College Essay Guy's college counseling team (yes, we do a lot more than essay support!), Susan continues to read applications at selective liberal arts colleges and universities to keep a “finger on the pulse” of what common themes, trends, and challenges are facing today's applicants.

Now, the TLDR (too long didn't read, as the kids call it) of this episode is this: to be competitive at selective colleges and universities, students should take the equivalent of four years of what we call “the 5 solids,” which are the 5 “core academic subjects” offered in most high schools: English, math, social studies, science, and a language course (beyond English). AND not just taking the subjects – but also embracing the healthy challenge of advanced coursework, whether those are Advanced Placement courses, International Baccalaureate courses, or something more school-specific.

But we also know, from experience, that this is an oversimplified piece of advice that doesn't take into account the everyday reality of moving through high school: caps or limits around advanced coursework, personal challenges, scheduling conflicts, slam dunk teachers who go on maternity leave so a sub comes in and doesn't know the material as well so all the students tank the class... the list goes on.

So in this episode, we're going to dig into some of the most frequent questions we get around academics, and how they're factored in to the college admissions process:

- How much do admissions officers REALLY know about my school?
- What's a school profile, and what does that communicate about the academic choices I had available to me at my school?
- How much do I need to communicate about my academic journey in high school beyond my transcript? AND how and where do I do that?
- What about AP and IB courses? Does it matter which ones I take... or just that I take ANY advanced classes to be competitive? What if my school doesn't have them?
- AND so many more

You'll leave with a much better sense of what admissions officers are asking themselves when they're reviewing your high school transcript and your course choices, AND some practical tips on what you can do to A. take courses that allow you to have the most college options as possible and B. advocate for yourself, beyond just sending in your transcript, through the application process.

AND while this episode is more about your high school courses, transcript, and the admissions officer perspective, stay tuned for a PART 2 in a few weeks where we talk more about the term

“intellectual curiosity”: what it means (beyond just having As in challenging, core solid academic courses), where admissions officers look for it, and how it can bring your college application to a whole new level.

Hope you enjoy!

Outro:

And there you have it: LOTS of tea spilled around how colleges view your academic record, and what choices you can make to make yourself more competitive. Hopefully, if you’re a younger student or family, you may have lots of time to implement our advice, but if you’re coming to us as a senior and you DON’T have a time machine to turn back your courses or grades, stay tuned for our second episode all about intellectual curiosity, and how to share that with colleges through your application: no transcript needed.

All right, cheers to you all, much love, and as always, stay curious

Co-host is Susan:

[Recording \(mixed by Tom in Descript\)](#)

Docs for reference:

- **[Questions about course selection from counselors from the \(highly selective course\)](#)**
- **[Slides/content on course selection \(from highly selective course\)](#)**

Intro: high school courses → academic journey
Susan Kastner Tree: Senior College Counselor

6/19:

- **APs**
 - Are some better than others?
- **Tests and your courses:**
 - How important are AP and IB scores?

- Other standardized tests and how they relate to this?
- **Honors/Advanced/more “unique” rigor: how should you communicate that?**
- **Specific course suggestions for:**
 - Business
 - Engineering
 - Computer Science
 - Pre-Med (and clarifying nursing) Physics vs. anatomy (Georgetown, Penn, Villanova would want physics; less selectives may be fine with anatomy)
 - Give the anatomy example
 - The Arts?
- **Overloading on courses (specifically if your school has limits)**
 - Certain high competitive majors = more likelihood that doing outside exploration of the school limits is a good thing to think about (i.e. CS)
- **Biggest tips for counselors?**
 - School profiles:
 - *“How much time to AO have to truly study the HS policies? Seems like that is demanding of you don't know the school well..”*
 - How college selectivity influences math recommendations (stats)
 - “Things I’ve taught myself” resume/exercise with your students (to help them realize moments of self-directed learning)
- **Lessons about building relationships/your fluid academic journey**
 - What happens when you have a tough teacher?
 - Taking up space/it’s OK to go to your teachers for support
 - At some schools/contexts, this is unusual (Privileged Poor)
 - Building relationships with teachers – what that means for you as a college applicant, more MORE IMPORTANTLY, a person

Part 1: Your High School Record, Major Choices + Admissions

- Trends in the current landscape around academic preferences
 - Understanding the level of achievement that is out there
- The “gold standard”/”general” courseload
 - How can you find this out?
 - “How to know if you’re excellent enough”
 - Common Data Set
 - ASKING SCHOOLS
 - Asking the admissions rep these specifics
- “But what about my school?”
- AP and IB
 - Honors/Advanced in between them... what about the “second tier” rigor?
- Some tips for pre-professional paths (business, engineering, CS, and pre-med/nursing)
 - Physics vs. anatomy (Georgetown, Penn, Villanova would want physics; less selectives may be fine with anatomy)

- Tempting to take the direct correlation, but the core sciences are still the norm
- Testing + courses: (touching on this briefly)
- Tips for international students
 - Leaving exams, IB
 - Preparing/being realistic about the level of competition for your demographic, particularly if you have high financial need
- Tips for counselors (school profiles, including enough info, etc.)

Part 2: Making the Most of High School (Beyond Grades)

- Intellectual curiosity
 - Ability to communicate/present digestible language
- Self-advocacy
-

Potential Questions/Talking Points:

- **“How could they have not admitted this student?!”**
 - The indignation
 - Qualitative and quantitative side of academics
- **How do colleges view my high school?**
 - You can’t control some realities (i.e. that certain elite independent schools have storied relationships with elite colleges), but know that colleges are not holding this against you
- What happens when you have a tough teacher?
- Building relationships with teachers – what that means for you as a college applicant, more MORE IMPORTANTLY, a person
- **How much are AOs reading for your particular major, and courses that align with that?**
 - Can touch on the difference from school-to-school
 - Increasingly, more specialization is folding into the admissions process (slash more pressure on students to have career interests be clearly identified)
 - Chemistry at some schools being preferred, but biology was more of a nail in the coffin
 - Anecdote about Grace Chapin Jones/UChicago and WashU
- **Being Undecided?**
 - There’s a difference between being undecided and apathetic

- Had a kid who was really interested in philosophy and talked all about that in his app, but I found out that he put down Undecided on all of his apps, and he was waitlisted at a ton of places
- **Questbridge: revealing the “diamond in the rough” kids**
 - Going beyond that you have (if you’re in a rural school/have really limited offerings)
- **Societal trends around academic subject/pre-professional culture**
 - The US is an anomaly in the world’s higher ed landscape for allowing kids to dabble and be more flexible academically vs. studying for a trade
 - Lots of social biases/misconceptions around “liberal arts kids” being soft/it’s more privileged to study it
 - At the more highly selective schools, there’s more and more kids applying to STEM and pre-professional programs (business, engineering, CS) than ever before
 - Some colleges even have recoded certain majors (ie economics) as STEM so that way international students can have a work visa that’s approved by their
- **What about international?**
 - Big emphasis on leaving exams (versus external grades) with a lot of country’s system
 - Tom read for Africa and basically ignored the internal grades, it was all about the leaving exam grades (WASCE, etc.)
- **Mentioning Common Data Set/”Recommended” vs. “Required” classes**

	Units Required	Units Recommended
Total academic units		
English	4	4
Mathematics	4	4
Science	3	4
Of these, units that must be lab	3	4
Foreign language	3	4
Social studies		
History	3	4
Academic electives	3	4
Computer Science		
Visual/Performing Arts		
Other (<i>specify</i>)		

- **IB Diploma**
 - We just marked them as a “dip cand” and moved along – we saw it as the highest rigor available
 - **From Susan:** Still would be aware of doing core academic solids vs. some of the IB options (such as Business)
 - Which HLs are they taking? Film, really?
 - Not the end of the world, but the core academic classes
- **“The spike”/hook in admissions — yes, that does play a role (and sometimes “excuses” soft spots in the transcript — but**
- **If your school has “tiers of rigor,” be aware that highly selective admissions officers are typically only looking for the top ones**
 - (So for a school that has AP and Honors, they will literally be counting/looking for the APs on the transcript and not giving as much “weight” to the Honors one)
 - Less selective schools are a little different with this
 - This is something I (Tom) didn’t really know about/wasn’t advised about in high school. My high school talked about AP and Honors pretty interchangeably and advised students in this misguided way.
 - I’d want to bring this point up delicately/not have students and families worrying about whether or not to trust their own school...
- **The five core solids across four years**
 - English, math, social studies, science, and language

- You can “mix and match” and double up in areas throughout your four years, as long as you have four cumulatively. This is just usually the best way to balance it out, but every school is different.

- **The importance of building relationships with your teachers**

- Kids spend way too much time hyperfixating/complaining/stressing about grades. You are much more likely to have impactful rec letters and glowing school support/someone in your corner if you work to improve the relationships with your teachers, versus just keeping your head down all semester and spending all your time and energy getting A++s
 - Not saying you have to be extroverted, just proactive/communicative with your teachers

- **Overhearing 9th graders in the lunch room... a sad amount of time being spent talking about comparisons with grades**

- No one in college does this/really cares about it. The sooner you can break out of this habit, the more liberated your school experience will be

- **Unnecessarily overloading on certain course areas**

- Even if you love STEM, just getting the graduation requirements done in the other academic areas will most likely not set you up for success at the majority of selective colleges.
- Taking 3 STEM classes as a senior is not going to impress MIT if you ignore all other areas. In fact, it's unnecessary. Spend your time elsewhere/sharing your love for STEM with others.
- Remember, your academic record is your foot in the door at these schools. Once the door is open, you've “done your part” with this area of the application review process. Just adding more and more courses (beyond the five core solids all four years) is usually unnecessary, and your time can be spent better elsewhere.

- **Once read in a book by a popular admissions resource site (Crimson, but we won't call them out haha) that students should find ways to take beyond the course limit at their school to have a more rigorous schedule compared to your**

- DO NOT DO THIS. The course limits are there for a reason, and colleges honor individual schools' lenses on what's best for their community. They would not be expecting students to side-step/disobey these limits.

- **Taking courses depending on your career interest**

- Are there particular course paths that are recommended for students who want, say, nursing, architecture, engineering, etc.? How much should this influence your high school trajectory?

- **“Colleges don't know how hard/good my school is”**

- Oftentimes when talking with students and families, they will bring up a lot of uber-specific particularities about school culture/nuances that they are hopeful that colleges will understand about their student
 - Colleges will be using a school profile, rec letters, a transcript and a student's own testimonials, and the AOs own experience with the school to assess the school culture, rigor level, and college-going culture
 - If there are particularities that have happened, use the Additional Info section and communicate with your recommenders about your concern
 - Sometimes students will have personal issues with teachers, etc. that may have influenced their course trajectory... that is something to take up delicately
- **“But what if”**
 - Parents and students will often want to play the “what if” or “wouldn't colleges see xyz” when rationalizing/discussing their course choices, especially if they deviate from the norm.
 - (for instance, “won't colleges admire the students' passion in this one area and understand why they stopped taking history?”
 - You need to understand that there are students who've dove into their passions AND taken courses in all academic areas throughout high school who are in the pool. Rarely are colleges going to make exceptions for students who ignore/don't do this, especially when they have a pool of equally talented students who HAVE.
- **The importance of self-advocacy**
 - If you've taken courses that are unexpected/outside “the norm” or are less conventional (i.e. a unique project based learning class that's not an AP/honors but helped you learn a lot), make sure to share that with colleges in Additional Info! They won't know what you don't tell them.