

MICDS

MARY INSTITUTE AND SAINT LOUIS COUNTRY DAY SCHOOL

Monday, November 1, marked the first major college application deadline of the 2021-22 school year. In reflecting on this milestone, Head of School Jay Rainey posed several questions to our “Fantastic Four” MICDS college counselors: Matt Essman, Scott Herrmann-Keeling, Earl Macam, and Karen Wildman. His questions and their responses follow here.

What should students think about as they anticipate applying to colleges?

MR. ESSMAN: It is so important to find schools that are a good fit. Students should think in advance about the qualities that they value in a school (academic program, size, location, etc.) and remain true to those priorities throughout their search. Students are more likely to thrive at institutions where they are happy, and they will be happier at places that fit them well.

Students should also remember that applying to colleges is work. It takes time. They should have concrete reasons for why they ultimately apply to particular schools, and those come after doing extensive research. There are so many tremendous resources at their disposal to learn about different schools before they ever set foot on a campus for a visit, and they should avail themselves of those resources.

Most importantly, this should be a fun and exciting process. Students have more control than they think about where they will be continuing their education after MICDS. For many students, this will be one of the first big decisions, if not *the* first big decision, that they will make in their life. MICDS has prepared them very well for this, and it should be an exciting time.

Also, be open to new ideas. Just because they haven't heard of a school doesn't mean it can't be a good fit for them. Take the time to do some research and find out if that school they've never heard of might be just the right place for them.

MR. H-K: Think carefully about what you want out of your college experience. People often say, “It’s the best four years of your life.” And while I certainly hope that’s not true (because then you have several decades of a less exciting life left to live, and that’s no fun), it can and should be an amazing time. The more you have a sense of how you want those four years to go—what you want to accomplish, who you want to be when you’re done—the better chance you have of maximizing that special time. Think beyond big things like what you want to major in. Be as

granular as you can. What kinds of people do you want to have around you? What do you want to be doing on a typical Friday evening?

MS. WILDMAN: Themselves. Students should spend a bit of time trying to isolate from the voices of their friends and peers to really think about what they want from their next community academically, extracurricularly, and socially. That might mesh very well with what their best friend wants—or it might not—and they need to work toward self-reliance in this regard. In my experience, students who are able to be confident in who they are and what they want generally have more successful college searches in terms of how they feel on May 1. I also believe that privacy is something students should begin to think about as they start to take standardized tests, if not before. The college search can be a brutal interpersonal business for juniors and seniors. Students who are better able to “keep themselves to themselves” typically have an easier time when the admissions decisions begin to arrive.

DR. MACAM: Ideally, students should apply to colleges and universities that they are genuinely interested in attending. The hope is that students (and families) have given deep thought to how appropriate a school is for them. When actually making an application, students should consider how that college's curriculum aligns with their goals and how that school can provide for their educational and personal growth. Students should also anticipate that the application process takes time and work.

What do students often focus on more than they need to when applying to colleges?

MR. ESSMAN: The opinions of others. Don't get me wrong, it is important to solicit advice/opinions from people you really trust and who know you best. But I have seen in recent years that students are seeking advice or information from many more sources than they used to, and it has made the process more confusing for them. Searching for and applying to college is all about students being their authentic selves, acknowledging what is important to them and finding places that fulfill that. The more opinions they seek—be it about places they should/shouldn't apply to or how they fill out their applications—the more they feel pulled in different directions and that can be challenging.

MR. H-K: Being good at everything. There's a misperception that only “perfect” candidates are admitted to college. That's simply untrue, even at the most selective schools. Often, in fact, it's the candidates who are very good at one thing who have an advantage in the admission process.

MS. WILDMAN: Testing, particularly now that COVID has led to most colleges being test optional. Many months of test prep, particularly at a younger age, rarely result in the gains that students (and parents) hope for.

DR. MACAM: I believe some students focus too much on thinking about “what the colleges want to hear” rather than being authentic in their voice. Colleges and universities know that their applicants are 17 and 18 year-old high school students, and they don't anticipate a “polished

product.” University admission offices expect that their applicants still have room to grow and flourish. That’s why they want to go to college, in essence. Students should be genuine in their writings and responses to college questions so that those who are reading their applications can truly understand “what makes them”—the student—“tick.”

What should parents think about as they anticipate applying to colleges?

MR. ESSMAN: Parents should know that this process often makes students anxious. It comes at a very busy time in their lives, and they place great significance on this big decision that lies ahead. It is important, as parents, to be supportive and encouraging. The college search is an exciting time of exploration and self-discovery for students, and parents play a critical role in helping their children along that road. It is important to truly listen to what students are saying regarding their hopes and desires for this next phase of their education, and then help and support them in finding the answers that will allow them to make the best decision for them.

MR. H-K: Parents should think about allowing their kids to own this process. The more the student takes control, the more buy-in and excitement there will be about the opportunities that lie ahead. And seeing your kids be that excited and eager for the next step in their lives will put your hearts and minds at ease, giving you the confidence to let them go when the time comes.

MS. WILDMAN: Parents should think about who they know their child to be, what that child wants in a new community, their financial priorities, and, perhaps most of all, their child's self-esteem in the process. “Reaching” should be part of most students’ college list but not to the detriment of a solid base of reasonable college choices that will suit the student well in all regards (except maybe weather, which isn't my favorite criterion!). They should also think about who they will be when their child leaves home for college—and try not to put any negatives associated with that on their child.

DR. MACAM: The college application process should be truly owned by the student. Be supportive and empathetic. Be a resource for your child. Listen to what they are telling you, because the application process is the student's story. As parents, we have had our time, and we have owned our own stories. These are our kids' stories now, and they have the tools to be successful. MICDS gives them that. Allow the student to go through the experience themselves and take responsibility for the choices and decisions they make as it relates to the schools they apply to and what they are saying to each school. Also, know that the application process takes time and work. If parents hover too closely, the experience becomes a burden to the entire family. Realistically, there are thousands of great and very fine colleges and universities in the universe, and their student will eventually find the best fit for them. Finally, the entire process is fluid. Thoughts and priorities can change, on a dime, and it's okay if they do.

What do parents often focus on more than they need to when applying to colleges?

MR. ESSMAN: Sometimes parents focus on what they want as opposed to what is best for the student. It is important to remember that it is the student, not the parent, who will be going to college and to honor and respect what the student is hoping to get from this process.

College and university rankings can also be a detrimental aspect of this process that in no way capture why a particular school may be a good fit for a student. In my opinion, a ranking should never be a reason why a student does or does not apply to a school.

MR. H-K: Outcomes. Yes, we all want kids to be gainfully employed and have long, prosperous careers. It's usually too early to tell, however, exactly what those careers will look like—especially when there are four or more years of education still to come. Students don't have a wide enough frame of reference to know most of the possibilities that await them. They are bound to find new interests in college (and beyond), so let that process happen naturally. They will find jobs. They will have good lives. They don't have to have it all figured out just yet.

MS. WILDMAN: Ten years ago, I might have said “prestige,” but I don't see that as much anymore. Of course, some parents unduly spotlight “brand,” but in general the focus of parents is appropriate, and I believe that is at least in part due to the four-year college counseling program at MICDS and the thoughtfulness of the preparation for both students and parents. (Not to brag—I didn't devise the program!) I believe that most parents trust the college counselors, and I don't have many super-worried parents at this time of year.

DR. MACAM: In my experience, parents sometimes put more emphasis on the “household name” of an institution as opposed to the true fit of an institution for the student. Some parents tend to own the process for their child. It's best to allow the student to progress through the journey and experience the highs and lows along the way. That's where we, as parents, have to listen, be supportive, and be encouraging.

What is the most joyful part of your work as a college counselor?

MR. ESSMAN: On a macro level, I just love working with high school students and their families. It gives me such joy to be a resource/guide/assistant as they navigate this journey. Every student's college search is different, and I'm thankful that I get to work with students on such an individual basis to help them find what they are looking for.

But I have to say, nothing puts a smile on my face like the first time I see a student when they come home for that first break from college (usually fall break or Thanksgiving) and visit the office to talk about how much they are loving their experience and what a great fit their school is for them. This happens so often, whether the school was a student's top choice or lower on their list, and it serves as that final closure after working closely with a student throughout their Upper School career.

MR. H-K: For me, it's that moment when a student drops by my office to tell me they got into college. Getting an email is nice, too, especially when the excitement is palpable even in writing. Whether it's the first school they've been admitted to and it's obvious a weight has been lifted from their shoulders, or it's the school they've been aiming towards for years, being able to celebrate that achievement with students is what this job is all about.

MS. WILDMAN: Students! Specifically watching students grow from freshmen to graduates and all of the changes that occur during that time (and those that don't).

DR. MACAM: Getting to know the student and personally working with each student and family throughout the process is a joy. Our approach is intimate and individualized. Our four-year curriculum allows each college counselor the ability to be deeply engaged with each student and their family. It allows us to know their dreams, desires, and priorities. The milestone meetings we have in ninth and tenth grade are intentionally placed at the midpoint of each academic year so that we can gain a better understanding of each student's progress and where they see themselves going and growing. Then in eleventh grade, when the "volume" gets louder, we have a previously developed relationship and connection with each student and family and can strategize individually as to how they should proceed. It's enjoyable when a student discovers a place that's unknown to them or this community and finds that place to be a "gem of a fit."

What is the most challenging part of your work as a college counselor?

MR. ESSMAN: When students see the decisions they receive from colleges as a reflection of themselves as people. It is a tough college admission landscape out there, and students can do all the right things and it still doesn't work out the way they had hoped. I see them sometimes question the hard work they put into their high school experience when they don't achieve a desired outcome, and it makes me feel for them. I know they are going to be fine, and I know that it has prepared them for a successful and enriching college experience, but I hurt with them in that initial period right after a decision. It's also tough when a student gains admission to a school that does not work out for them financially.

MR. H-K: It's tough when parents and students aren't on the same page. Often when that happens, the students have an idea of what they want, and the parents either want something different or have unrealistic expectations. That's hard on everyone. And that kind of tension makes already unrealistic expectations that much harder to attain.

MS. WILDMAN: It's hard when a student isn't happy with what they have achieved before applying—when they are dissatisfied with themselves regarding grades, test scores, activities, etc. This often colors their entire search and can have a dramatic impact on self-esteem.

DR. MACAM: Managing expectations. There is nothing guaranteed in the world of college admissions, so having a balanced approach to the search and application process is key. We aim

to be supportive and empathetic and to advocate for each student. We want students to continue to be ambitious and aspirational in their search and applications. With every big dream, however, there is always the hope of an “ounce of reality.” That perspective is what brings balance to their process. Some students and families are very aware of this balance, but some are not. Imbalance between hope and realism can become a challenge.

Name a college or university whose curriculum, mission, or vision impresses you as a good fit for many MICDS graduates, but to which relatively few MICDS students apply. Why did this particular institution come to mind for you?

MR. ESSMAN: My college admission background, prior to getting into independent school college counseling, was at three wonderful liberal arts colleges (Grinnell, Bucknell, Haverford). I love the opportunities that schools like these afford students in terms of getting involved in the community and trying out a variety of academic offerings. I've had the good fortune the past two years to serve on an advisory board for Furman University in Greenville, SC. I have spent a lot of time on that campus as a result, and what an amazing place it is!

MR. H-K: I would advocate for a whole class of schools: small, liberal arts colleges, which often don't get enough traction among applicants. So many students tell me every year that what they value most about MICDS is the relationships they build with caring teachers who foster their interests and open their eyes to opportunities they didn't know existed. That's the bread and butter of small, liberal arts colleges. Basically, MICDS is a small, liberal arts college in many respects. If you love it here, the same atmosphere exists beyond this campus. And attending a small liberal arts college doesn't mean sacrificing things like doing research or studying engineering (check out Trinity College and Union College) or theater (Sarah Lawrence and Vassar) or being in an urban environment (Macalester and Rhodes). In fact, there can be less competition for openings in labs and more of a need for undergraduates to contribute meaningfully at a school that isn't churning out PhD and MFA students every year.

MS. WILDMAN: I do think it is wonderful that MICDS students attend such a broad array of colleges. Perhaps because I attended a large state school, I tend to love the small, cozy liberal arts colleges that don't get as much attention. Particularly, St. Olaf in Northfield, MN, and Hobart William Smith in Geneva, NY, seem to me to be ideal in terms of fostering intellectually curious students in a close-knit community with a real emphasis on college life itself, as distinctive from the “real world.”

DR. MACAM: I tend to think that small liberal arts colleges align with the mission and vision of MICDS. The intimate character of these schools emulates the MICDS community and the spirit of learning that our students experience here. These places allow students a similar connection to a teaching faculty, provide a plethora of support resources, and host an abundance of community activities of the kind that an MICDS graduate has grown accustomed to on our campus. Colleges like Grinnell College (Iowa), Carleton College (MN), Franklin & Marshall College (PA), Centre

College (KY), Lewis & Clark College (OR), Beloit College (WI), and Colorado College all come to mind.

What type of advice would you offer to any student, of any age, that might be helpful down the road as they apply to college?

MR. ESSMAN: First, read, read, and then read some more! It stimulates their creativity and introduces them to different perspectives. Second, try new things. Maybe it's a class, maybe it's an activity. As we get older our interests will narrow, and we will devote more time to fewer things, but in our younger years there is such great value in being receptive to exploring new opportunities. Finally, remember that it's important to be a kid. Make time for the things that make you happy. Spend time with family and friends. Pursue hobbies. Not everything needs to be "résumé worthy."

MR. H-K: Follow your interests. People often ask me, "What do colleges want to see?" What they want to see is who you are—so explore that. Who are you? What are you interested in? What excites you? Find ways to foster your unique identity and interests. Find ways to keep excitement in your life. The more excited you are about something, the more you will practice it. The more you practice, the better you will get. The better you get, the more you will advance. The more you advance, the more you will be able to compete or collaborate with or against others who are more skilled—which makes you better, and which makes what you're doing more exciting.

MS. WILDMAN: Be yourself, but be active. Pursue your interests both academically and extracurricularly, and when something no longer interests you, move on to something else. Activities don't have to be in a formal setting. Journal, play music, code, work out, travel, spend time getting to know your grandparents, explore nature. You can add just about anything to your Common Application activity list, and the better you know yourself, the easier it will be to find a college to help you continue on your path.

DR. MACAM: Grow to know yourself. Be involved in what makes you happy. Be mindful of what your likes and dislikes are. Strive to always do your best. Give your best self daily. Be a good friend and a good citizen in your community. And know that the college application process will evolve over time and that there are thousands of great colleges and universities in this world to call home after MICDS.