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From Gilman School's College Counseling Office

Once our Junior Class College Night program concludes, we are confident that you will have a thorough appreciation for and command of the world of selective college admission. The admission deans will present the central role of grades, courses and testing. Much of this will strike you as common sense, and much will be enlightening. Below we'd like to offer some information that has relevance beyond the numbers. The qualities we summarize here are not quantifiable and they are not, by themselves, a powerful component in the admission process in such a way that they will make admissible an applicant who is not admissible. They are, however, the qualities that distinguish applicants from one another in competitive applicant pools. We offer them here so that you might cultivate a kind of 'big picture' of adolescent growth, college admission, and application success.

No boy will possess all of these qualities, and a great many first-term juniors possess perhaps only one or two, and often in very modest amounts. We invite you to make use of this list in any way you see fit. We think it will be a helpful introduction to the philosophical underpinnings of what admission officers refer to as "crafting a class."

## 1 A COMPELLING INTEREST IN SOMETHING BEYOND FORMAL ACADEMIC COURSE WORK AND PERSONAL ACHIEVEMENT

So much of adolescent life is understandably rooted in the self. Teenage boys can be charitable and thoughtful, as well as polite and well-mannered, but adolescence can also be preoccupied with 'me.' This is natural and age-appropriate. Eventually, however, as boys develop into young men, an awareness about the world around them can provide satisfaction and stimulation. This might be political (campaigns and elections), social (serving the underserved) or cultural (art and music). Of course, sports and popular music are among the most common pursuits, and while these are fine, the more successful applicants have thought deeply about these endeavors in ways that go far beyond the superficial. Over the years, the college counseling staff has been fascinated and impressed with boys who've pursued their interests in the weather, geology, poetry, electronics, reptiles, aviation and scouting, to name only a few. These same students are those that tend to make favorable impressions on admission officers and rise to the top of applicant pools.

## AMBITION THAT IS HORIZONTAL RATHER THAN VERTICAL

Students in schools like Gilman learn at an early age what constitutes a 'good college,' a 'less good college,' and 'not a good college.' These conclusions are based largely on reputation and little else. Strange as this may sound, it often ends up becoming a handicap in the selective college admission process. All kinds of schools – but especially private and selective ones -- are hopeful that applicants truly understand their institutions, and include in their applications questions designed to solicit

# 2

and measure this. Within the application or within an interview, the applicant's ability to articulate something distinctive and telling about the college's program is an asset; the inability to do this is a liability. Our students must be encouraged to look at colleges with curiosity, and avoid presuppositions about prestige and reputation.

Horizontal ambition invites students to be curious about what a college offers within its program and how that might make for a lively and engaging undergraduate experience. Vertical ambition makes students excessively and exclusively fixated on the prestige and the 'getting in' portion of the college admission process. Students with vertical ambition are preoccupied with the four months of the application process, while those with horizontal ambition are more interested in the four years of undergraduate life.

### A LIFE OF THE MIND

**3** Colleges have become sophisticated and aggressive with the ways they appeal to prospective students. The messages coming from many admission offices are often designed to convey a sense of fun, excitement and cosmopolitanism about their institutions. This, combined with the proliferation of televised college athletics, creates a powerfully intoxicating notion to young applicants: that the college experience is defined by a number of factors that have nothing to do with academic concerns and what is often referred to as the 'life of the mind.' Students who resist this notion and are able to maintain (at least some) focus on the 'school part of school' tend to do well in the selective college admission process. These students read books, often outside the curriculum, and enjoy the experience. These books are not necessarily heavy tomes or deeply philosophical. They are often popular fiction or even sports literature. Such students read the newspaper and care about political and cultural developments. They see connections between disciplines and can discuss them. Said another way, these students have an inner life that is fed through the things they read.

In the end, admission officers, although they often present their institution in diverse and exciting ways, will use admission criteria that heavily focus upon academic and intellectual achievement.

### SELF-RELIANCE AND INDEPENDENCE

**4** Throughout the admissions calendar there are myriad ways that admission officers become impressed with an applicant's ownership of the process. Students who make appointments, attend visiting rep sessions in the fall, and complete the app entirely on their own tend to do well in this process. We parents are often understandably tempted to assist our children with any endeavor that appears complex. This is right and proper. A line must be drawn, however, that helpfully distinguishes the role of the parent from the role of the applicant. Where precisely that line is drawn can vary among families. The College Counseling Office hopes that parents take an active interest in their child's admission process, and we will deliberately request your thoughts and participation. We have also witnessed, from time to time, how an enormous and inappropriate portion of the application process will come under the direction of parents. There is, of course, a principle here that concerns us, but our primary concern in this message is the ways that experienced admission officers so frequently perceive this. Needless to say, it detracts from what might otherwise be a strong application.

### SOME LEVEL OF DESIRE TO PURSUE AN ACADEMIC SUBJECT (OR SUBJECTS) AS AN UNDERGRADUATE

There is a meaningful distinction between an interest in pursuing an academic discipline and what one intends as a major. These are often the same, but many boys tend to see college exclusively as a preparation for a career. A college education certainly fulfills this role, but college admission officers find more compelling those applicants who see college as an opportunity to learn and to pursue an intellectual curiosity. We all, admission officers included, hope that our children will consider and pursue careers in law, business, and medicine. A preoccupation with pre-professionalism, however, and the temptation to view college exclusively as

**5** the pathway to a profession is unhelpful to applicants as they seek to distinguish themselves in a very competitive applicant pool. Within the counseling process, your sons will often hear advice about it being OK to love and pursue math, history, the classics, or poetry. Well, not only is it OK, it can be quite an asset as well.