



Rethinking college admissions at GCPL

BY RIKKI N. MASSAND

The highly competitive college admissions process is a constantly evolving effort, often leaving high school students and their families feeling harried and anxious for months if not years leading up to schools' ultimate decisions. But at a free seminar this coming Monday, March 20 at 6:45pm in the Garden City Public Library, professional admissions advisor Michael Binder will attempt to refresh applicants' and families' perspectives by showing them the most efficient route to getting into colleges and ultimately getting the most out of the investment in a four-year degree program.

Binder is the founder of Your College Navigator, LLC. He primarily presents at public libraries and meets families from top Long Island school districts including Garden City, Manhasset, Great Neck, Hewlett-Woodmere, Jericho, Syosset, as well as at the Roslyn Jewish Community Center. He has presented at the Garden City Public Library twice a year for each of the past seven years, becoming well-acquainted with the former young adult librarian at GCPL and village resident Marge Kelly, who retired one year ago this month.

Now as Binder enters his eighth year as an advisor, he says the market for his unique service has grown because of the droves of families and applicants looking to gain admission to "the best college" and they start a process of thinking about it in winter, nearing the end of a high schooler's junior year. The reality is that's far too late, combined with a mindset that doesn't really match today's college standards and the implications college study has for individual careers. He borrows the expression from the U.S. Army and says a high school student should "be all they can be" in applying to colleges. Binder meets students who may have participated in a lot of activities, but at times it comes across that they're adding things to their resume without planning behind that and "just because." He advises them to add qualities and activities that can make a contribution to their college of choice and before reaching the application phase, realize a student's full potential both from the academic and extracurricular points of view.

Simple process

"This whole process is so simple but everybody makes it so complicated. If people really do the right things and start planning in ninth and tenth grade it will go far. If students did not take the right courses and they didn't participate in the right activities, if they didn't separate themselves, they will get nowhere. With activities it is not quantity it's quality. Ideally I want students preparing in 10th grade or earlier, but there is no grade level too soon to listen to what I have to say – I don't care what grade a student is in. I want students to build up who they are, and first they should make the most of who they are. I want to know what they can accomplish. What students are doing now can help develop them into a more accomplished person. That way when they apply students have many more accomplishments they can talk about, and their supervisors and teachers' recommendations can illustrate that," Binder explained in an interview last week.

Binder's website, YourCollegeNavigator.com, promotes ways of researching colleges and their admissions criteria as well as articles on "mistakes to avoid," students' "10 best steps" in the process and information on scholarships and financial aid. His work is broken down into short, convenient concepts and takeaways to apply when students start a new path towards "maximizing their college admissions value."

With the districts he's been making rounds in, Binder clearly notes the higher focus on sports activities in Garden City High School compared with other top Nassau schools, only rivaled by Cold Spring Harbor and Manhasset. Music has come up in both Garden City and Syosset, while he mentions the academics focus for Hewlett-Woodmere and Great Neck. He looks at the schools that students in Nassau County's top districts tend to apply to, with Cornell and Boston-area universities being top draws, and it remains a constant with kids "looking for the best schools." That logic can signal a trickle-down from their own parents' choices of moving into the best Long Island school districts to raise the student. All the universities Binder advises students to apply to make the national and regional lists of 'Top Colleges' but Long Island students tend to overlook some of the best.

“At the better Long Island high schools students tend to have high grades and high SAT or ACT scores. As a result they look to get into ‘better schools’ as in name colleges or colleges with prestigious rankings. What I show students and parents is that what really makes the ‘better school for you’ is going to be different than a ‘better school’ for someone else. You absolutely want to pay attention to the college’s prestige and formula, that is part of the process, but I want students to focus on getting out of college with your degree and career track rather than just getting in,” Binder said.

Research schools programs

For example students interested in specific majors like biology, math or engineering should research the schools’ programs, and what makes a particular school’s biology/math/engineering program competitive compared to others. He says the right questions before applying become a critical factor.

“What professors does that program have? What results have students there, past and present, obtained? Where do their graduates work? What is their salary at their place of work? What companies recruit on-campus? Or, did those students continue with graduate school or medical school, did they go into areas? This is the basis for comparing schools A, B, and C and the majors the colleges offer,” he says.

Binder has an MBA in marketing from Fordham University and a master’s degree in computer science from Pratt Institute. He completed his undergraduate degree in Mathematics at Brooklyn College, part of the City University of New York. For college his son completed a five-year work/study program at the Stevens Institute of Technology, and Binder raves about the career experience, chances to try out roles at corporations, and contacts that his son made by taking that route. His own transition into college admissions advising came from a need to identify the right college choice for his son.

“I found that his high school and many of the ‘Top Colleges’ books did not help me. The books just give facts and statistics, not many insights that you’d really need. I knew my son and I knew what his needs were. I spent a lot of time going to colleges and getting insight into them, understanding the whole process – what makes them unique and different, and what they are looking for in students. With that I was able to really match my son to the right college for him. I never thought of getting into this business but after I looked for him I was approached by several of my neighbors who saw what I did. I ended up working with their daughters on admissions and simultaneously I was approached by an SAT tutoring company who saw my work – they said a number of their clients would benefit from my service,” Binder explained.

Binder enjoyed an extensive New York ‘career grind’ of his own before becoming a college admissions consultant in early 2009. He was a vice president of marketing for a Fortune 500 New York City technology firm. He has found a niche in college admissions that marries his marketing acumen with the ability to decipher students’ qualities and their best environments for learning post-high school.

“This strategy is all about marketing. One of the deans of admission at Cornell University talks about getting into college as ‘all about marketing’ so students can build the best product. Two, students need to know the colleges that are their target market and do the right research for them. Three, students must present a compelling story. I was a president of marketing and we figured out our product, our best way to approach our target market and presenting a compelling story. All I am doing is taking business techniques and applying it to college admissions,” he said.

Binder’s advice to parents is for them to recognize the need to be equally involved in their child’s application process and apply a serious business approach into “the college search.” He compares the course of action with applying for a job, and using the same techniques to look for a college fit.

“Know what your strengths are, know who you are going after, apply yourself in a serious way with a mature approach. The challenge is that parents and students don’t necessarily know what I am telling them to do – no one has led them through it and no one shows them the process,” Binder said.