



September 9, 2016

Dear Freshman and Sophomore Parents,

A warm welcome from the College Counseling office! Recognizing that some of you are already thinking about your student's college search and wondering when and how that should begin, we're writing to provide an overview of the college counseling process at Prairie. We hope the following information and opportunities will answer a number of your questions and help you get started at a time and in ways that are appropriate for your student and you.

The first thing you need to know is that if you and your student haven't begun the college search process, that's okay! In grades 9 and 10, it's important that students focus on just that: being high school students. They should concentrate on building a strong academic and co-curricular foundation, learning to organize and govern their own affairs, socializing with their peers, and coming to know themselves better—in short, growing up. For that reason, our college counseling program is relatively light in the freshman year, a bit more involved in the sophomore year, prominent in the junior year, and intensive in the senior year.

To begin, we meet with the freshmen and sophomores to address the following college-related topics.

- We advise students to think of high school as building a strong four-year history in three ways: 1) academically, by working diligently and to the best of their abilities, actively engaging in their classes, and taking charge of their learning by being accountable and building relationships with teachers; 2) co-curricularly by getting involved in co-curricular and service activities they enjoy or want to try, pursuing their interests over time and in depth, and stepping into leadership roles where possible; and 3) personally, by consciously developing their character, integrity, and social maturity.
- We urge students to recognize that GPA is cumulative and always evaluated in light of their course history. In other words, if they don't do their best in grades 9 and 10, their cumulative GPA (the average of gr. 9-11 GPAs) will not reflect their real abilities and could compromise their college choices. Similarly, they should construct a course history that is commensurate with their abilities, challenging themselves where possible but not overreaching such that they struggle to achieve even average grades.
- We introduce students to some key online resources:
 - College Board's "Big Future" site (at collegeboard.org): This comprehensive college search site offers students a wealth of tools and resources of all kinds, but we especially urge freshmen and sophomores to use those designed to build self-awareness. While these self-exploration tools are certainly not oracles, they can help students think more deeply about who they are, the kinds of study and work they enjoy, and majors and career paths that might be a good fit. Any growth in a

student's self-awareness is a good step toward thinking intelligently about college when the time comes for us to help them craft an individualized list of colleges suited to their interests and preferences.

- Naviance: This software program that we use for college counseling provides many college search tools, including personality/learning type and career interest inventories for self-awareness as well as career/career cluster explorers to illuminate the enormous spectrum of professional paths available to them. Another important Naviance tool sophomores should use is the list of colleges visiting Prairie this fall (see next bullet point). Your student will receive their own Naviance log-in now so they can explore at their leisure. We usually add parents' log-ins later when we meet with you individually to begin the college search process in earnest, but if you want your parent log-in before then, feel free to email our College Counseling Assistant, Christine Uebe, at cuebe@prairieschool.com.
- We urge sophomores to attend a handful of the college visits to Prairie mentioned immediately above. We have and cultivate the extraordinary advantage of hosting over 80 colleges on our campus each fall—colleges near and far, large and small, public and private, from the most selective to the most accessible, and offering various combinations of liberal arts, pre-professional, and art & design programs. Sophomores should identify several colleges of interest on that list and attend those meetings with admissions officers.
- We advise students to keep a record of their important co-curricular, service, and paid work activities in grades 9-12. For each activity, they should log what they've done, how much time they've given to it (hours per week and weeks per year), positions they've held or roles they've played, and any special accomplishments. When they apply to colleges, they'll need that information at hand, and it's easier to take it right from their log than to jog a foggy memory.
- We urge students to clean up their social media pages and *keep them clean throughout high school, college, and beyond*. We recommend they Google themselves to see their own digital footprint; it might be a sobering lesson in what colleges, graduate schools, employers, etc., could see if they were looking (which they often do).

Looking further ahead, be aware that for most students the college search gains real traction in the junior year. We work with juniors and their parents in many ways, but here's a brief overview for now:

- 1) From January to April we conduct a series of eight classes with the juniors on all aspects of the college search and application process. These occur during the school day, approximately once a rotation.
- 2) In January we conduct our annual College Meeting for Junior Parents where we present important information about the college search process. If you want a preview of what's to come later for your student, you're more than welcome to join us for this event on Thursday, January 12, at 7:00 p.m. in the Theatre.
- 3) Beginning in December, we meet individually with each junior to discuss what they're looking for, interested in, concerned about, etc., with regard to college.

- 4) Subsequent to each individual student meeting, we meet with each junior and his/her parent(s) to talk further about the same things and review key aspects of the college process, including the individualized college list we will have built based on our conversations. The list helps students focus their search and plan visits to targeted college campuses.

Then in senior year, of course, we work closely with every student and family as they navigate the detailed application process and ensuing decision process.

For more details on the college process and an opportunity to ask questions, we encourage you to attend our **Informational Evening for Freshman and Sophomore Parents** on **Tuesday, February 21, from 7:00-8:00 p.m. in the SRC**. Save the date now!

We look forward to meeting and working with you!

Warm regards,

Maggie McDonough and Jim Zielinski
Co-Directors of College Counseling