



October 2019

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 and to encourage you to save the date for our **Informational Evening for Freshman and Sophomore Parents on Wednesday, February 12, from 6:00-7:00 p.m. in the SRC.** We hope the following information 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 should know is that if you haven't begun to think about the college search process, that's okay! In grades 9 and 10, it's important that students focus on just that—being students. They should concentrate on building a strong academic and extra-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 in various ways to address the following.

- 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) extra-curricularly by getting involved in 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 the GPA is cumulative and always evaluated in light of 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 commensurate with their abilities, challenging themselves where possible but not overreaching such that they struggle to achieve strong grades.
- We introduce students to two comprehensive online resources: SCOIR (our data management system for the college process) and College Board's "Big Future" (at collegeboard.org). Both sites offer students a wealth of tools and resources, but we especially recommend the tools designed to build self-awareness. While 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 a list of colleges suited to their interests and preferences.

- We urge all sophomores to attend several college visits to Prairie this fall, and we encourage all freshmen and sophomores to attend our mini college fair in October and large college fair in March. Between the 80+ individual college visits and two fairs, Prairie has the extraordinary advantage of hosting almost 100 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.
- We urge students and parents to attend other College Counseling programs that families every year find extremely helpful. Please see the attached flyer for details!
- We advise students to keep a record of their extra-curricular, service, and paid work activities in grades 9-12. They should log what they did, how much time they gave to it (hours/week, weeks/year), positions they held or roles they played, and any special accomplishments. When they apply to colleges they'll need that information, and it's easier to take it from a well-maintained 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., will see if they look (and they often do).

Looking further ahead, 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 classes with the juniors on all aspects of the college search and application process. These occur during the school day.
- 2) In January we host our annual College Meeting for Junior Parents to present important information about the college search process. You're more than welcome to join us for this event in any year.
- 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 the student and his/her parent(s) to talk further about the same things and review key aspects of the college process, including an individualized college list that helps to focus the student's search.

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

Please join us at any and all of our events, especially the Informational Evening for Freshman and Sophomore Parents on February 12. We look forward to working with each of you!

Warm regards,

Maggie McDonough and Jim Zielinski
Co-Directors of College Counseling