Inside College Counseling with Director Sean Logan
Extended Content Edition

Sally Holm: What are the greatest challenges overall in college counseling right now?

Sean Logan: Educating students and parents about the current admission landscape is certainly one challenge. It has changed dramatically in the last 10 years. For example in 1997, Pitzer College, a terrific small school, was admitting 65 to 70 percent of its applicants; I believe it admitted 18 percent of its applicants last year. Take Vanderbilt—25 years ago people said, “It’s a regional school, not particularly diverse, not particularly interested in getting outside of that region.” But Vanderbilt, in the last 15 to 20 years, has changed remarkably. They’re more selective than Georgetown now, admitting 15 percent of their applicants last year. In the last 4 years, Duke University has seen applications increase by 55%.

SH: Multiple factors must contribute to this. Some schools have improved that much…

SL: Right. Schools have added millions of dollars in new facilities and programming. Also the Common Application now has more than 300 schools on it. You can apply to multiple schools much easier with the advent of the electronic common application.

SH: And the Web…

SL: The Web has dramatically increased it. You can be a kid in Iowa City, get online, take a virtual tour, chat with current students half way across the country and realize, “Wow, this school seems like a good fit for me—the financial aid is pretty good, I’ll apply.” That dramatically increases the pool. Also international recruitment. When I was at Williams in the early 1990’s, I coordinated international recruitment, and it was all via paper—no electronics, there was no international traveling, and we had limited funds for international students back then. We had a total of 350-400 applications. Now, some of these smaller colleges like Williams can now get 300 applicants from Chinese students alone, and another 150 to 200 Korean applicants. You see this incredible array of kids from all over the world.
SH: What else has changed?

SL: I am in the generation of college admission where it went from being deans and directors of admission to deans and directors of enrollment management—a very different animal. Schools are much more sophisticated with their recruitment and admission practices. “Demonstrated interest” has become a driving factor. In my last year in San Diego, the top two students in the high school were Brazilian-Americans, spoke four languages, had perfect ACT scores, had over a thousand hours of community service—great kids. They were admitted to almost all their schools. Curiously, they were not admitted to one of their “likely” schools. So I called that school knowing probably why, and they said, “Oh, do they want to come? We’ll take them right now. We assumed they weren’t coming, because we didn’t have much contact from them. We know they’re probably using us as a back-up and they haven’t done much to show any sincere interest, so we decided to waitlist them.”

Contact points have become important for many schools—visiting, phone contact, e-mailing are all important. Some schools will look at how much you’ve been on their website. Have you signed in? How many clicks did you go through? If you visited, did you take the tour and interview? Some schools will say, “We strongly encourage or recommend interviews.” If they recommend them, and you haven’t done them, obviously, you’ve missed a requirement, but if it’s strongly encouraged and you don’t, it sends a message: “I guess you’re not as interested in us.” You have to pay attention to those things now.

As a college counselor, one of our challenges is to create a balanced list of schools. We generally like to have a minimum of 2 “likely schools” (80% chance of admission) and 2 “possible schools” (50-50 chance of admission). But if you don’t contact them, do your homework, and let them know you’re interested, your “likelies” probably move to “possibles” or maybe “reaches.” If you wait until late in the process, it’s almost too late to add “likelies” and “possibles” because there’s no contact history—no demonstrated interest.

Another issue: Gone are the days when 50 students went to Harvard and 50 went to Yale every year, but some of that still pervades. PA kids will say, “I’m at one of the best schools in the country.” We are one of those schools certainly thought of as a national and international school—and a terrific institution. But the pool that applies to boarding schools is a sliver of what applies to highly selective colleges. It’s a very, very different group of students you’re competing with, but the mindset remains, “Well, I got into all the top
boarding schools and I chose Andover, and I’ve done well here, so then I should go to a “like” college institution.”

**SH:** And things are so different now.

**SL:** Right. We have to make sure that kids understand that it’s not enough to say, “I’m at PA, and I’m an A–B student.” I tell parents, “If your main reason for sending your student to Phillips Academy is to get into a specific college, don’t send them here. I can’t guarantee that.” I can guarantee they’re going to get an amazing education, and I believe that because I’ve seen well over 300 high schools in my life—domestically and internationally. This is a really unique community, and our kids capitalize on that. I’ve been to other high schools that have great academics, but they don’t have our diversity and the global exposure. Most students applying to colleges come from homogeneous communities—all white, all black, all Hispanic, all Asian, etc. Admission Offices are trying to build a community. Our students already know how to interact and engage in a diverse community. They already have that cultural capital. And they can really be bridge-builders. A lot of schools look at our students and realize that they have had a unique experience. Along with a top notch academic experience, they have had opportunities to engage in sophisticated discussions around race, class, poverty, philanthropy, morality, etc with a diverse faculty and student body—most high schools can’t begin to offer this. I say to parents, “I don’t think you’ll ever regret sending your son or daughter here, in terms of the experience they’ll get.” A lot of alums see this as their seminal experience, not their college.

**SH:** So there’s a big education task here—kids and parents.

**SL:** It is difficult to college-counsel a student without college-counseling the parent. You can spend a good deal of time helping students understand the important issues in the process and the realities of the hyper-selectivity of today’s climate, but then they go home to the parent(s) who do not have the same information; they come back with a totally different list. We talked about visiting a certain group of schools, and they went and saw these schools that all admit 20 percent or less of their applicants.

**SH:** So it’s about lowering expectations?

**SL:** Making them more realistic. The other piece of it is that there aren’t just 15 amazing schools—there are so many more! That’s the mindset that’s difficult to
crack, the mindset of, “Outside of this group of schools, I’m a failure.” So we have to do a better job of educating about these different programs and what else is out there. I spent a lot of time this past summer looking in-depth at what we’re doing.

**SH:** What was the headline?

**SL:** I think we are doing a terrific job of working with students from January of upper year onward. That process is in good shape—there are always tweaks, but it is a very comprehensive process. We have some work to do in the junior and lower years with communications to parents and students. We need to create more time to get to know our students, and we need to be vigilant with continuing to educate universities and colleges about the ever changing Andover experience.

In general, our students are doing incredibly well in the admission process. I took an unscientific look at the Class of 2012, using the *U.S. News and World Report* top 100 colleges and top 100 universities. Ninety-eight percent of the class was admitted to a top 100 college or university. That’s not bad.

Of the two percent who didn’t, some were admitted to international schools that aren’t rated or specialty schools (arts programs or conservatories).

Although the list is incredibly impressive, it doesn’t speak at all to satisfaction of students and parents. In the past, we have had students who were admitted to top-ten–ranked universities, and were “devastated” because it wasn’t Harvard, Yale, or Princeton. We hope to better manage expectations (there are more than a handful of great schools) and allow students/parents to have greater satisfaction in their choices.

**SH:** Tell me about what you call “grief counseling.”

**SL:** We start working with 11th-graders in January. With seven college counselors and 300-plus uppers, you want to make sure that everybody’s getting roughly the same information—so we have a CCO curriculum. We have a minimum of four individual meetings with students. That first meeting for us is, “Tell me about yourself. Let’s get to know each other. What are your hopes? What are your dreams?” We don’t talk about college in that meeting, or the second one. We start talking about ideas—locations, sizes, distances, and
maybe things you want to do, and how to start thinking about that. And then
we’d like to start to create some lists of schools that have some of those
characteristics. The challenge sometimes comes in the end of February when
students come in and say, “We want to go on a spring break trip in March and
here’s the list I’ve come up with.” That list is usually composed of school
admitting 25 percent or less of their applicants. By then we’ve only had one
meeting with the student, and now we’re faced with, “I’m going to have to
break it to you…”

**SH:** Which means you have to start earlier…

**SL:** So they can learn to trust us. There’s little trust after one meeting. So we
get parents calling saying, “What are you talking about? You don’t know my
child very well.” Because their child is at Andover, their mindset is, “My child is
an A–B student at one of the best schools in the country. Why wouldn’t he/she
get into…” I get that. I completely understand. I think we are one of the really
interesting schools in the country. But from a college point of view, when a
school has 35,000 applications and they’re going to take 2,100 students, being
an A–B kid at Andover 30 years ago? Great. Now?

**SH:** Not so much.

**SL:** They are looking for so much more than just being an A–B student at
Andover. But remember, there are lots of wonderful, wonderful schools. We
need to better education students and parents about colleges, testing, and
summer experiences, to name a few. Parents don’t need to spend $5,000 each
summer to make their child look impressive for college. You don’t need to
spend any money to do that. In fact, if they go and get a job at The Gap selling
clothes, that could be as interesting and as important as getting a research
internship at MIT.” College admission people know that sometimes those
things are very much socioeconomically driven. You can get a whole education
in and of itself by working 40 hours a week in the summer. It’s about kids
following their interests. I completely understand why parents get caught up in
the vortex, parents who worry that they are disadvantaging their kid by not
doing “X.” Or worrying that they should get a personal trainer in ninth grade
to make their kid a soccer star. Or wondering “Should I start SAT tutoring
now?” And they are asking me, “Please keep me sane!” And that’s what we
have to do.

**SH:** Is it out of control?
SL: I say this to a lot of folks in a lot of different settings, “Everybody repeat after me, ‘College admission is not fair.”’ Let’s get it right out there. It’s going to be as fair as possible, but everybody has different needs and wants. Andover has different needs and wants. We admit students for various reasons. There’s academic excellence, but we also want to have a dance program, we want to have a music program, we have 24 varsity sports. So you’re not just taking the top academic kids. Kids love that when they’re here, and it’s the same story when they’re applying to college. But we have to do a better job of educating the community to say, “All the reasons why you loved Andover, that’s what these colleges are trying to do.” It’s not fair; the playing field isn’t remotely fair. Not remotely level.

SH: When you help students create a list of schools, how do you rate the likelihood of admission?

SL: We put schools into four categories: ‘Likelies’—80 percent chance of admission, ‘Possibles’—50-50 chance, and ‘Reaches’—25 percent chance.” Ten years ago those were the three categories everybody used. Now there’s this “Unlikelies” category—5 percent chance, because most selective schools have gone from admitting 18 percent to 6-9 percent. To rate schools, we’re looking at past data. Also, conversations we’ve had with admission officers who come through to talk to us about their current needs and what they’re doing in the upcoming admission season. Then we make the best guess of where a specific school will fall for a specific individual. What sometimes gets lost in the process is regardless of how we’re rating a school, we are advocating just as strongly for unlikelies as likelies. Rating schools is a hard message to deliver. Students and parents can feel blindsided by the hyper-selectivity of the current admission climate.

SH: At what point do you first connect with parents?

SL: The second week in January we do a parent kickoff weekend. They come to campus. We get a pretty good turnout, and we try to give them some insight into this process. About 20 admission deans come. They do an application workshop with them. In small groups, parents go through and evaluate three students with the goal of admitting one, denying one, and waitlisting one based on all kind of factors. We have several other sessions including financial aid. We’re changing that process a little bit too, because I want to do more targeted sessions. We also need to create specific parent-generated material—and find
time to speak with ninth- and 10th-grade parents. It’s difficult to be that far away and not have any information, especially for decisions that are $60,000-a-year decisions. So we need to continue to re-envision college counseling within the Academy.

**SH:** You got a chance to address ninth- and 10th-grade parents this fall…

**SL:** Yeah. That was new, and Kemper was full. It was a conversation about what’s important over the next two years. Virtually none of that had to do with a specific college. We discussed course planning, summer activities, appropriate testing dates, what selective colleges value in the admission process, etc. We hope that engaging families earlier in the process will help keep the anxiety level down and keep the focus on Andover.

**SH:** So many competing interests for time…

**SL:** We need to weave our way into the academic calendar to benefit students. We do a lot of outside programming. But the problem is, for instance, we’ll do an essay workshop, and 120 kids will show up. That means 180 didn’t. Not because they don’t want to, but because there’s no time. We are considering many options to create more time with students, possibly during the opening of school in September—a three hours “boot camp” with seniors before classes start.

We also would like to help the faculty more with advising. We’re seven people in the CCO. We can’t advise 1,100 kids. Faculty—they’re the front line, the important people, and, quite frankly, the people the kids really know. We think we have a role somewhere in there to better help the advisors.

It also would be great to be able to partner more—with the CAMD office, the arts, athletics, etc.

**SH:** What impact is our need-blind policy having on admissions?

**SL:** I came to Andover partly because of its need-blind policy, so I’m a huge proponent of that. Since the 2008 economic meltdown, a lot of schools have less financial aid dollars, and more and more money has gotten tilted toward merit aid, and not need-based aid. So there’s less money. Students may be getting a financial aid package, but they may be getting “gapped” $3,000 to
$5,000. I saw gaps of $10,000 last year—so kids whose estimated family contribution was $5,000 were being asked to pay $20,000.

**SH:** So how do you increase interest in less-known, merit-based schools?

**SL:** Plenty of places would love a PA kid! I had a student last year—4.5 GPA, solid 700 test scores—who got a $20,000 merit award. That student felt great: “Not only do they want me, they’re giving me money.” These schools may not have top name recognition, but a lot of these merit programs or scholarship programs also give first choice of classes, best choice of housing, and stipends to do summer work.

So we need to talk about financial aid in a broader way now too. Because of our very positive financial aid program, we have kids who qualify for aid here who won’t qualify in college. We have to make sure we’re educating those families up front. So need-blind has changed the composition a little bit, and we need to be able to work with that group more, be fluent with all kinds of financial aid issues. It’s a complex, challenging situation for some kids, and you have to have the support. I’ve worked a lot with first generation low-income kids. Many don’t know what to ask or how to be proactive. From a college counseling perspective, more students on aid has added a whole extra level of work and involvement. And frankly, that’s why I’m here. It’s interesting work. But you have to create time for it.

**SH:** You have to have the resources, and the personnel.

**SL:** I will say this: everybody I’ve spoken to has been incredibly positive about wanting to make some changes. I’m not worried that this isn’t going to happen. But it’s going to be gradual. Every department at PA has needs here. I feel very supported and people are listening. When people think of Andover, they think of excellence. I want you to be able to think of excellence when you think of the College Counseling Office at Andover.

**SH:** What are the biggest mistakes kids make when they come to you for help?

**SL:** If they come in with only a certain set of schools that could be right for them, it’s challenging. I don’t blame the student. They hear about certain schools and are curious, but a list of schools is the wrong start. To me, the college admissions process starts with reflection. It’s probably the one thing that Andover students do poorly—reflect. They’re going 150 miles an hour,
with their hair on fire, in a forward direction at all times here. What they need to do when they come into my office is stop, turn around, and look in a mirror. Why are you here? You’ve been here for three years. How have you changed? What’s good about Andover? What’s not so good about Andover? What are your hopes? What do you want to do over the next four years?” And if I can’t get you into that process, and you’re already thinking, “I know these are the schools I want”…

**SH:** “I’ve got to go to MIT.”

**SL:** And MIT might be a good match or the exact wrong place for you. One of the hard things about these schools—the most selective schools in the country—is they let you turn your brain off during the process. You constantly get positive reinforcement without having to explain why you like the school.

**SH:** And if you say, “I’m looking at Grinnell…”

**SL:** The response is typically more thoughtful because most times the student has to explain to the person why they think Grinnell is a good match for them.

**SH:** How do you go about finding the best match for any given kid?

**SL:** That’s the fun part of our jobs. We push students to be reflective. We have a “curriculum” in the CCO that all our counselors use to help our students research and select schools that really fit their needs. It’s challenging because we need to build a comprehensive list. The parents’ job and the student’s job is to shoot as high as possible, but our job, as college counselors, is to make sure you’re well covered.” If a family is going to make a $60,000 investment in a school, we want to make sure that they have a broad list of options and ones that all fit the student’s criteria.

**SH:** What kind of communication do you have with colleges these days?

**SL:** A lot of parents think, “This is Andover, so you’re going to be able to advocate for my kid.” There are schools that will entertain conversation after the application is submitted, but the great majority do not. We’re going to be able to advocate in our recommendations, but the sheer number of applications schools are receiving don’t permit it. As an example, in 1996 Stanford had approximately 18,000 applications and admitted 2,100 students. Last year, Stanford had 37,000 applications and they admitted about 2,050. That’s 2,050.
That’s 100 percent more applications, and they took 50 fewer kids. Because of that, Stanford’s not picking up the phone. Stanford has no time! They have the same time frame to evaluate double the applications. And especially when Andover has 80 applications in there, I’m not getting a chance to talk to them about all of our students before they go into committee.

But they may call me and say, “We really like this kid. Can you have him/her submit something else? Or can you give me a little bit more?” Great. I’ll be the student’s biggest advocate. But every spot is precious. And so it’s not like you can have certain spaces for Andover students, because there are so many applicants now.

**SH:** What trends are you seeing in college admission?

**SL:** National trends are seeing more females applying to colleges than males—especially at liberal art schools. These numbers are tipping the gender balance at many schools and in some cases making it more challenging for females to be admitted.

There is a continuing trend by colleges to use merit money to help attract some top talent to schools across the nation. The downside is that these same schools are putting more of their funds toward merit aid and less toward need-based aid. If you’re a full-pay student, you have way more options than a student who needs money. If you’re a full-pay male, you have more options than most students in the pool.

There’s a huge case in front of the Supreme Court right now—Texas vs. Fisher—that could have major implications for how race and ethnicity are used in higher ed. If race and ethnicity get taken out of the admission process, the next thing that might get challenged, that might get looked at is alumni status. That’s sort of the original affirmative action, isn’t it?

**SH:** Where does college counseling need to be at Andover?

**SL:** We can’t promise where kids are going to get admitted. What we should be able to promise is a quality process. I can understand why you’d be incredibly disappointed if your son or daughter didn’t get in to the college of their choice. That’s natural. But we don’t want you to come back and say that the College Counseling Office did a poor job. We need to focus our energies on providing
a thoughtful process that keeps students and families well informed, while providing them with sound advice.

Another part of my job description was connected to the idea that Andover is a private school with a public purpose. It was clear Andover wanted the College Counseling Office to become a national model, talking about access issues on the national level. I’d like to expand some of that piece. The job is interesting to me because it has that national piece, and I think it’s important to keep that larger perspective.