IAN: Hello and welcome to CollegeFluency for Parents. My name is Ian Mortimer. In addition to being the vice president of Enrollment Management here at RIT, I am your host for this podcast. On CollegeFluency for Parents, we’re going to demystify the college search and financing process and give insight into the realities of college admissions and financial aid. You’ll hear from some of the nation’s most reliable professionals and experts on admissions and financial aid, as well as give items to you, the parent, on some of the most critical things you should know as you engage in this process. Our guest today is Mr. John Serafine. John is the director of college counseling at McQuaid Jesuit High School in Rochester, New York, and has more than 30 years of college counseling experience in both the private and public high school sector. John has held leadership roles with the National Association for College Counseling, and from my perspective, is one of the finest people and minds in our collective profession. Welcome, John.

JOHN: Thanks, Ian. Thanks for having me here.

IAN: Of course. So our conversation today is going to focus on the relationship, expectations and ownership of the college admissions and financial aid process between really four key stakeholders: the guidance community; parents; students; and the professionals at colleges and universities who are aiming to facilitate this process on behalf of parents and students. So let’s start off with the most important stakeholder: the student. John, from your perspective, what do you think the student’s role in ownership of this process should be?

JOHN: Well, Ian, I'm glad you said that the students are the most important stakeholders because clearly they are, and as such they need to be the central character in the process. So my understanding and my belief has always been that it's a team approach to have a good result in the college admissions process. But the student has to drive the bus and be the central character in the whole process, without a doubt.

IAN: Great. And John, do you think that the balance between the students and the other three stakeholders – parents, the guidance office, and the college and university admissions office – do you think, in the current state, that they take more of the responsibility or less right now?

JOHN: I'm finding that parents tend to take more ownership than they should or need to. Oftentimes, I think parents have good intentions, and they want the best for their son or daughter. But I think they, oftentimes, can overstep and take over the process for their kids. And the example I always use is, I always say to parents that it's a bus trip. The kids have to drive the bus, you need to be on the bus, preferably a little bit farther
toward the back. But you do need to be on the bus and so do the other stakeholders that you mentioned. But the student has to be driving that bus.

IAN: You mentioned that it's important that the student drive the bus in this process. Can you expand on that?

JOHN: I think students need to start with what criteria is important to them as opposed to their parents. Do they want to be, geographically, do they want to be close to home? Do they want to be far away? Do they want a liberal arts school? Do they want a technical school? Et cetera. I think it's also important for them to drive the bus in terms of finding out what are the requirements for certain schools and what are the steps they need to take to get to those schools. What test do I need to take? When do I need to take them? Do they require a visit or an interview? So I think in that regard they're in charge and responsible to drive the bus.

IAN: Yeah. And I think from my perspective, what I see is that even when we first engage with the family, you can tell pretty quickly who is kind of playing point within that relationship between parent and student. And when I see parents taking all of the notes and the student kind of disengaged in the process, without a doubt, long-term, that has a pretty big consequence because the student's not getting all the information that they need to make an informed decision.

JOHN: I think when that happens the students do disengage. And I also think it sends them a tough message. I think the message that you're trying to send as a parent is that you care and you want the best thing for your kids. But I think, ironically, the message that you send when you do that is that the student's not capable, mature enough, or responsible enough to handle that.

IAN: Right.

JOHN: I don't think that's a message you want to send, especially at a time when kids are just transitioning from high school life to college or adult life where they're going to have to be responsible and take charge of their own situation.

IAN: Yeah, excellent point. So let's transition to a second category of stakeholders in this process. That is the people who do what I do, and that is the college admissions and financial aid professionals. And so I'll share a few thoughts, and then please jump in from your perspective in terms of how you see the current state of things. So what I see in college admissions is a pretty significant gap in terms of what the service expectations are as we deal with families. There are some admissions offices that view
themselves as service providers. And so they make themselves available after hours, or the hours of the student and the family, to engage in conversation. They serve as counselors and facilitators in the process. And from my perspective that is kind of the primary role. Because of the competition, we’re at a stage now where admissions professionals, they assume the role of the recruiter. And there’s really a tight balance there in terms of having an authentic relationship with a family in terms of doing what's in their best interest, while at the same time, obviously, hopefully having that student enroll if it’s a good fit. And I think as parents, given that this is the audience from which we’re talking with, that you need to kind of assess the admissions professionals that you're working with. And get a sense if they may be overly on the recruiting side or maybe overly on the counseling side, and not kind of fleshing out some of the important parts of the university that they work with, but really striking a balance in terms of being motivating and engaging. But also really doing what's best for the student in terms of making sure that they're a good fit for that institution. I'm not sure what your perspective is.

JOHN: I think parents and kids have a pretty good detector as to are they being sold something, are they being informed, and if the college admissions people have their best intentions in mind. I think it's a tough job. I mean, you don't need me to tell you that the college admissions professions is a tough job. It’s competitive. You are recruiting, but you also have the kids’ best interest in mind. I think sometimes the lines get blurred. And I think parents, they want to know about the school, they want to be sure they get the best “deal” they can get, they want the best situation they can get, they want to befriend the admissions counselor so that that admissions counselor is an advocate for their child, which I think is all good. I get worried when the reliance is totally on the relationship between the student and the admissions counselor. Then I think the focus of, “What does that school have to offer and is there a good fit?” I think that gets blurred a bit.

IAN: Yeah. I think it’s an excellent point. And one of the things, just in self disclosure, that we’re working on is: How do our admissions teams serve as facilitators to other areas of the university, rather than owning the relationship themselves? The investment in higher education is, obviously, super-significant in making sure that you have the relationship when you start. The admissions person is probably not going to be as available once the student is there, so building a network within the community is, I think, a part of that process, especially late. The other thing I would say about that is that – and this is advice for parents – is that relationships do matter, though, to your point earlier. When it comes to making final decisions on both admissions and aid, if we have ten files that we have to make a decision on and two spots, if we know who that student is and we kind of know their family or where they're from or some of the
elements of them, and they've been an advocate for themselves, they will absolutely get the nod over a student and/or a parent or family that we just don't know anything about. It's just paper and it's just a transactional relationship, rather than a human relationship.

JOHN: Sure. I’m constantly telling students that there are other human beings on the other side of the table. And it's not a rejection office, it’s the admissions office. And they're trying to get to know you, and they're trying to do well by you. But sometimes, like I said, I think they get caught up in the competitiveness of it, and the sales approach of it, and they lose sight of it, that there are humans at the other end. I always think that the best relationships are those that are honest, and kids feel comfortable asking questions. But you're right, once they get to campus, the chance that they're going to have a relationship with their admissions counselor is pretty slim. Oftentimes then, it becomes your professor, your adviser, your coach or whatever. And I think it's important in the process to be sure you access all those folks also.

IAN: Yeah, excellent point. So let’s transition to the third influencer-stakeholder in this process. And that is the individuals that do what you do. Could you maybe take a few moments and just share with us what you see as the current state of those relationships between parent and either guidance counselor or college counselor?

JOHN: Sure. I think it varies obviously from school to school and person to person, you know, I think the people in the school counseling profession, the college counseling profession, there's multiple pieces to your job. A, you have to understand the trends in college admissions. You certainly need to be abreast of financial aid situations and testing and, like you said, any trends in just the college admissions world. But B, I think more importantly you have to know your students well and your families well and they have to trust you because if this is going work, it has to be a team approach, and you have to be a pretty big figure on that team. I often think that parents are a little bit leery oftentimes when working with counselors, school counselors. They're trying to test out how much you know, what’s your experience, and they feel that you're kind of the linchpin here of if my kid's going get in or not get in. And I always tell the counselors that I deal with that you have to know both things. You have to know your content and your craft but, more importantly, you have to know the population of people that you're working with.

IAN: Yeah, along that thread, I mean, one of the things that we get asked a lot, and at least from my perspective this is as accurate as a statement as at least I'm aware of is that, when we read recommendations from counselors, that is one input into kind of the discovery process on who that person is. The recommendation from either a teacher or another member within their community is almost an equal weight to that of the
guidance counselor. And then to be candid, the personal statement or how the student represents themselves is also of equal weight to the counselor recommendation. So this idea that the counselor is making the do or don't or the green light, red light for that student is just not true. But I think they have an opportunity to tell us something that is not on paper on the transcript, you know a little lens into their soul a little bit.

JOHN: Yeah, I feel my job with the letter is to present my student in an accurate and thorough way that doesn't just repeat information that you're going find in other places in the application. This can be my experience with this student, my sense of his or her likelihood to be successful on a college campus. Just give you a better understanding of who that person is as opposed to getting some numbers off a transcript.

IAN: While we're on the topic, if there needs to be some information sharing in between the family and the guidance professional, would you prefer that the parent reach out to you or would you prefer that the student do it and really be their own advocate?

JOHN: I want to hear from both. What we do, I've always done this, is we send what we call “brag sheets” home to students and parents, and they're pretty comprehensive brag sheets. We basically say to people, “Hey, tell us some things that maybe we don't know about your son or daughter.” We ask some prodding questions in hopes that when I go to write a letter I have all the information that I need. I know the trend is, “Hey, this is a student-driven process.” And it is. But oftentimes kids won't tell you everything, and I think sometimes parents have a broad lens, and they can shine some light on things also. So I like including both.

IAN: That's really interesting. Thank you for sharing that. And then the last piece, and you've already kind of touched upon this a little bit, and that is: What is the ideal role for a parent in this process? Really from beginning to end. We talk about the discovery process of options for college, and that probably has an appropriate role for parents. And then we talk about the advocacy role once they're in the admissions process. And then there's also this kind of final stage. That is making the best informed decision when it comes to scholarships and grants and that kind of final evaluative phase where there's two or three schools and you're making the best decision. You know, given our primary audience is parents, could we talk a little bit about the role of parents within each of those three in terms of finding the best options in the beginning. How do you kind of make sure that things get done in the middle? And then the third piece is: How do you coach and help and support without owning in the last piece?

JOHN: Here's a sporting analogy I always use. You ever go to a little league baseball game, and your kid's in the batter's box, and you're a nervous wreck as a parent? But
sometimes you’ve got to let your kid swing the bat. You can’t jump in the batter’s box for him or her. You’ve got to let them swing the bat. So I'm always telling people, “Help, but don’t do”. And there’s a part of this, a huge part of this, that parents have to be involved in. There’s the financial aid part, which if you're writing the check, you're probably going to have a pretty big say in the ultimate decision. But I think the best thing that parents can do is become educated on the process. It’s an ever-changing process. I think you need to really take the time to understand the different components of the process. And those different components are standardized testing, how colleges make decisions, what factors should students consider when looking at colleges. You need to understand financial aid, everything from early decision to early action. You just need to be informed before you start out on this process. Then I think you're a supporter, you're a mentor, you listen, you give input when necessary. But again I think your focus always has to let your kid be the one swinging the bat.

IAN: Yeah, and I think along that thread again is that there’s another opportunity for the parent to connect with the admissions professional to understand the details at that particular school. To your exact point, most schools have a different timeline, right? So sometimes have a preferred date, others this is our hard deadline for items, these are the things we look for, prioritize, these are the things that are less important, depending on the school. And to the parents, I would suggest that every college usually displays who their admissions contacts are within that school by either geography or by program. And if you want to understand the process or the timeline or the important considerations at that school, to me, it feels very appropriate for the parent to reach out to that admissions counselor. And not to, again, get into the details of why Johnny or Suzie at that school, but more along the line tell me about the ideal timeline that you want us to engage with so that we work within that at home.

JOHN: I think it’s a good clerical role for parents to have and in an organizer, be mindful of deadlines that pass because sometimes kids, it’s their first time they've ever gone through this, so they’re not really aware of deadlines. But again, I think when the parents step into the point where they’re setting up all the appointments and “We’re going to visit these three schools next week, and I’ve made an appointment for you at ten o’clock at ‘School X’ and 11:30 at ‘School Y,” then I think kids tend to back away from it a little bit and I don’t think that's healthy.

IAN: You know, just to kind of continue on that, one of the things, and I'm not only a professional but I also have a rising senior in this process. And one of the conversations that has probably caused us the most uncertainty and anxiety, and I work in this field, is how many times do you take an SAT or an ACT? And, at least, we're finding in our house that it's completely contextual to the endgame and the goal, right? And I was
wondering if you could share a little bit about setting a goal in this process as a parent and maybe facilitating that conversation with the student so that you know if you get there or not. I think sometimes families they go through the process and they grind through the process, and then it's the end of the timeline and there's not an assessment if we did well or not. And I was wondering if you could maybe think a little bit or reflect a little about should that be part of the process. What is our goal as a parent and a student and even a counselor so that we know if we've won or lost?

JOHN: And to do that I think you work backwards. I think it's dangerous to set your sights on one or two specific “high-power, name-brand schools” where if we don't get there this whole process has been disastrous. I think that's a horrific way to start and I see that happen quite often. So you start with the endgame in mind, and the endgame being, our goal is to approach this process in an appropriate manner and end up in a good situation. Define a good situation. I mean, ultimately I think you want your son or daughter to have a good experience at college, which means socially, academically, it leads them off to a career path. And I think there's a lot of different schools and different opportunities for kids to do that. But I think it's dangerous if you start with a really specific: “This is the place we have to get in, and we're going to do whatever we can to get there. If it means taking the SATs 42 times to get a certain score, we're going to do it.” I'm not a big fan of that, obviously.

IAN: Yeah, I think that's absolutely right. The one thing that I do think is maybe a little bit more important today, especially as family dynamics change financially, as a parent and students start the process, to have a really clear and concise expectation of what is doable financially. And I think when they have that, and maybe even if it’s in a range, then the decision-making process along a continuum is a little bit more in alignment, so that hearts don't get broken down the road. I have seen, too, oftentimes in my work where that conversation about the financial reality does not happen until the last second, and then things become really emotionally unwound. Where if you know a parent and a student can at least have a broad range that, “We can invest in your education between A and between B,” then the decision-making process, the timelines, where you evaluate, where you don't, become part of that and also frames a little bit in terms of how you engage with the financial aid office. Just a really authentic, honest type of relationship.

JOHN: Yeah, people tend to be really uncomfortable talking about money, but in this process you're dead on. I mean, that's a conversation you need to have with your child early on in the process. It doesn't have to be as specific as, “This is the set amount we can pay.” But I think you have to have a conversation about how does that financial aid process work. You have to have a really honest conversation about student loans and
how much debt you want to take on. What does that mean? Because when you're in high school and someone says, “Oh, do you want to leave here with $75,000 in debt?” That doesn’t really mean much to you, I think, until you break it down and say, “Well, if you start out and you're making 40 grand a year at a certain school and you're paying $1,000 a month, you know, in the student loan.” I just think it’s an important conversation to have because, ultimately, no matter how much research you do and how much angst you go through at the end of the process, oftentimes it comes down to be a financial decision.

IAN: You hope that the balance between the rational input, the goal setting that you kind of establish in the beginning, is in alignment with this kind of emotional attachment piece, right? And you don't overweight one with the other. Falling in love with your college or university is a great thing, but it has to be in balance with long-term goals, planning. And parents, to your point, can kind of coach that mindset process as a part of that.

JOHN: Yeah, people talk often about that. When you're applying to schools with different selectivity levels apply to a couple reach schools and, for lack of a better term, apply to a safety school or two. I think it's equally, if not more, important to apply to different levels of schools financially, so you're not boxed in and all of the sudden you're having a really difficult conversation at the end that says, “Well, you know, we just can't as a family afford that. And the only way we could do that is to borrow X amount of money.” So you're right. I think it's a good idea to have a really upfront, frank conversation about finances and apply to schools that give you some options financially.

IAN: And I think to add to that, you know, this is another opportunity for parents to engage with their admissions counselor or financial aid professional, in fleshing some of that information out earlier. Again, not getting to exact numbers, but just kind of a sense of what the range is from a possibility perspective.

JOHN: I’m constantly telling people there's so much information available. You really shouldn't be blinded by the circumstances or financial offer that comes your way. You know the expected family contribution pretty much drives the financial aid process. You know there's calculators online where you can go, and a fairly good estimate as to what your expected family contribution is. I think if you do that in advance, you get a ballpark figure to what a typical financial aid package is going to look like. And without that, I think you're approaching it kind of blindly.
IAN: Yeah, yeah. John thank you so much for your time and your thoughts and your reflections today. I know that our parents will find them very helpful as they think about their own role in this process.

JOHN: Well thanks for including me. I enjoyed being here and if I can ever return I’d be more than happy to.

IAN: Great. Thank you, and great luck at McQuaid this fall.

JOHN: Thank you.

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