Do you remember applying to college? If you did so more than 20 years ago, chances are good that the process was much less intense than it is today. Our high stakes, achievement-oriented culture has amped up the stress and worry over college admissions to epidemic proportions. Luckily, our college counselors—Jennifer Carleton and Jean Lee—are experts in the field who not only shepherd Crystal families through the process, but have also served as college admissions officers at Georgetown (Jennifer) and Princeton and Yale (Jean).

Jennifer and Jean are known by the mash-up moniker CarLeeton by students, which underscores their own close collaboration as well as their close relationships with their students. The Crystal Magazine sat down with CarLeeton to dispel some common myths about college admissions and to provide advice on the process.

CM: Why does there seem to be more hysteria around college admissions than in the past?

CarLeeton: One problem is college rankings. These lists fuel the perception that there are only a small number of schools that good students should consider worthwhile, and a sense that great opportunities are only available to students who attend a top 100 school as determined by US News and World Report.

One issue with these rankings is that they are based upon varying criteria such as selectivity and campus amenities, which are used as a proxy for the actual quality of the educational experience. Selectivity—a low admission rate—as a gauge of value is probably the most spurious measure. A better measure for the quality of a school would be data on the number of its graduates who are gainfully employed (an output), not the number of applicants admitted (an input).

But colleges feel market pressure to improve their rankings and appear more selective by driving up application rates. Some even manufacture selectivity by courting unqualified applicants or offering enticements such as waiving the application fee or not requiring an extra essay for application.

In reality, there are over 4,000 quality colleges and universities in the country, and two-thirds admit 66% or more of their applicants.

CM: What are the biggest misconceptions about the college application process?

CarLeeton: First and foremost, you can’t reverse engineer an application to ensure admission. In no given year do colleges know what their application pool will look like, so one can’t guess what type of activity or interest they will presumably favor. Rather, colleges seek to enroll a well-balanced class with students who will be deeply engaged on their campuses.
Students can't control the decision a college will make on their applications. What they can control is how to spend their time. Demonstrating authentic engagement in a few activities is much more important than presenting a laundry list of more shallow interests.

Keep in mind that admissions officers have seen it all before, so authenticity has the most value in the process. A Dean of Admissions who took part in one of our College Colloquia panels put it quite well, “Whatever you do, do something of substance. Joining 12 clubs in your senior year will actually insult me.”

CM: Are there any college admission misconceptions that are specific to Crystal?

CarLeeton: There is a perception that it would be easier to be a top student at a public school that is less challenging than Crystal. There is a perception that it would be easier to be a top student at a public school that is less challenging than Crystal.

CM: How do you ensure that colleges know Crystal and our students?

CarLeeton: We host about 100 college reps on campus which is a large number for a school of our size. Many of these reps visit every year and cite the quality of student engagement and questions as their favorite aspects. It also doesn’t hurt that we are close to SFO!

Additionally, we are the only Bay Area independent school to host a fly-in/visit program for deans and directors of admission called the Crystal College Colloquium. The bi-annual program includes a half-day visit to campus where they have lunch with students, faculty, administrators and trustees. They tour campus with an admission ambassador, visit a class and meet with Amy Richards and us. The visit gives deans and directors of admission an insight into a day in the life of a Crystal student, to learn what makes our community unique. The evening program is a chance for students and parents to gain from the wisdom and insight of the panelists and help inform students’ (eventual) college searches.

CM: You mentioned that a long list of extracurricular activities does not help an application. Is there a right number?

CarLeeton: Actually, a long list can be harmful, especially if it’s artificially inflated. There’s a joke in some offices that a 17-year-old’s resume shouldn’t be longer than the Dean of Admission’s—it’s simply not sincere. As an admission officer, your eyes start glazing over when reading those files.

Colleges could implement one of the recommendations from the “Turning the Tide” report published in January 2016, and limit the number of activities an applicant can list down to 3 to 5 from the current allowance of 10. This could reduce student stress and make the mechanics of the application more consistent with colleges’ messages about the importance of authentic engagement.

CM: How important is the personal essay? What are some essay dos and don’ts?

CarLeeton: An essay won’t get you into college if all the other elements of the package aren’t there. However, a good essay can certainly help an applicant stand out in the crowd, particularly if it reveals something truly personal, such as a deeply held belief, value or core personal quality. The essay is a chance to open your heart so it’s important not to regurgitate your resume. Admissions officers can usually tell when a parent writes an essay, so it’s important that the students’ authentic voice comes through.

CM: What is your single most important piece of advice for seniors in the college application process?

CarLeeton: Treat every college as your first choice. That means demonstrating sincere interest and making contact by joining mailing lists, clicking through on email links, participating in an alumni interview, writing thank you notes, etc.

CM: How do you measure success?

CarLeeton: We measure success in many ways. First and foremost, we feel successful when a senior can articulate the academic, social and cultural qualities that will provide them both a comfortable and challenging college experience—this is the most important aspect of the college counselling process. When students take ownership of the process to learn about themselves—not just about what colleges are out there—they will be better equipped to make the most of their college experience. Success to us is a student who feels empowered to articulate the fit they are looking for in a college, and who is prepared to embark on a journey to college and beyond. We certainly feel successful when a graduate tells us that they have found a home away from home at college.

CarLeeton: Where You Go is Not Who You’ll Be by Frank Bruni

We also measure success by whether students and families feel informed and supported throughout the process. We are pleased by the recent NAIS CSUS Parent Survey results that about 90% are highly satisfied with their experience.

It is also gratifying to us when alumni visit us on campus to reflect on their experiences—both positive and negative—in a mature manner.

Jennifer and Jean’s list of required reading for parents who are helping their child embark upon the college process.