



THE FRANCIS J. CAREY, JR. LECTURE AT GILMAN

THE FRANCIS J. CAREY, JR. LECTURE IS DESIGNED TO CONNECT GILMAN STUDENTS AND OUR COMMUNITY WITH DEANS OF ADMISSIONS AT LEADING COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES.

Lee Coffin, Vice Provost for Enrollment and Dean Of Admissions and Financial Aid at Dartmouth College, delivered the following address to Gilman Upper School students and community members on Thursday, November 3, 2022.

As the third “distinguished guest lecturer” in the Francis J. Carey, Jr. Lecture Series, I am (correctly) billed as Dartmouth’s dean of admissions. Yup, I am the Big Green Dean. But I am also a podcaster—an unexpected byproduct of the pandemic lockdown—who muses about all-things-admissions every Tuesday (wherever you find your podcasts).

Last week, I recorded an episode in which three undergraduates reflected on their own admissions experience as they offered insights and guidance to this year’s crop of applicants. (Hello, seniors.) My first question produced unexpected unanimity. I asked the cheery trio, “When you rewind to your senior year, what do you remember?” Their unanimous response was not so cheery as they remembered “a bunch of stress!” That was not what I was planning to discuss as we opened the episode, but there it was, in their own words. So, I probed. They had worried about grades and testing, about what they “ought” to be doing and saying as opposed to what they wanted to be doing and saying. “I overthought everything,” one told me. “Truth,” chirped another. “I overthought how numbers define me, and I worried that mine were less than perfect.” Another chimed in, “I overthought everything!” They pondered essays about things they thought an admission officer wanted to hear rather the story they wanted to share; they eyed classmates with a jealous side-eye as results arrived, whether it was a grade, a score or an admission offer. Oof. I find no joy in being even an indirect purveyor of such stress. If I were a dog, that truth would make my tail sag, not wag.

I won't ask for a show of hands, but I'll use the transitive property we learned in geometry to assume if they were stressed, you are stressed, too. Their worry is your worry. Am I right? Clearly, the college admissions process is not the equivalent of a warm bowl of oatmeal on a cold morning or a snuggle with your dog. (Mine is staring at me as I write this speech, hence my second dog reference within the last minute.)

I was really struck by the nagging self-doubt that haunted these seemingly happy, grounded, high-achieving students. They each recalled genuine anxiety that their merit—as measured through grades and testing and activities and essays—would not be “good enough.” And they were especially preoccupied about their “poor” chances at their “reach” options, a reach being the admissions equivalent of catnip. “The odds were impossible,” one sighed. And yet, in a twist of sweet irony, all three received happy news when their search concluded. For the record, none of my guests wears a superhero's cape. They are three high-achieving, good kids—none of whom holds a patent nor earned a perfect SAT score—and each of them earned an outcome that made them happy. And “earned” is the correct verb in that last sentence.

I visit Gilman today as an “Ivy dean,” perhaps the most intimidating persona on the college admissions landscape. I am the gatekeeper at one of the “reachiest” of the reaches. An Ivy Dean is a Halloween costume, an avatar of doom, a cartoon character—likely clad in tweed—who stamps “no” on an application with a Hogwarts-like wax seal. Who wants to meet that character? Whether I like it or not, as nice and funny as I aim to be as I inhabit my professional role, I get it. My signature (always in green ink, since I represent Dartmouth) confirms or upends a goal, with too few of the former and so many of the latter each year. [Sigh]

Keep calm and carry on as you navigate and negotiate your college admissions process.

To dissipate some of your angst, let's channel a British vibe. Our friends in the UK have a saying, “Keep Calm and Carry On,” which Google tells me was coined by the shadow Minister of Information in the summer of 1939. While that unnamed shadow minister remains in the rhetorical shadows of history, the popular World War II poster is forever linked to Churchill's fighting spirit and the bravery of the British people as they anticipated The Blitz. Keep Calm and Carry On. It is pragmatic and unphased. No fuss. Onward we go. I can hear the late Queen saying it as Corgis swirled around her feet. Keep Calm and Carry On. Okay, maybe my vocalization sounds more like Monty Python than Her Majesty, but it's still a broadly British imitation... (I also like the avuncular voice who advises us to Mind the Gap as we enter a car on London's Tube, but now I am really off topic....)

Keep calm and carry on, or KC2O if we're texting it. Hmm, KC2O might work as an acronym a la OMG, GOAT (that would be Tom Brady, sorry Raven fans...), and LOL... Then again, KC2O is probably some nasty chemical compound—maybe it's explosive... Let's stick to texting. Anyway, the practical optimism of those five words resonates with me. So, let's imagine a contemporary purpose: keep calm and carry on as you navigate and negotiate your college admissions process. Repeat after me: Keep calm. Carry On. Keep calm... Here's the 21st century translation: stop worrying and chill out.

So, I might be this dreaded personification of college admissions angst and glory but the guy playing that part has an unlikely back story. I attended a modest public high school in a middle-class community not known for sending its seniors off to noteworthy colleges. My parents were not college graduates; my college counselor didn't really embrace either of the words in his title. I was on my own before there were guidebooks, clueless in a pre-internet era when “google” was just a silly sound babies made. And I needed a LOT of financial aid to make my education possible, which was another deep worry among my podcast-mates. In retrospect, I'd say I was lost and, knowing what I know now, my odds of admissions were low. But even so, I don't recall being stressed about the college admissions process, any more than any senior with a full honors schedule, lots of extracurriculars, and a part-time job at McDonalds might be. (Yup, the Dartmouth dean earned his first paycheck at Mickey D's...) And so, my own admission to Trinity College—not an Ivy but a place with lots of ivy crawling across the facades of its buildings—was a miraculous outcome for me.



Going to college changed the arc of my life, as it will yours. But as Gilman students, you have a head start over where I was. I checked the Gilman website yesterday and it confirmed what I already knew to be true: 100 percent of Gilman seniors matriculate at a four-year college. Boom. That is a huge statistic of opportunity, as close to a guaranteed outcome as you can get. But wait, there's more! Since 2018, the roughly 500 Gilman seniors have enrolled at 159 colleges. (I counted.) So, that's my first step towards dousing your worry. You will go to college if you want to go to college. Where you go is the missing piece of the puzzle.

You have so many options. Let me speak admissions heresy: a “yes” from a high-profile place is not the only measure of success nor is anything less than that a fumble in the grand football game of life. Resist the pull of prestige as the only the legit proof point of your admissions process. Ignore the chatter about selectivity—or the idea that stingy selectivity equals awesome—and remember an important truth: there are many more wonderful colleges than the two dozen or so places that crowd the annual lists of “best colleges.” The definition of “best” is so subjective.

Best to me might be meh to you. In fact, the college admissions process—from discovery to applying to enrolling—is a series of Goldilocks moments. “What’s right for me?” is the recurring query. Goldilocks didn’t ask the bear which bed was best. She answered that question for herself. You’ll do that for college, too. You’ll explore and discover, probe, listen, think and feel. It’s a full sensory journey.

When your counselors label a college as a “reach” or a “possible” or a “likely” (for the record, I never use the S-word in this construct because it suggests a back-up, a place that lacks agency in your planning, and every place where you file an application should be a place you could attend and thrive), the counselor is mapping your chances against a volume proposition. The reach on your list is not admissions nirvana. In the pool that gathers at Dartmouth each year, no one is a shoo-in. Volume makes that a silly definition. But there are so many high-quality places where those very same students would have been shoo-ins. As you mull your list, “possible” doesn’t mean “less than” nor does “likely” represent a consolation prize. Those designations frame your expectations; they are admissions definitions that reflect volume filtered through a lens of scarcity. Those characterizations are not editorial critiques of your merit.

Trust me. I flew from New Hampshire to Baltimore today as a messenger of reassurance, as someone who wants to empower you move confidently forward. I have been a college admissions officer for more than 30 years, which means I’ve met and counseled more seniors than I could ever tally. For sure, today’s admissions landscape is as competitive as it’s ever been, especially in the zip codes where I have worked. And yes, there are more broadly qualified applicants than seats in our classes. Admissions officers must make informed, unavoidably subjective decisions among those qualified candidates as we shape the next class. But here’s a key point: informed subjectivity is not random. You wonder: How will I succeed in this high-stake endeavor that looms before me. For what it’s worth, Dartmouth’s acceptance rate over the last couple of years was six percent, but that number hides the fact that 23 percent of the Gilman applicants to Dartmouth were admitted. That is almost four times the published, overall acceptance rate. While 23 percent is certainly “selective,” with more no’s than yesses, it does not seem impossibly so. Sometimes, an admissions statistic deserves nuance as it is digested.

Nuance is the key. It’s easy to get caught up in a twister of over-thinking and, as your spinning, you forget that your college search is your path from here to somewhere new. It is a moment for you to take stock of who you are, what you do, where you like to be. It is a moment to take an existential selfie and ask yourself a simple but important question: what makes me



happy? Happiness counts. Happiness leads to fit, a match, a connection. As college criteria go, fit is more important than any ranking, someone else's definition of "best." Fit generates happiness. And it's been my experience that happy people do their best work.

Focus on the things that are fully in your zone of influence. Do words or numbers make you smile? Do you play with ideas or equations or blank canvases or code? What format invites your curiosity? Do you lead or participate, debate or assess, tap dance or tap keyboards? Are you a risk taker or a rule follower? Is college a moment to test yourself, to move beyond your comfort zone, or is it a moment to double down on what already works for you. Only you can answer these questions. Do cities excite you or does your inner Thoreau point you outside, towards the woods? There are excellent colleges in both places, waiting to say hello. If you're Thoreau, concrete and high rises might not sync with your inner compass even when the colleges in those zip codes have bling. "Bling" is relative. My bling may not be your jam.

Maybe you don't have an answer to that question just yet. That's fine, you have time, even if you're a senior. You don't need to know the answer until May 1 of your senior year, but you do need to recognize the question as you wander and wonder through your options. Keep your own counsel as you have a conversation with the little voice inside you that knows you best.

Start with program. Do you like exploring or you ready for a specific academic path? Do you favor words or numbers, equations or languages? Hands-on learning or notetaking? Open options or requirements? Every college offers different answers to these personal inquiries, and they are important clues to what matters to you. Do you prefer listening or discussion, familiarity, or a degree of anonymity? Do 10 seats around a conversational table make you smile or squirm? Does a lecture hall of 500 with a professor professing feel exciting or intimidating? Would you raise your hand? Do you want to raise your hand? Those are clues about campus scale and classroom size and your own comfort level. My answer to those questions might not be your answer. I love pistachio ice cream. You might think it's disgusting. (My niece works at an ice cream shop and tells me only old people like the flavors with nuts. Guilty.)

Are you a city guy, outdoorsy, cosmopolitan, a hipster? Do you tinker? Are you crunchy, preppy, tattooed, or a bit of all those things? Do you run, tackle or punt? Are you entrepreneurial, conservative, an activist, a geek? Are you laidback or do you thrive on competition? Those qualities should inform the application you submit as well as the places where you submit it. Do you need a jazz scene or a place to get your hair cut? Do you hope to watch your college play its games on ESPN or is club soccer okay with you? How close is a major airport to the campus and what would the trek from and back to Baltimore entail? Do you want to drive or fly? Maybe it doesn't matter. Maybe it does. You tell me.

What else? What matters to you? How do you feel about snow? Humidity? Subways? Cows? Diversity? Museums? Religion? Partying? Open spaces? Required courses? Politics? A rah-rah vibe? Quarters versus semesters? Intensity versus chill? Are you a nerd who needs other nerds to feel happy? Are you the quarterback who loves poetry and needs a campus where both of those passions are cool? So many questions. Only you know the answers.

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Be open to surprises. Names you might not appreciate today could be the place of your dreams. This is a time to explore, try things on, let things go when the vibe doesn't click. When an option doesn't resonate, let it go. When it does, dig deeper.

Here's the counterintuitive thing about the college admissions process: it's about you, not the college. As your search evolves, look in the mirror for the answers to what counts. Who are you? What's your best environment? What are your hopes and aspirations? Hello, you. I am not recommending narcissism, and this isn't the "mirror, mirror..." moment from Snow White. But a mirror metaphor is a helpful way to frame the issue. Look at yourself, not everyone around you. Pause and ponder. What animates your personality, aspirations, talents, interests, and goals? Write those things down. Add a degree of weighting to each item as a priority through your own prism of what counts. Now, guided by that vivid selfie, assess your options.

As you complete your application, embrace the storytelling opportunity it offers you. Each application is a story. It is your story. Tell me what you'd like me to know. Who do you want me to meet and consider? Remember, if you don't tell me, how will I know? Describe the guy you'd like me to meet. Help me imagine you as a member of the community I am building, a community I am shaping from a deep queue of peers who have done well in their respective high schools.

Academic excellence—especially in a pool like Dartmouth's—is the norm. Add narrative to that data. Think about your classroom presence, your community engagement and impact, the adjectives that describe you, your aspirations and potential. Don't rely on the numbers alone—your grades, your testing—to frame your narrative. Numbers are only part of your admissions story. To be sure, your academic record is foundational, but it is not determinative in the tightest bands of selectivity. And Bs on your transcript do not stand for BAD. You do not need to be perfect.

Remember, I am a dean of admissions, not Dartmouth's dean of denial even if most students received a letter from me last year that said "I regret to inform you..." And I did regret to inform them; saying no is not fun. It's never my goal. My purpose is to find a path towards "yes" every time I open an application. And please believe me when I say that a denial is not a "rejection." A denial is an unavoidable byproduct of scarcity, a pragmatic result of supply and demand.

Make sure your selfie is in focus so the image you see is accurate. Keep calm: remember, you are in an exceptional place with wonderful teachers and advisors as well as college counselors who will guide you. Those are real resources. Focus on you. Ignore what your friends are thinking and doing, I know, that's easier said than done. Trust me. You will shed some angst when you stay focused on yourself, when you turn away from Instagram and its curated wonderfulness.

My pod guests ultimately agreed: "I wished I had chilled out more." Your path to that chill is straightforward: explore widely, keep an open mind as you discover colleges known and unknown as your search unfolds and develops; be honest with the little voice inside you that knows what feels right; ignore the voices that stress you out. And remember you are the delicious combination of data (your numbers) and voice (your story).

Keep calm and carry on. I am more optimistic about what lies ahead than you are, and my optimism flows from a well-informed perspective. I am old.

Take that existential selfie. Ready. Set. Click.

