

Episode 68 - Lee Bierer

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SPEAKERS

Lee Bierer, Moira McCullough



Moira McCullough 00:00

Welcome to the College Scoops podcast. I'm your host, Moira McCullough. And today we're talking with Lee Bierer to share her insights on lessons learned from the class of 2021 and advice for the class of 2022



Lee Bierer 00:11

Should always take the test right so you don't need to submit it. But you should certainly sort of see where you net out and how competitive that is.



Moira McCullough 00:29

This is the College Scoops podcast and I'm your host, Moira McCullough, we focus on everything college related from the admissions process to where to eat, stay and explore on and round campuses. Our guests include founders, educators, authors and experts in the college space. Join us as these experts share their knowledge, experiences and lessons learned to help you have stress free and formative and tasty college journeys. Whether it's your first or last child going to college, or you're just interested in going to a college town for a game or meal, we've got you covered. If you haven't already, please subscribe to the College Scoops podcast to get the inside scoop on everything college related and leave us a review. Thanks to all of our sponsors partners in the entire College Scoops

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 Lee Bierer 02:47
Thanks so much for having me. Delighted to be here.

 Moira McCullough 02:49
Well you're a person in demand because you and I connected just when the whole Netflix Varsity Blues was released. And you were actually giving several talks on NPR stations and your your regular on I think the one down in Charlotte, where you're based out of with Mike Collins, I think when we also talked I mentioned I'm a parent of a high school senior class of 2021. We're reflecting now with all the college admissions decisions coming through asking for your guidance and advice, lessons learned for parents and students. We're in the process right now seniors waiting for the final decisions to come through. And also juniors who are starting the college search process. So that is why you're here today.

 Lee Bierer 03:36
Great, bring it on.

 Moira McCullough 03:38

I will! Any thoughts at a high level on what you thought about that whole Netflix Varsity Blues show?

 Lee Bierer 03:43

There's overall it's very disheartening to hear we might have thought this kind of stuff was going on. He talked about there being the front door the way to get into admissions, which is the way we hope most people get in which is on your own merits and you apply and you write the essays and you get reviewed and get accepted. And they talked about the back door which is still legit and lawful, which is you can make a donation and it's not that there's no guarantee that you'll get in. What it is, is you're sort of put in a separate pile and legacy admissions and development you know, donating large sums of money sort of go in the back door so to speak. But what he was doing was this side door that is completely illegitimate, you know, and that he was bribing coaches and paying people off and getting families to spend outrageous amount of money to have their kids not take this SAT, or have it corrected and edited by somebody else. And it, it just, it I think it hit home for so many people that there's a world of haves in a world of have nots and the haves are, are allowing themselves to take advantage of the fact that, you know, money can buy lots of things, and you sort of think of college being this ivory tower of purity. And it was knocked down. Right, it was just a very sad case of multiple cases of what I think is just overall disheartening to so many people.

 Moira McCullough 05:47

Absolutely. When you think about all the work that so many students we talked about high school, but some of these students were working from middle school on and actually think that there's a fair shot at at getting into some of these institutions purely on merit. They were doing all the right things, they were doing everything that you know, kids are creating nonprofits, they're volunteering, they're participating in speech and debate. They're playing a sport, they're doing all these things. And they're prepping for the tests in there. And none of that matters.

 06:28

You know what? I think about the kids who didn't get in, because these kids did get in and that really that hurts.

M**Moira McCullough 06:37**

Absolutely. And that kind of brings a question to mind that I I have, especially given what we've just gone through in the past year with the pandemic, because the whole testing aspect. So a, you know, a lot of schools went test optional. And I'd love your take on it is, is test optional, really test optional? I mean, when schools say that their test optional, are they really test optional? When they come to evaluating the applications?

L**Lee Bierer 07:12**

I think there's sort of two camps here. I think there's the camp that was test optional, before the pandemic. And I think they did it for what they felt were the right reasons is that, you know, a single test on a single day is not indicative of of what the student is capable of, or, or is not a reflection of what they know. And so I think those schools have approached it, because they made the decision basically, voluntarily, you know, they choose to do this, I think that's very different than the vast number of schools, who were it was forced upon, because the students couldn't test. So they so they have all said they were test optional. And I think they want it to be, but I think if you sort of put yourself in the role of the person who is evaluating these, and you've got a test score for kid a, but you don't have a test score for kid B. And other than that, they look pretty, pretty similar. I think it would be very hard to take kid B. Right. I just think that, and I'm not, I'm not too cynical to think that that they're ignoring it. I just think human nature if you're if the information has been shared, okay, you're probably going to look at it. Right. And it's probably going to weigh differently for you. That said, I don't think we know yet. I think we won't know, for a couple of weeks. As to how this all shook out, you know, there's going to be a huge weightless, crazy, huge weightless, but we just don't know, we just don't know where how it's going to happen to impact kids. Right? Because Because this is the first time that's ever happened on this scale.

M**Moira McCullough 09:21**

Right? Well, as you mentioned, there are schools that you said that took that approach, years ago from a test optional. They've held their ground on that. It's interesting, because going forward, everything's opening up now. So students can have the opportunity to take tests, but last year, truly so many, I mean, it was not a level playing field. Because I know in New Jersey, my son couldn't take his test every single time he went to go take a test it was it was canceled. the playing field wasn't level at all across the different states, and people chose to either cross state lines and take tests elsewhere, but that's good. goes to your original comment to about access. Not everyone has the ability. And to do that for students that you work with now as juniors, is that something that you would say, you

know, some of these schools have said, okay, we've decided to go a second year of test optional. Would you recommend taking that test? Given what?

 Lee Bierer 10:19

Oh, not even a question. If you can, always take the test, right, and you don't need to submit it? Right. But you should certainly sort of see where you net out and how competitive that is. A lot of my students submitted test scores to their safety schools and their target schools, but may not have submitted them to their reach schools, right. So they weren't good enough to make them competitive at their reach schools, but their GPA and their rank and class and everything else. Were competitive. And so that's the big To me, that's the biggest reason why there was a huge influx of applications this year, you know, with schools going up 30 4050, even more percent in one year. Right. So

 Moira McCullough 11:11

Yes, and because of that test, optional, they applied instead of the normal, what is the normal number of schools that your students or that you hear students, that you recommend students apply to?

 11:22

It's obviously all over the map, depending if they're an athletic recruit, and they want to apply, so they're applying to a whole bunch of schools for athletic reasons, and then a variety of other schools for academic reasons, but sort of for the non non athlete, the more of what I would call sort of a typical applicant, I usually recommend somewhere between five and 12 schools, but I had two or three kids this year, who applied to over 20. Right. So they were sort of hedging their bets. And they didn't get to visit, right, so they didn't get to do the campus visits. So that made it a more level playing field, because they couldn't really get a sense of where they felt the best fit because they couldn't go visit. And so at that point, they figured maybe I'll be able to go visit in April, before, you know, once decisions are out before a deposit needs to be made.

 Moira McCullough 12:27

Right. So I exactly, because when you think about the number of schools, you originally start to look at, you're looking at about 20 schools, you're kind of here's a selection of schools, that you think that might be a good fit, academic, you go on the college visits, you get that other fit aspect, right. Sure, you know, to make that picture complete. And as

you said, this year, it was more of No, we can't get there. So that 20 schools that you had on your list, there was no fine tuning.



Lee Bierer 13:01

Absolutely.



Moira McCullough 13:01

You were just like, well, they all look the same, because I haven't been able to do anything to make any significant decisions as to what I like or don't like, when you talk about the the waitlist, can you share some information on that? Because some of us are new going through it, some of us are, I think I've heard too differently. The way they're handling the waitlist, too, is they're coming back asking some applicants, not only do you want to be on the waitlist, but now here's another additional essay that you can write to share your thoughts on why our school is the right fit. So can you provide some guidance to our listeners on that?



Lee Bierer 13:42

There's generally students can get deferred if they apply early action, right, okay. Or in some cases, early decision, but typically early decision is more either you get in or you don't. But they may defer them. And so deferred means then they go to the regular decision applicant pool. And then from there, they either get accepted, rejected or waitlisted. So it's sort of a process. So you have to go through sort of the early process and then the regular admissions process. And because there were just this massive application pool this year, colleges are clueless about who's going to yield at their school who's going to actually come and in order to hedge their bets, they are on my guesses that they will expand the waitlist to 1,000's right because they just don't know and they might be surprised and they might yield very highly and then take no one from the waitlist or they may they may really get me to go deep into the waitlist. So it's just uh, yeah, the other thing that I'll suggest is that if students do get waitlisted, that they, the one thing that they shouldn't do is just wait, right? They need to respond to the college. And if they're interested, right, so and if they can say, I will attend your school, if I am accepted and in believe it in their heart, that they would do that. So I don't do the same letter to eight schools where you are weighted, right? Colleges want to know who's going to yield, right. And so they're much more likely to give a spot off of the waitlist to somebody who's committed to going there. Right. So knowing that is in the lingo within college admissions is called a Loci. It's called a letter of continued interest. So you want to you need to share

new information about what's happened since you submitted the application. So did you get awarded this? Did your team go to regionals? Did you take another test and get new test scores? Did you know, what kinds of things? What were your first semester grades, etc. So it's an update with a statement about why it's a good academic fit for you.

M

Moira McCullough 16:33

And I feel I'm just gonna make a plug I feel for these kids, because when you talk about all those additional experiences, celebrations, achievements that they typically would have had in a normal year. We really aren't saying that because we right we have been on you know, the the athletics have been reduced. There haven't been the tournament's. There haven't been that type of experience, theater and music, the same thing. So it's almost like that added letter of what's happened since I feel for these students and athletes and musicians, because it's almost like nothing, right?

L

Lee Bierer 17:15

They've lost so much in terms of their high school experience. And then to have this added on top of it makes it very challenging.

M

Moira McCullough 17:24

It does, I think, from a psychological standpoint, colleges need to be aware that letter of continued interest, it's like, yes, but you're asking me what we've done since last time, and no one's done anything, or just so coming out of this pandemic. And life is not normal. So it's very hard to continue to message, the positive messaging that you would typically have in a normal year is kind of seeming redundant, okay, I'll give you my grades again, because that's the only thing that's kind of been steady and normal in this type of year. When you talk about two though, you mentioned the yield and the waitlist, let's say a normal classes 800 for a particular institution, they're normally accepting 200 students thinking that you're going to get 800 right?

L

Lee Bierer 18:12

So I'll give you an example where I actually know the numbers not to the penny, of course, but close. So I'm in North Carolina, and so UNC Chapel Hill is a wonderful school, very Ivy League difficulty to go to state, but 50% acceptance rate within state so but that's still insanely difficult, because basically, almost everybody applies, right. So it does make it difficult, but they have a class of about 4,500 kids. 4,500 freshmen, roughly. And so in the

past, they've accepted something on the order of about 7,500. So almost stumped, right? And not quite double, but because their yield within stage is very, very high. Because it's a wonderful school, and it's a financial safety for a lot of families that they can afford to go. It's the out of state kids who are paying out of state tuition, who are applying to the Ivy's and all sorts of other you know, baby Ivy's and all sorts of other schools that they may get in but they may not come because it's not that big of a financial bargain for them. Right, but yes, but that ratio is fairly typical. You can look at the I use the Princeton Review book, but Fiske is a great guide as well, but Princeton Review will tell you what the yield is. How many applicants they got and then what the yield is and the yield determines the waitlist, right? So if they had more kids accept their offers, then they're going to have fewer kids accepted from the waitlist, right? They write basic math. So it's but even a school like Harvard has an 82% yield. So that means that the likelihood of kids getting in is very, very high 82% of the ones who get in actually choose to go, the ones who don't go are probably going to Stanford, Princeton, yes, etc. So it a very, it's a delicate balance to try in the the admissions officers are now often referred to as enrollment managers, right, because they're encouraging the enrollment, and they need to meet their numbers, right. I mean, that's the tuition coming in, has got to be able to support the scholarships in all the institutional priorities.

M

Moira McCullough 21:09

Have you heard about Anchor, it is the easiest way to make a podcast and it's free. You can use their own creation tools to record and edit your podcast right from your phone. Anchor will distribute your podcast for you. So it can be heard on Spotify, apple, podcast, iTunes, and many more. You can make money from your podcast with no minimum listenership. If it sounds easy it is because it is, here's how you do it, download the free anchor app, or go to anchor.fm to get started. And then when we talk about the waitlist, normally, by May 1, everyone's locked and loaded on the decision of where they're going to go. And maybe you're pulling off the waitlist in June time frame, May, June time frame. And now we're hearing July and August, right, just because of the fact the sheer numbers and the fact that no one knows. So I mean, I remember telling my older to if you knew you weren't going to that school, please may you respond right away? And let them know, because it's the kind caring thing to do because somebody else that's somebody else's slot, who will get in sooner than later,

L

Lee Bierer 22:22

Somebody else's first choice. Right, exactly. So somebody else really wants to go right.

M**Moira McCullough 22:29**

So I think that's another thing that terms of times right now, as you said, a lot of kids applied to so many schools, it's like, be thoughtful. And if there are schools that you definitely don't want to go, and you already are in a couple others, like rank and write them and then give up that slot. So that that just makes it easier for everyone else. So lessons learned from this admission cycle, are you you're approaching your junior class any differently or giving them any other guidance as to what they might do differently this year.

L**Lee Bierer 23:04**

I think we have for the juniors, I think it's really hard because they've lost an entire year of extracurriculars. And so for seniors, it was really just that one semester, you know, spring semester last year, and then and then summer, you know, because you're filing applications in the fall, so but for juniors, it's been, I think, honestly harder for them to make their mark on their school and or their community, because they've been isolated, and they haven't been going to school. And there, there are no clubs, and there's no opportunity. So. So I work very closely with my students to help them come up with what we call Wow, project ideas, which are things that they can do on their own, that are not necessarily related to their school, where they can control their environment where they can control what they do, how they do it, when they do it, etc. And so a lot of students have been doing that throughout the pandemic, right. So yeah.

M**Moira McCullough 24:17**

Do you find that students are more agreeable and excited to do those types of projects, I'm just thinking about how we're all going to react after being inside and in our own little family units for so long. My hope is that some of the younger students may give up that technology that they all right, closely guarded, and maybe they will appreciate that face to face communication again, do you see some of the students more energized in terms of excited kinda.

L**Lee Bierer 24:48**

Yes yet because I think we're still we're still on the very early phase of that. I think we're, I think we're all hopeful, fingers crossed anticipated. That the summer will lighten up that there won't be any repeats of bad news and that the fall will be a semi normal year with everybody face to face and all of that. So, obviously, everybody, that's what everyone wants, I do think there will be a burst of enthusiasm. But for kids who are juniors now, it's a

little, it's a little burst a little too late. You know, it's, it's, it's, I mean, they hopefully they'll enjoy their senior year, and they'll have prom and they'll have sports and they'll help all of that. But it won't impact their applications, right. So their application is going to be much harder to brag about, you know, we talked about a brag sheet. Kids putting together a brag sheet, they're going to have a lot less to brag about, because they've been locked up for the better part of the year and a half, by the time they apply. We've seen a lot of people do things virtually that, right, surprisingly, actually works better,

M

Moira McCullough 26:04

And may continue on going forward. So are there any programs or opportunities or organizations that you'd say, Oh, my gosh, take a look at this, because it may be something you will enjoy.

L

Lee Bierer 26:15

I get emails all the time about different summer programs or research opportunities for students. Wake Forest has an amazing number of summer programs, their summer immersion programs they have in business and medical and all sorts of different topics. And they were face to face until a couple of weeks ago, they decided to also go virtual. So I had kids who had already applied and written essays and in gotten accepted and then when they went virtual, they said I'm done with virtual, you know, I've just been there done that too much. I need to be faced face. So so my I'm I'm really doing a lot of research about what's left, Vic is planning to be face to face. And there's some but it's you know, it's it's there's not a lot I mean, I think the risk is still there. And I think a lot of institutions are like not not worth the risk to do it this summer.

M

Moira McCullough 27:22

In terms of essay topics. Again, this year, there was a separate essay that pertained to COVID or black lives matter It was there any recommendation you have for students that are getting ready this summer to kind of sit down and become a writer and get some of that work done beforehand. Any guidance from that perspective?

L

Lee Bierer 27:43

Oh, lots, right. I mean, the the essay is totally within the student's control. So it is the one thing that they have that they can really make their mark on. In other words, their test scores or what the test scores are, you know, or what they will be right and in the GPA at

this point is pretty hard to change because it's, it's a cumulative GPA, right. And the rank and class is what it is. So the essay is really the most important part of the subjective aspects of the application. Right? So we talk about the objective aspects, which are the grades, the test scores rank in class. And, um, and we sort of put that to bed because yeah, it's it's the kids are doing what they need to do, but there's not much on a day to day basis. But then we talk about the subjective characteristics, and those are really the things that are within the student's control. And so we're talking about community service. And I know, a lot of people just go, Oh, I can't do community service. Well, that's not necessarily true. There are things that students have done. I had a lot of students who were exceptionally creative last summer and came up with some great ideas in the throes of COVID. That were, they were not exposing themselves or taking any risk whatsoever. I had one student who grew flowers and dill and purchased, you know, 100 vases, you know, from Michaels online, and every week, delivered flowers to each resident of the senior center, right and then start and then left her email address and some of them started this, you know, pen pal kind of relationship with with the people there and she just left the box with the flowers outside the senior center, you know, she'd made all the arrangements via phone, so there was no risk to her whatsoever. And this Really brightened people's days, you know, they were very excited. And, you know, she, and she did. And she did it every week. And then she really started developing some relationships with, with the people there. And so I know, she's looking forward to being able to actually go and meet them in person, you know, they did FaceTime, and they did all sorts of things. But point is that there are things that the students can do to really set themselves apart. You know, everybody was given lemons, right. And some kids made lemonade, and some kids watched video game. I think the the kids this past year, were tested as to so what did you do? You know, in what lessons did you learn? And you know, maybe they got into ancestry.com, or something, and they and they really became closer with their family and their cousins and all sorts of things there. So they're all different kinds of things that that students can do.

M Moira McCullough 31:07

People think, well, all these great activities, you need money, you need access to our family members. And actually, to your point, you really don't.

L Lee Bierer 31:15

No, you really don't.

M

Moira McCullough 31:15

You just need to be a little creative. You talk about there's some students who, whose light bulb goes on a little bit later in life, right. But let's say you're in high school, and all of a sudden, junior year, you kick into high gear, and you're just it's a great story. You look at those grades, anything freshmen and sophomore year, did okay. But like junior and senior, do colleges really look at that? I mean, do they actually love and, and take that into consideration? Or is it just, you know, the whole four years?

L

Lee Bierer 31:47

No, they definitely take it into consideration. I mean, you would want to see an upward trajectory. Right. Okay. So that that that makes sense, that it would be way better if the light bulb went off in sophomore year, right? Because then you have two years of strong performance. Right? Right. And colleges do tend to put less weight on freshman year when they're evaluating a transcript. So if they see an errand C or you know, some other courses the you know, that the kids did not do as well, they're, they're going to be much more forgiving freshman year, not so much for sophomore and junior year And don't forget, they don't see senior year grades. Right. So that's why we want the light bulb to come on a little bit sooner.

M

Moira McCullough 32:43

Yeah. Okay. But taking those looking at the course work and the rigor of the courses and the upward trajectory. Those are good stories to tell to share. what those are additional. Right. Okay. Lee, what do you wish you knew before you attended college?

L

Lee Bierer 33:00

I've never been asked that question. What do I wish I knew? Well, I went to college pre internet so so there was I was looking, I wanted to study abroad I was I loved I had never traveled I'd never been on an airplane before I went to college. Right it all so I loved finding out about different programs and different aspects of a college I think I probably would have liked to have known what colleges would have given me the the perfect combination of a liberal arts education, but also being well prepared for a career because I got the wonderful liberal arts education, but I was not prepared for a career at all. And I work in the Career Center at the at the college I attended. And so

M**Moira McCullough 34:01**

I you know, it's interesting because I also went to a liberal arts school and you know, you learn how to write think critically, you know, problem solving all that which actually, I find some students who are so specific in certain disciplines, right? They do miss out. So you need that combination. Right? You need that practical experience as well. Is there a favorite? We're all about food at college scoops. Is there a favorite dessert or food place that you have been to in your travels in your job or with your two students to children that have graduated from school? Would there any spots that you're like, I'm going back to that campus, even if I don't have a student who's interested in that campus.

L**Lee Bierer 34:41**

I remember when I visited Lafayette, it was fall so there was no snow in the ground. But I remember the tour guide telling us that on the first snowfall, there is a snowman contest for every single dorm and I said that's the kind of school I want. I want to go to I just that was it. But I always try and eat I'm from but I grew up in the Boston area and so I always I love Boston Cream Pie. So if I go I always want to find the best Boston Cream Pie somewhere else.

M**Moira McCullough 35:13**

Okay. I think my husband would be right with you on that fun you and he would be making a charge so that the best Boston I love that. Thank you so much for sharing your insights today. Really appreciate it.

L**Lee Bierer 35:25**

Thanks so much for having me. I wish everybody good luck in the upcoming notifications and next season.

M**Moira McCullough 35:36**

Thanks to Lee for joining us today. As we know many students are in the midst of hearing back from colleges about admissions decisions we discussed what to do if you're on the waitlist, how to write a letter of continued interest. lessons learned from this admission cycle and tips for the class of 2022. Is test optional really test optional? If you can take the test take it lead share your thoughts and writing a brag sheet after a year of COVID. You can find all of our show notes and links to our helpful resources meant to thread our

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