

Episode 80 - Alex Merrill

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SPEAKERS

Moira McCullough, Alex Merrill



Moira McCullough 00:00

Welcome to the College Scoops podcast. I'm your host, Moira McCullough. And today we are talking with Alex Merrill, on how parents can support their high school students as they transition to college.



Alex Merrill 00:10

The reason for that is that transition is really hard for a number of reasons. They change so many things at the same time. I mean, they're leaving home. I mean, whoa, just stop and look at that chain. It's just that they've lived with you their entire lives and been dependent on every meal. You know, right there in the house has been downstairs. And now it's not. I mean, that is huge.



Moira McCullough 00:41

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, send everything college related, and leave us a review. Thanks to all of our sponsors, partners and the entire College Scoops Ambassador team for helping us bring valuable content to our community. If you would like to support College Scoops as a sponsor, please head over to patreon@patreon.com/collegescoops and sign up as a sustaining listener, insider or Deluxe sponsor. We have exclusive benefits for our members free ebooks and even a College Scoops care package. Alexander has taught English, coached and dorm parented for nearly 20 years at Dartmouth College, the King School, Kingswood Oxford Phillips Andover and the Taft School. He is an expert in instruction in all humanities and test preparation. He has tutored hundreds of adolescent teens and young adults from middle school through college level on all spectrums, behaviorally, and academically. He attended Phillips Exeter Academy and received an undergraduate degree from Kenyon College and a master's degree from Dartmouth College. He lives in Middlebury, Connecticut, with his three Rug rats and wife, Alexa. Welcome to the College Scoops podcast. Alex, thank you so much for joining us today.



Alex Merrill 02:33

It's a pleasure to be here.



Moira McCullough 02:34

I want to hear about your experience and how you help students and your past experience just working in boarding schools, high schools, being a dorm parent, I mean, she's the least I'd quit after all that, like the fact that you continue to do what you do and help students is really great. So that's why we kind of invited you on here today to help share your expertise, and also help parents like myself, and how we can better support our students.



Alex Merrill 03:00

Yes, my pleasure. I mean, I guess through no effort of my own, I've kind of seen all the nooks and crannies of, you know, New England schooling. And I've taught everywhere from eighth grade up through college, competitive schools, public, private, you know, I've kind of seen the gamut.



Moira McCullough 03:18

Great. Did you enjoy teaching the most?

A

Alex Merrill 03:20

Probably freshmen in high school, which may or may not be a surprising answer, but I just think at that age, they're just so young, so excited, they're so eager to, to take in whatever you're willing to give you. They worship to I mean, you know, to be honest, like it's, it's a it's a little bit flattering, I guess a time since, you know, they're just like, wow, you know, things like you are God. But they take that in, and it makes a huge difference for them, I guess, kind of, you know, in the rest of their academic career, I still have kids that, you know, from, like, 10 years ago, send me messages now, like, you know, thank you so much.

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Moira McCullough 03:56

My son, youngest just graduated from high school, and we just had his graduation. And his the high school that they were at had middle school from sixth grade on, and that's somewhat similar, I think, to some of this schools that you are that as well. And it was very interesting when the middle school principal came up. I mean, I am forever grateful, because that experience was so crucial to setting them up for high school. But then to your point, you know, you see some of these freshmen and sophomore teachers, thank you so much.

A

Alex Merrill 04:27

It's an historic time. I think for all of us, I guess. It's just, you know, when our intellect sort of develops enough to be able to sort of appreciate some of the, you know, the literature, I was an English teacher, so obviously, that's, that's what I dwell on. But, you know, your brain finally reaches that point where you can sort of intellectualize things and like, you know, reflect on your own experience and apply that to the academics. You know, but you're still like, by the time they get to junior year, they look like they've kind of been through a few wars. They have You know, you can see him kind of slumped over there really tired in the morning that rains Forget about it. You're gonna get nothing that day. But junior year, like we've been beat down freshman year though. Like, they're just like walking on the clouds, man. It's so true.

M

Moira McCullough 05:12

They're so naive. To your point by senior either they're so worn down, or they know it all. I guess as a parent, I would see them. Oh, you know everything. You don't need anything from us anymore?

A Alex Merrill 05:21
Well, yeah, I mean, that's a separation from the parents, too. I'd say I'm not I have a daughter who's nine. I'm really looking forward to when she hits High School.

M Moira McCullough 05:29
Can you just share a little bit because you were also the dorm parents? So tell us a little bit that some adventures there or challenges?

A Alex Merrill 05:37
Yeah, it's well, at Taft, I lived on a hall with 50 boys, which is exactly as much of an adventure as it sounds. There were junior and senior boys too, as well and some post grads. They describe this smell there is like pee and soy sauce. I think all the time. It was a building that had been like, been there for like 50 years without being renovated. So it was it was kind of grimy. There was like mice in the in the walls and like insects crawling all over the place. And nothing worked. I mean, it was broken. But you can imagine what 50 boys would do to a place like that.

M Moira McCullough 06:16
Exactly. And did you teach at tapped in coach?

A Alex Merrill 06:20
Yeah, did the whole the whole nine yards a triple threat as they call it at boarding schools. What was nice in that is that you really got to know some of those kids. I mean, they were, you know, you spent all day with them, you teach them in the morning, you'd go, you know, coach them in tennis in the afternoon. And then that night, you'd help them with their homework. You know, it's a very sort of holistic relationship.

M Moira McCullough 06:44
And then did you move on to college, and teach there are no,

A Alex Merrill 06:49
I taught college actually, earlier in my career. When I was at Dartmouth, I taught as a TA

there. And that's when I was teaching exclusively writing. Dartmouth actually is a writing program that it's kind of the gold standard for the country. That's I guess, where I learned how to teach. And by the way, that's where I got my attitude about teaching really, which is that teaching is learning, I guess, you know, the brain statistics kind of port that if you read or you watch something, and you're asked to recall that information afterwards, you have a 5% ratio. If I were to ask you like 20 questions about thing that you had read, like earlier today, or something you've watched, you would probably get chances are you getting one out of 20 of those things correct? In terms of retaining that information, teaching direct opposite 90% so if I, if I gave you something and say you need to teach this to me, you would have a 90% of that. It's harder to do this in the classroom. It's easier to do it, I guess, on a one on one basis.

M Moira McCullough 07:49

Was that where you developed your love of teaching or thas it been kindo a journey.

A Alex Merrill 07:53

Okay. Yeah, absolutely. I guess that's where I learned how to write I guess. I mean, before messing around, but I never knew how to write I never knew why topic sentences were important that I was just like, now write this down. And I was kind of interesting. Maybe like, get something out of it. I guess they call it writer based writing versus reader base writing. But you must have been a good writer, maybe but by accident. Only coincidentally,

M Moira McCullough 08:18

Having worked with all different levels of students, what are some some struggles that students have right now that we as parents, or you as educators are buying to help support them? Yeah.

A Alex Merrill 08:29

So I mean, one of the main focuses my company Alliance tutoring is kids with anxiety. And it probably isn't shocking to hear that anxiety has been through the roof. This whole pandemic thing, we're just talking about it earlier actually, so unpredictable. You know, and for kids with anxiety that is like, absolute kryptonite, always having been through sort of, like all these traumatic incidents in their past that give us anxiety, I was expecting that like other shoe to drop, like, where's where's the other bad thing that's about to happen to

me that I like, can't predict. And that's what anxiety is. It's fear, like, run out of control as well. What's characteristic of this pandemic? unpredictability. Nobody knew what was gonna happen, when is it going to get better when we go back to school, nobody knew

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Moira McCullough 09:13

they look at I'm doing two or some kids and think they, there's no way they can having guided because they from the outside, they go together. There's from from your perspective, too, or as a parent, you could think, Oh, my kids not anxious. They're top of things. their grades are good. They're they seem happy. They're on activities. Oh, yeah.

A

Alex Merrill 09:31

That's a really good question. I mean, I'd say start with the fact that you're right on the nose there. I mean, much of it's invisible. And to bring gender into it a little bit. Boys typically have everything under control, don't everything under control, and they're kind of programmed to not show any weakness in life, right. So if if things start going wrong, they kind of take the opposite approach. It's like no, I got this like, there's nothing to see here like, you know, pay no attention to the man behind the curtain, but they're really their wheels are spinning and spinning and spinning. And you know, they're frozen in terror, they're in the fight or flight. That's when anxiety basically does does to us, it sends us into sort of overdrive that fight or flight, floods the system with, you know, with emotion. And that's what's going on behind the curtain. They're just they're freaking out. But they're certainly not going to show that to their parents. Absolutely not. That's the last person they would reveal those struggles to, especially because they typically respect them, all right, and they want they want their parents to like them to have a lot of respect for them and ensure that they get the freedoms and the the benefits that come with that respect. They typically won't reveal to the parents but you'd be shocked as a tutor or a coach that comes in there, that they open up just being an outsider, I guess sometimes is is the the only benefit you need.

M

Moira McCullough 10:55

To your point. I also think when something is going on, too, with adults, sometimes it's easier to tell that one person one removed, because it's not as if you're going to see them all the time, or you're going to have to explain for kids, therapists. Well, that's that's it, you know, you're not going to sit every every day. How's it going? Are you feeling better? I don't want to talk about that only on Tuesdays at two.

A

Alex Merrill 11:16

Right? Right? Well, and there's just so much packed into a parent child relationship. I mean, it's like, decades of like, brush your teeth, brush your teeth, like, like that. I mean, there's, there's, there's conflict, and there's love, and there's just layers and layers and layers of memories. And you know, all of that stuff that comes along with a parent child relationship. So you almost don't have room to operate in there. By the time they hit like high school college. I know for a fact that if I recommend a book to my daughter, and she's very, she loves books she's reading all the time. It's got libraries and libraries of books. If I recommend a book to her, she won't read it. And I'm an English teacher. And I consider her as close. But there's certainly no shame about that. I'd say if you don't have a complicated relationship with your child, you're doing something wrong.

M

Moira McCullough 12:11

I think there has to be that healthy, back and forth, or that healthy debate, or that, or that period where you're going through a hard time because as you said, it's only normal. kids want boundaries, they want ground rules, but they also need to be able to push back a little bit. As somebody who has has that experience and and with what you're helping students with today, what would you say are some of the things that you try to communicate to students from high school to college? I'm a new parent class of 2021. Student going off to college? What was some advice you'd give to that event? And then that parent?

A

Alex Merrill 12:50

It's a great question. So I mean, let me start with what kind of the attitude is in this country, at 18, you've been through 18 years of like, have a lot of a lot of emotion, a lot of complexity, a lot of ups and downs. And there's almost like this kind of like, okay, made it to 18, like good luck, like, it's time for you to grow up, it's time for you to like, leave the nest and like figure it all out. That's all well, and good. I mean, I, I appreciate that attitude of like, you must create independence. I mean, we don't want them to be 39. And living at home and you know, without a job, like, absolutely don't want that failure to launch but the sink or swim, attitude just doesn't work. It just doesn't work in practice. And we talked about it before the 30% statistic of kids who go off to college, don't make it to sophomore year, that 30% those are somebody who went off and like everything was cool, and like, this is gonna be great. And you know, now Where are they? You know, so the reason for that is that transition is really hard. For a number of reasons. They change so many things at the same time. I mean, they're leaving home, I mean, whoa, just stop and look at that chain. It's just that they've lived with you their entire lives and been dependent on every

meal, you know, right there in that house has been downstairs. And now it's not, I mean, that is huge. Okay. And, but that's not the only change, I mean, fundamental changes to their academic life. Before in high school, it's like, you go to math, you know, then you have a break, then you you know, then you go to English, then you have your extracurriculars, then there's lunch and there's sports. You go home, you know, you do some homework, go to bed, you do it all again the next day. In college. It's completely different, right? They give you several bucks, and you go, we'll see you in October, feel free to come to class. I hope you do well on the midterm, but it doesn't really bother me if you don't. That's that short circuit so many kids and of course, like you know, every all of those Exactly. Management things are in place for them already in high school Thank you just shuck the training wheels overnight and you know, good luck. And then you add in things like, okay, now you got to like, do your own laundry. Oh, by the way, here's like complete freedom and autonomy. I mean, no wonder freshman years of a mess, right? Just a train wreck sometimes

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Moira McCullough 15:20

As you just went through that I'm sitting here and I'm starting to think. Yes, some of them will wake up. But I even remember my first time stepping foot on college campus and even going into the cafeteria to your point, navigating First of all, the social thing. Okay, that in itself, and yeah, yeah. But then looking at the buffet and thinking, can I actually have Captain Crunch? My mother's not here? Is that something that every, for the students, majority of them who have never lived away from home, and to your point, we've micromanage everything or, or helped the system, guys. Yeah. And then you just say you have a chance to go and make decisions on every aspect of your life. Right? Every hour?

A

Alex Merrill 16:06

Yeah. I'm glad you brought up the social piece to that, because I do I specifically remember that meeting my roommate and be like, God, I hope you'll like sit down, like and have dinner with me, because I was just terrified. sitting alone having a meal in a new place. I mean,

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Moira McCullough 16:22

I don't think I listened to the first day of classes. Yeah. And think about that, like, yeah, how much energy and stress? Yeah, that just that, just that which, If only I'd had gone about it a different way,

A

Alex Merrill 16:35

I would say avoid that attitude of sink or swim kid, I mean, I think you need to give them as much like, it's should be the opposite, you should give them as much support as you can, because they're going to get plenty of like sink or swim, no matter what you do for them. I mean, they're, you know, they're leaving home, like I said that the system is totally different new social scene, like, they're gonna have plenty of challenges ahead of them. Okay, it's pretty difficult, not impossible to helicopter parent, a kid, and that's going off to college, especially in another state. So I would say you want to try to provide them as much support as possible. You know, obviously, our service is great if you have the means, you know, to provide a tutor or a coach or somebody like that, who's going to act as sort of a mentor and a big brother or big sister to that kid, if you have somebody like that. And that goes miles, doesn't it. I mean, imagine that. Imagine, you know, when you went off to college, for the first time, having somebody that you could talk to every week wasn't your mother, right? If she you know, you didn't have the sort of the fear of like, you know, recourse of her being angry at you for doing something. But somebody who is disconnected from the emotion of like raising you, who is also an expert, in all of the all of the academics that you were in at the time, and being able to meet with that person, weekly fit, it makes a big difference. I mean, it makes a lot more comfortable.

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Moira McCullough 18:03

I would also though, say I caution, you know, my kids that and this is something I'd said in high school as well find somebody and this goes to your to your previous experience, working in high school and middle school and high school, find somebody on that campus environment that you connect with, that you can go to when you need help, right. And if something happens, and you don't want to tell me or your father, go find that person, and and have that person's that you could ask them the uncomfortable questions. So I think having that yeah, that meant informal mentor that may turn into a mentor, but having adult that you can call?

A

Alex Merrill 18:48

Yeah, I mean, not everyone has the means for that.

M

Moira McCullough 18:52

Just finding a teacher or a coach.



18:55

So you get it from somewhere, voice of reason, you know, that, that person that's going to help guide you and support you. So it's really a matter of like, finding that. But I mean, the problem is, I guess that so many kids are scared of doing that. They don't want to impose on their professors. That the I guess the teacher student relationship in high school is like much different than in college. For the most part. You're more colleagues really in college, right? Or at least these step closer to that with the professor, and but if you don't make that effort, you're just a number to them.

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Moira McCullough 19:32

Absolutely. Well, that's why the extracurricular. You and I were even talking beforehand about your experience out in LA helping out in a fraternity environment. You're a sound resource network.



19:47

Yes exactly. So I mean, it's a matter of finding that part that can come through sort of advocating for yourself. And that's an amazingly simple move that a lot of kids don't make. Email your professor before class and be like, hey, like, my name is Alex, like, I'm going to be in your class, like, I'm really looking forward to this. How many kids do you think do that? Have a class of like 41? Maybe. And, and guess what the professor knows who you are for the rest of the semester. And you've made a wonderful first impression with one sentence. But it's, it's tough getting, getting the kids to do that. I guess they don't want to put themselves out there. They don't want to like with a lot of the classes right now, there's discussion boards, right? Let me just illustrate with an example here. So you posted you post a response to some sort of question. And then often there'll be like, you know, respond to somebody else's post as well. Okay, so you have some, some combination of those things? Well, kids will, they will go through and read everybody else's comment. First, right. And, and they don't want to, they never want to be first or second even. Or last for that matter. They want they want to stay with the pack. I guess, right? I mean, we're kind of pack creatures. And when you get into like tense situations, and like unfamiliar circumstances, you want to go along with the crowd. Right? So they'll read all those responses and then respond, you know, based on what everyone else has done. And so I guess apart part of that is they don't want to stick their head up.

M

Moira McCullough 21:25

I want to fit in.

A Alex Merrill 21:26
Yeah, that's kind of the inclination, I guess is just fit in. And they don't feel like talking to the professor is like that brown nosers maybe a knight in high school do that.

M Moira McCullough 21:38
I don't want to be that a couple of them probably did that. Right.

A Alex Merrill 21:41
Right. But I mean, it's different. In college, like you need to do that. Like if you want to thrive and do well, you need to develop a relationship with your with your professors, and they want that. And if you don't, you're going to kind of fade into the background.

M Moira McCullough 21:59
Well, absolutely. I remember my one of my kids called, and they were at a larger school, and all of a sudden, it was like, asking me a question. I thought, oh, gosh, I can't possibly give you an answer to that. You have a TA? You have. You have an advisor. There's a harmony.

A Alex Merrill 22:15
So some schools have tutoring centers, too. I mean, there's there's so many Dean's and I mean, offices of people that are that are there to answer those questions.

M Moira McCullough 22:29
And so that goes to some of the questions in terms of what's the support system set up at schools that typically students might not use? Well, you were a teacher, you don't put up office hours to sit by yourself, or maybe some of them do.

A Alex Merrill 22:43
Well, yeah, I mean, but that's the thing, like in high school, I remember in the private high

schools that I taught at, if a kid got to see it was like sirens flashing and like, you know, how to set up a meeting with the parents and let's get the administration in there. And let's get it let's talk about a 504 for a seat in like English, I guess is apparently failing college. There's no sirens that are going off. No one's gonna make that offer for you. Professors certainly isn't going to seek you out. like they do in high school. Don't make that offered in high school, but it's on you in college and a lot of kids just have a hard time making that.

M Moira McCullough 23:20

Ask students advices advocate for yourself.

A Alex Merrill 23:23

Everybody's doing it. It's not uncool. Like it's necessary. It's, you know, if you put it in a long term vision to if you're applying to graduate school, how are you going to apply to business school? Are you just going to throw out your resume to random schools you talk to a professor that you got along with they took a few classes with you did really well. Oh, he gave you an A and this and, you know, he always went to his office hours and you know, he's got a friends you know, Michigan, and he's got a friend at time and the business school, you know, it's networking. It's, it's, it's personal relationships. I mean, just take a look at trying to get a summer job for some of these kids. That's what I'm working on with a lot of them. It's it's about knowing somebody, it's about networking. College is so much about it's so much about the social aspect of it high school is social to write but I mean, your survival doesn't really depend on it in a professional sense.

M Moira McCullough 24:19

And that's actually a great description or that analogy like social in high school, it's kind of fun kind of Yeah, social whereas in college, that's strategic but it is so when you work with students then So a couple of things you you help them to with a setting up a mentor or a coach that helps the transition from

A Alex Merrill 24:41

Draft emails, but some of them need that. I mean, some some don't know how to send an email for come in and you know, be writing the letter U instead of y o u or want, like having a dress like Hello, Professor like layman, they'll just be like Yo, Professor Or they're just or they just start talking. They don't have any of the etiquette or whatever their their

version of etiquette is completely different. I mean, if you're just starting from that point, like, imagine all of the nuance in a communication with somebody in professional relationship that you also have to have a personal edge on, which also has some academic content to it. And there's some responsibilities that you have to take care of like, there's a lot to manage. They're surprising. I mean, that's something you don't see. But I mean, how important is it you communicate with your professors? Well,

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Moira McCullough 25:31

Well, that's it. I think, sometime this technology has been good. But that's the other side to that is they, they'd speak and write in text bytes. If it's not a formal paper assignment, do a normal, as you said, email or call, God forbid, an actual call that they would like to go to. All right. All right, text. What's

A

Alex Merrill 25:51

The generational divide? I mean, you know, with some older folks, you say, with the boomers like they like talking on the phone, right? With my generation, I guess this is sort of somewhere in between, I don't know what you call my generation?

M

Moira McCullough 26:05

And your students, right, there you go.

A

Alex Merrill 26:08

We're kind of like, in between, I guess we're emailish. I like doing things with email like I can, I can have a phone conversation and like, I text a lot to of course, but like, that's email, I guess, is like my most comfortable medium. for them. It's texting.

M

Moira McCullough 26:24

Okay, so I have an email etiquette question then talk about like, introduction and formality, that just the way you would introduce yourself or say hello to that person. Yeah. After our is there an email timeframe that I, for instance, I said to my son in high school, I'm like, Oh, just email the teacher? And he said, Absolutely not. It's after eight o'clock. Interesting. That worked with our phone call. And our family, no one was allowed to call the house after eight o'clock, when I grew up. I, my parents said, No one calls the house after it.

A Alex Merrill 26:58

I don't think there's too many universals in terms of communication these days. I mean, if you sit down and think about it, even with college professors, like there's some that will like, if it's Saturday night at 11, o'clock, like we'll respond at, like 11:07. Like, and then there's others that will like, like, forget to get back to you at all. There are some that will be, I only will write in the syllabus, I only respond to emails sent from this particular email address. And only within 12 hours or less, you know, they've very specific policies for it. So I think it's very subjective. Really, the only standard sort of communication protocol that I'm aware of that seems to be universal is you should respond to emails within 24 hours for call phone calls for that matter. And I guess another one would be, you should check your email every day, your school email, that should happen every day. I think that's a universal expectation. And some kids don't follow that. And that can get them into trouble because you just doesn't look good. It's not a great one.

M Moira McCullough 28:06

Okay, that's good to know. I know, I was going to say with those expectations is probably in the syllabus. So that is probably another thing, like sitting down, going through and knowing what the expectations are. And that would go into Yeah, well, yeah. And I mean, it gets back to the point that we were we were talking about before, which is agency, it is on you to figure that out. Like in high school, it's like you know, sit down with the dean and Dean will go over all the policies and you know, this this bell means this and, you know, you go to this, this office, when you get in this type of trouble, or this is where lunches, this is where the line starts, that doesn't exist in college. It doesn't, it's like here's your room key, like good luck. It's really on the students to figure it out. Okay, so I'm just gonna throw this in, make it a little bit personal. Your nine year old now is all of a sudden going off to college. You've gotten some advice for her as she walks out.

A Alex Merrill 29:05

Oh, well, I mean, certainly one of them's got, I don't I don't want to be too dark about this. But certainly one of them has to be about not imbibing too much and making irresponsible choices. I mean, I think, Oh, I'm a parent. So I worry about the safety first.

M Moira McCullough 29:22

I'm just making it personalized. Well, my son who just graduated from high school, they

have a tradition in High School. You go to the beach for a couple days. So to your point, that sink or swim, I didn't do that because he's my third. I sat down and I was like, if there's a pool, what are you going to do about that? If there's a second floor with a railing, kids fall off. Those break, don't stand on it, by the way, tips and tools to have. Knowing that I was it's terrifying. I didn't breathe until he drove in and I knew that he was not in a police car. I think it's having those difficult discussions as a parent to force your student to know that you are going to have some problems. And when you do, where are you going to go to?

A Alex Merrill 30:17
Yes.

M Moira McCullough 30:17
Make a ecoverable mistake.

A Alex Merrill 30:20
Exactly. It's all about the support network. Yep. And they can't tell you about some things. There's some things that they won't be able to tell you about, that have happened to them. I just, I guess I this is, I guess, opinionated. But I guess I'm of the mind that it's healthy to have, you know, things that you don't share with your parents and you have other relationships that are healthy and productive that you that you lean on as well. And that's okay. You know, really?

M Moira McCullough 30:48
I totally agree.

A Alex Merrill 30:49
I'm already extremely anxious about it. I mean, it's like, I could tell you a story that would like you'd never sleep again. But like at Kenyon College, I went to for undergraduate, I think was the year after that. There was a kid just at a party turning party, you know, saying I was in December, January, recalled, you know, got very drunk on his way home, he tripped in like ravine fell over froze to death. That was it, curtains. I mean, how do you how do you parent that? Like, I don't, I think that's just bad luck. You know, I think that there's some things I think you have to live with as a parent, like you're sending them off

into the world and like, bad things could happen to them.

M Moira McCullough 31:46

There's no answer to that. That's horrible.

A Alex Merrill 31:47

Yes, but you can do everything possible, to make sure that they're making smart decisions, and that they have the resources in place for when they don't make good decisions to be able to learn from that. And to and to get a little smarter next time.

M Moira McCullough 32:01

If there was a playbook out there for parents, we probably wouldn't have had kids. Right? I think it was written down somewhere.

A Alex Merrill 32:07

No, well, yeah, exactly enough, as the bad would happen to anyone. But to circle back around to your question, three pieces of advice. The number one thing is about, you know, alcohol and being responsible with that. Number two, is kind of the thing I've been harping on all along, which is advocate for yourself. And, and I guess, I guess this bleeds over into number three, find somebody there that you trust, who's an adult, you know, who you can kind of, you know, lean on for guidance in terms of, you know, whether it's schoolwork, or what's happened in your social life, or, you know, whether that's a coach or, you know, or, or a dean or, or a tutor, or, you know, whoever that is, you know, to try to try to form those relationships like that.

M Moira McCullough 33:01

And as a parent, your advice to somebody like myself, is have that discussion of, don't do this sink or swim, have some of those hard discussions? And let that listen, be there to listen. Right?

A Alex Merrill 33:19

For years, yes, absolutely. I mean, I guess that's kind of parenting advice. Regardless. I

mean, some things don't change. I mean, they're still your child.

M Moira McCullough 33:28

How many parents actually sometimes Listen, me included?

A Alex Merrill 33:31

it's hard. It's hard. But I guess that's what you're supposed to do. Right? I mean, that's what I've heard. Like, validate, you know, validate the feeling. I mean, I guess, if you sit down and think about it, like, that's what we all want, we want to be validated. We want to be heard. If I think back to like, the most traumatic, you know, moments of my life, and I'm like, What would I wanted my mother to do in this situation? almost universally, it's, you know, sit there, listen, understand what happened and say something like, wow, that was really hard. Yep. Judgment. That's rough. Right? And not in an artificial way. But like, actually, if I understood what happened to me, and, you know, and what I went through and be like, wow, I'm so sorry to hear that. And, and not try to solve it. Not try to solve it like that. And that's the inclination for me anyways, or to storytel and be like, Well, you know, back when I was in school, like this happened to me, too. And, you know, like, the that's, that's not particularly helpful. I wouldn't want that either. I mean, it's interesting, I guess, you know, hear about your parents and what happened in the 60s or whatever. But yeah, I don't think there's any substitute for just having somebody that witnesses you and doesn't solve your problem. You feel like you want them to respect you enough that they can solve these problems. I mean, they're 18 years old, they can figure out the right answer. They're not dumb. I mean, they're in college. They know the right answer, intellectually. It's not an intellectual problem. 99.9% of the time is it? It's, it's an emotional one, or socio emotional one. That's the solution that's needed. And guess what, that doesn't come from the intellect that doesn't come from relating some experience or knowledge that comes from, like getting a solid base emotionally, self reliance.

M Moira McCullough 35:23

I'm going to replay that whole last little bit for myself when I open up my mouth.

A Alex Merrill 35:30

I'm saying it, but I don't do it all the time. Just it's so hard when your parental inclination is cure heal. So when you see a kid, I mean, even when they're younger, it's like, their Lego tower breaks like, oh, here, let me come over and help you like, put it back together again,

like, Oh, fantastic. Then every time their Lego tower breaks, guess what?

M Moira McCullough 35:50

No, you're right. It doesn't matter what age it's. It's going to keep on going. Alex, so much. Great advice. I have to two other questions for you there. Yeah, a couple of times before, but what do you wish you knew before attending college?

A Alex Merrill 36:05

You know, I guess when I talk to regrets, I don't know if this is fair and onto myself. But I always wish I spent more time on school. Rather than, you know, this social life. And I guess, I mean, if I if I want to be fair to myself, I wasn't really mature enough to do that. So I sometimes I guess, I wonder about gap years, and the wisdom of doing things like that of programs. You know, America or whatever it is, or traveling abroad. You know, I told you about my two years between college and and graduate school. And I did not I mean, I just checked. But, but it was the most important moment of my academic career, if that makes any sense. But yeah, because that from then on. Like, every every assignment before that point I did the night before the assignment. No exaggeration, I did. After that, I didn't. I mean, it was I started a week before it was like, let's do this pieces. How do we get this published? Like, you know, it's just, it's different when you when you get a little real life experience.

M Moira McCullough 37:17

You said in the beginning, all those other decisions that you were emotionally physically making right now? Yeah. Do you took those two years to kind of like, nail it from that perspective?

A Alex Merrill 37:30

Yes, exactly. I think I would have gotten a lot more out of the academics, honestly, I mean, I learned a lot and made a lot of great relationships, the connections that I've made there, I still use today. I mean, I in business, and you know, and in my social life, and in networking, I mean, the relationships are like, right up there with the academics and I'm an academic. There, if not more important, just as important, so. But yeah, I do wonder about me, particularly for a kid like me, who's a boy who's not really I wasn't very mature. For my age, I didn't really, I mean, and that's kind of a brain science thing to the prefrontal cortex, you know, the, the super center of the brain that's like, the talks to your

amygdala. The amygdala is the little almond shaped thing in the middle of your head that's like, oh, let's eat cookies. Like let's, you know, let's drive 100 miles an hour on backroads when we're drunk. Good idea. And the super center brain, the prefrontal cortex is no, not a good idea. No, don't do that. It's not develops, for boys in particular until 25, or even 30. Hmm, think about that. Yeah, yeah. So if you look at that, if you look at a brain scan, and an MRI, of a 20 year old male, it's full of holes. Not surprising, but, you know, so patients, patients, I guess, is an that and that's a word that parents hate to hear about their 20 year old boy, because they've been dealing with it for 20 years already. So it's like wait a second, I thought I was at the finish line. You're telling me I have another like five years of this to go? Yes, unfortunately, that's what God said the roll was so

M Moira McCullough 39:21

Yes, but then I could take it on the other side. And I'm like that 25 is coming up pretty soon and I'm so grateful every single minute and I know once they fly the coop Yeah, yeah. Yeah, I just always to protect Yeah, it's it's one of those is apparent to it's hard when you're going through it and then when you're when you don't have it. It's like this empty void. Alex, do you have a favorite dessert or food place

A Alex Merrill 39:47

When I looked at that question, Portland, Maine, which I just went to, I don't know. I think the school there might be Southern Maine. The Holy Donut is fantastic donut shop Potato based and they all vary allergy. Friendly gluten free stuff and all very wholesome and organic ingredients and fantastic. We got we went there and we were my wife was like, I have to have five doughnuts

M Moira McCullough 40:11

Your wife and I would get along. I can just tell you right now,

A Alex Merrill 40:15

We ended up you know we ordered all doughnuts we got three kids, you know, but okay, that'll be \$70 like we're literally eating doughnuts for three days. And it was glorious. It was about \$70 I've ever spent.

M Moira McCullough 40:28

Don't you love that though? You know, it's good when you don't even talk about the price?

A Alex Merrill 40:32

Oh, yeah. no, okay, well worth it. It was an interesting experience to maybe a sidebar here. If you'll humor me, we pulled up to the donut shop. There's a line of people waiting outside because this is a very famous place. And across the street as a middle school. All of a sudden we see these police cars coming out of nowhere with a blue lights flash this boom, boom, boom, boom must have been like seven or seven or eight police cars. And we pull up we're like, Whoa, what is going on or you know, pulling up in the street getting ready to walk over and wait in line. And we see another officer come out with an assault rifle and start running over toward the building. Like what the heck is going on. Meanwhile, the peep the line of people outside the donut shop, like are completely unfazed, I'm unfazed, they're just waiting for their donuts. They're just like, no, it's another hard day at the middle school. It turned out it was a it was a school shoot. Teen threat fake I guess that's the thing. It used to be bomb threat in my day. But I guess.

M Moira McCullough 41:36

So it wasn't a drill. It was an actual actual sexual. Yeah, really. And you just looked around waiting for people to dive cover run to their cars. And they were like, I'm getting that blueberry glass. Yeah.

A Alex Merrill 41:48

They're like, forget it. Yeah, I guess that sort of speaks to how a nerd people aren't on violence these days. You know, throw in an editorial there. That's nuts to me.

M Moira McCullough 42:01

I didn't look at it like that. I was on the other phase. That would be me in the food area of being like so. Oh, yeah. Okay, I've been waiting there for like 2030 minutes. I mean, you're not going to give up your spot. And I'm going down. I'm going I'm hungry. Exactly. So, thank you so much for joining us today.

A Alex Merrill 42:26

Thank you. Thank you for having me.

M Moira McCullough 42:30

Thank you, Alex for sharing your story and insights and how we as parents can help support our college bound students freshman year. Transitioning to college is not easy. Parents have worked hard throughout their child's years to support them as they navigate every stage of their lives. We have taught them to advocate for themselves be competent and thoughtful in their decisions and to be kind. living away from home for the first time is that easy. For many young adults. The sink or swim mentality can present a host of challenges. So be present for your son or daughter. Listen to them help them as they navigate the freshman year, and there are plenty of resources available to help students transition from high school to college. You can find all of our show notes and links to helpful resources mentioned throughout our conversation on our website at [College Scoop's.com/podcast](https://Collegescoops.com/podcast). You can learn more about Alex at Alliance tutoring. Please take a couple minutes to rate review and subscribe to college scoops. Thank you for listening to our College Scoops podcast. Our entire College Scoops team strives to make the college journey a little bit easier, less stressful, fun and tasty by sharing all the inside scoops we have curated along the way. We would love to hear from you about topics to cover and your ideas and everything college related. Reach out to us at collegescoops.com or follow us on Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook.