

Episode 88 - Michelle McAnaney

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SPEAKERS

Moira McCullough, Michelle McAnaney

 Moira McCullough 00:00

Welcome to the College Scoops podcast. I'm your host, Moira McCullough and today we're talking with Michelle McAnaney about hiring an educational consultant, and who and how to ask for a letter of recommendation for the college application.

 Michelle McAnaney 00:13

Students think that they need to ask a teacher that has given them a really good grade. And that's not always the case. Sometimes the teacher who you struggle just to get that B, can better describe what you're going to be like as a student at school than the teacher where you did your work. And that's all they're writing. It's not very interesting.

 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](https://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. Michelle McAnaney is the founder of The College Spy an independent educational consulting firm that assists students and families across the US and internationally with the college selection application process. Prior to finding The College Spy, Michelle worked as a guidance counselor and educator for more than 15 years, including serving as the director of guidance at two high schools, an adjunct college professor, and a GED tutor. You can find her on Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn. Welcome to the College Scoops podcast Michelle, thank you so much for joining us today.

 Michelle McAnaney 02:23
Thanks for having me, Moira.

 Moira McCullough 02:25
Well, you and I kind of connected through a one of the educational consultant regional meetings and I had always been following you there'll be for him because The College Spy I mean, what a great name. I was like, who's behind that logo?

 Michelle McAnaney 02:42
Yes. You know, when I got into the business about six years ago, it was very hard to choose the name because my colleague stole all the obvious names. And it took me about a year to be like, it's The College Spy spying on colleges and telling everybody about them. So it's fun. It's funny, it kind of matches my personality.

 Moira McCullough 03:04
Well, it's finally I saw your face your smile, and the voice associated with The College Spy who you're you're all over the place. You're active on social media, and I love the work that you do. And really what we wanted you to share today for our community is so many families are looking at, you know, the college search process during the college admissions journey. And many questions we get are about educational consultants, like

what do I do? How do I hire one? What research do I need to do? And questions should I ask? So that is why you're here today to share insights and advice.

M

Michelle McAnaney 03:40

Great. And I think I'm a great person to ask these questions of because I used to be a school counselor at a high school. And that's the other person that all students rely on for college admissions advice. So I know the differences between the two roles, and can talk a little bit about that, too.

M

Moira McCullough 03:58

So what are some of the things that the pain points that your students experienced, or families experienced and as a high school counselor that you saw and that you tried to support your, your families with?

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Michelle McAnaney 04:11

Well, because I was working with all kinds of students, ones that were going to college ones that weren't the point, the pain points were very different, depending on who was coming into my office to talk about post secondary planning. So sometimes it was really looking for the How do I get into the Ivy League's MIT, Stanford and other ones were concerned about? How do I get myself my child organized so that they'll just fill out this application? Can you help me with that? So all different things came up with the students but what I like suppose I didn't realize it then because I wasn't an educational consultant. But once I became an educational consultant, looking back, I know that the students that I worked with did not receive nearly the same expert advice. personalized advice that I give out now, because my role was different at the school, about 20% of my time was put into college admissions. And 80% of my time was all the other things I was responsible for at school. So now as an educational consultant, this is 100%. What I do, and the students I work with have a very, very different experience.

M

Moira McCullough 05:22

I feel for high school, college counselors, just you've alluded to it and set it you know, you have so many more students. And as you said, 20 80%, I mean, your time is to help them through the college journey. But there's so much more administrative and so many other aspects of the job, and the number of students that you can't possibly help out each and every one to the same extent that you can as an educational consultant. So how long

were you in that role?

M

Michelle McAnaney 05:50

16 years- Yes, I worked with students for 16 years, I am in New York, Maine, and I had a little stint in England, I was also the Director of Guidance for two different high schools. So I know a lot about school counseling. And what I wanted to mention something that you said made me think of it was, not only did I not have the time to help students with the admissions process, like I do now, the expectation of my administration was not for me to do that. In such a detailed way, I was expected to be doing a lot of other tasks. So I was very good at the time at helping students through the process of applying to college, a college research was their responsibility. And I would help if I knew something that would help them, I would share it. But I was more involved in writing a letter of recommendation and sending the transcript to the school and making sure each student had a plan, but not helping them necessarily execute that plan is just very different. What are some of the goals and resources, as you said, that you shared with those students who, let's say, could only use their high school college counselor as their main support system for the college admissions journey, the main area, kids waited to come back to meet with us the waiting room of the counseling office, there were books that they could look at college admissions books, and we told them to go on the College Board website. And to use a low capex was one that we would recommend a lot, which is still out there. So but I didn't feel responsible for saying, well, this is who you are, this is what you're looking for. And here's a great list for you. I may make some suggestions. But each student might have three meetings. So that's a lot and other schools, maybe where the counselor was more overloaded with more students that might have been less do most high schools have those college planning tools like navient, or some other platform that,

M

Moira McCullough 07:52

At least for students, they input all the information, they can set up their college list and have some semblance of a kind of journal, shall we say?

M

Michelle McAnaney 08:02

I think I think many schools do. And I know because my students tell me what they're working on currently, and that they have these resources available to them through the school, they don't always know how to use them. And my role now I could say, okay, we're going to fill this out in NaVi on her use this tool to help you understand what your interests are. Next week, we're gonna need and I want to know what you did. And I'll see him on our

Google Doc, or what I have around executing this and they're responsible to get it done. It was different if you just go into an English class and share the resources, and then the kids did it or they didn't do it. Right.

M

Moira McCullough 08:36

Exactly, when I went through the process, with my oldest at the time, the Fiske Guide was always, you know, something that was really a great tool as well and not expensive, so that if somebody a family wanted to, you know, get a good overview of schools that was, you know, something that they could use as well. And you mentioned a couple other the College Board The catbacks, because there's so many other resources out there that I'm not wanted, go on a lot of, let's say the college confidential or some Reddit, there's so many other niche resources out there that students maybe it's a generational thing, they feel fine going onto those platforms together and helpful information from student generated content.

M

Michelle McAnaney 09:19

Yes, they do. But you know, they're not always great at interpreting the student generated content, especially when that content is generated without any kind of checks, you're making sure that they're appropriate. So your student might come to me and say, I heard a review online on on YouTube, and they hated the school, I'm not applying there. And it's like, well, wait a minute. Like we need to be smart consumers of information. And I walk them through that process and they, they learn a lot about analyzing the information coming at them. So my job is really fun because I get to help students with a very specific and very important tasks, choosing the right college for them, applying and getting in But then they learn all of these other skills that they can take with them for, you know, that life skills that now they can do that the next time that they're looking into something.

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Moira McCullough 10:11

Absolutely. I mean, it's always being cautious about the information that you gather and is that a reliable source? And is that something that right, you need to use as your deciding factor? families are looking for an education consultant? How do you even go about that? Like, what is some advice for families? going through the process the first time?

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Michelle McAnaney 10:32

Sure, well, I think most people find me through word of mouth. So asking other people in

your community who they used, if it's a community where people often use educational consultants, and what was the experience like for them, the other thing you can do is go on the independent educational consulting associations website, ieca, or HCA, which is the higher education higher education consulting Association, I believe that's it. I'm a member of both organizations, their professional organizations, but we call them ieca inhaca. And you can look at their lists of ICS and pick one out based on the information that's there and then calling interviewed them.

M Moira McCullough 11:14

Okay, word of mouth. It's like everything we do in everyday life anyways, I mean, you're going to pick a show to say, or a movie or book to read, who do you ask? Yes, your family, friends and peers for what they recommend. So the same would hold true for educational consultants. And then there are associations where there is criteria as an educational consultant to be a member of so that's something that one should know about, as well.

M Michelle McAnaney 11:41

Yes and the criteria is often that you're doing a certain amount of professional development, that you are visiting colleges, and you know the details about colleges, and that they hold educational consultants to a high standards standard about sex. So the person with the college admission scandal and all of that they were not a member of ICA and hecca. Because they were not ethical in what they were busy doing. But people who are members of these associations are really serious about doing the right thing for kids, our profession isn't regulated, anybody can hang your shingle, anybody can decide to say I'm an educational consultant, I work with my student on the college process, I loved it. Now, I want to be an educational consultant, I'll help everybody else. But that doesn't mean that they have the background to do a great job. You know, there's just a lot of professional development through HECA and IECA that members take advantage of that's why we join because we want to be really good at what we do.

M Moira McCullough 12:40

And do you have a certain certification program that you go through that you have to pass in order to be a member, there are certain number of schools that you have to visit or any other criteria?

M Michelle McAnaney 12:53

There is some criteria with the two organizations they vary slightly, and IECA has two levels of membership associate or professional. So for professional I remember, I had to have visited more colleges and done more hours of professional development. There are several certificate programs that IEC's can go through. The one I did was at the University of California, Irvine. I did seven courses in educational consulting, not because I had to do my job, but because I wanted to make sure that I was giving out excellent advice to my families, I learned a lot being a part of that certificate program and taking those courses. And I learned many things that I did not know when I was a school counselor, because nobody sent me off to study that. Like they're like graduate level courses to get the certificate.

M Moira McCullough 13:42

Can you give them an example of like something that you learned during that course?

M Michelle McAnaney 13:46

Yes, sure. So I took a whole course on financial aid, and how to advise families on financial aid. One of my electives was on working with students with learning disabilities. So that was choice. I wanted to take that some of them were business related how to use social media to help promote your business or you know, how do you set up a contract? How do these types of things, but a lot of it was even just learning? What is this job? What does it encompass? It was great. I'm so glad that he did it.

M Moira McCullough 14:15

There are different areas of expertise or areas that educational consultants focus on too. So if you're a family and you reach out to somebody, some educational consultants would provide expertise from a college search from a testing from a financial aid from a common application, an essay, others may be just focused on a particular area.

M Michelle McAnaney 14:39

There are some educational consultants who might just do essay assistance. But usually the differentiate differentiation is what types of students and student needs are you working with so I work with, I work with all students so I would say I'm more of a generalist. I have some students looking for very, very selective colleges. And then I said, I work with the LD population, I have a bunch of students who are applying for engineering and have developed a small expertise in helping students choose engineering. But let's say I had a

athlete come to me who wanted, you know, Division One, scholarships, that that is something I would refer out, because that is not my area of expertise, but somebody else that might be the thing they solely focus on. Another one is the arts. So Performing Arts, you might be able to find an educational consultant that is very skilled at helping you through the audition process.

M Moira McCullough 15:33

So there are different tracks. And they really are have, I mean, it's not to say that educational consultant isn't good at what they do. But that's a specialty. That's a niche. And there are people who do that all the time. And then there's so much changing in those two different areas that it behooves somebody if they're that serious about it, maybe to look at somebody who focuses on that.

 15:55

The other thing is some of us work with international students, and some of us don't, because that adds a whole nother layer of complication. So I have international students and third culture kids, so kids living abroad, who are American citizens, and they don't understand how the American system works. And they don't know what it means the internships or the CO ops are, it's just not common language for them. So some educational consultants will focus on that that's a whole nother Avenue a whole nother different set of timelines.

M Moira McCullough 16:25

And actually, to your point, if students are looking to apply, let's say, to international schools and McGill or University of St. Andrews are and the timelines are different. The testing the whole application process is so different. So that's something else,

M Michelle McAnaney 16:42

Exactly. And did your educational consultant visit those schools? Are they familiar with schools in England or Canada or Europe? And I know ieca has tours that we can sign up for where we go over to England for 10 days and visit 567 schools. I haven't done it yet. But I want to. So you know, you're hiring somebody who really knows the ins and outs of those systems and has been there and knows the culture on campus and can help you decide if that's a good fit for you. Asking about areas of specialty is important.

M

Moira McCullough 17:12

You mentioned another area that we get a lot of questions of, and I know I had questions with my my kids going through the whole process. In terms of letters of recommendation, you know, there's a whole I don't want to say strategy, but there's a thoughtful process that goes on with letters of recommendation, can you share some of your tips and guidance for families?

M

Michelle McAnaney 17:35

Sure, there's a lot to know about asking for letters of recommendation. So for example, one thing families don't always know is that you need to be asking almost always a teacher from the five academic subjects. So English, math, science, history, or foreign language teacher, most schools don't want to hear from the electives, art, music, etc. Unless you're applying to schools for art or music, then there's an exception. They're engineers, they should be asking at least one teachers math or science. And sometimes when you're applying, you need to look at the school's website, because they might give you advice on who do they want to hear from, right? Because a school if you're applying for engineering might specifically say one stem teacher, but one from English history. So you need to follow all of that information, all the details very carefully. The other thing is that students think that they need to ask a teacher that has given them a really good grade. And that's not always the case. Sometimes the teacher who you struggle just to get that be, can better describe what you're going to be like, as a student at school than the teacher where Yep, you did your work. And that's all they're writing. It's not very interesting. So sometimes kids need to be encouraged to ask the teacher where that knows them really well, but it wasn't the easiest subject for them.

M

Moira McCullough 18:55

So I just have to interject here because I mean, three kids gone through the process. Yes. Each one of mine and I will say that was something when a student, my son or daughter asked me, who should I ask? As a parent, my first thing was, that's not for me to choose for you. Who do you have a strong connection with? Who do you feel knows you the most? And obviously, going through the criteria that you just stated in terms of making sure it's from one of the five and making sure that if there's any other requirements of colleges that you're looking at, but I will say each kid picked a teacher that they probably had the lowest grade, it was a great that wasn't an A, and they pick these teachers who obviously I never saw the recommendation. Neither did my, you know, my son or daughter. But I know just by knowing that teacher It was a rock star recommendation. I'm like they knew everything about Yeah, kid and almost the curiosity. I think that teacher knows how hard it

was and what that student put in to the coursework. They have so much more to kind of probably share.

M

Michelle McAnaney 20:04

Right, and colleges are the admissions counselors are going to be interested in, what do you do when you struggle once. And that matters to them as much as I think they can tell by the grades on your transcript that you can do college level work at their school. Now they want to maybe hear about what do you do when you struggle? Yeah, and some kids struggle and then do get that day. So it's not that you shouldn't ask a teacher that you did very well with, it's just not that that isn't a rule, every student is different, and what they should do. And that's what I used to do is give the advice. It's personalized. So what I'm giving you now is this is kind of generally what we would recommend, right? Yeah, but or what I would recommend, but when I have students sitting in front of me and a parent, you know, we're talking about each teacher and your relationship with them, and how you did in their class and all that kind of thing. So to pick out that exact right teacher to write it,

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Moira McCullough 20:56

No, but you're so right. And that's where it comes down to, I think really also empowering the student to take ownership and kind of go with their gut at some point. They know, they know what that relationship is. And as you said, there's a lot of outside of the classroom, there's some relationship that they may have with somebody that just they know more about that student, not only in the classroom, but outside of the classroom character. There's a lot that goes into that recommendation. And I guess I would just as a parent say, those are really important. And when you get the right person, do you feel that there could be a tipping point in the application?

M

Michelle McAnaney 21:33

The actual recommendation? Oh, yes, it could. I think that, especially for schools that once you as an applicant meet the academic criteria. And now that many of the schools have more applicants than they have that meet the criteria, then they have space for so now they need to go to some other things to figure out which of these students do we want at the school and we want to offer an acceptance and so letters of recommendation as well as the essay come into play then.

M

Moira McCullough 22:02

Okay. And then when you're asking, Is there a certain etiquette of how you should ask if you need to give any deck documentation to that student, like a brag sheet to help them? That's the first question and then timing is the second.

M

Michelle McAnaney 22:16

So you should ask in person, if you can I say that because you know, we've got this pandemic, but asking in person is a good idea. sending the recommendation request through naviance, or through the common application without asking first is not a good idea. That's important is to ask. And in terms of a brag sheet, some teachers will give you some questions to answer about yourself to help guide their presentation. But other teachers don't want that. So if you're thinking you want to put together a brag sheet to share, I think it's good etiquette to tell the teacher I can give this to you, would it be helpful? Do you want it and then some kids will want to give a resume to the teacher, I actually don't recommend that because I have seen a lot of teacher letters of recommendation as a school counselor, right. So they would come through our office. And often we'd save them for scholarship time and use them then it's not helpful if the teacher just uses the resume to reiterate what the college already knows from the activity section of the application. So college admissions counselors are looking for in the teacher letter is how did the student do in your class, they don't want a whole lot of outside information, that information is either given by the student or maybe the counselor and the counselor letter recommendation.

M

Moira McCullough 23:34

It's a great point, because as you said, you're trying to find new information about that particular student. And if you have something, the work that goes into preparing that recommendation, which that's the other thing, you're asking teachers to take time out of their day, to write something for you. You want to be respectful and ask them, ask them if they need any other additional information, but then almost like let them write it. But I would also say, you know, make sure they're a good writer, like I know, My son asked a math teacher, I'm like, okay, make sure he can write.

M

Michelle McAnaney 24:04

I think that's really important too. And sometimes, because I would know which teachers were good writers at the school counselor, if a student said to me, Well, I might ask this one teacher, but I might ask that teacher I feel like well, you should ask that teacher. You

know, I wouldn't tell them why because that's inappropriate. But that is if you have a sample of their writing in any way, something they might have sent home or you want a good writer because maybe everybody would say something nice about you. But one teacher just might be more eloquent than another. So that's really important. And in terms of timing, I always encourage my students to ask at the end of junior year, and to ask a junior year teacher most of the time colleges are not interested in information from freshmen and sophomore year, because teachers junior year and some senior year teachers if you can, if the timing works out that they know you well enough in the fall to have time to ask the questions before your deadlines, junior and senior year teachers feedback to colleges is more indicative of how a student is going to do in College, then what if feedback from freshmen and sophomore year? So it's just more useful. So you really should ask a junior or senior year teacher?

M Moira McCullough 25:08

So a junior year teacher, when am I asking?

M Michelle McAnaney 25:10

I would ask in the spring, at some point maybe, April or May. That's a good time because some teachers do put a cap on the number of letters they're willing to write, they say 20. That's it. So you want to be first on the list? Exactly.

M Moira McCullough 25:25

And I always say that it's also Junior teacher, you want to do it while you're, you're top of the mind, they have you in class, they might be able to, like, tell a story or sharing something. But if you ask them for months later, you know, they're already into the next class. A little bit, the recall is a little bit dated.

M Michelle McAnaney 25:43

Right, exactly. I agree. I think it's better to ask earlier and then also takes the worry off the student they've done that part, they know who's writing their letter of recommendation, sometimes it is hard to get students to do it, even if I recommend it, because they're like, that's so far away. But other kids are just right. Yeah, they just do what they're supposed to do.

M Moira McCullough 26:02

So are there times when you might have a third when I know that you go through the application process or the decision making, and there might be an opportunity to submit a third, what are your thoughts on that as well,

M Michelle McAnaney 26:15

That's called "the other recommender". And it can be really a good thing because that the other recommender is somebody like a clergy person and employer, somebody who knows you really well through volunteering, it could be really anybody probably shouldn't be Grandma, your parent, but they can bring another aspect of you to the application to your application, right, the application tells an entire story about you. So another aspect of your story can be helpful to admissions in terms of accepting you know, schools want and other recommender, if they'd like one, it's usually optional. And then information is on the common app tells you whether you can submit another recommender or not. But it's a good idea if you have somebody

M Moira McCullough 26:56

And you just also touch on that in terms of they do say how many they want. And you always hear at the information sessions or tours like or admissions reps like do not send me 20. Because that will only hurt your right. Yeah, location. So be thoughtful in the sense of they give you a number, they give you some guidelines criteria, it's kind of not optional. It really is kind of a framework to work from.

M Michelle McAnaney 27:22

Absolutely. If they want to just give them too. They don't want more than that.

M Moira McCullough 27:25

So Michelle we always ask our guests to last questions in terms? What do you wish you knew before attending college?

M Michelle McAnaney 27:34

I mean, personally, what I was, before I went, Oh, dear, I wish that I knew that campuses varied widely in terms of culture. And that one campus is not interchangeable with

another, they're different from one another. And I think, along with that, I knew more about myself, and what my own needs and desires were academically and socially so that I could pick the right college for me. So I went to a large state school in New York. And I would have done wonderful and really enjoyed my experience at a small liberal arts college. And I just, I didn't know that. And I didn't have anybody giving me good advice and sitting down and saying, What do you like? Do you like a small discussion class? Or would you prefer to learn by lecture? I could do either one and get an A, but what's your preference? There wasn't ever that discussion about things like that. So that's what I wish I knew.

 Moira McCullough 28:30

Looking back in hindsight, of course, you have all these grand plans. The school that I ended up going to was actually the perfect size, perfect culture and fit for me. However, I always say like to 2.0, like, where would I like to go next? And it's totally somewhere different, like a large school like UCLA. But I think those questions that you asked, and that student should ask us, you know, where would I fit in? Where would I be most successful both in and outside of the classroom? and culture is such a big part of that college decision?

 Michelle McAnaney 29:05

Yes and I always tell kids that the college search start doesn't start with the colleges. It starts with self reflection, like what am I actually want a need? And then let's look at some colleges and what matches up with that and what doesn't, it's for some kids, it's very obvious the answers to those questions and others, it's the first time they ever thought about it, and it's a good exercise.

 29:23

It is not easy. It's not something that's an A, B or C That's right. You know, we're kids are like, well, that's hard for me to think about, like I don't want to answer that I want a quick fix, but in the US doing that self reflection will help them in the long term. We are foodies at college scoops. So you've been to so many colleges, I know is there a particular food that you would go back to a college campus or that town for?

 Michelle McAnaney 29:47

I always eat in the dining hall at colleges, if I can, usually you can just go in and pay the

\$10 or whatever it is and they let you sample the food because I like to try the food and I also like to people watch Imagine like what kind of student would fit in here, which ones of my students would I recommend the school for?

M Moira McCullough 30:05

Thank you so much Michelle for joining us today and sharing all that really helpful information to help families and students as they start the new year.

M Michelle McAnaney 30:13

Thanks for having me. I enjoyed it.

M Moira McCullough 30:16

Thank you, Michelle, for sharing your advice for families wondering why and how to hire an educational consultant. What should families ask for when interviewing an educational consultant? And what criteria should families look for and expect in a educational consultants background? Michelle also provided advice for students on how to when and who to ask for letter of recommendation for the college application. It is really important to consider what teacher knows you the best in terms of your learning style, your character and how you might contribute to the college community. Asking for recommendations in a timely and thoughtful manner will be appreciated by your teacher. You can find all of our show notes and links to the helpful resources mentioned throughout a conversation on our website at collegescoops.com/podcast. You can learn more about Michelle on The College Spy on their website at thecollegespy.com or on social media. 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 your ideas and everything college related. Reach out to us at collegescoops.com or follow us on Instagram, Twitter and Facebook.