

## COLLEGIATE DIRECTIONS, INC.

### “COLLEGE ADMISSION AND RETENTION: THE CURRENT LANDSCAPE”

Nina Marks, October 25, 2006

#### *EDITED PROGRAM TRANSCRIPTION*

I'd like to talk about the national college admissions landscape and suggest how this relates to what we're doing with CDI.

I've watched the college admissions process for a long time. We now have such access to information that it's hard not to focus on current, hot stories. This morning, the *Post*, the *Times*, and the *Journal* all carried “college stories” (today's were on aid and parent programs), and this seems to be the norm. It's endless. For those of us who are connected to the educational world, it's overwhelming. For people who are not connected, I can only imagine what alarm college admissions stories could induce. Some alarm – or at least discomfort – is appropriate, I think, because some of the issues we're dealing with are disquieting. We should be concerned. But our focus isn't necessarily in the right places.

Much of the national discussion is about how you get into college. Here's where CDI becomes relevant. Let me again acknowledge that we focus on a small group of students. We will gradually build our class to 20 students a year, over the five years from 12<sup>th</sup> grade through college graduation, so (at least right now) we envision having a total of 100 Scholars. CDI is a retail, not a wholesale operation.

But we cannot do what we do, wholesale. No good teacher works wholesale. We don't parent wholesale, we don't teach wholesale, we don't befriend wholesale, we don't mentor wholesale. We build these crucial, human connections one person at a time, and we know how long it takes to see results. So CDI is a retail operation.

What CDI offers, however, is a template with broader, maybe national application. I don't intend to be arrogant, because nothing I'm going to say to you is going to strike you as rocket science, but we don't necessarily think about what we're doing in the educational counseling world in these terms. In essence, what I suggest is that we think not in terms of the typical K through 12 model, but rather a pre-K through 16 one.

In my experience, we are so focused on how you get **into** college that we're not looking at the critical question, which is how do you prepare for college, how do you make informed choices about a good college “fit”, and how you stay, and thrive, in college till you graduate?

The national numbers on retention are terrible. They really are. College access is hugely skewed according to income: students in the richest quarter of our population have about a 75% chance of obtaining a college degree, as against about 9% of students in the poorest quarter of our population. And this problem is most acute all around us. In our back yard, in DC's Wards 7 and 8, 1 child in 20 is likely to obtain a college degree. Think about this. When you look at students who are not only low income, but first-generation-to-college, our societal divides are truly appalling, and those divides are widening.

I've been a teacher all my life. I joked earlier about saying to National Cathedral School alumnae that they are ours for life. I didn't know how significant that was when I started saying it, back in the '70s. We have some elementary school and some college teachers here. All of us know education doesn't happen in a series of discrete experiences, dividing elementary school, and middle school, and high school, and college. But we usually act as if this were true.

Too often, we think of children like batons in a relay race. We hand them off—"Congratulations! We're done with you!"—to the next level. This doesn't work, friends. We've got to have a pre-K through 16 model and we've got to do what we have started doing at CDI, which is to build partnerships. Most people understand that educators need to have partnerships with kids. Educators also need also to have partnerships with families, with schools, with colleges, and with communities.

We also need to ask ourselves how we, as educators and as a society, define success. Do we define success by the number of AP classes students take? We've discovered that, even in the caring, well-meaning community of counselors and teachers in the Montgomery County Public Schools, there are students in AP classes who are not prepared. Even if they're smart enough to make it through the course, their AP scores will be, on a scale of 5, a 1 or a 2. Never mind the scores for a moment. What's the educational experience, what's the message about success, for those unprepared students?

Another thing we've discovered is that you can get through public school without good study skills if you're smart enough to wing it. Our Scholars have told us that they don't actually have to study for a final exam, because exams count little or not at all. This is one reason our weekly workshops focus on study skills, on not just on learning SAT vocabulary, but using words correctly. We focus on helping our Scholars evaluate their reading and math skills. We work on how they are planning their curriculum. We focus, for example, on how students assigned to AP Statistics fared in Pre-calculus, the pre-requisite course.

The colleges in our network appreciate that we're focusing on skills that help bright kids not just to get into college, but also to succeed there, and to graduate. Colleges are acutely aware of economic and social inequities, and anxious about not just access but retention.

In that regard, the current debate about Early Admission is a hot issue. I have what might be a slightly different take on it. As you know, Harvard decided this fall to drop its non-binding “Early Action” program next year. Princeton and the University of Virginia quickly followed, saying next year they’ll drop their binding “Early Decision” programs. I have for some years run a workshop on selective college admission for our national counseling organization, as part of our annual conference. I have various Deans of Admission on the faculty, and this year, we had the Deans of Princeton and UVA, as well as the Dean of Michigan, where they’re deciding whether to change their Rolling Admission policy, and the Dean of Bowdoin, where they’re happy with two rounds of Early Decision.

We had a very interesting debate. It became clear that everyone has good intentions, but that (for most colleges) dropping Early Admission isn’t necessarily the way to go. I don’t think there’s any quick fix. I think the whole college admission process needs to be reassessed. Increasingly, it consumes high school. Teachers and parents (and college admission officers) worry about “Senior slump”. We wonder why kids think that getting into college marks the end of their educational experience, at least for the time being. Offering “cool” Senior year projects or programs is not necessarily the answer. The real questions are not how we keep Seniors who are into college focused on completing high school, but what college admission has come to mean to these kids, and why?

Harvard, Princeton, and UVA are hoping to level the admissions playing field and keep kids more focused on high school by removing Early Admission. Early Admission, they suggest, further advantages kids who don’t need financial aid, who are legacies, who are athletes, who have greater access anyway, and who are generally more privileged. Sounds like a great idea.

My problem with it is this: if you remove Early Admission without thinking very carefully, you’ve created another set of problems that potentially could move disadvantage from the beginning to the end of the process. I’ll explain. Colleges use Early Decision, or even Early Action, to lock in kids who really love them. Yes, this relates to yield and to *US News & World Report*, but it also relates to how colleges manage aid and other resources. Students admitted early to selective colleges are typically well-qualified, low (or no) need kids, and they’re typically, yes, networked or connected kids.

But even selective colleges very similar to Harvard and Princeton can have very different Early Admission policies. Yale University has in recent years cut the number of students accepted “Early Action” and has (at least so far) not indicated an interest in following the lead of Harvard and Princeton. So this is an ongoing debate.

Some of us in education have a number of questions. How will colleges with huge applicant

pools and 10 or 12% admit rates review all applications between January and March? Won't they have to start sooner? How will they determine yield, which could affect not just overall numbers but financial aid offers? Will there be even more competition for superstars, especially in the slightly less selective colleges, and will those top kids be offered more merit awards? Does that mean there will be less attention, in the avalanche of applications, as well as less money for the truly needy? And finally –and here's what I mean by moving disadvantage from the beginning to the end of the process-- what may happen to waitlists?

Waitlists theoretically offer students a last shot at admission, though the odds have been getting longer and longer. As one example, according to the *Journal*, Penn waitlisted 1400 kids but expected to take 10 to 15 last year. The odds are even longer for kids who need money. For them, being waitlisted means in effect being denied, because there's no money left at the end of the process.

I'm not saying that giving up Early Admission is necessarily a bad thing. I just don't think there are any shortcuts. We have to think about what we're doing in education more globally. Every kid, advantaged or not, experiences a change in community, and perhaps in culture and comfort, moving from high school to college. At CDI, we focus on helping Scholars (and their families) to make informed and thoughtful choices. Can they view their history, which includes their family history, positively, not as a barrier to success?

For first-generation kids, there are academic barriers to success, but there are also psychological and cultural barriers. We work on those barriers every day at CDI. It's a national issue. Today's *Times* had a story on luring parents to campus, to Parents' Weekend events. Did anybody read it? One college offered a wine-tasting session, another offered a little cruise, yet another offered a chance to meet a celebrity. You had to pay for all these special opportunities. Think about parents like those of our CDI Scholars, faced with these invitations. They are great examples of cultural barriers.

We've got to think better and harder about what happens "post-admission", when kids (and their families) are on that wonderful college campus. To do this, we have to do a better job of connecting high schools and colleges. CDI asks colleges in our network to look beyond our terrific Scholars to their schools and communities, to do some targeted high school outreach. We also connect with some other community organizations, those who may be doing the same thing, perhaps from different points of view. We've got to connect, not compete. The core problem, I think, that it's so easy to see college access and opportunity as a competition. It's not. We cannot allow it to be.

To go back to my metaphor of the relay race, we cannot keep handing kids off like batons. They need to see that we understand partnership. They need us to run, to stay with them. I hope you'll

think about the CDI model as a template, one key part of a pre-K through 16 model for education. We are seeing that this can work. It should work. And you know, it does work, it really does.

Thank you.