

Colon 102418

Interview with Canh Oxelson

Intro: *There is no guarantee for success. But there are ways to get closer to it when you do the right things, who you surround yourself with is just as important as what you do. Finding the right people, the right classes, the right activities, and taking the right tests are all decisions that shape your future. Find out more today on Destination YOUiversity with Dr. Cynthia Colon. Dr. Colon and her guests will give you the tips you need, whether you're a student, parent, or educator. Now, here is your host, Dr. Cynthia Colon.*

Dr. Colon: What do you do? Have you ever been somewhere, and a new friend asked that question? As adults, we're used to that. And we launch right into describing what we do for living our job, our career. I rarely find myself sharing my joys, my hobbies, what I read or how I spend my free time. On the other hand, if you're in high school and someone asked, what do you do? We assume that is an invitation to share how she or he spends their time out of the classroom. In other words, the question really is, what are you involved in? What are you passionate about? When it comes to applying to college, students submit their AQ's and their PQ's. AQ's stand for Academic Qualities, these are what I call your stats, or your numbers, your GPA, test scores, and your rigor of curriculum. PQ's stand for Personal Qualities, what you do outside of the classroom, in school, out of school, in your community, and for your community.

The college application engages each student to answer these two questions. Who am I? And what's important to me? Our guest today Canh Oxelson has been an admission and college counsellor for over 20 years. He believes the ways you can tackle the admission process is summed up in two words be interesting, and in that spirit, the lesson today is this. Interested students become interesting applicants. My question is, what are you doing today to make yourself more interesting than you were yesterday?

I'm Cynthia Colon, author of the book *Tips, Tales & Truths for Teens*. Welcome to Destination YOUiversity, where we explore extraordinary people who lived ordinary childhoods and found a pathway to college. If you are a student, a parent educator or a student of life, this show is for you. And hello and welcome, Canh. How are you today?

Colon 102418

Canh: I have been doing great Cynthia, thank you so much for having me on. It's kind of a crazy week here as we're closing in on the November 1st, early action and early decision college application deadlines, but we're hanging in there and it actually, definitely feels like fall. Fall is definitely in the air here, it's a little cool in New York, and being a native Californian it's always hard for me to get used to this weather change, this change with the fall season. But I'm excited to be with you today, thanks.

Dr. Colon: I love that you're in New York because I used to live in New York, and I remember wearing my wool coat in October and people said to me, what are you going to wear in the winter? You're wearing your warmest coat already. And I thought, Oh, my goodness. So yes, I love the fall. I remember apple picking and doing some really fun and fabulous things. But, thank you for being with us. I know it's a crazy time, as you mentioned early action early decision.

Deadline is just around the corner and so I thank you for being here because of the time but, I also thank you for being here because it's so timely that we have good conversations with college counsellors like yourself, as our listeners are listening across the country. And you should know that we have listeners in New York, New Jersey and Connecticut including Ossining, New Rochelle, Poughkeepsie, Hartford, New York, and I'm indeed excited to welcome our listeners today from New York City. And let's see, we want our listeners to know that you have a breadth of experience, in the college admissions world and college counselling. You were at USF, University of San Francisco, St. Mary's College in California, UC Santa Cruz, and the University of Pennsylvania in the admission office. Correct? So tell our listeners sort of what that means, and that where you are, now tell us a little bit about Horace Mann.

Canh: Sure, sure. So, having worked at four different colleges and universities has been really helpful in my current work, when you've actually read applications for four different kinds of schools that have four different kinds of missions and priorities or sets of priorities. You really begin to see the entire landscape of colleges. Not all colleges are the same and they're looking for some different things. And so having those experiences at four different colleges, it's just been really helpful in my line of work now, as a college counsellor. I started in college admissions and eventually came to college counselling. Just because I wanted to work more closely with students. When you travel around and recruit students as an admissions officer, you meet them once or twice, and you might actually read their application, but you don't really build a

Colon 102418

relationship over time, per se. And one of the great things about being a college counsellor is I actually get to spend time every day with students building a relationship, and kind of helping them become their best self. It's almost like being a life coach. It's really, really cool, and it's a very positive thing. And it kind of reminds me of some of the adults that were in my life when I was growing up that were positive influences that really kind of life coaches and mentors for me as well.

Dr. Colon: Oh, absolutely. And I love what you're saying because I too started on the college admissions side and JC Tuson used to say that you are on the receiving or the shipping end. And now you're on the shipping end. And that is a place where you do get to build relationships, which is what the show is all about. How do we encourage our educators and our parents to build good relationships, to have support systems around our students? So with that, I would love for you to just sort of share a bit about your own childhood and set the scene for our listener and sort of, you know, what that look like for you growing up because as compelling as your background is and the tips that we'll get to, at the end of the show for our listeners, your story is very compelling. So I'm excited for our listeners to hear, so tell us a little bit about you.

Canh: All right. Well, I got I really, I don't remember anyone telling me that I was actually adopted. But when you are half black and half Vietnamese and your parents are Swedish and Irish. It's pretty obvious that something is different. So I knew early on that I was adopted, I was actually born in Vietnam during the war, the son of a Vietnamese woman and an African American serviceman. And the day after I was born, my mother actually brought me to a Catholic orphanage where I lived for the first 10 months of my life. My birth mother was poor. And she seemed to know I think that her baby, her biracial baby would actually have the best chance of surviving if he was adopted. So I can't imagine having to make that decision as a young mother.

But I'm glad she did make that decision. I'm glad she decided to take me to that Catholic orphanage. So I was 10 months old, my parents actually adopted me, and they lived in California and raised me in a small farming community north of Fresno, California, right in the middle of the state of California. So I have two sisters older and one younger, I'm the only one that is adopted, and the three of us were always really, really close. Even though I was adopted, I definitely felt close to my sisters. And we, you know, we had the typical sibling disagreements, but we didn't fight a lot. And we're still close to this very day, which is a wonderful thing as well.

Colon 102418

My education was important. My parents really believed that education was one of the great equalizers. And they expected that all three of us kids would actually go on to college. They found ways to kind of enrich our academic experiences as kids. We travelled a lot as a family. We travelled to different parts of the country to kind of take vacations and then learn about different parts of the country. We took music lessons, and we got involved in different youth organizations. We played sports, and we were definitely active in our local Catholic Church. So, it was a really nice childhood actually was very, very comfortable and a lot of ways.

Dr. Colon: I love it. You're from a family of three siblings. I too, I'm the oldest of three. So you had two sisters, one older and younger, probably always looking out for you probably with you know, with good care and good love, I imagine, right?

Canh: That is definitely true. Yeah, if you're going to be the middle child, it's kind of nice. And you're a boy, it's kind of nice to have girls on the other, on the opposite ends of you, or the different ends of you. So yes, they were very protective, and I probably am of them too, but they were certainly very protective of me. And that was really, really good. Although I will say, you know, one of the things that I think affected my upbringing and certainly my search, as I started looking for colleges and things like that, which was just feeling different from my own adoptive family. I mean, when you look so much different. That stands out, it stands out when you when you're out in the community, and people notice that and there were definitely times when I felt a little out of place. And I think I struggled a little bit with identity as a kid, and lots of kids do probably for different reasons, and my reason was because I was adopted, and I looked so different. From my parents and from my two sisters,

Dr. Colon: And you said that education was important, as a family unit, it was a value that your family had. And was there ever a time and at the same time, you were also struggling with different things. So how did that, what was the role of, I'm going to college? You know, my very first episode was with my mother and she said, you know, she made a choice to use the word. Not if, but when you go to college, so was that true in your home? Not you know, not a matter of if you would go but when you would go, and where, and did you personally ever question that for yourself?

Colon 102418

Canh: It was definitely a question of when and where I would go. I don't think there was any doubt in my mind that I was going to go to college. I do think that there are lots of things that can get in the way with that though. And there were times when I was making decisions as an adolescent that weren't great and maybe I was hanging around some kids who probably weren't as convinced that they were going on to college, They had different concerns, they weren't worried about graduating from college. So I think my parents always worried that if I hung around a lot with kids who weren't as motivated, that maybe somehow I wouldn't end up in college, even though I think they had almost programmed me to think that I was going to go. So you just as a parent, I think you want all these things for your kid, but you can't be 100% sure, because you're not around them all the time. And when they're in school and doing other things, you don't know all of the other influences that are, you know, moving your kid in one direction or another. So I think my parents worried a little bit about that. But fortunately, I had mostly a group of motivated friends who also wanted to go on to college, and that I think really helped keep me on the right track.

Dr. Colon: Great. I mean, last week we had Yvonne Romero from Rice University and she has a son who's now in high school and she says, you know, I mean as motivated **[inaudible11:59]** I says Yvonne I know you know who Vaughn is, and she is like that can't do woman and she says, but you know my son, you know, it has to come from him the drive and the motivation has to ultimately come from the child. Then that's really what you're talking about. So in high school, oh, go ahead.

Canh: Well, I was just gonna, you're right. I mean, the drive has to come internally on some level, although I will also share a little bit about this. I was certainly a good student, but I wasn't a great student. What I was great at was actually swimming, and that was one of the things that kept me on the straight and narrow path and kept me focused on a good goal. So even if the goal isn't college, I knew that I could swim and that I could potentially swim in college. So it was related on some level. Even though I was focused on this sport, I knew it was also related to college. And part of the reason I actually wanted to continue to swim and take that as far as I could was because that's a kid who was adopted. I guess I just had this fantasy that if I became a national champion if I became an Olympic champion, there's a good chance that my birth parents might find that story somewhere might learn about me and say, oh my gosh, that's our son, and they might actually find me so it was kind of a pie in the skyway to view it. But there was a part of me that thought swimming could really help me in my

Colon 102418

life, beyond my childhood years that it might actually reconnect me with my birth family.

Dr. Colon: So swimming had a bigger meaning in your life. And you just shared it, you know, something very personal about how you know in your dream, you were thinking, oh, they're going to find me and I'm going to become you know, a champion. And also, and I know you know this, and I want you to speak about these athletics. I am a big, huge fan of athletics, and what it can do to keep students connected and build relationships and bonds, you know, through and through school, we know that students need to feel connected to a school in order to maybe continue to thrive in other areas of their life. So what did it mean to you to be part of a team?

Canh: Oh, yeah, it was a huge thing because it felt like a family on some level. And while there may have been other parts of my life where I was struggling with self-esteem, swimming was not one of those struggles. I mean, I was good enough at it that I had great self-esteem, partially because of that. So it connected me to other students. It connected me to adults, because they respected my ability as an athlete, and I respected their knowledge as a coach. So it did so much for me; plus, the other piece was that there were lots of skills and characteristics that were developed through swimming that really actually helped me as a student. When you have a poor race as a swimmer, you have to sit down and think about why that happened. You know, was it that I didn't practice particular parts of that event long enough or hard enough? Is it because, you know, I might have skipped a couple of practices? Is it because I didn't mentally prepare, and maybe I was too nervous? So you have to sit and think critically about why you didn't have a good race. And I would say it's the same and I use those same skills when I was looking at my academic life. I was thinking you know, if I didn't do well at a particular test, what's the reason for that? You know, is it because I didn't spend enough time studying? Is it because I got stuck on one particular concept? And if I just fixed that, I'll be fine moving forward in that particular subject. So the skills that I learned swimming were definitely transferable to the classroom. And that was a huge help for me as well.

Dr. Colon: Yeah, I agree. I wish I was an athlete in high school. I mean, I was a cheerleader and we certainly had to, I struggled getting to school at six o'clock in the morning for early morning practice. But that discipline, that discipline that you're talking about, is really a piece that is so transferable and such a lifelong skill for students to

Colon 102418

learn early on, and then also have that through college and then in life as well. And we have a few minutes before our first break, but can you start the story about you know, now you're a senior in high school, and about how many colleges did you apply to? And then when we come back from break, you'll share sort of your reveal, you know what happened, but share that first part of the story.

Canh: Sure, sure. So I actually applied to... I want to say it was seven different colleges and universities. Now, there were two things going on here, I was looking at colleges just as a student, but I was also being recruited by some colleges, which opened the door to some colleges that I might not have considered. So I really had two lists running at the same time one for just basically academic reasons, this is why I want to go to these colleges, and then another list that had a bunch of schools where I knew that I could actually be a competitive swimmer and actually do well as a swimmer there. So I had two lists going on the whole time I'm trying to figure out how important is it for me personally, to swim in college? And that was always the big question. Is this something that I can continue to do in college, it might help pay for college. But the downside was, is that I knew that college athletics would take up a lot of my time, and would I be able to do some of the other things I wouldn't do as a student if I was a college athlete. So that was a big question for me.

Dr. Colon: These are big questions for anyone but certainly a big question for someone who's at the age of 17. I am always flabbergasted every year we know with the college process of what a big choice this is for any student to be making at such a young age. So, listeners, we are fueling confidence and building drinks today. If you don't have your paper and pen, please get it. There are lots of '**golden nuggets**' that have already been dropped today by Canh. So we're talking about how what his choices were and what his childhood looks like, and when we come back, he'll share and reveal what choices he made to get to from high school to college. Stay tuned, we will be right back.

[18:13] *Commercial break.*

[20:09] Dr. Colon: Welcome back, I'm Dr. Cynthia Colon here with Canh Oxelson, Executive Director of College Counseling at Horace Mann School in Bronx, New York. Wow, okay, so we were at the point where you were explaining how you applied to

Colon 102418

seven schools, and you were choosing, you know, how important swimming was going to be for you for college. So walk us through sort of basically the spring semester and all the way to choosing your school and why it made a **[inaudible 21:37]**

Canh: Okay, so I ended up applying to UCLA, UC Irvine, UC Santa Barbara, which were three of the University of California campuses that I liked the most. And then I applied to the University of Southern California, even though I was really nervous about the cost of a private college. My parents thought it was a good idea for me also to apply to Fresno State University, which was the local for your college that way of money became tight, I can always live at home while attending college. And then I applied to the University of San Francisco, mostly because I was familiar with it my older sister had attended there, and it was actually the only Catholic college that I had applied to. And finally applied to Harvard University on a whim, my dad had actually gone to school there and I just thought, well, if miraculously I'm accepted, it would be a good option to consider.

So those are the schools where I applied and I didn't get into Harvard, so that wasn't going to be an option. And the University of San Francisco admitted me on an academic scholarship, but they didn't have a swim team. And then I looked at the other schools as well and so I was trying to figure out kind of balancing, how much do I want to swim? How am I going to pay for this? And what will my future look like? And I can remember a conversation with my mom, where she said to me, You know, I'm okay if you accept an athletic scholarship to swim in college, but the concern I have is that if you get injured and you lose that scholarship, I'm wondering how we're going to pay for college. And I remember her looking at me and saying you're a young black man, and I want you to have a college education because if you don't, you may lose out on some opportunities. And in her mind, it made more sense to take the academic scholarship, because even if I had a physical injury, I would still be able to keep that academic scholarship and pay for four years of college. And so ultimately, that's what I did. I gave up the swimming so that I could accept the academic scholarship, knowing that it was probably a safer way, more sure way of paying for four years of college education.

Dr. Colon: Sage advice from mom, moms are so smart.

Colon 102418

Canh: I know, right?

Dr. Colon: How did they get to be so smart? I don't know. They always seem to have, you know, know all the answers and well, very good, good job mom. So you go to USF and I do want our listeners to know that you did, you didn't completely give up swimming. So can you just share just a bit as to how you pop that back into your life?

Canh: Oh, yeah, that is actually a good thing to share, because I think sometimes you make a decision about where you're going to go to college and you think well, that's it. I'm gonna spend four years or five years there, and I'm going to be done. But partially through my college career at the University of San Francisco, I had a change of heart and I decided I really, really wanted to swim in college. So I actually transferred out and transferred to Cal State Bakersfield, which at the time was one of the top divisions to swimming programs in the country. I swim for one year there and that year the team actually won its seventh national title in a row. I'm not claiming that I had a lot to do with that, but I did have a good experience swimming there. And then I can remember thinking at the end of that swim season, I remember thinking I miss San Francisco.

One of the great things about going to school or going to college in San Francisco, it doesn't matter how weird you think you are, there's always someone who's probably stranger or weirder or in San Francisco. It's one of the great things about that city. So I never felt out of place there, and I think that's part of the reason after that swim season at Cal State Bakersfield, I said to myself you know what, I feel more comfortable in San Francisco where you can, you know, there's a tremendous amount of diversity. Nobody feels like they really stand out, which is, that's what I wanted, I missed that. So I actually went back to USF, and finally graduated. So I transferred twice out and then back in.

Dr. Colon: I love that because it's completely traditional as you said, we think you're going to go spend four years and most people do, well actually I don't even know, I'm not sure that's true. I'm not sure that most people do but a lot of people who go two or four years do stay there. But certainly many transfers, and then, of course, there's the two-year people transfer out of that into four years. So thank you for sharing that. I appreciate you sharing so many pieces so personal to your life, and so thank you for all of that because I know that is helping so many of our listeners across the country. And,

Colon 102418

by the way, thank you, listeners, we hit over 5000 listeners as of Monday, so there you go. Okay, so let's pivot and talk about the professional world of college admissions and you've been doing this for quite some time, and I want to know because as we said at the beginning, you have such a breadth of experience from different colleges. What is the one truth you would like to share with our listeners? One thing that you'd like to share.

Canh: One thing, I wish we had time, I give them ten.

Dr. Colon: Yeah.

Canh: Because there's a lot that I have learned in this time, especially working for four different colleges and two different high schools. But I guess the thing I would want to say is that you know, I often hear students talk about whether or not they think the college admissions process is fair. It's a word they use a lot. Is it fair? And in the last 20 years or so, I don't think I've ever heard a college admissions representative describe this process as fair. Now, do the admissions representatives try to give each applicant a fair read? Yes. Do they try to give each applicant the benefit of the doubt? Certainly. And for the most part, I believe their hearts and minds are in the right place and they're trying to be fair and their evaluation of applicants. But when students are using the word fair, I think most people are actually clinging to this romantic idea of fairness. And they believe that the college admissions process is or should be a pure meritocracy, right. whatever work you put in; you actually get out in terms of college decisions.

And there's a belief that the most important pieces of a student's application, the transcript and the standardized test scores are measurable and therefore students could somehow be compared objectively, and they believe that leadership positions can simply be ranked by title and hierarchy, and they believe that success in athletics can be objectively measured. They believe in all these components can be measured and then ranked, and because of that there has to be a way to strategize or checklist your way into a specific college. And I guess I'd say that the myth of a pure meritocracy might even have some truth at some colleges out there. However, things look really different at some of the most highly selective colleges in the country, you know the truth is that at those colleges the most difficult to get into, you can actually apply with the highest possible GPA, the best standardized test scores in still not be admitted. You

Colon 102418

can have checked all the boxes, sports, music, community service, journalism and publications and still not be admitted. You can have done everything right quote, unquote, everything right and still not be admitted. And that's because decisions at highly selective colleges are being made using criteria that isn't easily measured if it's measurable at all. And I just think that's one of the things that kids, and families miss is they think it's all measurable and it really isn't in a traditional or classic sense.

Dr. Colon: Right? And you know, I think that part of this comes from the fact that school teaches us that if we do all the right things, we turn things in on time, we memorize, we whatever, check all the boxes, we're going to get that certain grade at the end of the class. So I think that just feeds into this, okay, when you know, the college admission process must be just an extension of school, or what that looks like, or the way I've been rewarded in the past. And it really isn't, and so that's tough. But it's important to point out because Maria Furtado who was on colleges you know, she was on that early episode. She's the Executive Director for Colleges that Change Lives. She reminds us that the average acceptance rate across the country for the colleges all across the country is 60 plus per cent. So when students are really talking about these, you know what's fair and how can we strategize they're really talking about you know, 50 schools. I don't know. Is it 50 schools, maybe hundred? That would, yeah, so it's just a small

Canh: It's actually a small number you're 100% right. And I worry that sometimes our students are too focused on that group of 50, 60, 70 schools when the reality is there are hundreds, thousands of schools out there that actually might serve a student a little bit better. So I work at a high school where there is a clamoring for those schools that are hardest to get into, and we have to kind of sort through that and help kids understand how decisions are actually being made at the college level and that how is it possible that you could have all of those boxes checked and still not be admitted. And when I discovered conversations with admissions people, is that the answer is are you interesting or more interesting than the application next to you? If everyone has really good measurables from a transcript and test scores standpoint, how else are you going to make decisions? Well, you're often going to make them based on how interesting, unique, cool the story is that the student is actually telling. So the big question is how you become more interesting? And I have had lots of conversations with Deans of admissions about this exact question, and the reality is that it's hard to know how to become more interesting because what you Cynthia might find interesting, I might not, and vice versa.

Colon 102418

Dr. Colon: Yes.

Canh: And so you can't strategize towards something you're not quite sure about. But you can find ways to make yourself more interesting.

Dr. Colon: Yes, I love this conversation. It goes back to again, the AQs are going to be the same for everybody in that pool, but the PQs keys are different. I call that finding your coolness factor. And when I work with students.

Canh: I like that.

Dr. Colon: Yeah, what is your coolness factor? And the earlier I can help you figure that out because students know what it is, they just haven't articulated it you know, or someone else, it takes someone else to sort of see it in them. And as they start describing what they do out of the classroom or just for fun, or what they explore on YouTube or whatever. I'm like, you know what, you kind of like this thing or you know, and what's cool to you, is likely not cool to me. But that's what makes you interesting, engaging, or compelling.

Canh: Yeah, great way to describe it.

Dr. Colon: We could have the whole hour of this topic but, so one of the stories when we chatted a couple of weeks ago, I love this one story that you know, my book is called Tips, Tales and Truth. So my favorite parts of the book is the tales, the actual stories of actual students. So tell us, describe your favorite student give us the tale of your favorite student and why.

Canh: So first of all, can I just say when we had that conversation, I kept thinking, is it okay as a college counsellor to say that I have a favorite student? It's like asking a parent who's your favorite kid? And I just I laughed about it for a second, but it is true

Colon 102418

that when I think about my career, there are definitely students that pop into my head right away. And one of my all-time favorite kid graduated actually just a few years ago. I'm going to call him Mark, but he was modestly talented student, and I think the thing that stood out about him was, he was so curious. And that's the thing that left an impression on everyone. He was a really big reader, and when Mark liked a topic, he would read blogs and articles and books about the topic because he was just so curious about it, he wanted to know more about it. And I think that kind of curiosity information gathering allowed him to bring ideas to the classroom that none of the other students could bring. So everyone was reading the textbook, but Mark was reading some extra stuff that was related to that particular topic on his own, and those were ideas that he brought to the classroom that nobody else could bring. So he wasn't the best writer, he wasn't the best test taker, he didn't even earn the best grades. But the classroom conversations really, really flowed because of his interesting contributions, and I think it was pretty clear that everyone including the teacher benefited from Mark being in the room. He didn't need to be the strongest student, but he could still have a really, really strong impact on the classroom dynamic and to a teacher, they loved him because of his curiosity, it was great.

Dr. Colon: Oh my gosh. So it's probably a shock it might be I hope not, but it's probably shocking some people to hear you say that this you know, this student who was modestly talented, he was not the strongest student you know, in terms of grades but people loved him. The teachers loved him. So I can only imagine what those letters of recommendation sounded like. So can you just talk about that like you know, some of those fears of like you don't have to be perfect in every area of your life. So, how do you deal with students like that?

Canh: Yeah, you know, his letters of recommendation were great. And in one of the stories that I told in his letter was, really the second thing that kind of stood out for me about him is that he aggressively pursued his interests outside the classroom. So he was, Mark was a huge sports fan. He was always curious why some athletes could rise to the occasion when the pressure was on, and other athletes kind of seem to shrink from the moment when the stakes were the highest. And he read books about it, and he discovered that one of the authors of the book he read, taught at a university in this state next to us, in New Jersey. And so Mark actually wrote to the professor, who was so pleased that my student had taken such an interest in his research that the professor actually shared his entire research model with Mark. And my student took that model that kind of used this visualization to help an athlete overcome pressure. He kind of

Colon 102418

altered it a little bit and then conducted his own experiment with his local club basketball team. And the professor was so impressed that he invited Mark to present his findings to his sports psychology class of college juniors and seniors, and even invited some of his colleagues to sit in on the presentation.

And Mark didn't win an award for his work in sports psychology, he was just really curious about it, and he found a way to pursue that interest in a really genuine way. And he ended up making an impact with his local club basketball team and with the college students who are taking that professors class. And so I just thought it was a fantastic example of how you don't need, this isn't about an award, he just did this because he was just really curious.

Dr. Colon: Yes.

Canh: Sometimes I'll look up something on the internet and I'll just get lost you know, I'll find the next website, the next website, and then YouTube's got some video on it. And it was that kind of thing for this young man that was sports psychology for him. And I was just so happy that he found a way to aggressively pursue his interest. It almost doesn't even matter what the interest is.

Dr. Colon: No, exactly.

Canh: He showed that commitment, that interest in it, and people are drawn to that people are excited when you are excited about something. You can always tell when a kid is talking about something, they're super excited about, they're on the edge of their seat and they're really into it. They're animated, that draws people in. It draws people in.

Dr. Colon: Right. Well, you want to keep you know, you want to keep learning. I mean, some of my favorite essays, I work a lot with students on their essays. And the best essays are when a student is able to teach me something, I knew nothing about because they're just so excited about it. And that comes across on the paper when they can get through that it's just amazing. Again, what is your coolness factor and just go

Colon 102418

with that. I mean because again, you know, that's what makes you interesting. I love this story. There were so many 'nuggets' and I haven't been telling the listeners what to write down but listeners you know, my gig and my stick. I tell you to write things down all the time, and there have been lots of great things. So oh, share this episode with three friends even on a commercial break. We will be right back, stay tuned. We're coming back with some best tips. We'll be right back.

[38:05] *Commercial break.*

[40:37] Dr. Colon: Welcome back everyone, you're listening to Destination YOUiversity. I'm your host, Dr. Cynthia Colon, and I'm here with Canh Oxelson, Executive Director of College Counseling at Horace Mann School in New York. And oh gosh, I wish you could you know, be here with me for another hour and talking about this you know, what makes students so interesting and unique and how did they find that. And listeners we were chit-chatting at the break, and Canh say a little bit about, you know what we were just saying about, sometimes kids don't know exactly what their coolness factor is until maybe someone points it out or you know, so, say what you were saying.

Canh: Well, I just think you know, kids may know what they think is cool, but they don't know necessarily what adults or admissions officers think is cool. And you know, if kids were also making the decisions about who to admit then yeah, you could rely on them to tell you what's cool and what's not. But because adults are actually making those decisions. You want to talk to an adult if you're a kid. And you may realize that something you do that you think is ordinary, and adult might say, wow, I hadn't considered that, that actually really is cool that you're doing that. So I just think that interaction between the student and the adult, or the college counsellor, or the teacher, the person who's mentoring that person, that's student on the way to college is super important. Because as a teenager, we have a limited I guess, experience with the world to know what is cool or interesting. Whereas an adult has been through this world, been in the world for a little while and might have a broader sense or idea of what is interesting or cool on some level. So it's a good idea to have these conversation students and mentors.

Colon 102418

Dr. Colon: That's a great 'golden nugget', you should write that down everyone. He said, talk to an adult because the adult, what you are thinking is ordinary an adult might think is super cool. And I know I do have those conversations all the time, I'm like oh my gosh, that's super cool. They're like, really? Like Yes.

Canh: Yeah.

Dr. Colon: Well, I'm going to take you to the water for one second, but I want you to share with everyone about Horace Mann because we should give a shout out to where you are at school and tell our listeners about Horace Mann and what you love about it.

Canh: Well, Horace Mann is a really rigorous private school in the Bronx, New York. And then I think there are many people in this area who probably think of it as one of the top schools in New York and certainly one of the top schools in New York City. We have lots of curious and really engaged students who are trying to get the most out of their education. And that's a wonderful thing to work in that kind of environment where kids are really motivated and trying to do everything, they can, to get the most out of their education, I really appreciate that. And I think the other thing that I really like about this place is that it doesn't matter what you're interested in, there's a way to aggressively pursue that interest here. So whether it's robotics, or it's theater, or it's, you know we have a steel drum band here. So whatever your interest is, you can probably pursue it here, and that's a wonderful thing, that's a really cool thing. And that's not true about every high school, but it is one of the things I like about this high school.

Dr. Colon: Right, right I love that. Okay, so we're getting to the part where you're going to share some tips and we've shared some truths and some tales, and now it's time for your tips. So what is a good tip? And I think that listeners probably can guess what you're about to say. But explain what you mean, as we started by saying your biggest tip is summed up in two words is to be interesting. So, share a little bit more about what Canh means by that and how you share that with your students.

Canh: Okay, so I think you know, doing your best in school is a given and I think most students understand that preparing for and trying your best on standardized tests is

Colon 102418

also important. In many colleges just doing those two things will be good enough to earn your spot. But if you really want to stand out if you really want to be memorable during the college admissions process, I think we have a strategy that can help you do that, and that is be interesting. So to try and explain that I guess I'd say after 25 years in college admissions in college counselling, the best tip I can offer students is to find a way to aggressively pursue the subjects, activities and hobbies that genuinely interest you. You know, memorable people are those we find to be interesting and you're more likely to become interesting if you fill your time with things that are genuinely interesting to you. So if you just think of all your favorite all-time books, or your all-time favorite books and TV shows and movies, you can connect with characters in those stories because in some way, shape or form, you find them interesting.

Admissions representatives at highly selective colleges are no different, they gravitate towards the narratives that are most interesting to them. Sometimes it's the narrative describing a truly thoughtful journey, sometimes it's the narrative describing an unusual path, sometimes it's the narrative that reminds them of their own individual journey. There's really no way to know what an admissions representative may or may not find interesting. There's no way to strategize about being interesting other than first, figuring out what you like to do and how you generally like to spend your academic extracurricular and personal time and then second, aggressively pursuing whatever those interests really are. If you could do those two things, you'll be a much more interesting human being and more likely to stand out when it comes time to apply to college.

Dr. Colon: Well, and that's the key, it's going to be a much more interesting human being, not just a college applicant, as that right, so this show is called Destination You, Y-O-university because the destination is not college or university without, with you. It's you. You are the destination; this is your journey. And if you can figure those things out that Canh just talked about so beautifully, the college piece comes in naturally, it be authentic. This is sort of like a marriage proposal, right? Two things coming together, and students have two-thirds part of this decision. They get to choose where they apply, and they get to choose where they attend. The only piece that they don't have control over is where they get admitted. But if they're doing all the right things, meaning the right things for them, and becoming interesting human beings, then all of it should just work out and easier said than done, I understand. But this process is not a prize to be won but a match to be made. And I think students and parents forget that. How do you deal with that on your campus?

Colon 102418

Canh: Well, is interesting because you know, what I, the advice I was giving is easier said than done. And there are times when a kid really wants to pursue something they're interested in and their parents say no, that's not really what I want for you and that's not really what I imagined for you. And I've had parents say to me you know what, we didn't immigrate to this country so that my daughter could pursue that particular thing. We came here so she would have a chance to go to college and become a lawyer and that's what she's going to do. And I know that it's easier said than done to really pursue your genuine interests because there are things that can get in the way.

And sometimes you have to have conversations with your parents, or your mentor or your college mentor about whether or not it's okay to pursue something that doesn't look like it's going to pay a lot of money in a career down the line or something like that, and that's a hard thing. Because I talked to a lot of parents who have a very specific idea or vision, in their minds about what their son or daughter is going to do and when the son or daughter comes into my office and says, you know, Mr. Oxelson, I know my parents want me to become a doctor, but you know what I'm really, really interested in learning how to build faster race cars, that's my thing, that's what I want to do. And so we have a lot of difficult conversations surrounding what the parent's expectation is and what the kid really, really wants to do. But I always tell the parent if you want your child to have the best chance at being admitted to some of the colleges that you're thinking about, it probably will help them if they pursue the things they're interested in because they're just going to be a more interesting kid.

Dr. Colon: Right, wow. I don't envy your job at all, having those tough conversations you know, it can be really, really tricky. And you're right, and sometimes we wonder, you know what goes on at home because again, the conversation you're having with a student in school, can look and feel very different than probably what they're having at home. So hopefully it all works out, hopefully there they are hearing you. I want to, we have a couple more minutes before we, I have to close out but Canh again, I want to go back to you. So you've had four schools, colleges, that you worked at and then to high schools, and any other tips or behind the scenes truth that you want to share with our listeners?

Colon 102418

Canh: Oh gosh, yeah, you mean about how decisions are made? Or what kinds of things students could be doing or should be concentrating on?

Dr. Colon: Anything, I mean, anything that comes to mind that you know, is something that maybe again, is a myth that you say, you know what I was at you know, University of Pennsylvania, or you know, so you were at USF Pennsylvania, UC Santa Cruz. So something that maybe is the same across the board that we don't think that it is.

Canh: Well, I actually think admissions officers are much more forgiving than kids think they are. So you know, I think kids can be the most critical of themselves, admissions officer actually aren't that critical, I think. That's been my experience at different colleges. Part of the reason they do what they do is they love kids and they love education, and they want to see those two things connect really, really well. So they're not out to you know, deny as many kids as they possibly can, they actually are trying to find ways to admit as many students as possible. If they work at a university where they really believe in the educational mission of that school, they're not trying to exclude people from it, they're trying to include as many people in that experience as possible.

Now, if you're not admitted it definitely feels like you got excluded, and I get that. But the reality is, is that most of your college education is on you. It's how you engage with what's going on at that particular college and university. And I can think of tons of examples of really well-known people who have been successful in any a number of ways that you could measure that. And they went all kinds of different schools, but the common denominator is that they really engaged while they were there. They took advantage of the opportunities that were available to them at whatever college they went to, whether it was a well-known one or not, whether it was a two year college or a four year college, so it mostly has to do with you and if you're hoping that the college is going to do all the work for you. Oh boy, that's not a good way to start college. It's on the kids and how they really take advantage of what's there.

Dr. Colon: Oh, you read my mind I was trying to remember what the last question I wanted to ask, and it was about admission officers. So thank you so much you read my mind. Well, my friends we've given you some tips and tails, and here is the real truth.

Colon 102418

Every student applying to x college will have similar AQs, academic qualities. In other words, all the students applying to Duke University of Virginia, Berkeley, Georgetown, etc. will have similar AQs. What makes a student stand out is the PQs, what they bring to the table. What you do outside the classroom says so much about who you are, what you love, and the kind of community member you will be in college and who you will become in life. The challenge this week is this, write down three things that you can do in the next week that will make you more interested and interesting, and then go and do them. I want to give our listeners a chance to connect with you. So Canh you say a little bit about just your contact information that you would like to share in case someone has a question.

Canh: Sure, sure. So the easiest way is just to email me directly and that is Oxelson, which is oxelson@horacemann.org. And they can also Google Horace Mann and my last name, and I'm sure my email address will come up. But I'm happy to hear from your listeners and if they have questions, I'm happy to provide as much advice as I can. And thank you very much for having me, this has been a lot of fun. I as you could tell, I really like talking with people and young people about this particular process. So thanks for having me on, this has been fun.

Dr. Colon: Absolutely. So thank you for joining us today everyone. If this episode has fueled your confidence and help build your dreams, please share this episode with three people in the next 30 minutes. For additional free resources, a free consultation or to register for my essay boot camps, you can go to drcynthiacolon.com that's C-O-L-O-N is the last name and you can send me an email from there. You can also send me an email to destinationyouuniversity@gmail.com, that's Y-O-University@gmail.com. That is all for today my dreamers I'm Dr. Cynthia Colon remember to share this episode. We will see you next Wednesday at noon Pacific for another episode. Until then, wherever you are me you have a happy and sunny day. Bye for now.

Outro: *Thank you so much for listening this week to Destination YOUiversity. Be sure to join Dr. Cynthia Colon again next Wednesday at 12 noon Pacific Time, 3 pm Eastern Time on The Voice America Variety Channels and get one step closer to your success.*