



THE INS & OUTS OF COLLEGE ADMISSIONS

**TOM
TONNESEN**

It would be a stretch to say that I am a follower of NASCAR, but I have seen my share of E S P N highlights

where certain victories get derailed by wrecks on the last lap. Additionally, baseball fans (especially of the Cubs) are all too familiar with witnessing their teams give away big leads in the ninth inning. One could go on and on with the analogies, but you get the picture. It is not uncommon for individuals to fumble away things that seem firmly within their grasp. In the college admissions process, this disease is known as "senioritis," aka "senior slide" or "senior slack." Avoid it like the plague.

I can sympathize – Senior year can be very difficult. In the fall, college applications, essays and visits can dominate your life and many seniors are still dealing with trying to improve their ACT and/or SAT scores. Also, first semester grades can play a very meaningful role in college admissions decisions, thus this pressure comes to bear. Around mid-January, though, all the college applications have been submitted and many seniors already have the majority of their admission decisions. By April 1, all the admissions decisions have been received (except the limbo of being waitlisted), and by May 1, seniors have "signed on the dotted line" and submitted nonrefundable deposits. Surely, it is time to kick back, relax and rest on your laurels. NOT!

Please understand that all college admissions decisions are conditional and contingent upon completing your high school career at the same level of academic, extracurricular and personal achievement that won for you a "yes" decision in the first place. In fact, the majority of admission notifications state something to this effect quite explicitly. Upon graduation, your high school guidance office will send a final report and transcript to your chosen college and any

Attention High School seniors: Beware of this malady

noticeable drop in grades – or worse – can hoist a "red flag" upon which colleges can respond in a number of ways, none of them pretty.

Before going on with the possible ramifications of senioritis, let's talk a bit about symptoms. Like many illnesses, sometimes the afflicted is the last one to know. Have you ever had anyone tell you that you do not look well, and upon being diagnosed, it turns out that they were correct? Listen to your parents, teachers, coaches, counselor ... and yes, even your peers if they notice that things just do not seem right. What are some telltale signs? Becoming apathetic and lackadaisical about schoolwork and assignments are at the top of the list. A decline in a senior's third quarter (or second trimester) grades may be an indicator that a slippery slope has begun. Be wary of missing deadlines, incomplete or late assignments, increased absences, dropped courses, cutting classes ... all of these can be indicators that you have been bit by the senioritis bug. At the risk of sounding like a mental health professional, some of the signs can be akin to depression, i.e., not wanting to get out of bed, fatigue, mood swings, lack of motivation, use of alcohol and drugs, etc. In the minds of many seniors, their job has been completed. They have put in their three and a half-plus years of hard time, been admitted to college, and want to move on with their lives. They are "so over" high school and the finish line is in clear view. Remember, though, the most heartbreaking (and injurious) crashes occur in the final lap.

So how might colleges respond to overt signs of senioritis? In some instances, colleges will send out warning letters informing the student that things seem to be going amiss. Some colleges privately refer to these as "Come-to-Jesus" or "Fear-of-God" letters and they will require the students to provide a written explanation for the decline in performance. It is not unheard of for such students to be placed on academic probation when they enter college in the fall, a prospect that is not very appealing. Do you think that senioritis has no financial implications? Think again. A college can change the amount of its financial aid award, especially if parts of the package were merit-based. Of course, in worst-case

scenarios, a college can exercise its "nuclear option," i.e., revoking its offer of admission. In a recent year, the University of Colorado-Boulder withdrew admission offers to 45 of its accepted students, 10 of whom already had attended freshmen orientation, selected classes and met their roommates. A college may not receive your final high school report and transcript until mid-July; good luck finding another school to accept you when the fall semester is about five to six weeks away. No thanks!

Before concluding this article, I should mention that academic declines are not the only reason for colleges to take the actions described above. Severe breaches of discipline, an arrest, plagiarism, cheating, even a "senior prank" that goes too far can have devastating consequences. Remember, colleges consider themselves to be a type of community. Since membership is not a right but a privilege, a college can perceive you as a risk factor and someone who may have a deleterious impact.

If you dare, you can view this column as just another scare tactic that – in the eyes of teens – adults utilize ad nauseam. So be it, but as a high school senior within a month of graduation, why let it get to this point? You have worked hard to compile an exemplary record that has gained you acceptance at a college of your choice. A new, exciting part of your life is about to unfold. Remain focused, energized, involved, active, motivated. As they say, you are remembered not by how you started, but by how you finished. The best writing has paragraphs where the concluding sentences not only summarize what has been stated, but also smoothly transition to the topic of the new paragraphs and their beginning sentences. Manage your transition from high school to college accordingly. Good habits breed good outcomes.

Tom Tonnesen is the director of College Admissions Pathways (CAPs) and works with students and their families on the entire college search, admissions, test preparation and financial aid processes. He is a member of the National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC). Contact information: tonnesen@caps2college.com; 377-0302 (home/office); 262-389-4588 (cell); or www.caps2college.com.