



Adoption and the College Admissions Process

By Debbie Schwartz

I heard the panic in Evan's* voice when he phoned me with what should have been good news.

"I've been accepted to Skidmore..." His voice trailed off uncertainly.

"That was one of your three favorite schools," I responded. "But you don't sound excited by the news."

"They want me to attend their Discovery Tour program for traditionally underrepresented students," Evan replied. "I can't go to that event. No one will believe I'm Hispanic!"

I smiled to myself as I recalled the events that led up to this moment. Months earlier, Evan sat in my office discussing the questions on the Common Application, a centralized

application process used by approximately 700 colleges and universities. Like many of the students I work with, Evan struggled as he decided how to respond to the section regarding ethnicity and race. For those students who joined their families through adoption, like Evan, these questions often reveal deeper questions about identity that can be difficult for students and families to process.

Evan knew that his birth father identified as half-Hispanic, but he had no additional information about his birth father's background — the second question that would drop down on the Common App (as it's popularly known) if he checked "yes" to "Are you Hispanic or Latino?" He also knew that his birth father did not speak Spanish. On the other hand, Evan did speak some Spanish — he studied it in school. And his grandfather on his father's

side, a Sephardic Jew, was raised speaking Ladino, a Judaeo-Spanish language. Evan resembled his birth mother; with his pale skin, freckled nose and dark hair, he looked more Irish than anything else. And his first and last name made him sound like exactly what he was: the quintessential "nice Jewish boy."

As a college consultant, I knew that Evan could choose to identify himself as a Hispanic male on the application, and I understood the advantages and disadvantages of the decision at the time. But as an adoption educator and as an adoptive parent, I also recognized that what was more important in that moment was how Evan felt about himself and where he was developmentally in terms of his identity. Did he want to identify as Hispanic? What did that mean to him in terms of his connection to his birth parents? To his family? How did checking

that box make him feel? And what happens in the process for students who have less information than Evan about their family of origin?

The college process is more than just an application and, not surprisingly, adoption can be an overlay in other places as well. For many students, adoption often comes into play during the essay writing process — but not always in the way you might expect. The Common App offers a choice of essay prompts each year. For the last few years, one of the options has been: Some students have a background, identity, interest or talent that is so meaningful they believe their application would be incomplete without it. If this sounds like you, then please share your story.

The first time I met with Sarah, her mother said, “And of course Sarah will write her essay about how she was adopted from China and how she went to Chinese school on Saturdays when she was young and studies Mandarin so she can visit China someday.” Sarah rolled her eyes and cringed visibly.

I looked over my notes from the hour I had spent with Sarah. Not once had she talked about wanting to visit China, although her Mandarin classes were on her school transcript. Most of our conversation had focused on her summers working as a camp counselor. The previous summer she had been asked to work with a student on the autism spectrum — a job she felt completely unqualified to do but the experience had been transformative for her. She had spoken passionately about how much she struggled at first and how hard it was, and then about the change that occurred when she finally made a connection with the camper. It was clear to me that this story was more meaningful to her; the Chinese lessons were more meaningful to her mother. Sometimes my work as a consultant is about helping parents step back and let the students drive the process.

One of the most important things I do in my job as a consultant is to help parents learn to let go — and I’ll be the first to admit this wasn’t any easier for me as a mom than it is for anyone else. But what I’ve learned over the years (both as a consultant and when I worked

in admissions) is that this process works the best when the students take the lead. This is your child’s journey, not yours. If you choose the school, if you decide what your child’s future should look like, your child misses out on the opportunity to explore his identity in this process. For students who were adopted — who may feel (consciously or uncon-

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sciously) — that the central question of their identity was taken away from them at the outset, this is an important opportunity for them to take control of their future. As an adoption-competent college consultant, I understand the value of this process and I work with your family so that your child takes ownership and controls the outcome.

Once upon a time you took a leap of faith that the incredibly complicated, stressful, confusing world of adoption would work, and that somehow, magically, if you listened to the experts (the social workers and/or adoption attorneys), you would end up with a child. Today, I’m here to tell you that the incredibly complicated, stressful, confusing world of college admissions will work, and that somehow, not so magically, if you listen to the experts (the guidance counselors and/or college consultants), your child will be admitted to college.

Remember Evan? We talked for a long time that evening. He decided not to attend the Discovery Tour program, but he did revisit Skidmore and his two other top choice schools, both of which had also offered him admission. He sat in on classes, participated in team practice for his favorite intramural athletic event, and stayed overnight in the

dorms at all three schools. In the end, the team practices were the deciding factor for him. With all other things being equal, he found his “crew” — the place he belonged — at a school 500 miles from home. He reports that he no longer studies Spanish. He joined the Latin American Students Association and then never attended a single event (although he

remains on their mailing list). And he’s loving college. And someday, his parents will get over the distance...

*names have been changed

Debbie Schwartz, principal, DS College Consulting LLC, is an independent educational consultant advising students and families on the college admissions process. She is also the founder/director of Forever Families Weekend, a program for Jewish families touched by adoption. She was the program coordinator for Adoption Connection at Jewish Family Service of Greenwich and has served on the board of the Adoptive Parents Committee, Inc. Schwartz was a 2010 recipient of the Congressional Coalition on Adoption Angel in Adoption Award for her work with pre- and post-adoptive families. While working in admissions for Yale, Schwartz interviewed both national and international applicants, reviewed applications and participated in admissions committee meetings. She and her husband are parents to a college student and a high school student, both of whom joined their family through adoption. For more information or to schedule a workshop for your adoptive family organization, email her at debbie.schwartz@dscollegeconsulting.com or call 914-768-3722.