

Mary Miele:

Welcome to Be Evolved, a podcast for parents and educators who prioritize developing possibility and expansion within the total educational process for themselves and their children or students. We invite you to listen to the podcast with your child or student in mind and with yourself at the center of the learning experience. Ultimately, our goal is to bridge the gap between educational expertise and research, translating it into practical action. Gaining knowledge plus taking action is what it means to be evolved.

Hello everyone. It is March, and this is the Evolved Education Company podcast. It's the be evolved season, and we are definitely going to get right into being evolved today with our guests because we're talking about impactful college application processes. And just before we got on this podcast, I was explaining to our guests that I know parents come in and hire us to get the college essay done or to get that school list for college and get into a college. So the end result is really why people are coming in to get this assistance. But I'm here to tell you there's a whole lot more that goes on that we're going to talk about today in between hiring us and that end result.

And what I'm really excited to talk about is this impactful process that both Anabel and Avram and I take students through in this college journey. So let's define what I'm talking about, and then we'll get right to our guests. So when I say impactful processes, what I'm really saying is that most students need to do these things. They need to find a school list. They need to go through the steps in order to apply to their best-fit schools. And most students need to write a college essay. Now, these tasks can take many different forms for many different people. But today, Avram Schlesinger and Anabel Graff are going to talk to us about how to make these processes a lasting, impactful experience for your students.

So they're going to build skills within it that they're going to take with them forward. So I know that Avram and Anabel have a lot of expertise and values and approaches that are important to them when they work with students, and I wanted you guys all to know about them because if you're going through this process, you should 100% go through this added value. All right. So let me just make sure I said everything in my notes that I wanted to before we get right to Avram. Avram has a kiddo in college and a kid who will be going to college in quite some time, but I'm going to let him introduce himself to us a little bit, and then we're going to get into some of the counseling ideas. So Avram, would you just pop off and introduce yourself to everybody listening?

Avram Schlesinger:

Sure. Thank you so much. Yes. Just so you know, the younger one will be going to college, and if you're ready for it, the year 2040. So yes, I have a 20-year-old, and I have a 14-month-old, so they're a little bit separated from one another when it comes down to it, although they are thick as thieves. So I am a college counselor, and I've been happy to work with Mary because I think we see eye to eye on a great deal in terms of all of this. So that's basically what I can tell you at the moment.

Mary Miele:

All right, awesome. So we're just going to get right into it because I want to really stress this word counseling because there's a lot of different ways that people advise through college processes, and something that we hang our hat on is this idea of counseling. So can you tell us why this word is so important to you and why it translates into an impactful process for students?

Avram Schlesinger:

Sure. I think that a lot of it comes from, in my sort of thinking about it historically, once upon a time, this was not called college counseling. Once upon a time, this was called college placement. That was the names of the offices. And what that essentially meant was that you were being literally placed into a space, into a college. The historical sort of surround of it at the moment, if we think about it, is our

students today have way, way more options, right. And many of our students are applying to multiple schools rather than just a couple of schools.

And so the idea of counseling is really about getting to know a kid, getting to know what it is that they would like in a best-case scenario in order to figure out what the best, as we would call it, fit is for the student rather than sort of saying, "This is the name of a place that I know, or this is a name that somebody told me, and as a result, that's the name that I think we're going to go for or the name that we're going to stick with." So the idea of counseling is really exactly that, finding the best fit. And that means a lot of different things, right. That means is it the best fit socially?

Most of our kids, the thing that they're most worried about, really when it comes down to it, is not necessarily the education only that they're going to get. It's, "Am I going to go to a school where I'm going to be happy? Am I going to have a good time? Am I going to make friends?" And sort of figuring out what's going to make them happy is the first step to figuring out what's going to be a successful place for them. I'd like to claim that as my own. It's not. It's one of my mentor's statements that students need to be happy, and that way they can become successful. So that's kind of where the counseling comes in. So is socially happy? Is it going to be academically a place that's a good fit for them? And that might take a number of different sort of routes as well.

Is this a kid who works with their hands versus a kid who only in their brain? And that's something to think about, right. What kind of programs are there? Are there places where this is a kid who wants to go to college, is interested in college, but really is interested in also being a working person at the same time, and what does that look like? How do we counsel them in that direction also as well? So the whole idea is really sitting down and getting to know whoever it is that we're talking with, getting to know your kids, trying to understand who they are, and from there building out whatever a, quote, unquote, list might be.

The problem, more often than not at this moment, is that you tend to look at graphs. Schools give you all of these tools, whether it's Naviance or SCOIR or any of these other things. And you can sit down, and you can say, "Well, my kid lands here and lands here, and so that's the school." But that's not thinking about what the fit is, right. That's not thinking about the sort of holistic, which is a word that we can get into another day, child and figuring out what it is that they actually want. Does that answer your question, Mary?

Mary Miele:

It totally does, and I love holistic. That was one of the first books I wrote when we started Evolved was this idea of looking at a child from the academic, social, emotional, and physical lens in school and at home. And for me, the practice came from special education because when we were doing special education in the 90s, the IEPs were always talking about the academic, social, emotional, and physical. So once I started thinking about humans that way, it was hard to undo.

So I'm always asking questions of those kinds. And so, of course, this holistic rubric that now schools are also using, people are hearing that word holistic, but is it the same? When parents might hear the word holistic, what we're talking about is social, emotional, physical, academic fit of a school. When we're talking about holistic college admissions, what does that mean?

Avram Schlesinger:

Well, that's something different. That's on the other side of the table, so to speak. And that's the way that they are judging each application. And that is not just looking at grade point average, not just looking at scores from exams, not just looking at extracurricular activities.

They're looking at the whole picture of what a student does and how that student tells their story, so to speak, which is what I know your other guest is going to talk about, like how it is that you tell your story. And so that's kind of what the holistic in their world looks like. So it is good to make that differentiation between the two because I think that they can probably get confused.

Mary Miele:

Yeah, that makes good sense. Either way, holistic sort of encompasses this multifaceted viewpoint. And I imagine that when you're counseling students, and I know I experienced this too in my work, it's helpful to the student because the student learns introspection. The student learns more about themselves because someone's actually asking them about themselves in that counseling process. So it sort of does lend itself to adding to that holistic application. I would assume that's your experience too, and can you speak a little bit more to that concept?

Avram Schlesinger:

Yeah. I mean, I guess the way that I would say it is that a lot of kids, when I have these conversations, or we have these conversations as counselors, are kind of shocked that anybody's having this kind of a conversation with them, right. They think they're going into a college application process and it's really about the nuts and bolts of school, the nuts and bolts of which school, the nuts and bolts of the program, the major that they're going to do, or however it is that they're going to do it, rather than trying to figure out who they are, right. And some of the questions that we end up asking them, they're kind of shocked by because they're not ready for those kinds of questions.

Sort of one of the more famous ones that's out there, and again, I don't know if is going to talk about this or not, but there's this very famous essay human being out there also in the world who has this idea about finding an essence object. And what that basically is looking at something that defines you as a human being based upon an object that's dear to you. Now, there's a lot of criticism of this thing and the rest, but what we're trying to do with that kind of idea is to try to figure out what do you value. What do you care about? Who are you as an individual?

Because if you go back to the other side of the table again, that holistic piece, admissions officers are thinking about, "Well, what kind of a class am I building? What kind of group of people am I bringing into this environment, and who are they going to be when they hit my campus, right?" And so we're asking sort of leading questions, but really asking, "What is it that you as a student, what is it you as a 17 or 18-year-old value as a human being in order to get to know you because that's part of who you're bringing with you when you land on a campus?" And for a lot of people, that's the most important thing. Think about that first day of meeting that roommate kind of a thing, right.

Do you want to be in that room with somebody who has good values versus somebody who has none, right? I mean, I don't think there's anybody who has none. Maybe every once in a while, right. But that idea of understanding that kid is really part of what we do as counselors. And to be honest, and just to sort of dispel a myth, the admissions officers also are interested in that. Admissions officers are often painted by parents, by people out there who don't understand how the process works as these individuals are out there to ding their kid, to find a way to not admit them. It couldn't be more opposite, right.

Maybe in some very, very selective situations, part of what they have to do is figure some of those things out as to how to make these comparisons. But what they're really trying to do is figure out how does this kid fit our campus. How does this kid fit our program? How does this kid fit our social dynamic? And again, is this the right place for them, right? Most AOs that I meet, they love talking to kids. They love learning about kids, and they go to the table, as they call it, championing their kid. That's their job. Because otherwise, what's the point really when it comes down to it?

Mary Miele:

Totally. Totally. Yeah. That's so helpful. Well, I really appreciate it. I know I could always listen to you all day. I feel like you have so much value to offer in this process. And I'll come back to you after we get some time with Anabel because I know this segues actually right into Anabel's work, and I would like Anabel to give us a little bit of a sense of her background and just where she's coming from. And we'll

then dive right into your part in all of this, which has to do with the impactful process of writing that essay for the application.

Anabel Graff:

Yeah. I feel like I have so much to say after listening to you both. Thank you, Mary, for having me, and thank you, Avram, for all the helpful pointers. I feel like I was taking notes during your talk. But anyway, me, I'm Anabel Graff, and my company is called Creative Connections Essays, which was named for my college essay, which I wrote about E.M. Forster's famous quote, "Only connect!" So that's how I kind of approach my process. What connections can we make between what you're interested in, who you are, what you want to study, what you have done in order to make an impactful essay? And I actually love the word impactful for this, which, to me, means powerful and effective.

And I think I'm going to try to keep that in mind as I talk about a little bit what I do. So I come to this as a writer, a fiction writer by trade. I don't always love writing about myself. So this process has been very challenging for me to put myself in the position of a student who's [inaudible 00:14:04] facing those same anxieties, uncomfotability of trying to get the essence of who they are on the page for someone to fall in love with, champion, show their values, all that stuff that we talked about. I began my company after I left a boarding school where I was a writer in residence, where I was hired to help students with their college essays. And I had a full year to do that, which is very different than what I do normally with kids when I only have a few sessions.

But I kind of really got to thinking about designing a program, which was what do I know from my MFA, my writing experience, my fiction writing, my nonfiction memoir essay experience, and then what did I want to know as a 17-year-old who felt that this process was anxiety-ridden, mysterious, unclear, and can I help demystify, make clear, give a step in a process to someone who's writing what they believe is the most important piece of writing they've probably ever done in their high school career? So those are the kind of two approaches I bring to sit with a student, which is, what do I want to know, and what do I know and how can I help a student move through what is [inaudible 00:15:08] challenging writing experience?

Mary Miele:

I love that. And I think it's such an interesting question, right. If I had more time with this student, what could I do? And therein lies a very interesting answer because it will tell you the benefits of having time to develop skill to really work, I guess, within that process that we talked about just earlier in this podcast, what happens from the start till the finish? If you have more time, what can you do with a student that is so impactful? Could you speak a little bit more because I think you have such an interesting way of teaching and thinking about this? So I'm excited to learn.

Anabel Graff:

Oh, that's really kind of, you couldn't see, but I was nodding my head the entire time [inaudible 00:15:53]-

Mary Miele:

Yes.

Anabel Graff:

... talking because we've had this discussion. I've had this discussion with many other counselors and coaches and tutors, which is what's the difference between supporting a student who's learning a skill and supporting a student who's generating a product? And as Mary mentioned before, this is a product-driven process. We do want an essay or a supplement or an application that's going to be handed in at a deadline.

But the benefit of time towards working on writing skills, and the ideal way I approach teaching this is can we learn the really, really, really important skills which often are not taught in school, in your school English class, your school history class, or any other writing based class of retrospection and reflection, which Avram was talking about in terms of what counseling is, trying to look inward to understand who you are as an individual in order to write something impactful or to have a strong application. And the really, really hard thing is that these skills are not developed. They're not practiced.

And my mantra when I started this was like, "We practice the ACT. We practice the SAT. We practice APs. We practice interviews. We practice going on college visits. We do all of this practice, but one thing we're not practicing is our writing." And then, if you sit down and ask a student to generate the best essay possible, it's really challenging. So I try to build practice into my practice with students, which is how can we start asking questions, journaling, looking at our lives analytically, imaginatively, to try to work on those skills of retrospection and reflection.

Mary Miele:

Can you give me just a small-bite size something? Let's say I'm your student. "Hi, Mary, and I have to apply to, let's say, a grad program." What is an example of a question or two that you might get me to do? Like Avram mentioned, the essence object as an opportunity to start getting me talking about myself. What question would you ask me to get me talking about myself, let's say?

Anabel Graff:

Well, I love that. We kind of did that in our practice, but I've worked on a set of brainstorms. I try not to make them exhaustive that really helped get the students start to thinking, and I'm going to answer this, I think, in a roundabout way for you, Mary. But Avram was talking about, "What's the story? Tell your story. What's an essence object that represents your values?"

To me, that freaks me out. I'm like, I have no idea how to start answering that. It seems so big. It's so overwhelming. So I try to start small and then build to these connections that are bigger about what your values are, what you want to do, what you might if you're theoretically applying to grad school. So they start out in Oculus. My favorite question is, what's the weirdest thing about you?

Mary Miele:

That I...

Anabel Graff:

I don't know if you want to answer that on a podcast, but you can.

Mary Miele:

That my kids think that my job is not as exciting as their dad's. I don't know. Maybe not. Maybe that's not [inaudible 00:18:31]-

Anabel Graff:

Okay, fine. That might be [inaudible 00:18:31]-

Mary Miele:

Whatever.

Anabel Graff:

... and it's interesting. Fine. I take whatever you [inaudible 00:18:35]-

Mary Miele:

[inaudible 00:18:35].

Anabel Graff:

If your job is not as exciting as others, I guess that's what you'd start with. That's what other people maybe think. And then I'd maybe ask questions, "Well, how's it exciting to you? What are three things that were exciting yesterday about your job? What's going to be exciting tomorrow about your job?"

And if we're generating a grad statement, I'm assuming it's going to be for some educational field. That would be actually a very interesting way to start and find you're a late-in-life applicant, maybe. "My kids think my job is boring. These are all ways they're wrong." That's a great way to start application. It gets [inaudible 00:19:03].

Mary Miele:

Oh, absolutely. Good.

Anabel Graff:

Yeah. I guess I think very differently about this process as maybe some other coaches, which is I don't focus so much on the narrative, the tell your story. I know it's important. I know it works for some people. I'm a fiction writer by trade. I know narrative is great. Instead, what I say is, "How can this piece of writing show how you think about what matters to you?" And even in that quick little role play, Mary, I think that's nail on the head. You're excited about education.

Mary Miele:

Yes.

Anabel Graff:

That's exactly the value that we want to get from your application, and easily generated.

Mary Miele:

Mm-hmm.

Anabel Graff:

So my process, I have tons of different tricks and strategies in my back pocket, but what I think I'm very good at is taking a little nugget and then showing students how to go through a structure of outlining an essay, of asking good questions, of drafting that leads to an impactful statement.

Mary Miele:

That's so fun. It's so vulnerable. It's so funny that I said that, but it just was my kid is over here, and I'm just thinking what he's probably thinking. I don't know. It just came up, right. So I feel-

Anabel Graff:

[inaudible 00:20:02].

Mary Miele:

... like it's very interesting, but it did yield a really interesting essay. So it is true, and it's funny, right. So I think that's really a very captivating way. Who cares where you start. Just start somewhere, right. That's the point.

Anabel Graff:

I think that anything can be an essay, and any little detail can turn into it if you're willing to dig deep enough and be vulnerable, as you said. And it's a joke, but our gut instincts are often the things that are most important to us, and that's what we want the essay to do.

We want it to show your genuine, authentic self unfiltered. When you ask the question, what's my story? I think it immediately places a student in a position of like, "I have to show a polished version of myself, a crafted version of myself." And it's almost, I kind of sometimes work to do the opposite.

Mary Miele:

Avram, I'm curious. If we could come back to you when you hear Anabel talk about this. Do you feel... I don't know. Do you have anything you want to add on to or amplify or say?

Avram Schlesinger:

I would agree with what Anabel says. I think that there's a lot to not necessarily having a narrative also as well, or not having a perfectly polished story also as well. And I think that this is for many of them, as you say, and I like the way you put this, Anabel, that it's like this is the most important piece of writing that these kids have ever done, really, when it comes down to it in their brain.

And I think even more so, it's like the most important piece of writing that they've ever done in their parents' brain. And I think that it comes with so much weight as a result of that. So anything that we can do, and I like the idea of how you sort of handle it, Anabel, of taking that weight off of it a little bit, is rather awesome. So I think that's an awesome idea, and I may actually steal some of that from you. I apologize [inaudible 00:21:47]-

Mary Miele:

[inaudible 00:21:47]-

Anabel Graff:

I think all writers are good liars and good thieves, which is [inaudible 00:21:52] not something to put on this, but [inaudible 00:21:55]-

Mary Miele:

So are teachers. Teachers are the thieves of the world. We're always stealing everyone's great ideas. But I do think that you're onto something here, Anabel. I'm going to push you in terms of teaching a curriculum to us about all of this. But I think that there's such value also in taking a student through the college process in a way that they can feel proud of themselves as they go through it. And I really do hope... You were mentioning, Anabel, that when you were in the college process that it was confusing.

It was unclear. It was not feeling good to you. I would hope that we could provide a different avenue. Anyone who's listening has complete permission to steal this and to immediately take action in a different direction, which is just simply to connect with the child that you have in front of you and just don't have the plan right in the immediate. Ask questions. Play around with it. Go down the road with whatever questions you're asking to see if that becomes a really interesting essay because it actually does illuminate something important to the student.

Anabel Graff:

I have to jump in there because that's 100% what I say, and I believe that so wholeheartedly. And I say this to my students, "If you know how the essay is going to end up if you have the realization that I'm going to write about my quote on my wall because it represents everything I have to say, it's a fine essay. It's a strong essay. It's an essay that probably will get you into school. But if you know the ending, it's not surprising to you. And if you don't surprise yourself, you don't also surprise your reader."

So I love what you just said, Mary, which is like, get messy. Ask those questions. Try to think deeply about why it matters to you that you're excited about education, or there's a quote on your wall that means something. Because if you don't know the answer, it's going to lead you to a place where you do know the answer. And in answering those questions, you're going to learn something about yourself, which is going to be a genuine impact on your essay.

Mary Miele:

Okay, we could just say what Anabel just said on repeat for the rest of the podcast, and then everyone will get the idea. Just do the 10 reverse a couple of times and just re-listen to that genius because it is really true. And I love it because this has been something I have loved about the school placement process, which now I'm thinking I should change to the school counseling process, which is an interesting change of things here, Avram, that you're making me think about.

Avram Schlesinger:

Sorry, Mary.

Mary Miele:

Oh, no. It's okay. But [inaudible 00:24:19]-

Avram Schlesinger:

[inaudible 00:24:19].

Mary Miele:

No, I really do love it because the other thing I do love, and I tell parents this all the time because, in New York City, we do our nursery through high school process very similar to college, right. The kids go around, and they look at schools, and the parents go look at schools, and it becomes very stressful, and there's lots of essays to write, et cetera, et cetera. But I love the process because parents get to connect with their kids, and they get to connect with education. So I love seeing them go through that journey.

And people are always... I literally just got a call today from a client. She said, "I'm so sorry to bother you. You must be so stressed with all these crazy parents." And I'm like, "Am I crazy that I love this? I mean, it's like I don't care, but I really love it." People may misunderstand. I love it because I see the development of what happens within the process because where we start is usually not where we end, even though many of us, me included, like to have that security of, "I'm starting here, I'm going to end there. Let's not go out of that lane."

If we can actually take from this podcast the impactful message, which is get messy. Go down the road, see where it takes you. Maybe you'll like... Avram always does this. He'll throw a school in there for a kid, and he'll say, "Just go check this one out." And, all of a sudden, it just puts them on a completely different trajectory. So that's what we're talking about is don't try to control it so much. Let it develop. Because also our kids haven't been in that seat before. They're not in that seat often where they get to sort of play with who they are and where they're going. And in writing one more thing.

How many of us are also teaching writing or helping our kids with writing, and they have to write the outline before they write. We're now training them to do something very different if they're going to do what we're talking about. So, so much to talk about there. All right. I'm going to give everybody a minute if they want to say any lasting comments to our audience about this. I know we could probably talk all day because we love discussing this topic especially, but Anabel, would you like to start us off with some closing thoughts?

Anabel Graff:

I think we've all been saying it, and when Avram was talking, I was writing down these notes, which is just that in order to have that outward success or that outward product or that acceptance when spring comes, you really need to look inward. And that's, I think, what everyone's been talking about, which is how can we look inside? How can we figure out what's important to us? How can we maybe make room to try things and ask those questions in order for us to feel proud, feel successful when the time comes for admission in the spring?

Mary Miele:

Yes, 100%. Avram, closing thoughts?

Avram Schlesinger:

Sure. I'm just going to steal from Anabel because she's [inaudible 00:26:54] from me, I think, and I appreciate it, is that don't be afraid to be surprised. Don't be afraid for it to get a little bit messy, right. Go down that road of looking at that school or trying something that you don't necessarily think is going to work or doesn't look like what the expectation is. Because, more often than not, going beyond that what is expected is where you actually do find real value, right. It's where you really will find something that's very new and may in fact be the perfect fit.

Mary Miele:

Amazing. I love this message so much, and I'll end with the message of time. I think that's really important. If we could give our kids some time as they go through this process to work with Anabel and really learn more about themselves and really go down that road, work with Avram and figure out what schools and really connect with another trusted adult. These are other sort of intangible reasons to work with someone through this process who can partner with you and really get to know you in the way that we're talking about.

That whole bringing it back full circle into that impactful process. You're going to do it anyway. You might as well do it in a way that amplifies who your kid is and helps them to gain some skills along the way too. So thank you so much, Anabel and Avram. It's a privilege to speak with you today. I'm really psyched about this podcast episode. It's going to help a lot of people, and thanks for just letting us into your amazing careers and work. Thank you so much.

Anabel Graff:

Thank you so much.

Avram Schlesinger:

Thank you, Mary.

Mary Miele:

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