



Episode #157:

**Eric Karlan on Navigating the College Admissions
Process**

May 7, 2019

Debbie: Hey Eric, welcome to the podcast.

Eric: Good morning, Debbie. Thanks for having me.

Debbie: Well, thank you for coming on to enlighten us a little more about high school students who are looking to go to college and kind of that application process. And it seems very overwhelming. I can say even as a parent of a child going into high school, it's, it's in the back of my mind like, ooh, it's time to start kind of thinking about planning and I don't even really know where to start. So, um, I'm sure there are many people listening to this who are going to be very curious and taking notes on this conversation. So as a way to get into it, can you take a few minutes to introduce yourself and tell us about your work in the world?

Eric: Sure. So I've been doing this since 2010. In college I actually individualized my major. The major was called Journalism History and Culture. Uh, but graduated in 2009 in the heart of the recession when magazines and newspapers were cutting freelance budgets. And I'd always been also interested in education. And I got into this world by starting to work with students and families on the application and application essay process. At the same time, my now business partner, he was a biomedical engineering major who decided he didn't want to be a doctor and he was doing SAT and ACT prep right after graduation. And the two of us were sitting together one day, a few months after graduating, and we said, why aren't these two elements both offered together by, you know, companies so they can, you know, a company like ours can really develop a meaningful relationship and connection with the family and in theory work with them throughout the whole high school experience leading up to college. And we started this in March in 2010 and now we're talking, I can't believe I'm saying that it will be our 10 year anniversary next March, which is, which is wild. But we've worked with students in 35 states, in 20 countries on everything ranging from SAT and ACT prep to college essays and applications. And it's been an incredible ride the past almost decade.

Debbie: That's really impressive and resourceful. I imagine that must've been a really hard time to come out of college and, and kind of face the current economic and work situations. So, so good on you for making that happen.

Eric: Thanks Debbie.

Debbie: Okay, so we're going to talk about college application, the process and gosh, there's so many things. We have a list of questions here and I, I'm not even sure quite where to start here.

Eric: And I would say that that's totally okay and that's a normal thought heading into this process as a parent or a student just starting the high school process. But I will say that just having the conversation and having a roadmap to navigating this whole process is really more than half the battle. And I always say not just achieving success or your goals, but really in saving you and your family time,

energy, money and stress. Knowing is more than half the battle. And when we do seminars and webinars for families and we talk about, you know, how to navigate the process, when I am talking with ninth grade parents and tenth grade parents and even eighth grade parents, I always try to emphasize that we want to have these conversations, not from a place of intensity, but really just from a place of knowing so that we can, you know, take away the anxiety and uncertainty that surrounds this process in so many ways.

Debbie: Can you say more about that? What do you mean 'from a place of knowing'?

Eric: Sure. So I know one thing you and I chatted about discussing was the SAT and ACT, which are scary tests in themselves for you know, many students and families and especially when we're talking about differently wired children, who may be thinking about or having to apply for accommodations for the test. What's important is to know how to navigate that process and having conversations early to figure out the timeline and trajectory that your student is on is pretty essential. For instance, when we talk about the SAT and ACT and actually just to take a half step back, these are the two standardized tests that you need to take for college. You don't need to take both. Every college and university looks at them completely equally.

So you only need to take one or the other. And one thing that my company has always emphasized to students and families is to take a diagnostic test of each one just to get a baseline score to figure out what test is right for your student. In some cases, students score pretty much the same on both tests, but in other cases there are students who score significantly better on one test versus the other. For instance, when I was in high school, I was doing fine on the SAT and I grew up in Connecticut where all we ever knew was the SAT, and I was on a college visit at Brown University and speaking with someone there and we were having a conversation and she said well have ever looked at the ACT? And the reality was I had never even heard of the ACT.

And she assured me that every single college looks at them completely equally. I went back home and I took a practice ACT and scored the equivalent of over 200 points better than I ever had on the SAT. And this is, you know, I always use that story in emphasizing that point. Knowing how to navigate this process and the rules to the game can be more than half the battle. When we talk about differently wired students though, who may be applying for accommodations, there's a whole other set of rules and things to navigate. So when we talk about applying for accommodations, with the SAT, the company, the non non for profit that does the SAT is called College Board. You can apply for accommodations at any time through College Board. Your school's SSD coordinator or a guidance counselor can submit the educational and psychological testing and history of accommodations and it's pretty straightforward.

But when you are applying for accommodations on the ACT, you actually have to register for a test date. And it's these subtle nuances that are important to navigate. When we talk about, you know, going back to what I was saying before about the importance of taking a diagnostic test to figure out what test is right for you, when you consider that you may qualify or get accommodations on one

test versus the other, it really underscores the need to figure out what your accommodations are for your student. Before, forget tutoring or studying on your own, before you even take a baseline test, I have used the analogy, if you're trying to figure out if your child is good at basketball, you don't start by telling them to start shooting hoops on a 15 foot rim when in reality it's a 10 foot hoop.

That's not going to be an indication of how they're going to play and how they're going to succeed. So it's small things like having conversations early with tenth grade parents and saying you should consider registering for a test even with no intention of taking it for the ACT, just so that you can figure out what the accommodations are and you can plan accordingly. Because you can always pay to switch the test date to a later date. So it's small things like that, that you know are really important to understand and it's why it's great having this conversation early.

Debbie: So just a few kind of little technical questions. To take a diagnostic test, is that something that's available online? How does one even go about doing that?

Eric: So there's lots of ways to do it. For my company we will actually, for any family that reaches out to us, we send an SAT and ACT diagnostic test to families for them to take and then we grade and evaluate them for free. But you can also get SAT and ACT diagnostic tests, most often if you go to the guidance department's office, they should have practice booklets. You can download tests from College Board for the SAT and the ACT as well and take them on your own. I've always emphasized to families, there's lots of ways to get those tests and to get a baseline of both, but it's just important that you do it in any one of those ways.

Debbie: And is there an ideal grade or age that students would, you know, start this process, take that first practice test or the diagnostic test?

Eric: I generally say at some point by the end of sophomore year. So there's a lot of high schools in the country that will offer the PSAT or practice SAT in the fall of tenth grade. Some will also offer the PACT. Now those are tests that, again, are more for practice, they're, they don't actually get submitted to colleges at all. But I would say by the end of tenth grade to have a baseline of both, because I'd say the earliest that students do begin any sort of SAT and ACT prep is the summer between tenth and eleventh grade. Assuming they have all the content and they're, they're ready to take that on. It's a great time to do, to start studying because, you know, unlike eleventh grade junior year, where it's the most rigorous academic year that students have had, and there's lots of other commitments and extracurricular activities going on, the summertime is often slower and there's never a great time to start preparing and studying for the SAT and ACT. So it's, as I've joked over the years, it's finding the least worst time to study for it, and the summer oftentimes presents a great opportunity for students to do that.

Debbie: I just have to confess in listening to this, when I, back in the day when I was in high school, I know I had friends who took classes or studied, I just kind of showed up and took the test. It seems like it's such a different climate now than it was maybe than many of our listeners, were, were going through this process.

It's just interesting for me to recognize how much preparation goes into this and that you can actually study and you can, you can practice and learn strategies for taking these tests that can really impact your score.

Eric: It's true. And actually what's interesting, I'll throw a question at you, do you know what SAT stands for?

Debbie: Standardized Admissions Test?

Eric: So it, it used to stand for Scholastic Aptitude Test and in the 90s that actually went away because they determined that the SAT wasn't actually measuring aptitude at all. So believe it or not, the acronym SAT stands for absolutely nothing now. It's just a branding acronym, because it's really a test that tests how well you do on the SAT. And when we talk about the SAT and ACT, they are, they're obviously testing material that high school students should know.

But what's interesting is when you really break down the content on each section of the test, you know, for instance, on the ACT there's four sections, English, math, reading and science. And when we talk about English, it's grammar, which we know that high school classes, they're not exclusively focused on teaching grammar. And then you have math, which covers pre-algebra, algebra one, algebra two, geometry and some very basic level trig and precalc. Reading is just reading a passage and answering questions about the passage. And the science section is the one that sounds, it is a bit deceiving in name because you really don't need to know science to do the science section. It's actually just interpreting graphs and data that happens to have sciencey, as I joke, sciencey or scientific terms on the graphs. So it's, it's a skill set for sure, but it's not that you need to take chemistry or that you need to take U.S. History to do well on the SAT and ACT.

Debbie: So, okay. A couple more questions about these tests and then we'll move on to other topics. One, I'm just curious, are there schools that don't require one of these tests or is it pretty standard across the board?

Eric: So, a growing movement that we're seeing at universities across the country is what we call test optional schools, where students have the option of submitting the SAT and ACT, but they also have the option to not submit their standardized tests and then be considered holistically, you know, with no standardized tests. Many times if you choose the test optional option, there could be an additional writing requirement or you need to submit a research paper, there's just something else to take its place on the application. There's, as you can imagine, so many parents and students who are very excited when they hear about the universities, the increasing number each year that become test optional. The one word of caution in awareness that I share with families though is you can certainly take that, take advantage of that, that test optional system. But you really need to have strong grades.

You, you can't have grades that are towards the middle or below the 50th percentile for a universities accepted students and then not submit the standardized scores as well. When we talk about what's most important on any

college application, and they really do look at students holistically, but by far and away, the most important factor on admissions is grades. And even significantly more than test scores. The grades in what we call academic rigor, which is how much a student may be challenging themselves in their high school curriculum with honors or AP or IB classes, the grades are the most important. So test optional is great, but you need the grades to establish, you know, your student's academic background at that point.

Debbie: Okay, that's good to know. So I wanted to just, before we move on, also just talk about accommodations. So you talked earlier about that roadmap and getting that process started and figuring out what kind of accommodations you might be able to get for a child. I'm wondering what some of them more typical accommodations are. And I'm also just, you know, knowing the college admissions scandal that has recently been everywhere in the news, I'm just curious, your personal take is, is that going to make it harder for kids who truly need accommodations to get them?

Eric: It's certainly a possibility that that maybe what happens. But the one thing that I've always emphasized to families, who even before that scandal, who are worried if their student's going to qualify and get approved for the accommodations or not, is talking a lot about, you know, having a history of accommodations that they can show and send to College Board for the SAT and then for the ACT. Having that history is pretty essential, and for the students who need it, they really do get it when there's that history in place. As far as the accommodations themselves, there's a wide variety of them.

The most important or the most common accommodation is extra time, which usually comes in the form of what they call 50% extra time. So basically multiply the time limits on each section by, you know, one and a half. Then from there, there's, like I said, a wide variety. Everything from ranging to taking the test over numerous days, to taking the test in a small group testing environment or having an individual proctor who may read the questions out loud or can serve as a scribe for the student. Having larger print, having the ability to start and stop the clock. There's more, but that gives you a good idea of what the different accommodations may be.

Debbie: And for those who are listening, who are homeschooling their children, which I'm raising my hand, I'm one of them, you know, a lot of us don't have IEPs that are current because some, some have never had their child in school and some have ended up pulling their child out after some failed school experiences. So have you worked with parents who have homeschooled, who don't have that kind of lengthy track record to demonstrate when they're looking to get support for their student?

Eric: On rare occasions at this point, to be honest with you, Debbie. But what I will say is even if a student isn't approved for accommodations the first time, there are opportunities to appeal that decision so you can make it clear, if it wasn't clear enough for College Board or ACT the first time around, and really explain this is why there's not a longstanding IEP. And I think if you communicate that effectively, I do think these, that the testing, that College Board and ACT are

reasonable and understanding and they get it because they've worked with plenty of homeschooled students and families over the years. So they understand the differences in those cases.

Debbie: Great. Okay, so let's talk about the other piece that I think is on a lot of parents' minds in this application process and that is the essay. I know for a lot of kids who struggle with writing, whether it's because of executive functioning challenges, processing speed issues and just having trouble getting thoughts from their mind onto paper, or other learning disabilities, talk about how students can kind of tackle that essay. Do you have any best practices surrounding that and then any thoughts that might specifically relate to supporting differently wired kids?

Eric: Absolutely. So I think, especially for differently wired students and quite frankly, anyone who doesn't love writing and writing about themselves, one piece of assurance that I always give to students and families heading into this process is that while good writing is a foundational piece of a good college essay, the best essays aren't the ones that are the best written or read like Shakespeare wrote them, right? The best essays are the ones that are the most personal. And what's nice about the college application essays is this isn't your five, you know, quote unquote five paragraph standardized essay from school. Students are liberated to share their personal voice in their own style. There's no format that they need to accommodate.

So to take a lot of the pressure and stress away from initial, you know, especially that first draft, which is very scary for anyone when you're looking at that blank sheet of paper, that blank template on your computer screen, our advice is to just start writing and not worry about the word limits. Just get your thoughts and ideas on paper. Sometimes that can be full sentences that are grammatically correct, but in those initial one or two drafts, we joke with students all the time, don't worry about grammar, don't worry about spelling. The idea here is to get your thoughts and your stories and emotions onto the page so we can look at them and then that's what revisions are for. And then honing that story down and really making sure we do capture the student's voice in the required word limit space. But I think that a lot of students do come into this thinking, oh, this is another five paragraph essay for English class where there's that rubric where I need a thesis statement. And it's not true. You really are liberated and unbound to express your voice in telling your personal story.

Debbie: And I guess it would depend on the school, what types of personal stories or expressions that school values? I mean I'm assuming there's not kind of one standard, you know, triumph over a challenging childhood or you know, a formula that schools are looking for?

Eric: Right. So first of all, there's a lot of different types of college application essay prompts out there. So if we want to break them down into two categories, there's one essay that is called the personal statement. Interchangeably, some people will call it the common app essay because you have this common application which students will use for probably the majority of colleges that they apply to, and on the common app there's this personal statement, which is a one page 650

word essay. And there's seven topics this year and they, there's some specificity to them, they're topics like tell us about a challenge that you've encountered or an obstacle you've encountered and how you've overcome it. You can also tackle a question like, tell us about a time that you challenged a belief or idea, what did you do about it? What prompted you to take action?

But believe it or not, one of the seven prompts is just topic of your choice, write about anything. So that's that main essay where the prompts are really loose guidelines and ideas to get you started. Then the rest of the essays can be grouped under a category called supplemental essays, and those vary by college and university. So some schools like Northeastern University in Boston or University of Miami in Florida have zero supplement essays at all. And then you have a school like Wake Forest University that has seven supplement essays, including a prompt, this isn't as much of an essay prompt necessarily, but I always think this one's fun, it just says, give us your top 10 list. But the prompts can range from asking about a student's intellectual interest, to a community they belong to and their role within it to their personal diversity and how they've embraced that.

So there's really a wide range of prompts out there. But no matter what the prompt is, Debbie, I have students brainstorm the same way for all the questions. Because really these questions are all opportunities and invitations for a student to share their story. Which is why when I'm brainstorming with students, I only ask them one question, which is what do I need to know about you? And that's a very overwhelming and intentionally broad question, but I don't want students only thinking through the lens of what a prompt may be asking because I think that limits the stories that they share and open up to tell. When you ask, what do I need to know about you, as big of a question as that is, it really invites a cool conversation where students can talk about things from their resume, like activities and accomplishments and awards.

And another place which, I always say there's two places ideas come from, your resume and your eulogy. And I don't mean to sound morbid in saying that, but when we think about what would be on a eulogy that wouldn't be on a resume, it would be a lot of the intangibles, like important or meaningful moments and stories in a student's life. Obstacles that they've overcome, quirks, interests, curiosities, traditions that they have. And when I'm working with a student, I want to know all of that going into the process before they ever start drafting an essay so that we can talk, you know, really evaluate and think about what stories they feel are most important to share.

Debbie: Super interesting. I'm learning so much. Thank you for all this insight. I had no idea how the kind of behind the scenes works with the, the essays and the common app again is just so different from, from back in the day when I was going through this process. And again, I'm sure listeners are taking notes as well. Okay, so we've talked about grades, we've talked about tests, we talked about essays. So then there's the intangible, there's the, the whole person. Can you talk about the interest, the passions, the ways that kids can best share who they are and kind of what they bring to a university and how they can give insight to that piece of them that that could really spark a college's interest.

Eric: Sure. So working backwards, I always tell students and families, there's really three areas on the application that you have control over where you can really share your student's story beyond grades and an academic transcript and standardized test scores. So one of those ways that you can share your voice is obviously the application essays, which we were just talking about. In fact, that's really the one opportunity that students have to share their personal voice on the application. Another way that they can do this is teacher and guidance counselor recommendations, which some parents and students always find a little funny that I say that you, you know, quote unquote have control over this. But you really kind of do because it's on the student to develop and foster a relationship with their teachers and with a guidance counselor. And the guidance counselor is actually required to write a letter of recommendation for every single one of their students. And having these third parties help share and illuminate your child's story and their journey can be very impactful on an application. And then of course, the last way that you can share your story and the intangibles on the application is through the activity list, which you know, is essentially a collection, a report, of a student's extracurricular endeavors throughout high school.

And you know, you talk about how things have changed over the years. And I think for a lot of parents, there's this idea that back in the day maybe colleges wanted to see students do a little bit of everything. They wanted to see leadership and creative pursuits, volunteering and service, maybe having a job or an internship. And I think what's happening more nowadays is that colleges do still want to see all those things, but what they really appreciate is really seeing synergies in a student's life so they can really understand who that child is and what they're all about. There's a movie that came out a few years ago starring Tina Fey and Paul Rudd called *Admission*, which, you know, the plot of the movie is somewhat irrelevant, but Tina Fey in the movie is an admissions officer and there's this scene where every time she opens up an application file, the student pops up in the room with her.

And I think that's an important image for families and students who are trying to understand the college application and college prep process, is the fact that admissions officers are people and people accept other people. They want to be able to envision you in the room with them. So, I gave a Ted Talk last September and an example I gave in my Ted Talk about a really great way to think about extracurricular pursuits is if your son or daughter comes home one day and tells you, mom or dad, that they want to start a rock band in the garage. And I joke that with parents all the time, I'm like, let's be honest. What's your initial reaction if your child says that? And I think when we parent from a place of fear as opposed to possibility, a lot of moms and dads are like, well, you're looking to get into a selective university. It's probably a waste of time.

Or they're just dreading hearing their child banging on the drums at two in the morning and keeping them up at night. But when we think about that proclamation from your son or daughter from a place of possibility, you can say, well, my child is starting a band. That means that they have leadership initiative. And it also must mean they have creative musical talent if they can start a band. And it also means that they have the ability to collaborate and work well with

others. It means that, if they are writing their own songs, that that's a different sort of creative pursuit with lyrics and poetry. And then if the band starts playing shows around town, if they get paid for some, that's a job. If they start playing charity gigs, that's community service. Maybe your child ends up learning html programming to code and design the band's website.

Or maybe they start giving music lessons to other younger children in town and that's another job. There's so many opportunities to quote unquote check off all those boxes that colleges have wanted for years. The leadership and service and collaboration, etc. What I try to emphasize to every family and especially families who are just entering or starting high school, is that when we talk about what can I do for my child or what are the conversations that should be having at home with my ninth or tenth grader, of course it's obvious to talk about the importance of them keeping up their grades and doing their schoolwork, but it's also engaging your son or daughter in conversations about what are their interests, what are their curiosities? And I always hesitate, Debbie, to use the word passion. Certainly some students have a passion, sometimes multiple, but I think even there's a lot of adults in the world who may not have a passion.

And that's why I try to take that pressure off of students when we have those conversations, is there may not be something that is their end all be all in life, but they may have lots of curiosities and lots of things that pique their interest and get that, you know, spark and glimmer in their eye. Having those conversations and talking about ways to do a deeper dive or take an interest to the next level, to engage in it more meaningfully and purposefully. I think that that's one of the best things about the high school experience is it does present opportunities and it encourages students to engage in what's meaningful to them on deeper levels.

Debbie: I love that. And I love the example you shared about the band. That makes total sense and I'm wondering then, how are those skills, those interests that, you know, they, there was a job and a business and html and all these different pieces, how would that information be conveyed throughout the application process?

Eric: Sure. So, essays. On the activity list they give you the opportunity to write a description of your roles within a commitment or organization or endeavor and write a brief summary. Some colleges and universities will give you the opportunity to upload a resume, which gives you the space to include more details. There also is an additional information section on the common app and many other universities applications where, it's not intended, and admissions officers don't want another essay there, but when there are extenuating circumstances, when a student has done something or engaged in activity in such a deep way that uh, I think it's on the activity descriptions on the common app, I think you're limited to 150 characters, right? So you could joke that's about the length of a tweet. Which sometimes that's sufficient, but in many cases it's not. So to have that additional information section to really elaborate and include more bullet points or details that illuminate and shed light on the true depth of how a student has engaged in that. There, there's always ways and opportunities. And if the space provided to you isn't enough, there's certainly ways to create more

space or make sure that you communicate everything appropriately to an admissions officer so they can fully appreciate what your child has done.

Debbie: So for parents who are listening to this, and maybe they have middle schoolers or high school students, what's kind of the one thing you want them to take away from this conversation? Any kind of one key piece of advice or something they should start thinking about if maybe they're feeling overwhelmed, like, oh my gosh, I'm behind, you know, I should have been doing this already. What's your piece of advice to them?

Eric: My piece of advice is knowing how to navigate this process, like I said before, is more than half the battle. And understanding that there is a lot to navigate and it's important to have conversations and get good information. Not from a place of fear, but from a place of being able to plan ahead. There's a lot of myths and bad information out there and it doesn't come from a malicious place or even, it's not even fear-mongering either. It's just that some people aren't always aware of the intricacies of how the system works and the different rules at different schools. And if you take the time to have the conversations and plan ahead, I'd say that is the biggest key takeaway. When I am, like when I'm doing seminars and webinars with families who are just starting high school, one thing I always say is there's nothing to take action on immediately, necessarily.

When you're a parent of a ninth grade student, the messages to your child are keep up your grades and let's have conversations about your extracurriculars and how you want to engage in the world. You shouldn't be doing SAT and ACT prep in ninth grade. Certainly college essays and applications, while you can keep that in the back of your head, that's not something to really worry about because you're not going to be writing those essays until probably the summer before twelfth grade. So there is an opportunity to ease in this, into this process. But I think, when I talk to parents of ninth graders and they say, we don't want to have this conversation now with you. We want our child to just enjoy high school and not think about college. I think that's missing the point of the best way to engage in the high school experience. Because when you come from a place that every activity, if you think about that and your mentality is well I'm just doing these things for college, then you're already doing them wrong because then you're focusing on the idea of being a better applicant and not using the high school experience as a way to make your child a better person.

And I think that's probably the biggest takeaway I would want families to have is it's okay to have these conversations because there's a lot of opportunities for growth throughout the whole high school experience culminating with those college essays and applications. When students ultimately are writing essays that need to be based in what do I need to know about you, the person who's evolved and matured and grown over the past three or four years. And too often I see students and families look at those essay prompts with the mentality of what do colleges want to hear about me? And I think that subtle difference is so important for families to understand going into the process if they want to make the most out of the high school experience.

Debbie: That's great, thank you. Super helpful. So tell us how we can connect with you. You mentioned your webinars and online offerings, so what's the best way for parents to engage with you and what can they expect when they go to your site?

Eric: Absolutely. So my company's called Ivy Experience. Our website is myivyexperience.com. And what you'll find on our website, beyond an outline of the services that we offer families, is also some great resources, blog posts to educate families throughout the process and of course a contact form. And when you reach out to us, I've made a hallmark of my company. I've always believed in growth by education. I think that there's too often this idea that some of this information about how to navigate the college prep process should be a secret that you need to access. And when families reach out to us, we are eager and excited to answer all of their questions and you know, ease any anxieties to help them navigate this process and start thinking about it and planning ahead for their child in the ways that are best for their family.

Debbie: Great. Well, thank you. Listeners, I will leave links to Eric's website and the other resources that we talked about on the show notes page for this episode. So definitely check those out. I'm going to be checking them out after, I was on this in prep for the interview, but now I want to go back and dive a little deeper into your blog posts. This has been super insightful and yeah, and actually calming. You know, I do think there's a lot of stress and anxiety that parents experience when they start even thinking about these conversations and what's coming up for our kids. So I really just love your approach. It feels really, it feels like there's room, you know, to kind of navigate it and to, to move through it in a way that, that has possibility at its roots instead of fear, as you said. So thank you so much for taking the time and sharing all this with us today.

Eric: Thank you, Debbie. I really appreciate you inviting me to talk with you.

RESOURCES MENTIONED:

- [Eric Karlan's website](#)
- [My Ivy Experience](#)
- [What Do I Need to Know About You?](#) (Eric's TEDx talk)
- [SAT/ACT Accommodations](#) (blog post)
- [College Board](#)
- [Application Strategies for Differently Wired Students](#) (podcast interview with Marisa Meddin)
- [How to Navigate the High School to College Transition](#) (podcast interview with Elizabeth Hamblet)
- [The ACT Test](#)