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[00:00:05] Welcome and thanks for listening to today's episode of the UW HELP podcast. I'm Randy Parvin, a student services coordinator at the University Wisconsin System HELP office. Today I have a wonderful guest and I'm excited to be talking with her. We're going to visit about that senior year of high school and making the transition to college a great one. I hope that the guest, and I'm sure she will, can offer some suggestions on how to make that a great transition. Mary Vilmo is my guest, and she's the director of the UW HELP office. Mary has more than 24 years of experience with helping students applying to college as well as helping students who are in college. Mary, welcome to the UW HELP podcast.

Mary: [00:00:50] Thanks, Randy. I'm very happy to be with you today and hopefully I'll have some ideas and thoughts that are helpful to our audience.

Randy: [00:01:00] I'm sure you will, I'm sure you will. Well the reason I asked you to the podcast today was to talk about, you know, how seniors can make that a seamless transition to college because you know as we both know it can be bumpy at times, right?

Mary: [00:01:13] Sure, that's absolutely right. Yes, the senior year is a busy time. It's an exciting time. It's also an emotional time. There are so many things to think about with completing applications and the transition to college process. But it doesn't have to be chaotic and being prepared and organized can help tremendously.

Randy: [00:01:36] Yeah, yeah. I like what you said there. When I go to high schools and I talk to seniors... you know, let's start here. Many students have narrowed their choices down to two or three colleges. For those who have not decided or just don't know how to start, you know, how to sort out those two or three, or how to start, do you have some suggestions about what steps to take?

Mary: [00:01:58] Sure. You know, oftentimes it does happen that students get stuck. They just don't know where and how to start. So there's some suggestions that we can make to help students with basic questions that they might ask themselves about what they're really looking for in the campus or campuses that they could possibly attend. They can ask themselves some questions but it's also fun to involve the family members and ask them, too, to participate in thinking about what the student might be looking for and what might be a good fit. So we asked students, number one, to think about the size of the campus that they're looking for. Do they want to be at a small campus, or a campus with lots and lots of students. And also the same for the size of community: do they want to be in a small community of maybe five, six, seven thousand people or one of our larger campuses? UW-Milwaukee is our largest campus in the UW System. So think about size of community. And also very important is distance from home. Do you want to be very, very close to home, within an hour or less than that? Or do you want to be a great distance from home where you probably wouldn't have quite so many visits home on weekends or breaks in your college schedule.

Think about does the campus offer the majors or their programs that you're interested in? And we do have sources of information that students can use in order to determine whether or not the campus offers the program that you might be interested in. Think also about organizations. Does the campus offer an extracurricular activity that you're looking for, and maybe an intermural sport that you're interested in participating in? So do some research at the campus website to

determine whether or not those are available at your campuses of interest.

How about research opportunities with faculty members? If you're interested in particularly a STEM major—science, technology, engineering, math—are you going to have research opportunities with a faculty member? Or internship options for any major program that you're interested in—can I do an internship and what are those opportunities? Are they local? Are they within the state, or maybe something on a national basis? And finally, determine cost of attendance. It's important for the family to take a look at that. Determine what the budget is for this college venture, and determine whether or not the campus or campuses that you are looking at fits within your budget.

I also want to mention you UW Journey. This is a tool that we created. It's a downloadable app that we created this summer, that launched this summer, and many of the factors that I just talked about are asked in UW Journey as factors to determine a likely campus... a campus that's a good fit. So right in that application the student will be asked for a preferred size of community, preferred campus size, interests, major, and so forth.

[00:05:34] And when that's entered into that application, a list of campuses will be suggested as possibly a good fit.

Randy: [00:05:46] One question I have for you. I know a lot of folks don't know the University of Wisconsin System, and you talked a little bit about the different sized campuses. Can you kind of outline what the UW System campuses are, and maybe the range of student body sizes that are there for folks?

Mary: [00:06:06] Sure, happy to do so. Our campuses in the UW System are two- and four-year campuses. Our two-year campuses are institutions where students typically will spend two years or so. The students attending there can earn an associate's degree and then transfer onto one of the four-year campuses that will offer them at least a bachelor's degree and sometimes beyond that. Our two-year campuses are our smaller campuses. They range in student population size from around 600 or 650 up to almost 3,000 students at UW-Waukesha. UW-Richland is our smallest two-year campus, and then our four-year campuses are all over the board as far as campus population. Our smallest two-year campus is UW-Superior way in the northern part of the state, and our largest four-year campus is UW-Madison with an undergraduate population of about 30,000 students, I think.

Randy: [00:07:12] And then there's sizes all in between there, everything in between. You know I think it's such a wonderful System and I hope everyone out there who is from Wisconsin or outside, really understands how fortunate we are to have so many great four-year public universities, and two-year, in our state.

Mary: [00:07:30] Exactly. Yes, there are wonderful options for students to receive a very high quality education in our state.

Randy: [00:07:39] Yes. Yeah. All right. Well, my friend Jay who I was talking to last night, he has a daughter who's a senior, and he wanted me to ask you this question. She has...he thinks she's going to get accepted at two or three colleges. How does she decide what's the right place, and really more importantly, Jay was hitting me... what's the timeline where she has to make these decisions, and/or the family?

Mary: [00:08:03] Sure. Jay's daughter really does have time to make her decision if she is accepted at those two or three institutions she does have some time. She doesn't need to make that as soon as she receives those admission decisions. She should send in the enrollment deposits that are requested, as well as make arrangements for housing at each one of those campuses so she doesn't lose her spot. And those are there for her. She will also be asked for an enrollment deposit for housing. But though that enrollment deposit and housing deposit are both refundable if she chooses to not attend, you know, two of those campuses. And so all those campuses will offer a full or a partial refund of those campuses. Oftentimes a few months and some time will just help with making that decision, too. If possible, she might visit or revisit those campuses that she's still interested in. That can help. It's also helpful to make a list of pros and cons for each campus that she's been accepted to, so she and family members can see on paper what advantages they see as the pros and cons to each one of those campuses. And finally I would say talk to people. Talk to other students that have attended those campuses to get their impression of their experience there, talk to school counselors, talk to family members that might have some information about those campuses and ask them to share their impressions and their thoughts about that campus, and hopefully as time passes, the answers will become more obvious.

[00:09:58] But Jay's daughter should also realize that she could probably be happy at multiple campuses and not just one. And so to keep an open mind about all of those that she's been accepted at to attend.

Randy: [00:10:15] I like that message, Mary, keeping an open mind. Even as adults we often close our minds to options. So that's a great message.

[00:10:26] All right. So this reminds me of another issue as we're talking about deciding which college to go to. That's tough for some families to sort out. I know it was tough for my family when my daughter was a senior. Who in the family should be communicating with the admissions office?

Mary: [00:10:45] It's often tempting for parents to step in here and do a lot of communication with the admissions office. They sincerely believe that their student is busy during the day and unavailable to make calls at the end of the day, and maybe they are doing extracurricular activities, or maybe they have a job to go to at the end of the day, and they just believe that it's easier for them to communicate either via phone call or sending an e-mail. But the campuses absolutely want to hear from the students that are applying to their campuses. That's who they want to hear from. And especially because they want to hear that the applicant knows how to communicate, that they're capable of communicating with college and university staff members, so that's very, very important.

[00:11:37] But there are some things that parents can do. And so if you give me just a second I will talk about those.

[00:11:46] Parents can talk to their students about different colleges and their requirements for admission. Parents will learn this by looking at campus websites and that's something the parents can do too, take a look at campus websites, do some comparison for your student so you can point out some differences to them.

[00:12:05] But talk about the different campuses and their very real guidelines for admission. Help

students arrange for campus tours and preview days. So help them with that. That's a good recommendation. Emphasize to your student the importance of applying to a backup campus, to a safety school, and not only apply to that dream campus but also it's important to apply to that backup. Help them to create a timeline for applying and submitting application materials, but also still expect that your student will take charge of that whole process, too, and take ownership of it.

[00:12:51] Help them to create files, either electronic or paper files, for all of this admission information that is collected during that senior year. There's a lot of it, most students will make a copy of the applications that they send off to various campuses and then also all those electronic communications that are returned to them once they submitted an application. They want to create an organized system for that. I encourage parents to encourage your student to create an email address just for communications during the application season. Use an e-mail address for applications and keep that e-mail address as the one that you use with the campuses that you're communicating with. That's mainly because your school address will expire upon high school graduation and you don't want to be using a shared e-mail address with other family members. So create one just for the college application process. We encourage parents to review their student's application before it is submitted but review it for grammar and spelling errors only. There are statements that the students will include in their application for admission and those should be the student's writing. So just take a look at spelling and grammar. Talk about finances. It is difficult. It absolutely is. But everybody needs to be aware of what the student budget is, and it's also important for students to know if they're taking out loans, how that will impact adulthood. So think about that. And finally if the student is not admitted, again, to their first choice institution, this is not necessarily a loss but an opportunity to take a serious look at what else is available. So stick with them and remain positive.

Randy: [00:15:04] OK. I love those suggestions. One thing I want to... I'm going a little deeper on something you mentioned. That dream university. So many students have that or have what they think that it is. And you mentioned that. What happens or what advice would you give to students who are fearful of being denied to their dream university?

Mary: [00:15:27] Sure, that's possible; that could happen. And often times students, if they do receive an admission decision that is a denial, that's sometimes kind of a hard pill to swallow. But there are some recommendations we have for what they can do in this situation. For students, it's easy to question that decision because they might know of another student that applied to that same campus. They believed the student had the same qualifications that they have or they might believe their qualifications were even better. But they, but that student was denied and that student was admitted and they were not. But remember that UW campuses all do a comprehensive review.

[00:16:19] And they all look at all parts of the application, so what made the decision for one student compared to another is something those of us on the outside of the admission process cannot know. Students can always call the admissions office of their dream campus and ask for more information about the admission decision, and why it was what it was. And sometimes they'll get a further explanation and recommendations for how they could do something differently.

[00:16:56] And sometimes the campuses will recommend that they retake the ACT, that they retake the SAT, that they provide more information in the form of a letter of recommendation. That campus may suggest that they appeal that decision or if they don't suggest to the student can

always ask about it.

[00:17:18] Do you have an appeal process? If a student goes forward with that decision to appeal the original admission decision, they certainly can do so, but they should never do so without new information. As mentioned before, submit a new ACT or SAT score, maybe explain something further about their application that was not known earlier--that was not stated earlier. Maybe there was a slip in their grades during their sophomore and junior year that wasn't explained. So this is the student's opportunity to explain in more detail anything that might have influenced the admission decision of the campus that they applied to.

[00:18:08] So those are options that are out there and certainly could be exercised if the students really wanted to stick with that campus and give it another shot. As I mentioned before, it's entirely possible that most students will be happy at multiple campuses, and that there isn't just one that's a fit. But remember, getting into your dream college is no secret formula for a happy and meaningful life. We always recommend that students apply to their dream campus and then a backup. If they are denied, this is their chance to seriously consider their backup campus or maybe another campus that they hadn't even considered before. Like we were just talking about, there's excellent opportunities in the UW System. There are 26 campuses. And never forget that that dream campus is still an option as a transfer student. Go somewhere else do really well, and then consider transferring after two or three or four semesters.

Randy: [00:19:13] OK. All right. Thank you. I think that those are some great suggestions. So let's move a little further along in that senior year, kind of thinking about it from the start to the finish. And I recall my daughter Hayley's senior year. She had been accepted into University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire. And you know, for whatever reason, suddenly she was talking about changing her schedule to some, let's say "less than difficult" classes with her mom. What thoughts would you have for families or students who are thinking about changing that senior schedule?

Mary: [00:19:50] Sure. That's almost never good idea for multiple reasons. There is a relationship between coursework students take in high school and college success later on. Often students will want to drop a difficult course, and oftentimes, that is a math class that they want to drop in their senior year. We know that taking one math class beyond algebra 2 is associated with doubling a student's chances of graduating from college. Students need to be as academically prepared as possible for college level coursework, and dropping a difficult class, as appealing as it might be at the time during their senior year, it leaves them less prepared for college. Admission offices admit students based on the information they submit when they send their application to a campus.

[00:20:47] If the student changes their schedule during their senior year and don't inform the campus that they've been accepted at, and that they decide they're going to attend, the campus may rescind that student's admission based on the final transcript that they receive from that student after they graduate from high school, and so that always is a possibility. And if a student does decide that they really need to drop a course--change their senior schedule--it's critically important that they inform the admission office.

Randy: [00:21:25] All right. Thank you. All right. Well let's again move a little further. I know financial aid it is such a big topic that it deserves its own hour discussion. But are there two or three pieces of advice you might have about financial aid?

Mary: [00:21:42] Sure, it is a difficult topic and it's one that families really should discuss before

students begin applying to campuses, to really think about what that budget is going to be. My advice is for students and families to have a really honest conversation about this. How much is the student able to contribute to their education? How much is the family able to contribute? And what will need to come in the form of financial aid? When that discussion happens, students and families will be much better able to make a decision about the type of institution to attend, whether it be here in Wisconsin, a technical college, a public two-year campus, a public four-year campus, or a private institution. You remember that grants and scholarships are monies that don't need to be paid back but loans do. So think seriously about how much aid is truly needed. Often the offer from the financial aid office in the form of loans may be more than what is absolutely needed, so carefully consider that when that aid office comes from the financial aid office because it may look appealing, but think about whether or not as much as what is being offered is absolutely needed because remember, loans need to be paid back.

[00:23:10] Another piece of advice is for all students to complete the FAFSA. All students should do this. Even if they think that they won't be offered anything other than loans, which may very well be the case, but it's also important to know that the information that is presented in a student's FAFSA application is information that some campuses will use when they award scholarships. And so without FAFSA information, that student at some campuses might not be considered for scholarships that are offered at that campus.

Randy: [00:23:50] Yeah I like your suggestion about all students filling out that FAFSA. I know a family who I was close to, they did not fill out the FAFSA and their finances changed--you know, mom or dad got laid off, and they had to go through that step before they could get some financial support. So I'm guessing, but what you're saying is that by having that filled it out—yeah, that's one step they've got done already.

Mary: [00:24:14] And just something you've mentioned also makes me think that for any student and families when the financial situation in the family changes, it's important to let the financial aid office know that. So they've got that information. They may adjust a student's aid package based on that information. So even if it happens mid-year, it's still important for the student to contact the financial aid office and let them know just how things have changed in their family.

Randy: [00:24:49] OK. Good advice. I didn't know that. All right. Is there any final thought you'd like to share with senior students and their families?

Mary: [00:24:58] I do. I have two thoughts. First thing I would recommend is that students start early with the application process. Students that are seniors right now, many of them have already started that process. In the UW System, our application for admission opens in August, on August first, and so they may have already started working on their application. And so I just suggest start early with that because that senior year is just filled with so much busyness, stress with high school coursework, extracurriculars, all those applications that they're sending in, and sometimes follow up materials that need to go with that too, and then certainly their social life, which is incredibly important to a lot of students in their senior year. If the student starts applications early enough, they can avoid some major stress later on. We suggest that students dedicate two to four hours per week with the application process, and literally set aside two to four hours each week and then apply early.

Also my final thought is going to college means so much more than it used to. We know that young people greatly decrease their chances of being in poverty if they attend and finish college.

We know that unemployment rates decrease and salaries increase with each additional level of education. We know that more and more employers expect college degrees even for jobs that never required one before. We know that college can be a transformative experience. I encourage all students to further their education beyond high school. And I also encourage anyone to call or email UW HELP if they have questions about the application process in the UW System.

Randy: [00:26:57] OK. Can you share our email and phone number?

Mary: [00:27:02] Happy to do so. We have a toll free number: 800-442-6459. Or contact us at uwhelp@uwex.edu.

Randy: [00:27:16] All right. Thank you. Well, Mary, I love those final thoughts. I love everything you shared, and thank you for joining me and the UW HELP podcast to share some great advice and suggestions for families and students going through that senior year--a real exciting time. Well that wraps up our third episode of the UW podcast. If you have suggestions for a future podcast, e-mail us at uwhelp@uwex.edu. And until next time this is UW HELP, your guide to the college process.