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[00:00:08] Welcome to episode seven of the University of Wisconsin HELP podcast. Thank you for your ongoing support by downloading and listening to these podcasts. Well I have a special guest today that I've been looking forward to visiting with since it was scheduled. But a few details first. I'm Randy Parvin, your host and a Student Services coordinator here with the University of Wisconsin system. If you haven't listened before, I suggest you catch episode 6. It was just posted a few weeks ago. It was one of the best! In that installment, I visited with Melissa Perez. Now Melissa is the director of admissions for the University of Wisconsin Colleges. And we visited about how families can get the most out of their college tour. And I have to say, I think it was a good one. Well let’s get on to today.

My guest today is Brian Inkenbauer. I met him and his daughter a couple years ago at a college presentation. And they were just starting out that college search that you might be doing as well. I followed up with him earlier this year to see how it went. Curiosity kills the cat. And just to find out where his daughter ended up and how it went. And during that conversation, I thought their story would be a great one to have for this podcast.

So, I think it's key to point out that I didn't invite him here because I think this is the right way, or their way is the right way. It's one way, and it's one family's way. I did invite him here to tell that story. And I hope there might be something that you could use, you know a bit or a piece, and say to yourself "That will work for me and my family. I think I can make that work, and that's useful." Ryan, thanks for being a part of this podcast. And gosh, I appreciate you taking time out of your busy schedule to visit with me. Welcome!

Ryan: [00:02:15] Thanks Randy. I'm glad to be here.

Randy: [00:02:16] Well Ryan, tell folks about yourself. Maybe where you're from, your family situation and anything else you feel is important.

Ryan: [00:02:25] Sure. I live in Monona, Wisconsin. Just a few miles from here, actually, on the east side of Madison. My daughter graduated high school last year. She graduated from Monona Grove. Go Silver Eagles! And she is currently a freshman at college, starting her second semester.

Randy: [00:02:50] It goes quick.

Ryan: [00:02:51] Yes it certainly does. Our family situation: her mom lives in North Carolina, and dad (me) lives in Wisconsin. And it's been like that since she was five. So she grew up in a single parent household. And me (dad) was heavily involved in the college search and application process. And everything else you can imagine [that comes with] raising a daughter.

Randy: [00:03:20] Do you recall how you started that conversation with your daughter about "Well we better start looking for colleges at some level." How did you begin that conversation?

Ryan: [00:03:32] It was something that was always in the discussion growing up. In elementary school it seemed so far away. And almost hard to picture, completing school and going to college. We've always thought that was the path. And as you get closer, the kids start taking some more advanced courses. Or into high school AP classes or certain honors situations, volunteering, stuff to maybe round out that college resume a little bit. So I would say it really started to become a reality sophomore or junior year. [She started] taking ACT's and that's when I realized we really had to start making some concrete plans.

Randy: [00:04:24] Started having some conversations with her. Sounds like it wasn't any particular event that steps out. But it was kind of a building up process. What were your first steps? And do you recall what your daughter's first steps were when it came to search for a college? Just out of curiosity.

Ryan: [00:04:46] For me it was such a blank slate. I really didn't know where to start. And honestly I went onto Amazon. And I bought some books on the subject. I remember one book was "College Rankings Across the United States." I didn't know if she might be going somewhere in California, or east coast, or staying somewhere nearby. So I wanted to learn about the schools. And then for her, I think she wasn't very sure either, about the size of the school, how far she wanted to be away from her parents. And I think we really had to start exploring that. The summer before her senior year is when we really started planning some college tours.

Randy: [00:05:37] I have a question. Did you find that college ranking book useful for you or Emma, your daughter?

Ryan: [00:05:47] I think it was a little overkill, to be honest with you. There was not much in there I couldn't have found online already or at college websites. It was more of an opportunity to dream about some of these different universities that you've never heard of, actually. I remember there was a small liberal arts school in Washington State that sounded very quaint and beautiful. But we soon learned logistics, at least for our family, of applying to schools like that. [Those schools] weren't going to work in the long run. So, that book didn't help with that a lot.

Randy: [00:06:27] But you know you tried. And you were trying to help and get your head around it.

Ryan: [00:06:31] Research. Research and narrow things down.

Randy: [00:06:35] That's what I hear. So with your search for colleges, did you put fiscal or geographic constraints on her initially?

Ryan: [00:06:42] Well, I wanted her to come to those conclusions herself. So, personally I left it a little wide open, knowing deep down that we did have budget constraints. And that there were some schools we could not afford. But I wanted her to at least look at these schools. And see if she was interested in them. Maybe do a tour if that was feasible. And at least consider them. Geographically, since her mom lived in North Carolina, dad lives in Wisconsin, she realized pretty early in the process that she wanted to be within driving distance of one of her parents. So for us, then, that kept us looking in those two locations.

Randy: [00:07:30] How far is it from Wisconsin to North Carolina? I mean how many miles is that?

Ryan: [00:07:33] It's a plane ride. I'm not quite sure. I'll have to ask her. She's done the trip more. Way more than me.

Randy: [00:07:42] Well I just got thinking about it. It is a big geographic range there from North Carolina to Wisconsin. Any resources - you mentioned some books - that you used to narrow down the list that you'd like to suggest to us.

Ryan: [00:08:01] There were some scheduled talks at the high school that brought in different admissions advisors or counselors. I guess it gave us literature, especially on the Wisconsin schools. And then aside from that, I know there were many late nights where I was on my laptop reading about certain schools that we talked about. And looking at their areas of study and the schools within them. And to see if it would be a good fit for her. And try to advise once she discussed certain universities.

Randy: [00:08:42] I know some of those universities have college cost calculators. And for those of who don't know, a college cost calculator kind of estimates the financial aid package your son or daughter might get from that university. Did you ever fill out one of those? And how effective did you find that?

Ryan: [00:09:01] Absolutely. I did several of those online. I thought they were great. They really gave me a better picture of what maybe family contribution might be required. I even saved some of the results on my computer. And had a special file on this because it all starts blurring together after a while. So just to kind of document the work that I had done researching the costs of schools.

Randy: [00:09:30] I really relate to what you say. It all starts blurring together. My daughter who is a senior is going back to visit two of the universities - University of Wisconsin-Madison and University of Wisconsin-Platteville - that she visited last spring as a junior. It starts to melt together.

Ryan: [00:09:51] I would even recommend when you take a physical tour - writing some notes. Or often you get a folder. And putting the literature in there to help remember the things that you saw and the vibe that you felt and the people you talked to.

Randy: [00:10:10] Sounds like you might be a little bit off and running and taking some tours. What suggestions do you have for parents out there as they get in to that van, or SUV, and start on the road to take a tour? Any suggestions you can think of?

Ryan: [00:10:30] Well I thought those tours were great. They were well worth the time. I know we did six together. And she did another two in North Carolina. So I don't know if that's a lot or average. But I thought they were all well worth the time. And generally, they were very well run. The tour of the campus will be led by maybe a student. And then you'll meet back with an advisor that might do a presentation. Sometimes you get to have lunch on campus. And in some of the longer tours, your student can maybe participate in a class. And then they separate parents and the students and look at different things. So I thought it was well worth the time. To me, it's not one of those times where you want to be super quick or efficient with your time. We really wanted to enjoy and see not only the campus, but also maybe explore the community. And that was big for us because that's somewhere you're moving to. You'll likely live there for four years. [I encourage people to] look at some of the local restaurants or hot spots in town. Drive around or walk or bike if you can bring a bike or rent a bike. To me, that's one of the best ways to see a local community. Kind of slows things down. And you can really take it in.

Randy: [00:12:02] Any good examples of that you did? Can you give us a specific example where you did that and it was a positive experience? Where you kind of adventured out into the community. A little bit away from that university or campus. Any good examples?

Ryan: [00:12:17] Yeah we had a great tour at UW-Eau Claire. I had not been there before. So I was really surprised at how beautiful that campus is. So we were really excited by it. And then it was one of the longer tours. We had a meal on campus. That was one where she was able to sit in a class. And then afterward we wanted to explore the city a little bit. So we were cruising around and looking at the rivers. [It was] really, really great. And that ultimately became one of the places she applied to because she really enjoyed that experience. On the way out of town we had a long trip ahead on the way back to Madison. And we wanted to grab some snacks for the road trip. And we stopped at this local, small, health foods store. I think it's called "The Local Store." And it was right up her alley. And it was close to campus. And she was just saying how she could maybe do some shopping here if she attended this school.

Randy: [00:13:30] So she could see herself [there].

Ryan: [00:13:32] She really felt like it would be a good fit and it would work for her, yes.

Randy: [00:13:37] Yeah that's neat, isn't it? Where did she end up applying to?

Ryan: [00:13:41] We looked at so many, and there are a lot of options. But we had decided to narrow it down. And I did encourage her to try for one reach school. One that was probably academically a little above her range. Also, maybe even financially out of our range. Just to see what that financial aid award letter, is that the term?

Randy: [00:14:16] Yeah financial aid award letter that they get in the spring.

Ryan: [00:14:19] To me, you never know, as a single parent household, how complex that is. With my income and trying to figure out that expected family contribution. And also see what scholarships are available at those schools. Anyways, she really enjoyed Wake Forest University in North Carolina. That was one of her favorite schools. It's very competitive. It was definitely above our budget. And I knew that would be kind of a lottery ticket if she was able to get in to that school. And if we'd be able to afford it ultimately. But it's exciting. I think it allows you to explore that and have that opportunity. And then she decided on three other schools in Wisconsin. UW-Madison she applied to. Also kind of a reach, it’s a competitive school to get into. And then she also applied to Marquette and UW-Eau Claire.

Randy: [00:15:29] Out of curiosity where did she end up going this fall then?

Ryan: [00:15:33] That's another exciting time, when you get those acceptance letters. And I was very happy she decided to stay closer to home at UW-uMadison. That's working out great. And she's really loving the experience at the university.

Randy: [00:15:51] That's awesome. Glad to hear that. Here's a tougher question: were there any moments that you are willing to share that were tense or a little challenging between you and your daughter?

Ryan: [00:16:07] Yes. As parents there always is. One that really sticks out in mind was filling out the financial aid forms. I had heard early on from one speaker to "let your kid do the work. Let them enter the numbers." And I was very open and candid about our financial situation. And I thought that benefitted her to see our family's income, our family's situation, and try to understand the affordability aspect of it. At this age, they're coming into adulthood. I think it's time they can see that stuff and understand it. And it's not fun entering in that information. But we sat at the kitchen table together - her on the computer and me with my tax forms or whatever - and we worked through it. It wasn't very hard. But it wasn't a fun part of the process.

Randy: [00:17:17] And the only reason I mention that - I imagine it wasn't - is I know when you have those tense times with your son or daughter, a lot of people think no one else has those. Or “I'm less than” because I had those. That's not the case. You have a great example. And I'm sure it's tough for other parents to sit down and fill out that Free Application for Federal Student Aid with their son or daughter. Let's go to the positive. Were there any moments with your daughter as you were going through this search where you just said, "Wow, this is a pretty special moment." I always imagine wanting to take a picture of it so I can play it back when I'm older and forget those great moments. Just one moment that you would like to share that is kind of a cool moment?

Ryan: [00:18:07] I think something that was special was after the college tours on the way home, when we were driving back, discussing what we saw, what she liked and what she didn't like about the places. Because there's just a very honest discussion and feedback. And I could witness a young adult starting to make these adult decisions. And processing this in their head. So it's very rewarding as a parent to see that and to say "You know what, I've done a pretty good job. This person is coming to these conclusions and these decisions on their own. And they're headed in a good direction." Those were very good moments.

Randy: [00:19:01] Thank you for sharing that. Any other tips that you would like to give parents out there who might be listening - or guidance counselors - about the tours or the college search process?

Ryan: [00:19:16] One, let your child explore this and make the decisions themselves. Don't be too overbearing. Definitely nudge them in the right direction. I had to encourage her a lot to do scholarship work, for instance. She stays on top of deadlines and [is a] very hard worker. But the scholarship stuff, you have to sit down and write an essay. It's a lot of work. So as a parent keep nudging in that direction. But as far as looking at what schools to look at, I let her come up with this on her own. Two, enjoy the time. You're coming into that senior year. That senior year goes very fast. It's a lot of last things. A lot of milestones. "This is my last orchestra concert. This is the last track meet." So enjoy that time right before senior year where you're researching this stuff, digging into it, and having those long car trips. For us, like I said, those were some special moments. And three, pay attention to those deadlines. There are a lot of application deadlines, financial aid deadlines, scholarships. And I relied on my daughter to stay on top of those. But I also kept an eye on them myself.

Randy: [00:20:48] And I always emphasize to people [that] high school students are used to coming from high school, obviously. But that also means they were given some flexibilities there. That a deadline didn't mean a deadline. Generally, if there was some sickness or just forgot, many teachers and administrators would let them by with that. But it's different, even for my senior, to understand that a deadline means that after that point the process is dead. It's ended. And not very often are they going to give you flexibilities on the other side.

Ryan: [00:21:23] I think that's true. When I miss a deadline at work I don't get good extensions.

Randy: [00:21:30] No generally I don't either. That's a good one. Ryan this has been terrific. But before we're done, this podcast is on a quest. Not only about college and admissions, alright so we need a little bit more of your time. Jeremy and I - Jeremy, folks, is my colleague who records these podcasts - we're on a quest to [find out] a few things about bratwurst. How do your cook your brat?

Ryan [00:21:57]: That is a great question. That’s near and dear to my heart actually. I've done a lot of grilling in my life. So what's the question? How do I cook my brats?

Randy [00:22:06] Yeah how do you like to cook your brats. If Jeremy and I are coming over to your house tonight - it's a beautiful day here, about [in the] 40's - how would you cook brats for Jeremy and I.

Ryan [00:22:17] You've asked the right guy. For one, I guess I like to start with maybe a local brat from a butcher shop. A good fresh brat. And then I would prefer to grill it directly on a charcoal, or lump wood charcoal grill. I'm not for much for a gas grill or pre-cooking the brats. I like to char it. I like to get a nice golden color to the sausage. Have some grill marks. And then afterward I would prefer to maybe simmer it a while in maybe a beer bath with some onions and butter. That would be my style, anyways.

Randy [00:23:00] Now, ketchup or mustard on that bratwurst?

Ryan [00:23:05] Well, ketchup is for hot dogs and French fries. So for me, mustard is the way to go. A good, high quality mustard. Maybe, in addition, some sauerkraut on a good, soft bun.

Randy [00:23:19] I'm getting hungry, what about you?

Ryan [00:23:21] I am.

Randy [00:23:22] Well, now seriously, I think your story is an important one. To emphasize: it's just one story and one approach. Neither Ryan or I are here to say that it's the right way. Take what you can use that fits you and your family. Ryan, thanks again for visiting and sharing this story. It's been a joy.

Ryan [00:23:46] Thanks. This was great.

Randy [00:23:48] Well, that will do it for this installment of the UW HELP Podcast. Be sure to email me topics or thoughts on this episode at randy.parvin@uwex.edu. That was randy.parvin@uwex.edu. Until next time, this is UW HELP, your guide to the college process.