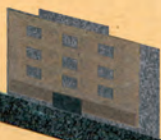




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# Five I's, Four C's, and the Right Road to **COLLEGE**

Penn Admissions Dean Eric Furda C'87 would love it if your child or grandchild comes to Penn, but he doesn't want them—or you—to start the college-search process with that goal in mind.

BY JOHN PRENDERGAST

**SO**, when you sent the *Gazette* your child's birth announcement you included their\* projected class-year along with name, weight, and length; you've dressed them in Red & Blue since diapers; brought them along to multiple Alumni Weekends, Homecomings, and other campus events; and regaled them repeatedly with (edited) tales of your own formative years in West Philadelphia. You've always known without a doubt that your child absolutely has to go to Penn, and all you want—now that the moment of truth has arrived—is some inside info on how to make that happen.

Here goes:

Early Decision.

That's about it.

Early Decision involves submitting the application by November 1 and making a binding commitment to attend Penn if accepted. The percentage of alumni legacy kids (which, in Penn's relatively broad definition, means having parents or grandparents who attended any of the University's schools) applying ED who are admitted runs in the mid-to-high 40s. Not a sure thing by any means, but a lot better than the 10 percent overall admit rate for Penn's incoming Class of 2018.

Okay. Well, good luck! You can stop reading now.

ILLUSTRATION BY RICH LILLASH

\*There's no ideal way to handle pronouns in a situation like this. Using just the male is too old-fashioned and patriarchal, alternating or combining male and female ones too clunky (and, to some, still insufficiently inclusive in an era of fluid conceptions of gender). This article settles on the technically incorrect but common-in-everyday-speech out of *they*, *them*, and *their*. —Ed.

... But you're doing it wrong.

That's according to Penn's dean of admissions, Eric J. Furda C'87.

Don't misunderstand. Furda can sing Penn's praises with the best of them—from the beautiful, compact urban campus; to the superb faculty, rich and varied curriculum, and myriad opportunities for interdisciplinary study; to Philly's vibrant attractions and the intellectual and emotional satisfactions of service-learning courses; and much, much more. He just doesn't believe that students and families should ever start out by asking "Can I get into Penn?" or any other school, for that matter.

Instead, he says—on the admissions website, in blog posts and newspaper columns, TV and radio interviews, and his frequent talks to alumni—that they should begin by thinking about the road to college, and the right direction for the student. "As in any journey, you're not going to say, 'Okay, let's go,' get in the car and start gunning it," he said in a recent presentation. "[If you do,] you're going to find out that you're down one road, and you should have gone down the other—because you didn't think about it. That's where the disconnect in this college process can come in. You know, you've been driving due North, and your destination is due West."

**For** most alumni, their first thought is that "the college admissions process has changed so much since I applied," says Furda. And they're right.

To start with, it gets a lot more attention in the media, fueling stress for all involved. "It's not just the conversation that you're having," he says. "It's a national conversation that truly is taking place."

The pervasive sense of heightened stakes doesn't entirely coincide with what's happening in the world. For example, there's little evidence students overall are applying to more colleges than they used to. On average, Furda notes, those using the Common Application (the most popular format these days) applied to fewer than five schools. But the situation can feel quite different depending on where you're sitting. "When you put yourself in the metropolitan areas of the US, or in suburban high schools in the US, it's going to feel like students are applying to more places—which is true," he adds.

Certainly, more of them are applying to Penn. As a point of reference, there were

about 10,500 applicants vying for spots in Penn's Class of 1987 when Furda—a history-lover from an upstate New York high school of fewer than a hundred students—sent in his application. That number had grown to about 23,000 for the Class of 2013, the first one admitted after he came on as dean in July 2008. It has continued to rise. For the past few years, applications had held steady at 31,000-32,000 before spiking to 35,866 this year, a nearly 15 percent jump.

A relatively small part of the growth in applications is from traditional "feeder" schools to the University, says Furda. "What's happening is there's a greater spread geographically, socioeconomically, in every way—literally across national boundaries, too. And that's what's feeding in to the increase in our applicant pools."

The increasing emphasis on the importance of higher education for upward mobility in an ever-more competitive working world, along with the fact that technology makes it much easier to access information about schools everywhere from anywhere, has meant that students and families are exploring a much wider array of educational options. One indication: only 40 percent of Penn's incoming class hails from New England or the Mid-Atlantic states (see chart).

Beyond the US borders, the story is the same. There were 6,215 international applicants to the Class of 2018; those

admitted came from 84 nations, with the highest numbers from Canada (57), Korea (39), India (34), China (29), Singapore (25), and Hong Kong (22).

Penn's commitment to expanding educational access through increased financial aid; its all-grant, no-loan aid policy; and outreach to underserved populations, articulated most recently in the Penn Compact 2020 ["From College Hall," Sep/Oct 2013], is another element in the picture. Some 45 percent of admitted students who are US citizens or permanent residents self-identified as minorities. First-generation college students make up 12 percent of the admitted class. The class also included 13 students who attended a Knowledge is Power Program (KIPP) school, with which Penn has a partnership announced in 2012 ["Gazetteer," Nov/Dec 2012], and 118 QuestBridge Scholars (a program that locates academically high-achieving students whose families face economic challenges).

With the growth in the number of applicants, qualifications have ratcheted up as well. Just since 2007 (the Class of 2011), the average standardized test scores of attending students have increased from about 2125 to 2180.

But while a number of factors have gone into creating this much larger—and extremely accomplished—applicant pool, the end result is clear: since Penn's class

### Growing and Diverse Geography | Applicants to Classes of 2011-2018

|               | 2011          | 2012          | 2013          | 2014          | 2015          | 2016          | 2017          | 2018          |
|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|
| Mid-Atlantic  | 8,587         | 8,617         | 8,263         | 9,685         | 10,645        | 10,330        | 10,263        | 11,666        |
| Midwest       | 2,024         | 1,981         | 2,049         | 2,461         | 2,931         | 2,834         | 2,988         | 3,376         |
| New England   | 1,918         | 1,951         | 1,942         | 2,220         | 2,532         | 2,330         | 2,440         | 2,546         |
| South         | 2,157         | 2,180         | 2,352         | 3,002         | 3,720         | 3,687         | 3,523         | 4,127         |
| Southwest     | 858           | 877           | 847           | 1,014         | 1,279         | 1,238         | 1,214         | 1,621         |
| West          | 3,578         | 3,497         | 3,661         | 4,432         | 5,497         | 5,314         | 5,240         | 6,315         |
| International | 3,496         | 3,775         | 3,624         | 4,123         | 5,058         | 5,484         | 5,614         | 6,215         |
| <b>TOTALS</b> | <b>22,618</b> | <b>22,878</b> | <b>22,738</b> | <b>26,937</b> | <b>31,662</b> | <b>31,217</b> | <b>31,282</b> | <b>35,866</b> |

### SAT/ACT Conversion | Classes of 2011-2018

|               | 2011           | 2012           | 2013           | 2014           | 2015           | 2016           | 2017           | 2018           |
|---------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|
| <b>TOTALS</b> | <b>2124.91</b> | <b>2138.67</b> | <b>2148.33</b> | <b>2153.07</b> | <b>2155.29</b> | <b>2163.24</b> | <b>2172.77</b> | <b>2180.14</b> |

size of roughly 2,400 students hasn't changed much in decades, it has become a lot harder to get in. Between Furda's class and the Class of 2018, the percentage of applicants accepted has gone from 41 percent to 10 percent. The University's stable yield rate—the percentage of accepted students who end up enrolling, which has been about 65 percent over

the past decade—has also meant that Penn needs to say *yes* to fewer students overall to reach that class-size goal.

Also clear: this means there are a lot of disappointed applicants and families—including alumni families.

“For most of us, thinking about anything where you've worked hard toward a goal, and you've done everything that you can

do and should do—and the numbers even put you in that competitive landscape—the expectation is that you're going to get the reward that you're looking for,” Furda says.

“The way I approach this is, you're going to have a reward. You're going to have some options open to you. But whether it is the one—that may not play out.”

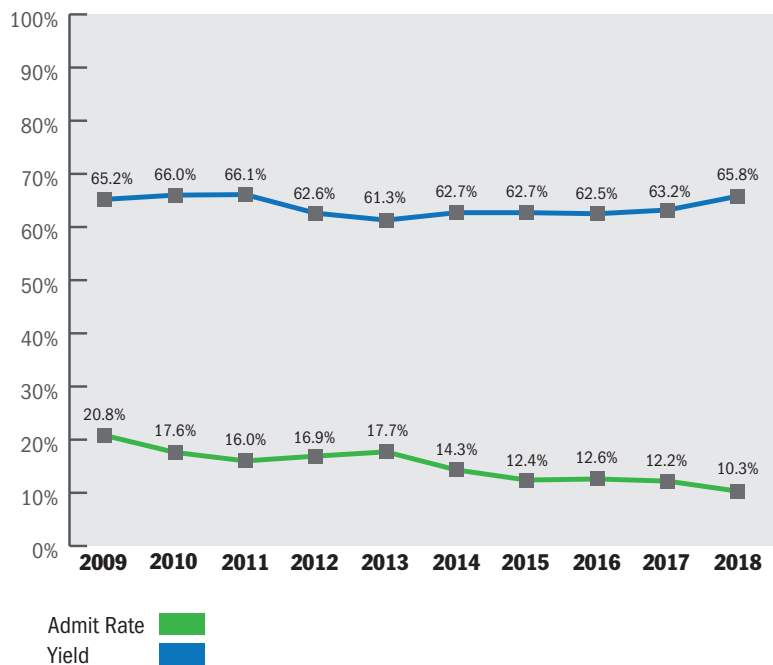
That can be a hard message to hear for alumni parents—not to mention grandparents—who may not be up on the latest admissions statistics and only know that their loved one is a lot more qualified to get into Penn than they ever were (and whose isn't?). Even alumni who readily acknowledge the benefits of having a more diverse student population can feel the sting when their child is rejected, Furda says.

And that's one of the reasons that, a couple of weeks after the May 1 deadline for student replies to their regular-decision acceptances, his work for the Class of 2018 done (except for possible wait-list admissions over the summer), Dean Furda was not off somewhere taking a well-deserved rest but on his way to visit alumni groups in New Haven, New York, Los Angeles, and elsewhere (including on campus the Saturday of Alumni Weekend) to deliver his signature talk on “Navigating the College Admissions Process.”

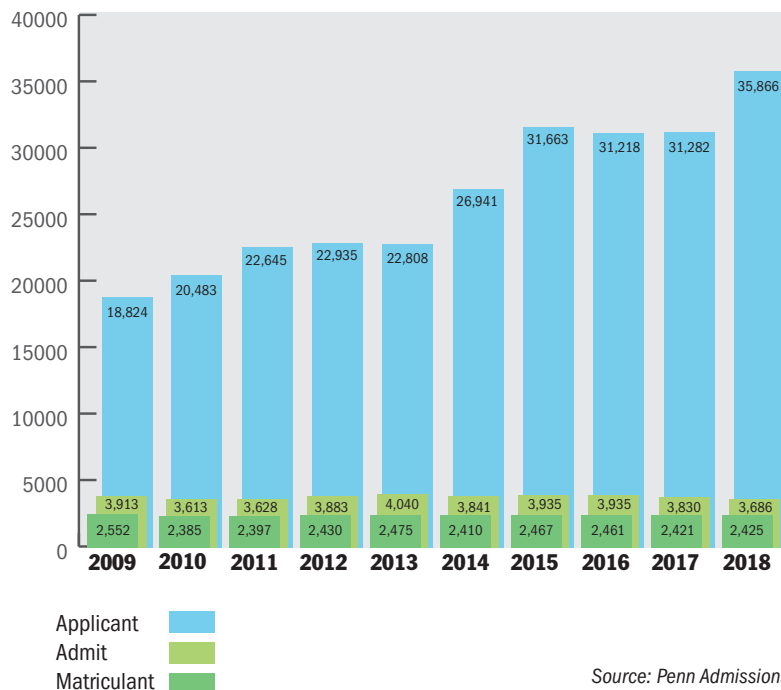
Furda's mission in these talks is two-fold, and in some ways contradictory. “Part of this is the tone I need to bring to these conversations,” he says. “There's a balance, in which you don't want to start off by scaring [people].” But increasingly, he and his team of admissions officers find themselves functioning both as advocates for Penn and advisors to students and families for whom other options may make more sense. “We have two responsibilities,” Furda tells his staff. “We're hired to promote Penn, educate people about Penn. That's our job.” The other responsibility is “being educators and counselors, helping families navigate this process.”

Other admissions resources for alumni include monthly “First Friday Drop-In Hours,” which are information sessions especially for alumni, faculty, and staff and their children held on campus (see the ad on page 6), and the “Inside Penn Admissions” page, [www.admissions.upenn.edu/inside](http://www.admissions.upenn.edu/inside). This site is designed to keep Penn employees, students, and volunteers who are involved in recruitment up to date on “Penn Admissions messages,

### Increased Selectivity and Stable Yield | Classes of 2009-2018



### A Decade of Applicant Pool Change | Classes of 2009-2018



Source: Penn Admissions

calendar of events, publications and social media presence,” but alumni are encouraged to make use of it as well.

Some alumni with older children who went through the college-application process may remember the Alumni Council on Admissions, which was phased out a couple of years ago. For much of its run the ACA interviewed alumni children interested in Penn and reported on them to Admissions. It was formed in the early 1980s with the original goal of encouraging alumni parents to consider the University as a school for their children, which relatively few did at the time. Penn’s rising reputation in the last decades solved that problem, and as time went by the ACA staff struggled to meet the demand for interviews, eventually shifting toward offering informational group sessions instead.

Though it never actually had a hand in admissions decisions, the ACA was seen as an advocate for alumni in the process, and Furda is sensitive to the negative impression its closing created. “I think this is one of the biggest issues, folded with the overall admit rate, that makes our alumni feel that Penn Admissions or Penn isn’t caring for them in the way that we used to,” he offers.

But he’s hopeful that the Penn Alumni Interview Program—launched two years ago as a revamped and expanded version of the former Secondary Schools Committee—will serve alumni and their children just as well or better, even if the program is available to all students applying to Penn. In fact, the goal is to ensure that every student who applies will be offered an interview, either in-person with an alumnus or alumna in their area, by phone, or via Skype. Over the last admissions cycle, about 31,000 interviews were offered—which would have come close to that goal but for the significant jump in applications for the Class of 2018.

According to Patrick Bredehoft, the alumni-relations staffer who directs the program, there are about 9,000 alumni involved so far. The majority are young alumni who graduated within the last decade, along with a smattering of members of classes likely to have children at or approaching college-age, and some of retirement age as well, he says.

As the program’s website puts it, “Penn’s alumni interviewers serve as ambassadors in their local communities, providing crucial assistance to the Undergraduate Admissions Office as they work to select

## “We’re going to define what success is, within a paradigm that there may be some disappointment in the process, as well.”

the next generation of Penn students.” (Yes, they are still looking for help; go to [www.alumni.upenn.edu](http://www.alumni.upenn.edu) and click on “Volunteer” to learn more.)

“Having frontline alumni involved with the process who understand and can help represent Penn” is a critical asset, says Furda. “They’re going to give us some information, or at least texture to some information, that we wouldn’t have just through the application.”

**T**he outsized attention given to “maybe 25 colleges and universities” in *U.S. News & World Report* and other media can sometimes obscure the “many other options within the higher-education system,” says Furda. “The message that I try to strike with families is to really think about, as a student, what it is you’re looking for in the experience of that college environment—academic, social, et cetera—and then let’s figure out what places meet that.” Chances are, there will be a number of schools that fulfill the majority of those criteria.

As he starts his Alumni Weekend presentation, Furda promises the crowd of parents and teenagers (with a few grandparents and middle schoolers mixed in), “We’re going to have a lot of fun.” Or maybe it’s a threat: “You’d better. That’s my prerequisite.”

Furda has a practiced rapport with the audience, and is quick to build on even out-of-left-field comments. A student’s facetious (?) inclusion of “milkshakes on campus” among his priorities prompts a Proustian digression on Furda’s favorite food trucks, for example. It would be easy at first to miss the stinger at the end of his statement: “You’re going to learn how to go through this process in a manner that’s going to give you the tools to have a successful college process... We’re going to define what success is, *within a paradigm that there may be some disappointment in the process, as well.*”

His first step is to ask students to note, on the index cards that have been distributed, four or five “attributes” they’re looking for in a college environment. This could start with the size of the school, or

distance from home, he says; it could be a particular academic program they want to pursue, or anything in between. Then he asks parents to do the same thing.

He tells the students and parents to compare notes—later, on the way home. The idea is to see how the students’ and parents’ attributes align, and start a conversation about that as soon as possible in the process. “I fail today if, a year from now, you’re not on the same page—or at least you don’t have an understanding of why you’re not on the same page.”

The rest of the session is built around what Furda calls the “five I’s and the four C’s.” (The framework can also be found on [page217.org](http://page217.org), part of the Admissions website, [www.upenn.edu/admissions](http://www.upenn.edu/admissions). The name pays tribute to an essay question once used on Penn’s application, which read: “You have just completed your three hundred page autobiography. Please submit page 217.”)

The five I’s, which have to do with the student’s self-assessment, are:

- *Identity*—“How do you see yourself, and how do others see you?”
- *Intellect*—“How do you think and approach the acquisition of knowledge?”
- *Ideas*—“What do you think and why?”
- *Interests*—“What do you choose to do when you have time and flexibility?”
- *Inspiration*—“What really motivates you?”

He ties the answers to these questions back to the application process. When deciding which teachers to ask to write a recommendation letter, for example, he says, think about how the way they see you will inform the view of the person reading the application. Furda loved history, and struggled more with math and science. “I wouldn’t ask two history teachers to write about me,” he says. “I would ask my history and math teacher to write about me because they’re going to be able to reveal different aspects, because they see me in a different light.” Similarly, the student’s answers to the *intellect* category could steer them toward a certain size of school or type of coursework, depending on their learning style.

*Ideas* prompted some pieces of interview advice. First, know something about the school that's interviewing you. "Not like, 'I really want to go to Brown, oh, I mean Penn,'" he says. "Know the difference beyond that they're Ivy League schools in urban areas." More important, interviewers "want to know what you think." The worst thing to do is to follow up a question with a question. "So if I said to you, 'What do you like to read?' It's not a trick question. You don't say, 'Well, what do you mean? Do you mean required reading, or, like, outside reading?' You know what your ideas are."

With *interests*, the answer should not be that that's what comes *after* schoolwork and extracurricular activities. "I hope that you're enjoying the things you're doing. I hope that you're really saying, 'You know, when I stay in a school building until six, seven, eight o'clock at night because I'm working on a set for the school play,' that you love that opportunity. And yeah, you're tired, but there's a passion there."

*Inspiration* doesn't mean, "I need to show that I'm inspired, you know, just waking up in the morning," he says. "Some of us are; some of us aren't." But he counsels students to "think about those moments when the heart starts racing a little bit more." Such moments may be sparked by a teacher, or a conversation with a peer, when "something else really kicked in. You know those moments when you're literally kind of feeling that rush. What are those moments?"

There's a storytelling aspect to the application that these insights can inform, Furda confides. "But also, most importantly, you're discovering things about yourself" that can aid in finding a set of schools that align with who the student is.

This is where the four C's—*culture, curriculum, community, and conclusions*—come in.

Go back to that list of attributes on the index card, he says. "And then, when you find yourself visiting five colleges in two-and-a-half days, keep going back to that as a reference point: 'What is it that I want to learn about this school through this lens?'" Besides helping the student to develop a thoughtful list of potential schools, it is also a handy guide to answering the "Why our school?" question, which many colleges and universities—Penn included—ask on their supplement to the Common Application.



**As Penn's selectivity has grown with the size of its applicant pool, Furda and his admissions officers find themselves functioning both as advocates for Penn and advisors to students and families for whom other educational options may be wiser.**

Taking the University as an example, Benjamin Franklin is an obvious influence on Penn's culture. Furda offers visionary entrepreneur Elon Musk W'95, founder of SpaceX and Tesla Motors ["The Next, Next Thing," Nov/Dec 2008], as a modern-day successor. "What he's thinking about is what does the world look like? How can I shape the future? Where else can we live? What else can we discover?" he says. Students should ask, of schools they are considering, "What are they about, how is it relevant today, and how does it match up to those attributes and interests and ideas that I have?"

*Curriculum*, says Furda, is "the big one." When you look at the annual price tag for a year at Penn, most of it goes to the classes you'll be taking. "For each school that you look to, I really want you to think about the curriculum and the practicali-

ties of how you navigate that curriculum." This isn't just about picking a major, he says, "but the design and aim of the courses you will take over four years." Another thing to consider: "What if I change my mind? Which a lot of students do."

*Community* can encompass physical space, people, and social impact. "If I take a group of 10 people, different walks of life, different experiences, different interests, and I stick them on a desert island, it'll be one type of experience, right? If I stick them in the middle of Disney World, there'll be another type of experience." What does it mean to be among thousands of classmates at a big school like Penn, for example? "How does that match up to your interests? How does that align with the attributes you might be looking for?"

*Conclusions* involves asking: "What should I envision for myself at the end of

my college experience? What are some of the outcomes I may expect?" he says. Those can include both practical considerations—"Will I graduate, and in how long? Will I get a job when I graduate? Will I get into graduate school?"—and longer-term, larger ones, like, "What did I learn?"

Using this framework, a student should be able to come up with a list of six to eight schools that possess the majority of their desired "attributes." (The framework can be effective in navigating career changes, too, he quips. "Go to Furda's *I*'s and *C*'s. They apply to any time in your life.")

Applying to more than eight schools, "you start becoming fatigued," he says, which is something that the admissions officers at schools nine, 10, and 11 can sense. "When you punt on that, 'Why our school?' essay, and you have test scores all the way in their top quarter, you're going to get wait-listed."

At this point, if Penn is still at the head of the pack—and "it's not just because Mom or Dad or Grandma or Grandpa went here"—it's time to consider Early Decision as a strategy. (Finally!)

As the Admissions website puts it, "Children and grandchildren of alumni will receive the most consideration for their affiliation with the University during Early Decision." (So it's not really inside information.)

The numbers clearly show that ED is the way to maximize the odds of acceptance at Penn. But it's not that simple, Furda says. First, to the chagrin of alumni families (and the Alumni Relations office), an admission percentage in the high-40s still means more than 50 percent of applicants don't get accepted, and they will have lost the opportunity to play the Early Decision card elsewhere.

That might be a wiser course, especially if the University is not the student's clear first choice, the student's test scores and grades aren't quite as competitive as they might be, and they have another "Penn-like" school on their list with a slightly less daunting admit rate. "Because there may be an opportunity cost there," Furda explains. "If you use that early [decision] application at a place where the admit rate is 25 percent and not 10 percent, that may be the push you need at that other place."

Some other strategy tips:

Be realistic about test scores. Many admissions websites will give the range of scores for the middle 50 percent of

students admitted, which Furda says is a more useful statistic for comparison than average scores. At Penn, for example, the range for the SAT (which currently scores on a scale of 2400) was 2070-2350 for the Class of 2017; for the ACT it was 31-34 out of the maximum of 36.

"You are not applying to a bunch of schools where you're in the bottom quartile of their testing," he says. He urges students to think about their desired attributes and broaden the range of schools they're willing to consider, provided they match most of them. "As it relates to testing, keep in mind that it is a range, but be practical about it and let that help shape the list."

Apply to at least one school with the

## Early Decision is the way to maximize the odds of acceptance at Penn. But it's not that simple.

qualities you're looking for that has a rolling admissions policy. "Get yourself in that pool right away. September. You get that first acceptance, whew, a little relief," he says. "You can only attend one school anyway. So there's one school that was thoughtfully put on your list, and you have one."

Whatever happens afterward, that's the definition of success, Furda says: Having gone through the process and found six to eight colleges that seem like a good match, you apply, "and you're admitted into one. You've been successful. I want you to be thrilled." While some may be inclined to think, "One out of eight, it's like, gosh, what a failure I am," Furda repeats, "You can only attend one college."

It's likely there will be at least a couple of "thin letters," Furda warns (the term lives on even though the news comes via the Internet now), so students should be prepared for that. "If you go through the process all the way, you probably should get a couple of those," he says.

For the student who is accepted at four or five schools, "you have a really busy spring, because now you have to revisit these places, and you're going to look at [each of] them differently, because now you have ownership over it," he says.

Assuming the University is one of those schools, Furda channels an imaginary student: "I have to make that final decision. I visit Penn on Quaker Days, I absolutely love it, and I [want to] attend Penn, and my mom lived in the 'Baby Quad,' McIlhenny, and I want the same room she had," he says. "You call me, and I ask the housing office, and they say *yes* or *no*."

*[Editor's note—probably no.]*

Furda's last piece of advice is couched in Penn terms but applies to all students and any school: "Take a quarter of the energy that you put into the college process to be thoughtful of how you're taking full advantage of the four years here—curricular options, knocking on those doors ... finding yourself in those smaller communities, putting yourself out there to take classes that you may not think are on your list right now ...

"And have fun."

Somewhere during the course of his presentation, Furda offers this snapshot of Penn's diverse student community: "We're talking about 10,000 undergraduates, 130 countries, every state in the US—full spread across the whole nation and around the globe," he says. "First-generation college students next to students who have had parents or grandparents and great-grandparents attend Penn for generations."

Looking ahead, the higher-education market is likely to become even more international as globalization progresses. In the US, demographic projections point to an overall downturn in the number of college-age students, especially in the Northeast. Already one-in-five 18-year-olds live in California or Texas. Among four-year-olds currently, more than three-in-five live in the South and West, compared to fewer than one-in-six in the Northeast. And minority, low-income, and first-generation college students are expected to make up a growing share of college applicants.

While these trends will have an impact, Furda doesn't see his framework or the admissions process changing fundamentally. Whatever the future may bring, there will still be the recruitment and selection-of-the-class aspects to admissions.

Growing use of technology and data should provide new opportunities for promoting Penn and for the admissions

# Furda on Testing, Curricula, and Test Prep

office's educational and counseling efforts, Furda says. A school's website is a great way to gauge its culture, he notes. The Undergraduate Admissions homepage—centered around the statement, “At Penn you can ...” accompanied by terms like *Explore*, *Innovate*, and *Engage*, with associated links showing how—has clear connections to the preoccupations of Franklin's university, for example.

At the same time, he is excited by what the Penn Alumni Interview Program may portend in the way of increased personal contact with potential students. “What does that look like with a group where we truly have feet on the ground—300,000 alumni, project out what that's going to be 15 years from now,” he says.

Such outreach is needed because, despite the impressive growth in the number of students applying to the University, “there are a lot of people who don't know Penn,” he says, “who still have confusion about us, or at least at another level, don't understand what we can uniquely offer compared to our top competitors.”

Besides providing alumni with a highly useful volunteer opportunity and the admissions office with an added source of information in the application process, Furda sees a third benefit to the program, which is “to help yield students when they are admitted.” Because the applicant will have had a—hopefully positive—interaction with an alumna or alumnus, “They can do some follow-up after the offers of admission go out” to encourage students to make Penn their choice.

“The reason all this is important is the people that we're trying to reach,” he says. “You know, here we are sitting in College Hall. Just think of that, almost like the back page of an airline magazine [showing all the different routes]. You're just seeing all these lines all over the place to the point where you're like, ‘Okay, they're everywhere, so I can't even look at the picture anymore.’

“Through this combination of technology, data, and our volunteers on the ground, that's what it's going to look like for us, reaching out and having people come here.”

Some of whom will be the children and grandchildren of alumni, who—after careful thought about themselves (five *I*'s) and detailed weighing of their educational preferences and priorities (four *C*'s)—will have made an informed decision that Penn really is *the* place for them. ♦

**T**here's been a fair amount of debate over the role of standardized tests in college admissions lately, and some movement among schools toward instituting test-optional or test-flexible systems (send *if* you want, or send *what* you want, more or less). But Penn, like the other Ivies, hasn't changed much in its approach to the SAT, ACT, and so on, says Furda.

Freshman applicants have to submit the SAT and two subject tests, or the ACT with writing. On its website, Penn provides information on the range of scores for the middle 50 percent of students accepted. Compared to average scores, this “gives a little bit more of a sense of, okay, the bottom of the testing range is going to look like this, and the top is stuck all the way up towards 800 [in each section], anyway,” he says. (For the record, in the Class of 2017, the top quartile was above 2350 on the SAT's 2400-point scale.)

Furda emphasizes that test scores are subject to interpretation during the admissions process. To take one example, in looking at public school students in Philadelphia or other cash-strapped cities, who lack many of the in-school support systems that wealthier suburban students have at their disposal, “you're going to have to dig a bit deeper,” he says, “to get a better sense of a student's preparation for Penn beyond, ‘Wow, their test scores are in the top 25 percent of our admitted range.’”

A related point has to do with how high-school curriculum can impact admissions. For example, the curriculum that students need in order to get into the School of Engineering and Applied Science—which, by the way, had a great year, with its applicant pool for the Class of 2018 increasing by 35 percent and “yield through the roof,” Furda says—is fairly standardized, and includes advanced placement calculus courses as well as physics. But he asks—rhetorically—whether that background is truly needed “to be successful within the curriculum, or is that what we'd like to see, because we have so many applications, anyway?”

Such questions are part of a larger conversation going on about how well high-school curricula align with preparation for college, he adds, and how well standardized tests measure that. The College Board's announcement that it will be redesigning the SAT starting in 2016 was aimed at addressing that issue (as well, it was widely noted, as being a response to the growing popularity of the competing ACT).

Citing College Board President David Coleman's previous work developing the Common Core national standards for K-12 education, Furda is cautiously optimistic about the effort to redesign the SAT. “What he is trying to work toward is getting these different pieces in synch a little more,” he says. “What do you need to do, not to just get in, but to be prepared for college? How does that align to high school curriculum? And how does that align to what's being tested in the test?” Engaging with these issues “could be a huge opportunity,” Furda says.

Another positive move, he adds, is the partnership between the College Board and the popular online education site Khan Academy to make “comprehensive, best-in-class SAT test prep materials open and free,” as the Khan website puts it. “I think, in and of itself, that's very powerful.”

Not that it will exactly level the playing field. Data from the College Board show that the clearest predictor of high scores is family income.

Still, when it comes to the infrastructure of private test-prep companies, individual tutoring, and more elaborate advice-and-counseling services that have grown up around the college-application process, Furda seems to be a believer in the market, more or less. “Whenever you have something provided, there's going to be another level of service,” he says. The problem is when providers promise more than they can deliver. “How are the services being represented to families?”

He says he doesn't share the instinctive reaction of many admissions professionals that independent counseling is necessarily a bad thing. “We need independent counselors out there who are being honest about what it is that they're trying to achieve, and charge for their services—and do some pro-bono work too, because more and more [school] counselors are getting cut. So there's a need there,” he says.

With test prep, at least, a student's scores either go up, or not. There may be a question of whether the course or tutoring actually worked, or it just makes the student more disciplined, “because parents are saying, ‘you'd better sit down now because I just paid them a thousand dollars!’” The result is measurable, though.

The value of “the \$25,000 premium service package” is harder to assess. But beware of anyone who claims, “Well, we know people, and we're going to help you, and we're going to get you in! No one's getting anybody in,” he says.