



Exit of a college-admission voice of reason

Article by William H. Caskey

Published by the *Providence Journal*, May 15, 2007

The college-admission world suffered a sucker punch last month when Marilee Jones, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's admissions chief, abruptly resigned after admitting that she had falsely claimed on her résumé to have earned several academic degrees.

Ms. Jones was a well-regarded, energetic and plain-spoken advocate for a rational approach to parenting our children through the college-admission process. Her job as head of admission at a prestigious university combined with her experience shepherding her own daughter through this painful process gave her the instant credibility she needed to reach families.

Jones's argument that we must stop demanding perfection from our kids, pushing them to apply to name-brand schools and treating the admission process as if it were a board game to be won, was gaining a national stage. It was a vital message conveyed by a convincing proselytizer. I worry that the eye-catching irony of her sudden downfall will eclipse the progress she made.

Ms. Jones's demise is more than just a short-lived news story. It will be a setback to families entering the vortex of college-admission frenzy, especially those living in the high-achieving epicenters of college anxiety. High-school counselors have long urged parents to exit the superhighway to college admission lunacy, but with little discernable impact. This is, in part, because their advice has been consistently and effectively countered by colleges themselves.

Like political candidates, academic institutions spend mountains of cash on self-promotion and on building a constituency of prospective applicants. Their goal is to drive up applications so that they can then, in an ironic turn, reject more students, appear more selective and pass their institutional peers in the rankings. For the sake of appearance, colleges will occasionally take an altruistic tack, encouraging families to "relax" and to tackle this process sensibly. But don't be fooled. As vocal as is their public disapproval of pecking orders and admission anxiety, colleges, like cater-corner gas stations, are privately fixated on their competition.

(continued on next page)

William H. Caskey: Exit of a college-admission voice of reason

Page 2

Marilee Jones was unusual in the college-admission world. Her efforts were neither casual nor cursory. She visited hundreds of public and private high schools around America, candidly telling us that we have flipped; that we are dragging our children into a dark and dangerous rip tide in which we equate selectivity with quality and brand name with success. School by school and speech by speech, Ms. Jones tried to pull us back to safety; urging parents to get a grip and avoid tying their child's success to their own.

Parents, high schools and some like-minded colleagues will miss Ms. Jones's mission to insert common sense back into the admission process. She took proactive steps to rebuild trust in a process that is increasingly viewed with cynicism. She stood on her soap box as if she were at Speaker's Corner in London, reminding us that there is a better way, that we must reclaim our senses and recognize that colleges can be no more conclusively ranked than parents.

Let's hope that someone else can pick up the torch that Marilee Jones carried briefly but with conviction.

Bill Caskey is a former Brown University admission officer and an independent college admission consultant based in Rhode Island. He founded AdmissionReady to provide high school students and their families with the inside knowledge and hands-on guidance they need to effectively and efficiently prepare for and complete the college admission process. Learn more about Bill and AdmissionReady on the web at www.admissionready.com.