



## **The College Spy® Podcast with Michelle McAnaney**

### Episode 11

#### *Is a B in a Harder Class Better Than an A in an Easier Class?*

Welcome to The College Spy podcast, a podcast for parents and students addressing all aspects of the college selection and admissions process. I'm Michelle McAnaney, the founder of The College Spy. We offer college planning services to students and families across the United States and internationally. We are a team of dedicated educators who are committed to helping students and families identify the right colleges to apply to and get accepted. We offer our guidance and expertise in a way that improves student performance, increases confidence and promotes college readiness and maturity. The College Spy works with all students including students interested in the STEM fields, students with learning differences, international students, and third culture kids. To learn more about The College Spy, visit our website at [TheCollegeSpy.com](https://TheCollegeSpy.com) and follow us on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), and [Instagram](#).

Welcome to episode 11 of The College Spy Podcast. It's spring, and spring is the time of year that high school students make decisions about what courses they're going to take the following year. Today, we're going to talk about high school course selection and academic rigor, specifically focusing on how academic rigor affects admissions decisions.

Let's start with a definition of academic rigor. It's a little hard to define because most people think it's taking very difficult courses like AP courses or IB courses. But academic rigor is actually different for different students, and it's also different for different colleges. For some students, academic rigor is taking AP courses or IB courses. And for other students, it could mean taking courses that are not required for graduation, such as a third or fourth year of a foreign language, or perhaps taking another science class that isn't required. And for other students, academic rigor means taking elective courses that interest them that they don't need to take. Basically, academic rigor means that a student is challenging themselves in high school. And that's what admissions counselors are looking for. They want to know that students coming to their colleges have challenged themselves in high school in whatever way that means for them. Colleges care a lot about academic rigor. The job of an admissions counselor, first and foremost, is to determine which applicants are going to be able to handle the work on campus. Who's going to come to campus, do well, be able to stay in school, and ultimately graduate. And colleges have figured out that there are two great indicators of who is going to be successful on their campuses, and those are academic rigor and GPA.

Colleges are most interested in how hard the courses were that you took in high school and how did you do in them? What grades did you get in them? And the reason why, again, is that they have determined that students who have challenged themselves in high school with



courses that were difficult for them and have done well in those courses are the students that are going to be successful on campus.

The courses that you choose to take each year of high school can really make a difference in whether or not you're going to be accepted at college. So it's important when you're making your selections to consider rigor because that's what colleges are looking for. Taking rigorous courses in high school says more about you to colleges than simply that you can do the work on campus. It also indicates qualities about you that might be very important to colleges. Here are some examples. Taking hard courses shows a college that learning is more important to you than protecting your GPA. It also shows that you are interested in cultivating intellectual curiosity. It indicates to colleges that you prioritize learning and school, and that you're willing to continue learning even if the subject is difficult, and that you're the type of person that doesn't give up. All of these qualities are important to colleges, especially highly selective colleges.

How much colleges care about academic rigor depends on how selective the college is. Highly selective colleges care about academic rigor a lot, and less selective colleges are less concerned with it. Here's the College Spy's recommendation. Take the hardest courses that you possibly can, as long as they do not cause you too much stress. A little bit of stress is fine because it can be motivating, but too much stress can be damaging to your mental health.

I talk about academic rigor all the time with students and parents as I guide them in understanding the admissions process and also in choosing courses for the following year. And I hear a lot of worries from families when I suggest choosing harder classes than they have previously taken. I want to share some of those worries with you today and let you know why I don't think you need to be so worried. The first concern I hear from families is that the student's GPA will drop.

In my experience, students who are taking challenging courses oftentimes don't find that there is a drop in GPA. They find that they are able to rise to the occasion and do well in the class. The other thing that's important to understand is that colleges do not look at your GPA at face value. They actually dive into the details and they look at the specific courses that you've taken and the grades that you've gotten in that class.

Colleges love to see an upward trend on the transcript, which means that students who started off high school taking courses that maybe were a little bit easier and then add rigor to their classes. That's an upward trend and colleges really like that. The other thing that you need to know is that rigor is often more important than grades, which means that a B in a harder class is better than an A in an easier class. Colleges have figured out that students who have challenged



themselves in high school with difficult courses, whether they got A's or B's, do well when they get to college.

The next worry that I want to address is a worry that I hear about freshman year. Many of you know that I used to be a school counselor and I worked with a lot of freshmen and I helped them make their freshman year schedule. One of the things that I would frequently hear from families is a suggestion that the student not take a difficult course load because they'd be adjusting to high school where the work would be a little bit harder. And families would say, let's have the first year be easier and then maybe add some rigor the following years. I don't recommend that students do this. I think that if students are recommended by their teachers to take rigorous courses, they should do so, even if it's freshman year. In my experience, they're ready for it and they can do it. I actually think families should be more worried that the student will be bored in high school if they take classes that are too easy for them than they should be about the student that is struggling because they took some challenging classes. Colleges are going to look at the entire transcript, including what you took freshman year. So if challenging courses are right for you, you really should be taking them.

Students are usually comfortable taking a challenging course load in sophomore and junior years, but something happens when they get to senior year and they want to take it easy. This is either because senioritis is setting in early or because they have met graduation requirements already. And nobody is telling them that they have to take difficult courses. Students need to understand that colleges are very interested in the courses that they choose to take senior year and the grades that they get in these courses. Many colleges will ask for quarter one report card grades. They ask for mid-year grades. And colleges will also request that school counselors send a final transcript. So senior year is really not the time to slack because your choices in senior year, in terms of what you take and how you do in those classes, really can affect admissions outcomes.

If you have any questions about academic rigor and what your child should be taking in high school, get in touch with The College Spy. We have lots of ways that we can help you, including one on one college consulting, small group coaching, and even our College Admissions 101 class, which is a course for parents, has time for you to ask questions about your child.

If you're feeling stressed and overwhelmed by the college admissions process, this is for you. Our next session of College Admissions 101 is starting soon. This four week course is the perfect opportunity for you to gain the knowledge and confidence that you need to help your student through the college selection and admissions process. College Admissions 101 is a live and interactive course on zoom for parents of students in grades 9, 10 and 11. Over the four weekly sessions we cover the key topics that you need to know to successfully navigate the college admissions process. At The College Spy we live and breathe college all day long and share



expert insights into the frequent changes to this process. It's not the same process we went through back in the late eighties and nineties. So save yourself hours of research and costly mistakes that could affect your student's admissions prospects with this course. You'll be working directly with me, Michelle McAnaney the founder of The College Spy. As we discuss key topics, including:

- How to build a college list that best fits your child and their unique personality, skills, and interests
- How to research colleges to fully understand what they have to offer, including how to find those colleges that offer a lot of merit aid
- How to choose between SAT, ACT, and test optional
- The college application timeline
- College application strategies for success
- And how to think about financial aid options, both need based and merit based.

If you can't attend one of the four sessions, you'll get a recording so you won't miss any useful information. We also save time for Q&A in each session where you can ask questions about your child's situation and circumstance. Spots are going quickly. Head to [thecollegespy.com](https://thecollegespy.com) and then click on Services and Group Workshops to register for the next session. I hope to see you there.

### **The College Spy's Tip of the Day:**

Today's admissions tip has to do with college visits. When you go on a college visit with your child, I recommend that you let your child express their opinion first and that you chime in after. The reason why is that oftentimes students do one of two things. They either agree with their parents automatically without thinking about it, or they disagree with their parents automatically without thinking about it. It's best for you to hold back and let your child process the experience, and then let you know what they think about the campus. Then you can add your opinion after.

### **Today's college spotlight is on Vanderbilt University.**

Vanderbilt is a medium sized university located in the heart of Nashville, Tennessee. Founded in 1873 by Cornelius Vanderbilt, the 300 acre campus is a mix of Gothic and modern architecture. The entire campus is a designated arboretum with approximately 190 different species of trees. The Peabody section of campus is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.



Vanderbilt is very selective, with an acceptance rate of 6%. Vanderbilt is a diverse community of students. Of the 7,000 undergraduate students, 41 percent are white, 10 percent are international, and 18 percent are eligible for Pell Grants. Vanderbilt boasts that their admissions process is need blind and that they meet 100 percent of a family's demonstrated need. Financial award packages do not include need based loans. Instead, additional grant assistance is offered.

Vanderbilt's most popular majors include engineering, education, economics, health and society, human and organizational development, and music. The atmosphere is collaborative and half of all classes have less than 20 students. All students participate in Immersion Vanderbilt, a unique program that allows students to focus on something they are passionate about. The project encourages learning opportunities beyond the classroom and begins with an exploratory phase. Guided by a faculty advisor, the experience culminates in a final project. Approximately 60 percent of students participate in research, and 40 percent take advantage of various study abroad programs.

Over 90 percent of undergraduate students live on campus for four years. All first year students live in one of ten houses, which are part of the Martha Rivers Ingram Commons. Students are assigned to a Visions group consisting of about 18 students, a faculty advisor, and an upperclassman mentor. These groups meet weekly and help build community and provide support for first year students. Students are encouraged to get involved on campus by joining one of the over 500 clubs and organizations. Approximately 25 percent of students are members of 20 fraternities and 16 sororities on campus. Many students take advantage of being in Nashville and venture out to explore the city on weekends.

Here are some interesting facts about Vanderbilt:

It is considered good luck to kiss the Cornelius Vanderbilt statue on your first night on campus.

In 1928, a blind Vanderbilt student brought the first seeing eye dog back to the United States and started the Seeing Eye Inc. in Nashville.

And first year students stormed the field before the first football game of the season.

Famous and notable alumni:

James Patterson, the bestselling author.

Jay Cutler, the NFL quarterback.

Roseanne Cash, singer songwriter.

Willie Geist, the Today Show anchor.



the college spy  
WE KNOW COLLEGES.

And Al Gore.

The College Spy has interviewed a Vandy student for you to get the inside scoop. Here are the questions and her answers:

What is the best place on campus to hang out with friends or meet new people?

*The best place to meet new people is definitely RAND. RAND is the center of student life on campus and you are guaranteed to run into many people you know there during all hours of the day. However, my favorite place to hang out with friends has to be Alumni Lawn. In the fall and spring, the lawn is filled with students studying and hanging out, especially during the first nice days of the year.*

What is the best food or meal at the dining hall?

*One of the best options on campus is the Randwich, a sandwich bar at Rand. The smoothies at 2301 are also a fan favorite.*

Describe a typical student at your school in under 10 words.

*A typical Vandy student is passionate, engaged, outgoing, over committed, and definitely an overachiever.*

What do most students do on weekends to have fun?

*What's great about Vandy is that our social life is pretty varied. Vanderbilt is definitely a work hard, play hard school. And there are always tons of on campus party options, including those thrown by fraternities and other student organizations. However, being in the middle of Nashville is a large part of a Vanderbilt student's social life as well. A big group of Vanderbilt freshmen can always be found at Lonnie's, an 18 plus karaoke bar, and Broadway is a huge part of upperclassmen's experience.*

What is something you wish a current student had told you when you were applying?

*I wish a student had told me that imposter syndrome is normal and that everyone around me was feeling it too. One of my favorite things about Vanderbilt is that it is an incredibly supportive and collaborative campus. I have never felt like I was competing with anyone or pressured to do better than my peers. However, a trade off of having such an engaged and accomplished student body is that everyone is very hard on themselves and it can feel like you're not living up to the amazing successes of your classmates. Just remember that they are going through the same transition and that you belong there just as much as everyone else.*

What is the best dorm to live in as a freshman?

*All freshmen live on Commons together, which is a big part of the Vanderbilt shared experience. You don't get a say which Commons dorm you are placed in, so it's not worth worrying about.*



*But Hank is known as one of the nicest, and Gillette is one of the worst or oldest. It is my very biased opinion, Murray House is the best.*

Finally, we asked our student, if you could wave a magic wand, what would you change about your college?

*Right now, there is still a lot of construction going on around campus as they transition to a fully residential college system. So I would speed up that process if I could.*

Thank you for listening to The College Spy podcast. For more information about The College Spy, visit our website at [thecollegespy.com](https://thecollegespy.com). For college admissions tips and up to date trends in admissions, follow The College Spy on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#) and [Instagram](#). Don't forget to like and subscribe to this podcast. We always appreciate five star reviews. See you next time.

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