

English Transcript for *University of Pennsylvania: Part 4: Piece-by-Piece Evaluation*

We're speaking with Jordan Pescuci, from the University of Pennsylvania. And now we're going to ask Jordan to go through each piece of the application and tell us a little bit about how the University of Pennsylvania uses those pieces, in the evaluation process. So Jordan, let's start with the quantitative side of things, maybe you can tell us a little bit about what you look at, and what you're looking for, when you review academic documents. >> When it comes to academic documents, we're looking for authenticity first. We're looking at a student's transcript and we would like it both be original and the official translation. So if it's coming to us from a different language, you would get that translated, but we also expect the original as well. Of what we're looking for is, you know, performance in whatever the system means in the context of your specific school and education system. So, we understand that there's different countries where internal markings are used more as motivators, and so they are going to appear lower. And that it's really the national examination that's going to carry the most weight. All of that is fine. We are fortunate that leave along history of bringing students from all over the world. And so our team is really versed in education systems from everywhere and we will always reach out to you or your school directly with further questions. So, primarily we are looking for the originals, we are looking for the transcripts. And then we're looking for any national examination that would be required. Whether it's your IGCSE, results in an A level system, whatever system of education that you're coming from. And if there are predicted results that would be part of that as well, we're going to ask for that. So, we are asking for your school to give us an indication of what you are expected to earn on your school leaving examinations, on your national examinations or whatever might be required in your system? >> Okay. So, similarly, when you look at English language proficiency testing what is it that you, that you look for? >> We are looking for consistency, when it comes to English language proficiency testing. We do recommend that students applying to Penn have an internet based TOFL score of 100 or higher. But it's not just simply of reaching that number. It's about the consistency between the different breakdown subject areas. So if a student had a very low score in speaking or listening or reading, sometimes that would be of a little bit concern for us and we would really question why one section was so much lower or higher than another. So we're, we're looking for students to just demonstrate that they would be able to keep up in a fast paced English speaking learning environment. And that's one of the things that we'll look to in addition to any grades that you might have in English, plus obviously, your SAT or ACT. >> You just mentioned either the SAT or the ACT. >> Mm-hm. >> Penn requires students to submit testing and they will accept either the ACT plus writing or the SAT plus two subject tests. >> Okay. >> Does Penn have a preference, one versus the other. >> There's no preference, no there's no preference at all. I think that a student would just have to give themselves enough time to experiment. Sometimes you'll find that you respond very differently to the different styles of tests, but there's no preference. >> So when it comes to test scores. >> Mm-hm. >> How does Penn use test scores as part of the evaluation process. Sure, so, the test scores, I'll be honest with you, that obviously it's the one piece of the application that's probably tell us, telling us the least, or at least the least interesting information about an applicant. But it is one of the universal truths that all applicants will submit this one, same piece of information. So, with so many grading systems around the world, grading scales, ways of measuring performance, this is at least one consistent standard that applies to every person in the applicant pool. So we're really looking at it as a continuation or building off of your academic record over time. That's

what we're going to look to first, what you have been doing in your education system, those grades over time. But this is usually we're looking for students to score somewhere in the range. Of what would probably be appropriate for their pre-existing academic record. We're very aware of cultural differences, of differences that might exist in various parts of the world. And so we definitely are evaluating everything with a cultural lens applied to it, and the same is true when it comes to the standardized test. Again that consistency piece, can sometimes be key. So if we suspect, you know, that a student has one section that is much higher or lower than another, we're going to look at that lower section, and we're going to try and piece together why that may be the case for that student. >> So Penn is one of a relatively small number of schools that requires SAT subject tests for students who took the SAT reasoning test. How does Penn use the subject tests again in the evaluation process. >> The subject test can have a few different a few different roles to play in an application. One is that we actually see that international students will tend to score better. On the subject test. Mm-hm. Sometimes than they might the over all reasoning examination. >> Because it allows them to focus in on you know, a particular topic. That may be a particular strength of theirs. The other piece is for something specific or a, a more quantitative feel to like engineering. If a student hasn't taken physics recently or doesn't have any grades yet in physics that, you know, maybe this their last year is the year that they're taking physics. Taking a subject test in physics is a way for that student to demonstrate knowledge or proficiency that might not otherwise be present in their application. So occasionally you'll see students wisely use subject testing to demonstrate proficiency in areas related to an academic subject that they might not otherwise have established in their application. Jordan, you mentioned that, that Penn is part of common application and as the common, as part of the common application, all students have to submit an essay. >> Yeah. >> In your opinion, what makes a good essay? >> I'll share a few pieces of advice that I hope students will find helpful. I often find that they approach the essay wondering what does a college want to hear? The real question that you have to ask is what is it that you want to say? it's not, there's no wants on our end except to get to know you better. And if you think about all of the pieces of the application, there's very few parts that are left completely up to you. Everything else is either numbers or already decided or coming in from other people. But this is where you have the real opportunity to shape your first impression and the impression that you are going to leave with the admissions committee. In our committee based admissions, we use a student's words and information for and against them and so we can't make assumptions. We are going by exactly you know, what it is that you are sharing with us. Students feel a lot of times I think burdened about finding the right topic. And its not so much the topic its again what is the point what are you trying to convey. And sometimes the simplest ideas are the ones that help us understand the most what kind of roommate you would be what kind of classmate which is really what we're trying to glean from that part of the application. The last you know piece of advice is I know that a lot of well intentioned guide books or advice that you may get from other people tend to steer students toward topics that make students all sound the same. You know, you can imagine that every student has been influenced by a character in literature or by an event or another person. And so students will write wonderful essays about how much maybe a grandparent meant to them or a teacher. But at the end of that we learned so much about a grandmother but we don't learn actually about the student who's applying to college. And so sometimes it's helpful that when you get to the end of the essay if you can summarize your main point in one sentence and then add the phrase, and that's why I should be admitted to your university it can help see

if you're on the right track. So if the main point of your entire college essay is my grandmother was a wonderful person, and that's why I should be admitted to your university. You can kind of see that that's not going to be as useful to the admissions committee as you intended it to be. The other, the last and final thing that I'll say about that is stick with what's comfortable for you. It's not the time to reinvent yourself. I see students a lot of times take risks. And misinterpreting what that means. So, you know, if you've never written a poem before don't submit one for your college essay. Express yourself in a way that's comfortable for you, that sounds like you. The intended goal of this personal statement should be that in a cluster of like 20 essays you could put them on a table. And one of your best friends could come by and sort through them and pick out exactly which one is yours. Because if your best friend can recognize you from that essay then the admissions committee has a real shot at learning much more about you. >> As part of the common application Penn also has a supplement which you mentioned and on your supplement you have an additional essay question. In that essay question, you ask the admissions committee would like to learn why you were a good fit for your undergraduate school choice. College of Arts & Sciences, School of Nursing, The Wharton School or Penn Engineering. Please tell us about specific academic service and or research opportunities at the University of Pennsylvania that resonate with your background interest and goals. >> Hm-mm. >> So, what are you hoping to learn from this question? So, what we are hoping to get out of our supplemental question is a sense of what the student can see themselves having an impact in or with at Penn. Anything that excited them to apply in the first place, why they chose the undergraduate school or program that they did. We want to know that this is a thoughtful application and we want the student to share with us that thought process that they went through in choosing to apply to Penn and how they can see themselves there. We're looking for students who, you get the sense that they would just hit the ground running, so to speak, once they got to campus. And we definitely want students who are very intentional, with their applications. So, this should never, you know, again going back to the essay, the idea that this has to be specific, and there has to be a reason for ever school that you're applying to. This essay especially, you cannot send supplemental essay to the same schools. You can't write one supplemental and send it to like ten different schools. We see students trying to do that every year. Those consistently students who sometimes don't even take out the other university's names. When they send it. [LAUGH] And so it's just that idea of obviously that's not the most thoughtful or put together case for why you should be part of this incoming class. So with all the hard work that's going to go into this application, don't let it fall down at this moment would be my piece of advice, is that I see a lot of students who don't treat this part. The supplemental question with the same care that they've given to all these other years of hard work and pieces of the application. Where as really this is what what we, is going to help bring you to life for the admissions committee. >> So, in the evaluation process at Penn, how important are these essays? >> These essays are critical, because you can imagine that there's really no other way for us to, hear directly from the applicant. It's what fills in all the rest of the, you know, fills in the picture so to speak. It really helps make things clear. It adds the color. It's the whole, you know, it's the way that you can finally bring someone to life I think is the best way to put it. And we use, you know, we can hear the excitement the nervousness, the anxieties of being 16, 17, 18 and that's what we really look forward to. We don't expect these essays to convey polished, already established person. We don't expect them to sound like, a resume for job. We very much expect them to sound like a person who is on the brink of a very exciting time in their life and we look forward to these essays for that reason. Along with the four

colleges at Penn there are also some dual degree and specialized programs and if a student is applying to one of those specialized programs their asked to write an additional essay. So that would be a third essay. >> Mm-hm. >> How different is the admission process for one of these specialized programs, compared to what we've already discussed. >> So, at Pen, we have the four undergraduate schools. And, that creates unique opportunities for us to create partnerships between the schools. Students who get here as single degree students do have the option to pick up a second undergraduate degree at another point. Multiple minors, or concentrations across the university. But also we've identified unique intersections of fields that are important to society or solving creative problems at this time, that students can apply directly as incoming first year students. So these coordinated dual degree programs, they allow students to graduate with two undergraduate degrees. We ask for a third essay that helps us understand why this student thinks that they would be a particular fit for this specialized program. The coordinated dual degrees have smaller class sizes so they're admitting only ten, 15, 20, maybe 40 students in some cases. So, the community that they're creating is much more specific and really asks students to think about the intersection of fields. So it's not simply I enjoy international relations and I enjoy business. Or I enjoy engineering and I'm interested in, in entrepreneurship and management. It's why these two fields together are going to be critical for your success and your studies as a student. So from these additional essays we're really trying to get at students articulating to us that they understand this intersection of knowledge. >> When we discussed your requirements you mentioned that Penn requires two academic letters of recommendation. >> Mm-hm. >> What makes a good letter recommendation and how were the letters used in the review process? >> Hm-mm. Mainly we are looking at letters of recommendation as somebody to validate that a student is capable of higher-level academic work. Because students are going to be asked to work closely with faculty when they get here, it's good to see that a student had that strong working relationship with teachers prior. So we're going to ask sort of what kind of student were you? Were you involved? Were you engaged? Helping us understand you know, did you raise your hand? Did you contribute? If you were absent, would they have noticed? so, what kind of impact are you already having in the classroom is usually really useful thing for us to find out, from those letters. From a student's standpoint, my advice is always, tell your recommendors why you have, you are choosing them. Let them know why you'd like them to rate for you? Where it is that you are applying and the things you are interested in? And that will help them gauge A, are they able to do this for you. You always want to ask in person. And you need to see the reaction, you need to understand if they have the time to do so. And it will also help them understand what your aspirations are so they can make it a little bit more specific to you. We know that there's big cultural variations and so we joke around a lot in our international team. That if you had a spectrum of teacher recommendations from around the world. You have the put the Americans on one side because we are very full of superficial pray is where every student is the best student in their career. And then on the other side, I think that you will probably have to put French teachers or teachers that stays around the world. They tend to be very rigid and not really, you know, they are, they are a little bit Stingier with their praise. But, and then somewhere in the middle I would say teachers from British systems because they're very matter of fact. And then everyone else around the world sort of fills in on, on either side of that spectrum. So we're very aware of that so you don't have to, you know, what we want it to be, again, is authentic. We want it to be you know, actually coming from your teacher, you want it to sort of capture their real sense of that environment. >> So when a student gets a letter and submits them as

part of the application, how important are they in, in the decision process? >> Having input from your current academic environment, people know you from a classroom setting is really important to us. So, we are very curious to hear if it's gelling with the impression that we are getting of you from other parts of the application. We want to if there is anything that they can bring to light that's new, anything that they raise that we should pay attention too. And they really help us with that consistent image of this applicant. Who is it that we are being introduced to and who is on the other side? So they're really critical in helping to, fill in those pieces especially from an academic standpoint. >> On, on the common application, it's listed that Penn will also accept the, optional letter of recommendation or an optional letter of recommendation. How is the optional letter used, and when should a student, Submit the optional letter, and when should they maybe just let that go? >> Sure, I'll try to expand to really any optional or supplemental material because I think that the same rules apply. An optional letters should only be used if it's conveying something that is not otherwise found in your application. So, if your teachers are already saying that your a good student, a wonderful community member, you wouldn't need an optional letter to also add, that your a great community member, a good student involved. Definitely less is more when it comes to the application process and I really think that that's an important lesson for students to, you know, think about. You don't water down your achievements. You want the admissions committee to be able to focus on the most important parts. Once it's presented, you know, once we have captured it, we leave you, we're moving on. Where as if we keep turning the, you know, our schooling, cause it's all electronic. If we keep looking for the application. And we're just seeing the same thing over and over again. It's really distracting us from bringing you to life and making you more than just the one fact that we keep learning. Same is true with a resume. What I see a failing, is students will. Submit optional letters of recommendation, or a resume, instead of using the parts of the application that are actually asked for and required. So, the first thing you have to do before you even think about including anything optional is, have you maximized the parts of the application that are already being asked for. because that's where every admissions committee is going to first go and look to. If you find that from the pieces of the application there really was something important about you that you could not get across there. That's when optional or supplemental material comes in but only then. >> So Penn does not officially require an interview as part of the application process. But some international applicants will be invited to interview with a Penn graduate. If a student interviews. How will that interview be used in the evaluation process? And what should a student expect from an admissions interview? >> That's a great question. So Penn has made a commitment to every year increasing the number of students that we are able to offer interviews to. We hope to some day get to 100% coverage. Every year that grows up significantly thanks to our extensive alumni network. What it means though is that you may or may not get contacted, and it has nothing to do with how viable your application it is. It strictly has to do with the availability of alumni in your area or the availability of alumni to be able to conduct maybe a virtual interview with you. That time frame, the number of applicants, all of those things but it has nothing to do with your potential decision. So, our alumni, they will reach out to students in one of two ways, typically, one is to schedule an in person interview or to invite them to an in person setting. And the other may be to have a Skype interview. Or if Skype wouldn't be possible then finding some other way to connect whether it's through the phone or G-chat, whatever it might be. So our interviewers are constantly reaching out to students and the interviewer that you speak with may or may not be from a similar geographic area. And they may or may not be

from a similar area of study that you're interested in. But that's okay. We see it as a great opportunity for two people to have a conversation about a university that hopefully they're both excited about. The number one thing for applicants is to come prepared with a question, or with an answer to the question, why did you apply to Penn? I know it sounds silly again, but it really is true you know. Students to be able to talk about that in a thoughtful way. This is not a formal interview, this is not, you know, like an Oxbridge interview or a job interview or anything like that. This is much more informal. But trying to remember that you're leaving an impression and these alumni are going to report back to us this impression that they have received. They'll try, you know we understand the nerves, but try to not be nervous about it. This really is just an opportunity for you to express yourself in a different medium than the writing that you've already included with the application. To me, I think a good question to ask in an interview is, you know, what are you most proud of about your Penn experience? because it can sometimes help open up whole new channel for the alumni to really talk about things that matter to them, at least that they connected with the campus. That maybe you hadn't as, considered before as an applicant. And definitely last but not least is, you know, make sure that you're on time, make sure that it's, you know, that you're going into it prepared but not over prepared. So definitely no need to show up with a resume. I think I see a lot of students show up and talk a lot about aspects that are already included in their application. They feel like they have to catch this person up to speed on their application. Avoid that temptation because then what happens is that the interviewer is only able to report back on things we already know. What we're looking to the interviewer for is answers to the question of, what do you think the student would be like at Penn? And what are they like? How did you enjoy the conversation? So, it's definitely based on things that are much more relaxed. More like having a conversation with a friend. And we're trying to incorporate their feedback to add to the impression that we've already come to as an admissions committee. So, is this inline with the impression that we've already, sort of, put together from the application? Is there something new that was raised? Is there a different dimension that came out? And it's just added as one additional piece of information. >> As a common application schools, students will be prompted to submit the school forms that you talked about before as part of submitting their online application. How do you use the school forms during the evaluation process. >> The school forms are really helpful in establishing the contexts of your performance within the larger school environment that you have been in. So, it's an opportunity for you know, counselor, headmaster, school official, whoever will be filling these out on your behalf. To help us understand any, anything that's specific about the system of education. The way that the curriculum is offered. The way that the examinations have been administered. The availability, or lack thereof, of activities in your school. All sorts of things can come out through these school forms, and that's what we're really looking for is helping us understand your specific school environment. And the opportunities that are available there as well as, what does a strong performance mean within your school environment. >> So, do you have any advice for students who don't have someone whose, called a you know, a quote unquote school counselor or maybe not even someone whose fluent in English to fill those forms out? >> I do. I would definitely suggest starting with Education USA as a resource there's offices all over the world. Their staff is very knowledgeable about how to approach these forms? How to work with your school directly? The key here is that, I just want to emphasize that there is a whole range of free help. So whether it's calling the university or college that you're applying to directly, writing them with questions, visiting their websites, Education USA. These are all wonderful places to start that can

really get you going in the right, right foot. And from there that, you know, somebody who should be able to help identify. A lot of times I see students use English teachers. If that's somebody in the school environment that's the most comfortable or that can help with translation and that can help bringing the application together. But the key is, is that you have to use someone from your school. These have to be coming directly from your school. So, anything that our office can do, I'm sure that again, Education USA, im, Penn you know does not endorse a student using either an agency or an independent party to submit these on your behalf. So we need them to come directly from the school in order for it to be considered a complete application. >> Jordan you probably hear this a lot but the students that I work with will, they'll come to me and they'll say My school wasn't like an American school. >> Yeah. >> We don't have clubs or organizations, or activities. So do your expectations for international students and their involvement, do your expectations differ for international students versus American students? >> Yes. I wouldn't even necessarily group it so large as international students. Our expectations differ for students period, depending on the context of their environment, and so if you are attending a school or a system that has much more limited involvement. If it's not you know, something that's culturally a, a norm in your society, that's completely fine. If you have family responsibilities, there's a whole host of reasons why students' experiences outside of the classroom will look different. And so we absolutely, you know, are excited about variations. What I would say is that we want to hear from you about whatever it is that you're excited about. So, it doesn't have to be an organized school activity, maybe it's a hobby again, maybe it's a job or a responsibility. We just want to know what are these things that get you excited? What are these things that, you know, when you're not in school, when you're not studying, when you're not eating, and when you're not sleeping, what might you be found doing? >> So Jordan, how do you use that information about what a student is involved in or what a student is excited about? An, how important is that information in, in coming up the, you know, with the application decision. >> It's important to help us understand what you might potentially bring to our campus. So, what you might potentially get involved in? What particular talents or interests you may contribute and what experiences you are bringing with you? We are excited about genuine passions. We are definitely weary about students who all of a sudden, in the year leading up to their application, created 20 different clubs. So it's that idea of consistency of really, you know, just genuinely what makes you excited. The common application has a funny instruction where it asks you to list these things in order of importance to you. And I think that's an important cue because it's not necessarily the one that sounds the most prestigious, the one that has taken the most of your time. But the one that means the most to you might be something completely different. And from that we can really understand what it is that makes you tick, what it is that you're going to bring here with enthusiasm. >> Something that's written about a lot that can sometimes confuse students is demonstrated interest. At Penn, do you use demonstrated interest in the evaluation process and why or why not? >> No, we don't. There are a few reasons. One is that, it's, one is that, it would dramatically increase our, you know, email load, our time, everything that when you have over 35,000 applications. If every student was contacting and sending updates and all those things we wouldn't be able to actually even admit a class. So it's definitely we do not track that at all. We know that different students have different resources only when a student generally has a question that cannot be answered from the website or other sources would it be appropriate to reach out. We love talking to students, meeting them on the road. We're happy to answer questions, you know, when the students have them. But the

reality is, is that you can easily find the same information most of the time on our website or through a general inquiry. So finally, in, in looking at all of the pieces, are there any common warning signs or problems that you see in international applications that maybe sometimes lead to denials? >> I would, speaking for Penn specifically I'm, you know, there's two things that I would mention. One is when there's just general inconsistencies. When we can't really piece together an accurate picture of the student. So, whether it's inconsistencies or questions about authenticity of documents, pieces of the application that just don't seem to match and we, you know, all of our detective work leads to dead ends. Anything like that, that just sort of, just means inauthentic or less than genuine. It can definitely raise red flags in the admissions process. The other pieces that for Penn, we do have the four undergraduate schools. We ask that question about why you applied to the undergraduate school or program you chose on our application specifically so that we can understand that a student knows what they're getting into. So at Penn sometimes we see students apply to. I don't know. The college of Arts and Sciences, but all they talk about is business. Well you should of applied to the Wharton School of Business. Or we see a student you know apply to engineering, but all they're talking about is physics in the College of Arts and Sciences. And so, we just need to understand that a student has a sense of what Penn offers, of what they're getting into. And that can definitely be a little bit harder when you're coming from farther afield. So giving yourself time to research the website, ask questions if necessary, definitely will help with that part. >> And we'll be right back with the final piece of our discussion with Jordan. [BLANK_AUDIO]