New College Counsellor at BISB

Mr. Richard (Rick) Lenfest is the new college counsellor, replacing Ms. Ellen Boucher, at BISB. He has over 35 years of administrative experience at independent schools, both boarding and day. Outside of the work he has done as a college counsellor, he has experience working in athletics, as a lacrosse, soccer, and hockey coach. Before this, he received a Bachelor’s Degree from The Ohio Wesleyan University in Modern Europe and Latin American Studies, as well as a Masters from Ohio University in Spanish Literature. We, at BISB, are proud to welcome him into our community.

We sat down with Mr. Lenfest to learn more about him and introduce him to the community.

*How did the opportunity to become BISB’s College Counsellor come to life?*

I left the Newman School in July, 2020 with the idea of starting my own college and independent school consulting business. Then COVID interrupted things, as many of my clients decided to delay their plans to next year. So I was looking to get back into teaching or college guidance, leading me to interview with a number of places. Fortunately the British international School had a job available. It was great because the school is near to where I live. Most importantly, it's an IB school, something I know very well having been an IB teacher and administrator.

*Why do you think there are so few IB schools in Massachusetts?*

Massachusetts, you know, for being such a progressive place, is a very traditional place when it comes to education. They look to schools like Andover and Exeter, and others, which use traditional systems like the Harkness method and Advanced Placement (AP). I think their philosophy is if it ain't broke, don't fix it, because they view their current systems working well. Roxbury Latin can still get their 10 kids into Ivy Leagues, for example.

IB gives a unique opportunity for a really rigorous curriculum that will serve students well now and for the rest of their life. It can give students an advantage in applying to colleges and universities, which is what I have seen on my end. If you can do the IB well and score highly, the world is your oyster.

*What do you think is your secret sauce: something that differentiates you from other college counselors?*

I have the experience of doing almost anything there is to do at a school. I've coached three seasons, I've taught five classes a day, and I have been an advisor. Personally, I think the advisory role is sometimes the most important role, that is not in your contract. You develop a strong relationship with the student, becoming a local parental figure for them and being their advocate. Being a college counselor is very much the same.

In addition, I am a parent myself. So I've already been through the system three times with my children. I have been through the application process for independent schools and then for college. So, I've been on both ends of it, which really enables me to help students and families find the best fit for them.

*What is the most common adjective that the staff at your old school would use to describe you?*

One word would be approachable. [Students] have heard me say my door's always open, wander in any time, and unless it's super important, I'll drop what I'm doing and talk to you. It doesn't have to be academic, it could be sports related or life related.

*How do you plan to get to know the seniors in such a short amount of time?*

So besides having the one-on-one, I want to go to the extra curriculars, watching athletic contests or musical assemblies, or anything along those lines. I also want to go and sit in on some classes and see what students are like in the classroom where I can talk to the teachers as well. This way I will get to see students not only outside the classroom, but in the classroom as well, something that would really help me with the letters of recommendation that I will write.

*As you reflect back on your decades of experience, what’s the 2-3 common traps you see students falling into during their college application process?*

Focusing on one kind of school and not properly doing their homework on it. I've helped a lot of students get into their dream school and when they get there, they hate it and want to transfer within a semester or at the end of the year. My biggest piece of advice would be to thoroughly research schools, visit schools, and know if that is where you want to be. Another trap would be applying to too many reach schools, that could be a good fit but are really competitive schools. In this case, students don’t have a good backup. I’ve seen it happen where fantastic students only apply to really selective schools, and end up not getting in or getting waitlisted to all of them, while not having a plan B or plan C.

*Given a 30%+ increase in applicants in some colleges (SAT optional, COVID gap year), what becomes even more important for students to keep top of mind in their application?*

Starting to take initiatives and do activities early on to show consistency over a long period of time is important for students to do. It is also important to start working very hard on academics earlier on as well. While it is important to take on a range of extracurriculars, students should not spread themselves too thin. You want to be able to do a few things very well and have the best experience that you can in them. If you are trying to do a million things at once, you are not going to do them all well. I can just speak from my own experience here at Newman, where I had 10 different jobs.

*What are the coolest kinds of personal statements you have read?*

Some of the best personal statements I’ve read are the non-traditional ones where someone talks about a significant experience and goes into detail about how they really had an epiphany, something that really changed the direction of what they wanted to do in life. Any essay that is like that, as opposed to one where you're just regurgitating all of your accomplishments, is strong. The admissions officers read thousands and thousands of applications and essays; one that's going to stand out is one that is unconventional. Too many people recount life's experiences, and what they might want to do in a superficial way.

We thank Mr. Lenfest for taking the time to sit down with us. We appreciate him for his hard work and wish him the best of luck in helping the seniors get into excellent colleges.