

Helping Your Child With the College Admission Process

How can I Help My Child with the College Admission Process?

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The college search, application, and admission process requires a lot of work. It can also be difficult and confusing for many students. You, as a parent, should play a significant role in the entire process. Your encouragement and assistance can make the experience much easier and less stressful.

You can help by dismissing myths such as “the college you attend makes you for the rest of your life.” No institution can do that. There is no such thing as only one perfect college for each college-bound student. You can help your child find the college that suits his or her individual needs.

The assistant headmaster for external affairs at St. George’s school in Rhode Island offered some very insightful advice in the following excerpts from his article entitled “*Taming the College Search.*”

“...Well I’m really not an expert, but I do have a point of view and I feel so strongly about it that I would like to share it with other parents who are about to begin the heartaches and joys of college admission: high school guidance counselors may also find it a useful tool for communicating with parents about this emotionally charged search.

I believe that parents are critical to the process—critical in the sense that they can make it go well or make it much worse than it should be. College admission should be educational and, like most educational experiences, there are mentors and there are students. Parents and the college counselors are the mentors, with separate and distinct, but mutually supportive, roles.

Both parents and counselors have to understand that teenagers don’t know anything about these colleges except the hearsay they have gleaned from others. Parents and counselors should also know that these students are anxious, even fearful, because they view college selection as the first big test of their own self-worth. Indeed, they place a disproportionate amount of importance on this process.

Our starting point as parents and counselors should be that there are 3,400 colleges and universities in the United States. Among them there must be at least five schools, of varying degrees of selectivity, where our children could be happy and challenged. It is the role of the counselors to help us identify that small group of schools. It is up to parents to help our children develop a level of comfort and confidence to sustain them through the selection process.

With these thoughts as background, what should we parents do?

1. Start the process early. I strongly recommend that you use spring vacation of the eleventh grade year to visit colleges. Most colleges will be in session and seeing them in action offers your child the chance to imagine himself or herself as a student. Try to arrange your visit so that you can go to a class, have lunch in the commons, watch a game or practice, hang around. You need to do these things because tours and information sessions begin to sound alike. And once they begin sounding alike, the colleges become harder to differentiate and big universities don't feel any different from small colleges. They just look different. And that's not a good enough measure.

Having said this, I don't think it's necessary to immerse yourself in every college, particularly on that first trip. I'd recommend that you plan a college trip which allows you to take a closer look at some places and a more superficial look at others...

If you keep in mind that your child does not know what "big" means, what "small" means, what "city" means—then you're going to be helpful because you can show them. Organize the first trip in such a way that you test all preconceived notions.

2. There is no such thing as a "safety" and no such thing as a "first choice." We do our children a terrible disservice by allowing them and allowing ourselves to characterize colleges, or to rank colleges, in any way other than by their relative degree of selectivity. There are colleges that are more selective and there are colleges that are less selective. What makes one more selective and another less selective depends on the child. And our children do not have any choices until they receive letters of admission. While in the application process, I urge you to never ask your child to identify his or her "first choice." The question isn't relevant and the answer can only set up your child for failure. As a matter of fact, I strongly urge you to tell your child never to divulge a "first choice" even if he or she has one in mind. No one needs to know the name of that college. It's just as important never to characterize a school as a "safety." To do so, again sets in motion the psychological forces for failure. Remember this is a rite of passage wherein your child is measuring self-worth. If a "safety" has been identified and that is the only school where your child is admitted, it says to him or her, "I've failed." What I suggest when curiosity gets to you, ask only "what five schools do you like?" And suggest to your child when the question of "first choice" and "safety" are posed by others, to dodge the question and, in response, identify the group of colleges in which he or she is interested.

3. Concentrate on finding the right, less selective colleges first. To ensure the success of the college admission process, you really should focus your child's primary attention on finding the desired one or two colleges where his or her admission is most assured. Too often, the search dwells upon finding the most selective colleges, and the less selective ones are tacked on to the final application list as an afterthought. When the afterthought turns out to be the only choice, everyone is disappointed. In my opinion, every application should be filed with the thought in mind that 'if this is the only college which accepts me, I would be delighted to go there.'

4. Set forth your parental requirements about college early. If you are going to place limits on distance, cost, or some other distinguishing characteristic of a college make that clear to your child up front. For example, to wish and hope that a college will provide the financial aid that you think you require may set in motion the forces for disappointment for you and for your child. Therefore, you need to educate yourself in advance about the realities of financial aid. If you make your issues clear right from the beginning, you will save yourself and your child a considerable amount of anxiety down the road.

5. Understand clearly the limited role of the college counselor. The college counselor does not get your child to college. Your child gets himself or herself into college. The college counselor can advise and help identify the selectivity of colleges, but parents are just as important, and in my opinion more important, to the success of the college admission process. You need to set aside the time. You need to listen to your child, go with him or her on visits, and create a climate which will minimize the possibility of failure by understanding what your child is going through emotionally and psychologically.

If you get involved and stay involved, the college admission process will go well, even if there are a few rejections along the way.”