

Navigating the College Admissions Process with Your College-Bound Child

By Heather Ricker-Gilbert

Navigation is the best word I can think of to describe the role of parents in helping their children through the sea of information surrounding the college admissions process. The sailing is not always smooth and the waters are often untested. At the same time lessons in self understanding along with new adventures are part of this experience. The seas can be rough, but hopefully the trip is rewarding. In the popular book *The Gatekeepers*, set at Wesleyan College, in Middletown, CT, a student is quoted as saying: “Applying to college is about trying to control all the things you couldn’t control even if you tried.”

December is the time when the parents of seniors are reminding their children to finish essays and applications; while the parents of sophomores and juniors are beginning to think about what lies ahead for their children after high school. As an educator and a consultant specializing in college admissions services, I offer parents five suggestions for helping their child navigate this very special time in their lives....the college selection and admissions process:

1. Be informed

There are hundreds of great institutions out there: private and public two and four year colleges, research universities, liberal arts colleges, conservatories, technical schools. Investigate what they offer in size, location, and faculty. Learn what are their strong programs and special advantages? Try and get a copy of the college catalogue in which all the courses and faculty are listed. In addition, find out as much as you

can about financial aid and how to apply for both need and merit-based aid.

There are many resource books in your public library and in bookstores along with a number of websites such as www.collegeparents.org. Most local high schools have helpful links on the guidance office webpage or you can talk directly with your high school guidance counselor or an educational consultant. Being informed is prudent, according to Loren Pope, author of two books I would recommend, *Looking Beyond the Ivy League*, and *Colleges That Change Lives*. He states, “A house may be the costliest thing most families buy, but college-which is second-is far more important, because that investment affects their teenager’s future.” If you know a bit about schools and how to approach them you can help your child be realistic and positive about the college admissions process so he/she can thoughtfully select a college appropriate to his/her future goals.

2. Don’t Take Over

While you want to be informed, try not to be consumed by the college admissions process. You are not applying to college, your child is! Watch your choice of words! This is not “our” college search. Children may become concerned about disappointing over-involved parents, or they may lose interest in the whole process. Don’t make phone calls, set up appointments for interviews or be too demanding of admissions personnel. At a recent visit I made to Bates College, a savvy admissions officer, at the end of his informational presentation, told the audience he would only take questions from students in the audience, not

their parents. Not surprisingly, the student response was far greater when mom and dad had to keep quiet.

3. Communicate and Listen. Occasionally Offer Advice.

It's important for parents to encourage good time management skills and make sure the college applicant in their family meets standardized testing and application deadlines. It is also important to talk about parameters or restrictions at the beginning of the process. Are there geographic, religious, or financial considerations which should be discussed prior to a student researching and applying to colleges. In other words, after your son or daughter is accepted to Lewis and Clark College in Portland, Oregon is not the time to state that you will only pay for one plane ticket home a year.

Communicate honestly, listen quietly, stay awake (we all know teenagers start talking late at night). Help your child assess what he is seeing, researching, discovering and evaluating.

4. Don't Make Decisions for Your Child

Your child needs to determine what is the right "fit" or "match" for him or her based on personality, abilities and interests. Just because you had a good experience at your alma mater does not mean he will. Just because you always wanted him to go to one of the "little ivies" or to a business college does not mean that they are the best choice for your child. Although consultation is important, the final decision about which colleges to apply to and possibly attend needs to be the student's decision. If your child makes the choice he/she will more likely to be happy with it. As *Washington Post* columnist, Jay Mathews writes in his

book Harvard Schmarvard “Recognize that it is your child’s college experience that matters, not yours, even if you are paying for it!”

5. Celebrate No Matter What!

Be positive, encouraging and proud of whatever the outcome may be of the college application and selection process. There is no one perfect school and most young people could be happy at several different institutions. You have all navigated well, so enjoy the outcome and look forward to sending your child off to the world of higher education with support and confidence. Happy Sailing!

*Dr. Heather Ricker-Gilbert is an independent college admissions counselor and welcomes your ideas for future articles. She can be reached at: collegewayways@comcast.net
www.collegewayways.com*