



Especially for Parents

Your Role in College Selection

Adolescents feel a tremendous amount of pressure associated with the college search. You, as parents, play an important role in making this experience more comfortable and productive for your children. You offer your children support as they go through this time of exploration. You act as cheerleaders when a child's confidence flags and when it is appropriate, you urge him or her on to higher goals. At the same time, you also help your children assess themselves and understand what they can realistically attain. If they aren't accepted at a particular school, you assist them in dealing with the disappointment and in moving on.

Parents, then, feel a great deal of pressure as well. Some of you may look upon college choice as the "final exam" of parenting and judge whether you have passed or failed by your perception of the "value" of your child's college admission. Try to maintain perspective! Resist the urge to think of the college selection process as merely a "numbers game." Your child is not a 32 ACT, a 1030 SAT, or a 3.15 GPA. Similarly, a college's quality cannot be summarized by a mathematical formula or a national magazine's rankings. Admissions decisions, while they all use numbers as a starting point, are not always rational or obvious, as admission people will sometimes admit after the fact. Making these decisions is, in truth, more of an art than a science.

As parents, you should acknowledge and share your aspirations, but keep them in the context of all the other factors that are part of your child's college search. You need to lend your support and your guidance to your child, but he or she should be the one to make the decisions and take the lead. Be there for your child, help assure that the right questions are asked, but *let your child be the one who asks those questions.*

For starters, you will probably be asking yourselves how to determine what makes a "good" college. Is it the percentage of applicants the institution accepts each year? Is it the school's average SAT scores? Is it the rating a college receives in a national magazine's report? These numbers, in our opinion, are a poor starting point at best, as they promise a "quick fix", often leading families away from the hard work of finding a truly relevant definition of a "good" institution.

In lieu of the quick fix, we would suggest that a college is good for an individual if it:

matches well a young person's academic, extra-curricular, social, and personal needs and goals.

You, of course, will add your own criteria to the definition: quality of academic programs and athletic teams; size, location and, yes, some numbers. Reference works, websites, and literature received from colleges will help, as will conversations with the college counselors. Visiting schools, however, is essential if you wish to learn first-hand about an institution's programs and "personality." Visits are time-consuming, yet they are invaluable for the process. We hope you will play the role of a researching assistant during these visits. Comparing notes, reactions, and insights will ultimately help your child to reach more informed decisions. In Chapter 4, "College Visits," you will find a detailed explanation of what to expect during your travels.

Ideally, families should be able to enjoy the college search. Given the right attitude, it can be a time for parents and children to connect closely with each other. Communicate, support, make suggestions, help your student plan and manage time, encourage the self-exploration that is so important, but try to leave these things in your child's control. Think of this as a time of discovery for all of you.