Adolescents experience a tremendous amount of pressure associated with the college search. You, as parents, play an important role in making this process comfortable and productive for your child. You offer support through this time of exploration. You act as cheerleaders when a child’s confidence waivers and at the same time, you also help your child assess him/herself. If your child isn’t accepted at a particular school, you help him/her to deal with disappointment and move on.

Parents 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” complete with winners and losers. 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 officers will sometimes admit. 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 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. To be clear, we don’t advocate for parents removing themselves from the process, instead, try to be the passenger rather than the driver.

For starters, you will probably be asking yourself 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 magazine? These numbers, in our opinion, are a poor starting point at best, as they are an easy answer, often leading families away from the hard work of finding a truly relevant definition of a “good institution” or a “good fit” for their child.
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 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 colleges, 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. 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 5, “College Visits,” you will find a detailed explanation of what to expect during your travels.

Many families ultimately 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 tasks in your child’s control. Think of this period in your child’s life as a time of discovery for all of you and the ultimate teaching moment for your child. If this approach is adopted, independence, confidence, and self-awareness accompany your child as they complete the college process.