

Chill Maxims for Frenzied Parents and Students as They Start the College Search Advice for parents and students to help them run the college search course successfully

by Mary Ann Willis - College Counselor

As the race for the “right” college starts, here’s some advice for parents and students to help them run the course successfully.

1. Focus on making a match. Find the next great place. As much as educational purists and people like me want college admissions not to be a business, it is. Think of these terms: enrollment management, tuition discounting, marketing, six-thousand-person wait-lists, enough early plan alternatives to sink a battleship, cross-applications, yields. Admissions will remain an escalating arms race until parents and students focus on student talents and needs. Where can the student go to have the opportunity (there are no guarantees even if you pay north of \$40,000 a year) to make the most of what he or she has? Tons of places. Take back control of the situation. Vote with your feet and tuition dollars. Erma Bombeck, a University of Dayton alum, said the grass is always greener over the septic tank. Make sure you know what is under the green, green grass of Super U. This is, after all, appropriately called a college SEARCH.

2. Take the see-what-is-out-there adventure attitude to heart. Be open to the possibilities. Hold onto the wonder and excitement factors. The college and the student should be better and different as a result of enrollment. Look for places that will develop the individual. That is a healthy approach. The caveat: applying to tons of places worsens the situation for all. Remain open-minded. Stretch with an eye on reality. Make a sincere vertical list. No school should appear on your list unless you would truly be happy to go there. Anything less than that attitude is gamesmanship. Gamesmanship makes the college admissions world worse for everyone. In August, I look my seniors squarely in the eyes and note: the student next to you applied to your first-choice school. On his own, or encouraged by his hovering parent, he did it just to see if he could get in. He didn’t really want to go to Whoopee U. He got in. You didn’t. Doing that at 27 schools has made a mess of the world of admissions. Not good for anybody.

3. Read, really read, good materials on college educations. This isn’t voodoo. Highly educated parents frazzle at what they think is the unknown. Do your due diligence. Approach the process armed with good information. Learn what preparation students need to have the best shot at getting out with a degree (Department Of Education Toolbox Revisited). See what experts say about the current mayhem (Jay Mathews, Harvard Schmarvard; Lloyd Thacker, Colleges Unranked). Check out the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) –a real world view of what really happens in classrooms and on campuses. Consult intelligently written works about what should be taught, how it is being taught, and how to maximize college-learning opportunities (Derek Bok, Our Underachieving Colleges).

4. Realize that good mentoring – in school, in a career, in life – is an amazing and extraordinary gift. Much of the best college mentoring takes place out of the classroom.

Much of it takes place with people other than professors. Look at the entire college environment. In a seven-day, 24 hour-a-day week, think about how little time is spent in a college classroom.

5. Early on and regularly, talk – really talk – about learning and college opportunities with your student. We’ve always understood as a nation that learning was to be valued (though at first we didn’t grasp that it should be for all varieties of individuals). Jefferson wanted three things listed on his epitaph. One of those was that he founded the University of Virginia. The rest of the world is rapidly and successfully copying the best parts of education models and goals we can’t seem to hold onto. We’ve somehow gotten the notion that learning is simply a school-product designed solely to get a career and make a buck. If we don’t encourage learning and foster the ability to adapt as information and situations change, the rest of the world is going to clean our clocks (Friedman, *The World is Flat*).

6. Stay calm. Visit colleges with your student. Remember, it is the student who is going to college—not you. Be open and honest about what the family can and/or is willing to undertake in terms of college financial support. Empower your student to own the process. Parents who take over the college search and application process tell their students that they are incapable of managing the college search and application process. That’s an awful message to give someone who is about to be on his own on a 24-hour-a-day basis.

7. College isn’t about getting in. It’s about getting out with a degree (and, hopefully, with less debt than the initial purchase price of a new car). It’s about learning information and having a career. However, if a student can only discuss USB circuit cards or price-to-earning ratios, we’re all doomed. Give me a college that teaches students to think, read, write, speak, analyze, and take action in a purposeful way. Make it a place that develops in students the ability to alter their course when the situation merits a change and conduct themselves and their undertakings in an ethical way. That would be a college offering a world-class, lifelong learning experience designed to maximize individual, national, and international assets for the long haul. That is my kind of place.