

Parent Tips for Navigating College Admissions

1. Starting with your student's first year of high school, ease into learning about current college admissions by attending any and all presentations offered by your student's school. Schedule an appointment with your student's counselor to share useful insights about your child + any issues that might impact his/her school achievement. Encourage your son/daughter to make regular visits to the counseling center to learn about summer programs and volunteer opportunities in addition to getting to know the counselor well before the senior year. Help your child develop a relationship with the counselor who can be an ally in keeping you all informed about developmentally appropriate experiences that might enhance the student's self-awareness as well as interests.
2. Along with becoming familiar with the college admission testing timeline, learn about general college application requirements for your instate schools. Do they require an essay? Recommendations? Have early application deadlines? Use an "Index grid" that gives a general idea of admissibility based on grades and test scores?
3. As early as 9th grade, start this process as a family by visiting college campuses while on vacation or visiting relatives. The point is for students to start establishing a "baseline" of how colleges differ...big/small; liberal arts/universities; urban/rural...basic characteristics that can be defined and thus becomes a part of the student's college knowledge. The emphasis needs to be on "exploration" and helping the student start to learn about identifying a *personal match* as opposed to being influenced by name recognition or other's rankings.
4. Parents also need to begin having honest conversations (between themselves and with your child!) about their expectations and limitations. Perhaps there are strong feelings about distance from home or type of school and financial issues may also impact college options. It would be appropriate to share this information with the school counselor during a Junior conference (after already having the discussion as a family) so that there are no misunderstandings as the college search process begins in earnest.
5. Along these lines, parents can ask the counselor to recommend some reading material that can give insight to the world of college admission (which can be quite random!) There are excellent books that will give parents a grounding on how to maintain a semblance of sanity during this sometimes stressful journey. Learning to tune out much of the media hype will become a useful defense mechanism (Nationally, the average acceptance rate for applicants is close to 70%, not including the highly selective colleges). If parents approach this with a sense of adventure and openness to colleges they've never heard of, the student is much more apt to discover multiple schools where the student can be successful.

6. During that Junior Conference, clarify with the counselor what kind of help will be available to your student with researching colleges and processing the college applications. How will students be informed about important college information? Is there a handout of useful questions students can refer to when meeting with a college rep or on a college visit? Does the counselor have a generic "college calendar" that includes college testing dates; deadlines for ROTC + recommended tasks to be completed during each month? What is the process for submitting college applications? Ordering transcripts? Getting recommendations?
7. Depending on the student and the level of selectivity of the schools he/she might apply to (if applying to highly selective schools, this step should be addressed by midway through the Junior year, otherwise, no later than the summer after Junior year), create a personalized calendar and define when each part of the process will be done. Agree on a schedule of college visits, a testing schedule, deadlines for when essay drafts will be completed and then the final essay, + a timeline for the completion of applications. The student needs to be in charge of this process and understand it is his/her responsibility to keep track of upcoming deadlines. At this time, it's appropriate for parents to offer their help while making it clear that they are quite confident in his/her ability to navigate this important process.
8. Parents might offer to research scholarship opportunities with an understanding that the student will complete an agreed upon number of scholarship applications. It's certainly appropriate for parents to investigate crime statistics for the colleges that their son/daughter is considering. Some students might want a parent's feedback on the college essay which needs to communicate who they are, how well they think and how well they write. Parents need to resist the urge to offer more than general verbal suggestions.
9. Parents should take the lead on being informed about the financial aid process---what forms are required by the colleges that their son/daughter applied to? What are the deadlines for applying? There should be open communication about whether the student will be requesting financial aid and the implications of that decision. Sometimes parents aren't comfortable discussing their finances with their children but at the very least, there needs to be an understanding of what role a financial aid package will play in the final decision.
10. Lastly, ALL communications with the colleges a student is interested in and/or applies to needs to be made by the student. This is perhaps the most difficult "piece" for parents to let go of but the implications are significant. Colleges are far more impressed with a student who has the self-confidence to make inquiries concerning his/her future, and students gain valuable experience in self-advocating as well as perceiving the parents' respect for the emerging young adult's ability to do so. IF a student is procrastinating about making a college choice, including sending out any applications, a family conference to clarify the young person's issues is strongly advised. Avoidance may be due to fear of rejection or ambivalence about continuing in a structured setting after high school. There are excellent GAP Year options that students benefit from and it's not an uncommon path for today's youth.