

Tips for Parents: Dos and Don'ts for Helping Your Child With the College Admission Process*

The college search and admission process is a life-changing event for your child, and often for the whole family. The beginning of the college search signals the beginning of a child's transition from teenager to young adult. As a result, it can be difficult for parents to strike the right balance of helping their child without taking over. Here are some dos and don'ts for parents entering the world of college admission.

DO Learn About the Process

Even if you have vivid memories of your own college decisions, realize that the college admission process has changed since you attended. Whether or not you attended college, invest some time in reading up about today's college admission process. Plan on attending college fairs and any informational meetings offered at NCHS. In addition, become familiar with the particular guidelines the NCHS counseling department has with regard to the handling of college applications.

DON'T Believe That There is Only One Right College

Choosing the "right" or "best" college implies that there is a single, magical campus that will meet students' needs completely. This is simply not true and puts too much pressure on your child during this process. The better question for your child to ask would be: "Is this college a good match for me and my needs?"

DON'T Make This "Your" Application Process

In his article, Joseph Allen bluntly states a truth that is sometimes overlooked: "The most frightening words admissions officers hear parents say are: 'WE are applying to your college.' The fact is it's not your turn. On every parent's list of schools they would choose for their child are their alma mater and the schools that turned them down. This is a great opportunity to recognize your child as an individual facing a world unlike the one in which you grew up..." Along these lines, think about allowing your child to "own" this process in as many ways as possible such as filling out the applications, writing the necessary essays, and making contact with college representatives. BUT...

DO Remind Your Child of Deadlines and Offer Help When Needed

Divide up the many complicated tasks involved in the college application process, as these can be daunting. Some tasks are perfectly appropriate for parents, such as finding out about deadlines, arranging for visits and helping gather information. For example you might sort through application materials and help our child formulate a schedule for completing and mailing all of the necessary components. This could prevent the nagging that has been known to take place in the households of some seniors!

DON'T Nag

"Say what you have to say and drop it," advises Scott White, a counselor from New Jersey. "If the process delays or changes because students don't do what they are supposed to do, this is one time they may have to live with the consequences". Remember, the goal is for your child to own the process, so that he/she can make college decisions that are right for him/her.

DO Discuss Restrictions Up Front

If there are financial or geographic restrictions that limit the range of colleges your child can consider, discuss them with your child at the beginning of the college search. Then your child won't waste time and energy researching colleges that he/she won't be able to attend, BUT...

DON'T Limit Choices Based on Cost

"Parents should certainly be willing to lay out economic realities to their children at the front end of the college search process, but should not shut out options based purely on sticker price," says Michael E. Dessimoz, associate vice president for enrollment services at Roosevelt University. It's always a good idea to encourage your child to include several affordable colleges among his/her choices. Remember that financial aid often helps families send their children to even the most expensive colleges, so don't be in a hurry to write these schools off.

DO Listen and Offer Advice

For many students, their choice of college is their first adult decision and it can be difficult. Likewise, it can be difficult for parents to find the right balance of guiding their child without making decisions for him/her. Try being a mirror and reflect back to them what you hear them saying as they talk about what they like or dislike about a particular school. Ask good questions and let your child supply the answers.

DON'T Make Decisions for Your Child

Your child needs to choose a college based on his individual abilities, interests and personality. To that end, beware of pressuring your child to apply to the colleges you would like him to attend. Of course, encourage your child to apply to a good range of schools, but support your child's final decision about which college he/she will attend. Allow him/her to "trust his/her gut" when it comes to picking a college.

DO Be Your Child's Cheerleader

The college admission process can be stressful and thus put a strain on your child and your relationship with him/her. Your child may feel uncertain about the decisions he/she must make, fearful of rejection from colleges, or anxious about meeting deadlines for both college applications and schoolwork. Over the course of the search process, your child may change his/her mind (more than once) about career aspirations, academic goals, or what he/she wants in a college. All of this is normal. Parents can help their college-bound child by offering plenty of encouragement, a listening ear and gentle guidance. Try to lighten up when you see that the stress is building and ask what you can do to help. "Normalize" things by pointing out that it is okay to change your mind during the process of making a big decision. Above all, express with your words and with your actions that you have faith in your child and their ability to make this decision.

*Much of this information was taken from an article written by Jennifer Gross for the National Association for College Admission Counseling. Some portions were taken from an article written by Joseph Allen and can be found on the Hinsdale South High School website.