

Tips for Parents: Dos and Don'ts for Helping Your Child Through 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. There are many good books on this topic in your public library or bookstore, and high schools often sponsor workshops for parents on college admission topics. Or ask your child's counselor to recommend helpful resources.

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 she won't be able to attend.

DON'T Limit Choices Based on Fees

"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 (IL). It's always a good idea to encourage your child to include several affordable colleges among his college choices. But remember that financial aid often helps families send their children to even the most expensive colleges. No matter your income level, find out all you can about financial aid. Your child's guidance counselor or colleges' financial aid offices can direct you to good resources and answer your questions about how financial aid works.

DO Remind Your Child of Deadlines

The life of a high school student is often very busy, and teenagers are still learning time management skills. So help your child begin keeping a calendar or day planner to keep track of all those college application deadlines (as well as her school work and activities).

DON'T Nag

"Say what you have to say and drop it," advises Scott White, a counselor at Montclair High School (NJ). "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 can make college decisions that are right for him.

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 her. "Parents should be aware of what is going on, should make sure that deadlines are not missed and the proper tests are taken, and should be available when the student wants advice," says White. Try to act as a sounding board for your child: 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 college(s) you would like him to attend.

"This is the first time the student is making a decision that should be theirs alone," says White. "About things such as schooling, camp, etc., it was your decision with your child's input. [The college choice] is the opposite."

Of course, encourage your child to apply to a good range of schools, but your child must decide for himself which colleges to apply to and which college to attend. After all, your child will be the one who spends several years living and learning at college.

DO Be Your Child's Cheerleader

The college admission process can be stressful. Your child may feel uncertain about the decisions she must make, fearful of rejection from colleges, or anxious about meeting deadlines for both college applications and her school work. Over the course of the search process, your child may change her mind (more than once) about her career aspirations, academic goals, or what 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. And don't forget to celebrate each step along your child's journey from high school to college.

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