



Keeping it Real:

Taking the Myths out of College Admissions

Type in “College Admissions” in the search bar on the internet and you’ll likely get thousands of results. It’s no wonder parents and students alike are stressed about applying to college. Sometimes, the hardest part of college admissions is just navigating the information. And while there is plenty of good information out there, there are also many myths that can send you and your teen on the wrong path. Here are a few of the big myths you might encounter. Avoid these mistakes and your student is sure to have a more successful journey:

Myth #1: Some secret strategy can get me admitted to college.

You’ve probably heard another parent saying they know someone who knows someone in “Favorite University’s” admissions office. Or maybe you’ve heard about a student sending in his application written on a flip-flop or some other creative substance. Yet, in reality, colleges admit students because they are a good fit for the school – someone who will contribute to the goals and purpose of the college, not because of who they know or because of some clever trick. Recommendations should be from adults who know your teen well – someone who can speak to the kind of student or adult your teen will become. Extracurricular activities should be chosen based on how they contribute to your teen’s **strength-based profile**. Choices that show your teen is seeking to grow as a student and future contributor to society are better than random activities to fill lines on an application. Finally, let your teen’s accomplishments speak for themselves. Admissions officers have precious little time to go through all the applications they receive. If your student’s application is clear and has a strong purpose, it will speak volumes over some unusual presentation.

Myth #2: Relying on magazine lists of “Best Colleges” is the best way to choose a college.

We love lists in America — Top Ten lists for football teams, Top Ten lists for most beautiful people. Even David Letterman had a top ten list. But when it comes to choosing a college, Top Ten lists leave out important factors for your rising college student. While there is certainly some use in the information they provide, these lists are often based on factors such as admissions rates, cost or other number-based factors. But lists can’t tell you what it feels like to hang out on campus on the weekend, or what type of students will be in your freshman classes. And those attributes are very important to your teen’s decision. Choosing a college should be based on fit. The better the fit, the more likely your teen will be successful and happy at the school. As a parent, you’ll potentially avoid the frustration of your teen feeling like she made a poor decision and the related costs associated with changing schools in order to find a better fit. There are thousands of accredited colleges in the U.S. with many excellent programs. Seek out the programs that will allow your teen to explore, grow, and enjoy her college experience.

Myth #3: The best time to visit colleges is after you have been admitted.

Have you ever ordered a pair of shoes online? You thought they looked nice in the picture and the reviews said they were comfortable, but when they arrived they were quite the opposite? Well, some students make the same mistake when applying to college. They apply based on what their neighbor said and the sharp-looking brochures they received in the mail (or that nice ranking from the magazine...remember Myth #2?). Except returning a pair of shoes is a lot less expensive and emotionally draining than finding out that the college your teen applied to doesn't fit them. If it is at all possible to visit a college before your teen applies, it is the best way to see if it is a school he can see himself attending for the next four years. It may cost some money to travel to the school, but it could possibly save you a lot more in the long run. Make certain your teenager spends time visiting different parts on and off the campus. Visit the library, dorms, and eating establishments. Ask current students what the campus is like on the weekends or during the summer. Sit in on a freshman class or two to get a feel for the teaching style of the university. Have him speak with someone from the department he is interested in majoring in. Attend a university sponsored event if you can. Enjoy sports? Go watch a game. Love the arts? Check out any museums or gallery events on campus or in the surrounding area. Let him have some time alone, too. You won't be with him there and he needs to know he will feel okay by himself.

Myth #4: If you don't have a perfect GPA, you'll never get accepted to a "good" college.

Of course there are well-known colleges, but there are also prestigious academic programs within less-known universities. Be sure to your teen explores her potential major and the corresponding college programs. And remember that most colleges admit over half of their applicants. The average acceptance rate for all four-year colleges in the U.S. is 64.7 percent (*U.S. News* 2017), and there are amazing success stories coming out of all types of colleges regardless of rankings.

Myth #5: Colleges are looking for a well-rounded student

Just when we thought we understood the game, the rules changed! Yes, 10-20 years ago, that was the way the game was played. High school counselors taught their students to dabble in a little bit of everything. Run track, act in a play, join the chess club and play the flute. Students were going crazy trying to fit in all of the different activities so that they would be well-rounded on their application. Now colleges have changed the way they approach their admissions. Instead of a well-rounded student, they want a well-rounded student body. Having a student body that has done a little of this and a little of that was creating an environment that didn't allow for much diversity and innovation. Schools now recognize that having a student who is an exceptional swimmer, along with a student who is passionate about community service, allows those two areas on campus to be stronger and more productive. Help your teen use this change to his benefit. By exploring his interests, he can turn one or two into passions that will allow him to better understand his strengths and weaknesses and hopefully, his future goals. If your teen loves piano, for example, encourage him to give some depth to his passion. Perhaps he can play piano on his own, take additional classes at the community center, play for a senior citizens' center, or teach elementary students for pay. Or, say he loves animals. Use that interest to explore potential careers by interning with a veterinarian or volunteering at an animal shelter or zoo. Call it "job shadowing" or an "extracurricular activity," but either way, colleges will call it "interesting."