



**Crunch Time:  
Solving the College Acceptance Dilemma**

**A Guide to Helping Your Student Decide  
Which College Offer to Accept**

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Dear Parent,

**Congratulations on taking the step to support your student through this important decision making process.**

**Choosing the right college is a difficult and stressful process. According to the National Center for Education Statistics of the U.S. Department of Education, many students do not remain through graduation at the colleges where they start out, and many do not graduate at all. For instance:**

- **Only 50% of the beginning students completed a degree or certificate within five years;**
- **13% were still enrolled after five years and had not completed a degree; and**
- **37% had not completed any degree and were no longer enrolled after five years.**

**College Parents of America's Crunch Time is a practical and easy-to-use tool to help parents and students organize, rank and compare the critical criteria on which to select the school that promises to best address the student's particular needs. The guide features recommended strategies to address common questions most often raised by students, a five-step process for organizing critical college information and eight key criteria for consideration.**

**While CrunchTime is a vital decision period, as a parent you are a vital partner not just this month but through your student's transition, adjustment and completion of their college education.**

**College Parents of America is the only national membership organization dedicated to advocating and serving on behalf of current and future college parents. Our mission is to help parents understand, prepare for and protect and maximize their family's college investment.**

**I invite you to become a member of College Parents of America. Only members enjoy the benefits and the peace of mind that they provide. From our GradGuard's™ Tuition Insurance to ID Theft & Resolution Service and the Student Protection Plan© that is offered to our premium members.**

**Please join us by calling 1-888-761-6702 or online at [www.collegeparents.org](http://www.collegeparents.org)**

**James A. Boyle  
President**

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## There's good news and bad news...

First, there were the long, stressful months of helping your student pour over college catalogues, wander around campuses, and read and re-read essays and application forms. Then, there were the nail-biting weeks of anticipation, waiting for your student to receive acceptance letters.

The good news: your student is IN, and IN, and maybe even IN again. The bad news: it's time for him/her to decide which offer to accept and which to reject, a decision often more difficult than the arduous process that brought your student this far.

## Why is this last hurdle so daunting?

1. Your student doesn't have a lot of time left to ponder this decision. Most schools require letters of acceptance by May 1, known as the "common reply date."
2. Many things may have changed since your student first applied to college. The admissions process is a very introspective exercise and it is not uncommon for a student to emerge from it six months later with very different ideas and ambitions than were previously held.
3. Many of your student's decisions were initially based on trying to determine "Which school will accept me?" (hence, the whole concept of "safety schools"). Now, your student must decide "Which school will I accept?" With this shift comes the possibility of using leverage to "negotiate," particularly in the area of financial aid.
4. And lastly, other previous assumptions – ranging from where your student's friends are going to school to your family's financial situation – also may have changed.

The objective of this guide is to assist you and your student through this stressful process by providing you with the tools to identify and evaluate the many variables that will have a bearing on making the final decision.

"Parents today are viewed as coaches or partners in the college selection process and as guides in helping their students make responsible decisions."  
– *Steve Goodman, Independent Educational Consultant*

## The Parents' Role

As your student prepares to make one of the biggest decisions of his/her life thus far, your thoughtful approach will help your student to methodically examine his/her options – and your help is more important now than ever! You are a key part of the team of "advisors" whom your student is likely to consult on this final decision – a team which may also consist of a trusted teacher or high school counselor, friends, close relatives, clergy, or others.

The key to assisting your son or daughter in making a wise choice is by engaging in "active listening," or paying close attention to what your student is saying (verbally and non-verbally) and by asking open-ended questions to stimulate further discussion.

For a variety of reasons, your student may not be willing or able to articulate his/her true feelings about the schools or the selection process. Be prepared to delve deeper into his/her decision if you hear any of the following statements, which could be masking underlying concerns your student may have:

**Stated reason:** "My best friend is going there."

**What it may mean:** Your student is scared to move away from home on his/her own and needs the security of a hometown friend.

**Recommendation:** Acknowledge how tough it can be to move away from home and friends, but point out the many ways to stay in touch (i.e., visits, e-mail and telephone exchanges) and the fun of making new friends. Share some of your experiences and friendships you've made since high school as an example.

**Stated reason:** "It's one of the best schools in the country."

**What it may mean:** Your student's decision may reflect your own dreams about a prestigious school...or it may represent his/her need to impress peers.

**Recommendation:** Make sure he/she understands that you are primarily interested in a college that satisfies him/her on every level. He/she should understand that it is better to thrive at a lesser known school than to struggle at a well-known one.

**Stated reason:** "It costs less than the others."

**What it may mean:** He/she is worried about putting a financial strain on the family.

**Recommendation:** If it is within your financial reach, reassure your student by walking her/him through the family's financials and by explaining how college costs can be handled via loans, scholarships, etc.

**Stated reason:** "It was one of the colleges we visited."

**What it may mean:** Your student may be trying to tell you that he/she doesn't have enough information on the other schools to make a valid comparison.

**Recommendation:** If you can manage it, schedule visits to the colleges he/she would like to see in the time remaining before May 1. If this is not possible, help him/her explore other means of researching the college. (See Step 5, Researching and Revisiting)

"Your role as a mentor is to provide support, encouragement and information so that your student can solve his or her own problems and explore alternatives."

– Helen E. Johnson, Author

*"Don't Tell Me What To Do, Just Send Money: The Essential Parenting Guide to the College Years"*

**Stated Reason:** "I don't know, I just like this one better."

**What it may mean:** Your student may have already made his/her decision based, perhaps on instincts.

**Recommendation:** Try to refrain from reviving the debate and making the selection process more difficult for your student. The college experience will be his/hers – not yours – and your student is more likely to succeed at a school that he/she is excited about, for whatever reason.

**Stated Reason:** "I don't know – where do you think I should go?"

**What it may mean:** Your student is overwhelmed with making the final decision.

**Recommendation:** Ask your student to sit down with you and go over the next two sections on selection criteria, making comparisons and starting the process of elimination.

**Stated reason:** "A Web site matched me with College A, so that's where I'm meant to go."

**What it may mean:** Your student is overwhelmed with making the final decision.

**Recommendation:** Assure your student that these sites are often very useful in providing initial information, but that such a personal decision requires personal attention. Then, offer to initiate this process by taking the following five steps toward helping your student determine the right school for him/her.

## Step One: Know Thyself

Now that you understand your role in this process, it is important to understand your motivation. Before you begin discussing the pros and cons of each school with your student, it's a good idea to review the criteria upon which your own concerns and/or preferences are based. The following is a list of criteria for evaluating a school – much like the list that you and your student may have consulted when he/she decided where to apply. That original list may be valuable to review again, but the criteria below take into consideration **the factors that may have changed** since your student's applications were submitted.

Of course, only some of the following eight School Selection Criteria will be relevant to your student's final decision, and some of these may be far more important than others. That is why each criterion is designed to be weighted according to its influence in your student's decision. Ultimately, by focusing on the criteria that matter most, your family's selection process – and your student's decision -- will be easier, less stressful and more effective.

## School Selection Criteria

### 1. **Academics: Does the curriculum match your student's current needs & interests?**

The majority of high school seniors have only a vague idea of what fields of study or future careers interest them – and this may have changed since the time that applications were completed. Most students do not declare their majors until the end of their sophomore years in college, and often, these are in subject areas unrelated to those originally presumed.

However, if your student has a fairly definite idea of what he/she wants to study, ask questions about the school's strengths, faculty, facilities and opportunities for internships, jobs and graduate studies in this area. At most schools, the admissions officers can facilitate conversations with appropriate faculty members to answer questions like these or schedule a tour of the department and facilities for your student.

## **2. Enrollment, Campus Culture and Environment: Does the school's personality fit your student?**

You know your student's social and emotional character better than anyone. Has this changed in any way as a result of the introspection or stress of the college admissions process? Have you witnessed the growth of a more adventurous or independent student who is ready to move to a large, urban school? Or have you noticed the development of clearly defined lifestyle preferences in a student who may thrive more in a defined community of like-minded students and faculty?

Consider whether your student's current personality and goals match the campus personality to the same degree you (and your son or daughter) thought it did at the time applications were submitted.

One exercise for your student to help define the ideal college environment is to visualize himself/herself interacting on an imaginary campus. How large and how diverse is the student body? What social activities are popular (attending sporting events, gathering in coffee houses, joining fraternities or sororities)? How do faculty and students interact (in large lecture halls, in small classrooms)? What would the campus look like (a collection of downtown buildings, a pastoral compound)? Now, help your student compare each of the schools that he/she is considering to this idyllic one.

## **3. Prestige, Legacy, Ranking: How will your student benefit from an education at a "name" school?**

There are many valid reasons why a college's reputation (either nationally, among your peers or within your family) may influence your judgment about a school.

An academically prestigious school may offer an advantage for future job opportunities; an athletically prestigious school (i.e., a Big Ten basketball school) may offer a dynamic campus environment and a strong alumni network; a highly ranked school (by U.S. News and World Report or others) may offer an overall high quality college experience; and a legacy school may offer a generation-tested education and promote within your student a sense of family pride.

Be aware that a school's reputation may be based on its graduate school or faculty research programs—not necessarily because of the undergraduate experience it offers. The issues to weigh now are how important these factors are to your student today and over the next four years and whether the *schools themselves* meet his/her **current** academic, social and emotional needs.

## **4. Location: What is the right distance between school and home for your student?**

This question requires you to examine, not only the evolution of your student's emotional character over the past year, but also, the nature of your current relationship with him/her. Would your student feel comfortable and secure living a significant distance from home? Would your relationship survive (or even improve) with the time apart that this would likely entail? Or would your student thrive in a more familiar setting with ready access to family and friends?

With regard to traveling from school to home, are there any factors that may have changed? Has the acceptance of friends to the same school created carpooling opportunities? Has the establishment of an airline hub near the school resulted in more convenient flights or less expensive fares? Will the financial burden of tuition or other expenses prohibit frequent travel home?

And, since this exercise is about what criteria is important to you as well as your student, how does the school's location affect your ability to visit him/her?

## **5. Campus housing and facilities: Will your student be able to live comfortably at school?**

If your student values space, light, modern amenities and cleanliness, crummy housing can make his/her freshman year a bit more challenging. But, keep in mind that most students make the best of the 8-9 months spent in freshman housing – and generally, their happiness has more to do with the people with whom they share their freshman year and their own attitude, than with their accommodations.

(Note: There is often a wide variety of housing offered to students – ranging from spacious and spanking new residences to ancient, musty dorms. Your student can ask to tour the residence halls, and even spend the night in one, but rarely are assignments made until after the May 1 acceptance deadline.)

But your student may have some other housing issues that could affect his/her decision: Has the friend who agreed to be your student's roommate decided to go elsewhere? Has your student changed his/her mind about single-sex or co-ed dorms? Can the dorms accommodate your student's computer needs? How long are students permitted to live in on-campus housing? What is the average cost of future off-campus housing?

Check out other on-campus facilities and services that may now mean much more to your student than they did six months ago, such as dining halls and meals, athletic facilities, 24-hour computer labs, outdoor parks, studios or rehearsal space, the library, parking lots, etc.

## **6. Security: How safe will your student be at school?**

Often, the safety issue is one that gnaws at the back of a parent's head – stifled during the exploratory and admissions process – but now, in the final hours, forces itself into the conversation.

Exactly how safe is the campus or the areas where your student will be studying, working or traversing? Federal law requires colleges to divulge their annual security records and their emergency response times. If security is a nagging concern, ask for these records. Has there been an upward trend in crime or violence at the school or in the community over the past year? In response to September 11<sup>th</sup>, has the school developed an emergency preparedness plan?

Just as important as these questions, however, is how sophisticated/street smart is your student? No one deserves to be a crime victim, but leaving doors unlocked, drinking to excess, leaving belongings unintended, letting unknown people in to residence halls, propping open doors, walking alone in the middle of the night and other risky behavior lead to the vast majority of campus crimes. There is very little stranger-on-stranger violence on college campuses. If your student is particularly naive, careless, or overly trusting, you should have a lengthy conversation with him/her, no matter where he/she goes to college.

## **7. Gut Feeling: Is there something else that makes the school an attractive option?**

Sometimes it's the little things that leave big impressions on parents and students during the selection process. Maybe it was the friendliness of the admissions staff and students you met, or the beautiful grounds and history-steeped campus? Or, is there someone whom your student admires who attended this school?



These are examples of impressions that can create a favorable gut feeling. Negative impressions can have an equally strong effect. Was it a cold and rainy day when you visited the school? Was the student guide a dorky dresser whose enthusiasm for entomology really bugged you? It is important for you and your student to acknowledge impressions like these, but also to evaluate the degree to which they truly represent the entire campus environment

### **8. Cost: How will you or your student be able to afford this school?**

The average annual total cost at a public institution is more than \$15,000; the average annual sticker price at a private institution exceeds \$35,000. For most parents, cost is, understandably, a major consideration. If you are in the enviable position of being unconcerned about cost, you can skip this section. **For everyone else, Step Three (in the coming pages of this guide) is devoted to understanding and maximizing your (or your student's) payment options.**

## **Step Two: Working Together to Identify Differences**

One way to begin a dialogue with your student about the selection process is to acknowledge the growth and maturity he/she has undergone since the college application process began, and to ask how his/her interests, ambitions, values and concerns may have changed. Use open-ended questions like, "how do you feel about this now?" and "what concerns are you struggling with?" and "if X wasn't an issue, how would you feel?"

Some of the things you find desirable in a college may contrast (mildly to sharply) with what your student finds appealing. This is to be expected – you are each unique individuals with distinct opinions and frames of reference. Your agreements and differences of opinion are both going to help shape a final decision – and this decision will probably be subject to peer reviews, processes of elimination and leaps of faith before it is finalized!

## **Crunch-time College Comparison Chart**

Before reading ahead, you and your student should take a few moments to evaluate the significance of each of the previous criteria categories (**with the exception of "cost"**) in your personal college selection process. Then, on the following page, rate each school according to how it satisfies these criteria.

Beginning with the rows that run down the side of the page, each of which lists a particular criterion, rate the importance of this criterion between 1-5 ("5" indicating the most important) in the weight column ("Wt"). Continue down the page.

The final numerical score for each school is not intended to render a binding decision, but rather, to provide your student with a quantifiable means of evaluating his/her options.

Along the top of the chart, list the names of the schools to which your student has been accepted. To make sure you're comparing apples to apples, assess the degree to which each school meets the **first criterion (Academics) only**, working your way **across** the first row, with a rating of "1" to "5" (five indicating that the school successfully meets the criteria).

Multiply each school rating by the weight that you assigned this particular criterion, as in the following example:

		College A	
		State U.	
Criteria	Weight	School Rating	Score
Academics	4	5	20

Continue on to the second criterion (Prestige/Legacy), evaluating how well each school addresses this consideration, and then repeat for each of the remaining five criterion.

You can either print this chart and compute the data manually or download the attached Excel file and the data will be computed automatically for you.

**The highest total score at the bottom of the chart will indicate which school most effectively meets the criteria that you and your student consider most important.**

Note: This initial exercise purposely omits “cost” as one of the criteria, although for many students, this may ultimately be the most critical factor in determining where they go to school. Nonetheless, it is valuable first to evaluate a school solely on its merits ... then to determine if its value justifies seeking more financial aid, taking out an additional loan, participating in work/study programs, etc.

Upon completion of the exercise, add “cost” as a criterion. Simply fill out this row and compute a revised score total.

### Crunch Time College Comparison Chart

		College A		College B		College C		College D		College E	
Criteria	Weight	School Rating	Score	School Rating	Score	School Rating	Score	School Rating	Score	School Rating	Score
Academics											
Prestige/Legacy											
Culture/Environment											
Location											
Housing/Facilities											
Security											
Gut Feeling											
<b>TOTAL</b>											
Cost											
<b>TOTAL</b>											

## Step Three: Show Me the Money!

"Financial aid" describes any combination of loans, scholarships, grants, and work-study that will help pay for your student's college education. Financial aid packages can range from full, all-inclusive, four-year scholarships based on merit to one-time, partial payment grants based on need. While federal guidelines exist for some of these programs, these are among the many factors that schools consider when awarding financial aid:

- **Cost of attendance**
- **Family income** (aid referred to as "need-based")
- **Family size**
- **Number of family members in college** or graduate school at the same time
- **Family assets**
- **Scholarships or grants** not received through the school
- **Major field of interest**
- **Academic, athletic or other abilities** (aid referred to as "merit-based")
- **State or town of residence**

This is a critical time for you to understand what kind of aid is available; what is being offered to your student; how each school's financial aid offer compares to the other schools' offers; and how you can appropriately leverage one against another to negotiate the maximum aid available to your family from the school that best meets all of your other decision-criteria.

Note: In order to be considered for any type of federal or state financial aid (including a federally backed student loan), your student must fill out a Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) form – ideally as close to its January 1 release date as possible. This may be obtained online at [www.fafsa.ed.gov](http://www.fafsa.ed.gov) or by calling 1/800-4FEDAID. To complete and submit the form electronically (the faster option), your student must request a Personal Identification Number (PIN) at <http://www.pin.ed.gov>.

### **Myth #1:**

"We can't get any aid because we make too much money."

Not so. Merit-based financial aid goes to many families who are above the income level set for needs-based aid.

### **Myth #2:**

"There's less aid available now."

Wrong. Student financial aid continues to rise to record levels.

### **Myth #3:**

"My student didn't get top grades, so we won't get any financial assistance."

Untrue. Merit does count, but most federal aid is based on need, not grades.

But, if your student is not eligible for federal aid, he/she may be eligible for state or school financial aid. (This is another reason to complete the FAFSA.)

## Types of Financial Aid

### Grants

Several types of federal grants exist, all of which are need-based and require annual renewal, but have unique qualifications and funding limits.

1. **Federal Pell Grants:** These are typically awarded to students from low-income families and can range from \$400-\$5,550 per year. (Congress just passed, and President Obama signed into law, a raise in the maximum Pell Grant, but the average grant is less than \$3,000.)
2. **Federal Supplemental Educational Opportunity Grants (FSEOG):** These awards are reserved for very low-income students who are frequently recipients of Pell Grants, as well. Awards range from \$100 - \$4,000 annually.
3. **Institutional Grants:** This financial aid (based on need or merit) is made available by the school, through funding by individuals, the school endowment or other sources.
4. **State-Sponsored Grants:** These state-funded grants can be based on need, merit or both and apply to in-state schools only.

### Work-Study

This program provides part-time employment for students to help offset a pre-determined amount of their education expenses. Pay is minimum wage or higher, based on the work or skill level required. The work is usually related to community service or to a student's field of study, but assignments can change from year to year.

### Scholarships

While they do not have to be repaid, scholarships are often both conditional and renewable (i.e., they may require your student to maintain a certain grade point average and they must be re-applied for each year). While some scholarships may be listed on the award letter, there are thousands of others offered by organizations around the country.

### Loans

There are many different types of loans available to students and parents to help finance college tuition and expenses. It is important to understand and to weigh the costs and benefits of each type in order to make the right choice for your student and family.

#### Federal Loans

These low-interest loans are guaranteed by the US government and are subject to many qualifying conditions and limits. They may be either subsidized (in which interest does not accrue on the loan while the borrower is in college) or unsubsidized (in which interest on the loan begins immediately).

- 1. Federal Student Loan:** A Federal Student Loan is a low-interest education loan designed for undergraduate and graduate students. Nearly all colleges and universities participate in this program. Depending on financial need, a student may be eligible for one or both loan types:

**Subsidized Federal Student Loan:** Eligibility for this loan is based on financial need. The government pays the interest while the student is in school, in deferment, or during their grace period.

**Unsubsidized Federal Student Loan:** This loan is made available to all students regardless of income. The student is responsible for all interest that accrues while they are in school, in deferment, or during their grace period.

Loan amounts depend on a student's year in school and whether they're considered a financially dependent or an independent student. The financial aid office will determine a student's eligibility for a subsidized or unsubsidized loan.

- 2. Federal Perkins Loan –** The Federal Perkins Loan is a low-interest loan available to students who have exceptional financial need. Eligibility is determined by information that a student has provided on his/her FAFSA. With these loans, the school is the lender and the loan is made with government funds; 1,800 schools participate in the Perkins Loan program.

Under this program, undergraduates can borrow a maximum of \$5,500 per year (\$27,500 for the entire time they are enrolled).

- 3. Federal PLUS Loan –** The Parent Loan for Undergraduate Students (PLUS Loan) is a federal education loan designed specifically for parents. Eligibility for the PLUS Loan is not based on financial need, so parents at all income levels may apply. Qualified applicants must pass a credit check.

Parents may borrow up to the cost of attendance (COA) annually, minus all other financial aid received. This means that parents may borrow only up to the amount not covered by scholarships, grants, student loans, etc.

## Private Loan Programs

These loans are not backed by the federal government, but are offered by banks and lending companies and are not subject to qualifying conditions or limits, except, of course, a standard credit check.

## The Financial Aid Package

If the schools that have accepted your student included financial aid packages along with their letters of acceptance, it is important to understand the nature of the award. The following are important elements to consider when comparing the schools' financial aid packages:

- The total amount of aid being offered
- The family share of costs
- The individual percentages of work study, loans, grants and scholarship dollars awarded in the package
- The life of the grants or scholarships (Note: Most of these are only applicable for one year, so your student may have to re-qualify and re-apply each year. It is important to keep this in mind when your student is deciding upon the school to attend for potentially four or more years.)

Note: If your financial situation has changed since the applications were sent out – or you have received outside scholarships or other funding for college, you must notify each of the schools immediately.

### Additional Costs: Tuition is only part of the expense ...

Before you and your student finalize any financial aid or student loan plans, be sure you're aware of all the additional expenses likely to be incurred by your soon-to-be college student. According to a recent study, the average family spent \$2,000 supplying their freshman for college last year. Once in school, another study shows, he/she incurs ongoing expenses (not including room, board, tuitions, fees, books or major transportation costs) of between \$250-400 per month or \$2,250-3,600 per year.

Here are some of these often over-looked *additional costs*:

- **Text books and school supplies**
- **Special equipment/supplies** (art equipment, musical instruments, lab fees, software)
- **Room supplies** (towels, linens, alarm clock, coffeemaker, mini-fridge, microwave, toaster oven, stereo)
- **Personal services and items** (cell phone service, laundry, haircuts, toiletries, clothing, shoes)
- **Entertainment** (movies, live shows/sporting events, CD's, meals, snacks)
- **Transportation** (flights, drives or train rides home, local bus service, parking)

## Step Four: Getting to the Bottom Line

The following chart will help you and your student to accurately compare the estimated cost of attending each of the colleges to which he/she has been accepted, as well as the financial aid packages that each may have offered. Simply fill in the amounts for all of the colleges to determine the amount of money still needed in order for your student to attend each school.

You can either print this chart and compute the data manually or download the attached Excel file and the data will be computed automatically for you.

### CrunchTime College Cost Comparison Chart

	College A	College B	College C	College D	College E
<b>COSTS PER SEMESTER</b>					
Tuition/Fees					
Housing					
Meal plan					
Transportation					
Personal Expenses					
<b>Estimated total:</b>					
<b>FINANCIAL AID PACKAGE</b>					
Expected Family Contribution					
Grants					
Scholarships					
Work/Study					
<b>Estimated total:</b>					
<b>Difference between cost &amp; financial aid</b>					

### Appealing Your Student’s Financial Aid Award

As noted in the beginning of this guide, the dynamics of the relationship between your student and the schools he/she applied to may have changed dramatically when more than one acceptance letter arrived. If obtaining adequate financial aid is a prerequisite for him/her to accept an offer, now is the time for your student to take advantage of any leverage he/she may have acquired.

After carefully evaluating and comparing each school’s financial aid packages (**Step Four**), if your student’s first choice school (School X) offered a lower amount than another (School Z), encourage him/her to contact the financial aid office at School X and explain that, while he/she really wants to go to School X, School Z has offered more assistance. The financial aid office will require proof of School Z’s offer; then, if it is possible and they really want your student to attend their school, they may offer your student a more attractive aid package – perhaps one that even surpasses the amount offered by School Z.

If none of the other schools' offers are better than School X, but this amount of aid is still insufficient, urge your student to contact the financial aid office anyway, to explain the situation. Based on availability of funds, the school may be able to increase the aid or to suggest other means of assistance, such a work/study program.

Note: Public universities rarely have resources available for negotiation, so you may have better luck negotiating for more aid from a private college. Similarly, because aid offers beyond those that are strictly needs-based are market driven, highly selective/prestigious schools with a large pool of applicants are less likely to offer additional aid than less selective schools with rooms to fill. Another example is, if a school seeking to build its music program needs a tenor saxophone player, it will be more likely to offer a talent scholarship to a qualified applicant than a school with a highly ranked conservatory program.

## Step Five: Going the Extra Mile

### Researching and Re-visiting

While time and expense may preclude you and/or your student from visiting all of the schools to which he/she has been accepted, the more information your student can obtain, the more confident he/she will feel about his/her ultimate selection.

You can help your student conduct a final research campaign by first devising a list of his/her unanswered questions or incomplete impressions about each school. Then, identify potential sources of information, such as:

- Insider guide books;
- School newspapers;
- Virtual campus tours
- The official school Web site;
- Your student's high school counselor;
- Recent alumni (found via the school Alumni Relations Office); and
- College admissions officials or pertinent faculty members.

If you are able to visit the school, ask about special tour dates. Some schools try to prepare for the onslaught of undecided applicants in April by scheduling days dedicated for minorities, for out-of-state applicants, etc. Ask about the school's policy on overnight visits, classroom observation and meals in the dining hall. Encourage your student to prepare for the visit with a comprehensive list of questions and to talk to as many students on campus as possible (preferably, not while in your company).

Be sure to explore the local community and to query residents about the school and its students. The locals will have a good sense of the school's personality based on how the two co-exist.

Also, take advantage of this opportunity to closely examine the security measures incorporated by the school. Check for blue emergency lights throughout the campus, locked and/or monitored residences, trolling security vehicles and staff, etc.



## Process of Elimination

By this point in the decision process, your student should have gathered and evaluated enough information about all of the colleges to feel a certain measure of attachment to each. After working so hard to be accepted by the schools, then examining so closely how each reflected his/her dreams and ideals, your student may find it difficult to eliminate any one of them.

But the time has come to eliminate the *least* appropriate choices. You can help by applauding his/her success at arriving at these decisions and by encouraging him/her to remain focused on identifying the *most* appropriate school. Ultimately, this will be the school that he/she can happily look forward to attending in the months ahead.

Note: What if the school that **you** most favored for your student is eliminated? Applaud yourself for having served well in your role as a trusted advisor and supporter during a very difficult time for your student. You have raised a young adult who is capable and confident enough to accept and weigh the value of your advice without sacrificing his/her sense of self.

## A Reality Check

If the previous paragraph failed to comfort you, perhaps the following statistics from The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) will:

- 29% of beginning students left the college where they started and transferred elsewhere; these students were just as likely to complete a degree program as those who did not transfer.
- Only 50% of the beginning students completed a degree or certificate within five years. (Characteristics of these students included those who started college immediately after high school; those who attended college full-time and were enrolled continuously in all terms.)
- 13% were still enrolled after five years and had not completed a degree.
- 37% had not completed any degree and were no longer enrolled after five years.
- 58% of beginning students received financial aid; students who received aid were more likely to finish their degree programs in five years than those who did not receive aid.
- 92% of the beginning students held jobs at some time while they were enrolled in college; working less than 20 hours per week did not have an adverse effect on degree completion.

“What is most important is for your student to choose a college where he/she will fully engage and take advantage of the resources, opportunities and relationships available. A student who is passive and uninvolved at a highly ranked university is less likely to succeed in life than the one who is fully involved in academic and co-curricular opportunities at a less prestigious school.”

– *Pamela T. Horne,*  
*Assistant to the Provost For Enrollment*  
*Management and Director of Admissions*  
*at Michigan State University*

Of course, your student's college experience – regardless of where it begins or ends – will only be one of many factors that contribute to his/her future success. A look at any list of accomplished people will show that they were educated at a wide variety of institutions.

## The Waiting Game

A seemingly cruel practice of prolonging the agony of anticipation, the Wait List process was created by schools as insurance against lower-than-expected "yields" or acceptance rates. While some schools rank their Wait List applicants in order of academic, geographic, demographic or other determinants of desirability, other schools combine qualified applicants into a large pool and select them randomly when a position opens up. Few schools will disclose an applicant's position on their Wait List – your student may be 2<sup>nd</sup> or 102<sup>nd</sup>. However, he/she may ask how many students have been accepted, how many have been wait-listed in past years and – if wait-listed students are admitted in the coming year – how much access will they have to housing and financial aid.

While this may seem like an entirely closed process, there are ways your student can draw favorable attention to his/her application. In order to demonstrate to admissions officials your student's ardent desire to attend the school, all verbal and written communication should come from your student – not you. He/she should let the admissions office and any faculty members with whom he/she has met know that he/she is still interested in the school. Then, he/she should follow-up with mailings that include items such as: recent grades, AP or IB test results, exceptional papers or projects, awards or honors for accomplishments in or outside of school, etc. Your student can also request an interview with either an admissions official or a local alumni recruiter.

Finally, as there is typically little financial aid remaining for students from the Wait List, if your student can attend the school without aid, he/she should let the admission office know this now.

All schools are required to notify students by August 1 of their status on the Wait List. Some prestigious institutions never tap into this list at all – or only do so if there are freshman who fail to report to school in the fall. Still, other schools may extend offers to Wait List candidates for the following winter semester.

## Why Some Kids Never Graduate

Recent studies show that, while 67% of high school students in America apply to college in their senior year, only 25% of the graduating class will end up with a college degree. The most common reasons that students do not graduate from college are:

- They don't have the right skills for college
- They pick a school that is too challenging
- They run out of money after four years, before completing the required number of credits to graduate

– Valerie Pierce, author, "Countdown to College"

## Step Six: Just say “Yes!”

If, at this time, your student is still torn between two schools, help him/her resist the temptation to accept both schools’ offers. (This deceit will only prolong the arduous decision process and make keep another student needlessly on the Wait List.)

Encourage your student to make the choice, promising to help him/her to spend the coming months looking ahead at what is to be – not behind at what was not to be. Depending on how torturous the final decision is for your student, you may want to hold off making an announcement until he/she has had a night to sleep on it. Then, once the decision is official, and everyone has heaved a collective sigh of relief, give your student (and yourself) a few days to bask in the glory of his/her success.

The end of the road to college is within sight and now is the time for your student to begin taking on the adult responsibilities of a college student. It is important that he/she immediately send **acceptance withdrawal letters** to the admission offices of the schools that he/she will not be attending, so that candidates on the Wait List may be contacted. If your student is on any other schools’ Wait List, he/she should withdraw from these, as well.

Your student should also begin to handle the business associated with making a college choice: completing the enrollment deposit online or writing and mailing the check **on time**; completing the housing application, scheduling orientation, etc.

These small steps toward independence will be the first of many that your student may take in the coming months as he/she prepares to make the mental, emotional and physical leap to college. Warning: this period may be challenging at times! You and your student (and other family members) must negotiate the changing dynamics in your relationships that maturity and separation will inevitably garner. But, your support and involvement in your student’s life – especially as he/she enters adulthood – will be as valuable as ever while your student is in college.

### Alternatives for Higher Education

If none of the schools to which your student was accepted is acceptable, here are other education options you may want to discuss with him/her:

**Deferment** – Many schools grant 1-year deferments to incoming freshman who present a valid case and reasonable plan of activity during this period. Some students use this time to work and save money for school, while others use it to travel or to enroll in a volunteer service organization.

**Attendances at a two-year or community college** – Some students who have not been accepted by their first choice school (or have chosen not to attend a 4-year school) begin their college careers at 2-year or community colleges. The benefits of this option are that the schools are typically close to home, tuition is inexpensive and the course credits are transferable if the students choose to continue their education at a four-year university.

## **Almost There: A Summary of Strategies For Solving the Acceptance Dilemma**

- 1.** Count your blessings and pat yourself and your student on the back – you’ve overcome countless challenges and succeeded in achieving acceptances at not one, but several colleges.
- 2.** Understand your role as an advisor, mentor and facilitator to help your student make this important personal choice.
- 3.** Carefully consider the eight key criteria by which you can evaluate a school’s appeal and “fit” for your student and family.
- 4.** Help your student complete the College Comparison Calculator to help identify each school’s strengths and weaknesses.
- 5.** Filter in the financials – help your student compare the cost of the college and the financial aid packages offered by each. Money often drives college decisions and your student may have to apply for a scholarship, grant or loan in order to attend the college of his/her choice.
- 6.** Urge your student to revisit or research the campuses he/she is still considering if possible; a second impression can be even more convincing than the first.
- 7.** Have the courage to make the cuts – help your student focus on eliminating schools that really fall short of the short list.
- 8.** Celebrate -- once your student makes his/her choice, take some time to savor your family’s success and your student’s achievement!

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