

## *For Parents:* **Coping**

No one has ever said that being the parent of a college-bound student is an easy job. It is basically a balancing act, which, if well executed, combines support and letting go, advising and knowing when to listen. A few generations ago it wasn't so complicated. Not so many young people went to college, because a high school diploma was sufficient for entry into more professions than is the case today; people tended to stay closer to home, and students were, perhaps more content to let their parents do the choosing or simply to go where Mom or Dad went, if they were college graduates.

All that changed long ago, amidst the turmoil of the Vietnam War era. Students demanded control over their own education, including the right to decide where—or whether—to go to college. Much has mellowed with time, but one healthy legacy of that era remains with us: making a college choice that is right for the *student* usually takes precedence over making one that is merely convenient or acceptable to the *parent*.

Rather than diminishing the parent's role in the process, however, this change has, if anything, expanded it and made it more complicated. Parents are called upon to listen to their children and, often, to give up preconceived notions of what their children should do with their lives. They must try to guide without dictating; they have to learn to read between the lines. If a daughter rushes into an Early Decision application, parents need to be sure she is doing it because she really wants the college and not merely to avoid the hard work of looking at many different institutions. If, as deadlines approach, a son drags his feet in filling out applications, it may be that he is afraid of failure or doesn't want to go to college at all.

A parent's job is complicated, too, by the constantly shifting sands of college admission practices. As we move into the electronic age and the number of applications continues to rise, colleges at all levels of selectivity have been pushed into intense competition. Moreover, as any sophomore with a box full of unsolicited college mail can tell you, many institutions now market their wares very aggressively. Admission officers who used to describe themselves as *counselors* have become *salespeople*, who urge students to “apply early” in order to have a better chance of admission. Decision-making is made even more complicated by the glut of publications that rate the “quality” of colleges according to the editors' own criteria, many seriously flawed. Making good decisions, in a word, is no longer easy.

So the job of being a “college-bound parent” isn't simple, but it can be very rewarding. We offer you two lists that we hope will help.

### **A. What a college applicant needs from a parent:**

- A good listener and a sounding board.
- An open mind. (Sometimes this takes a bit of play-acting, particularly if you have strong ideas about what your child should do with his or her life. But work at it. Teenagers have often thought about their futures far more than we give them credit for, and when they

haven't, they need the bullet above even more.)

- The willingness to admit that you don't know everything about getting into college, and that it was, in fact, different and certainly simpler when you were doing it. (Share this one with your friends and neighbors. Their college experiences with their children have nothing to do with yours. Many people have heard stories about someone whose son got into Harvard with a 480 verbal score. On the very, very slim chance that it really happened that way, it was for reasons peculiar to that student and that student alone. And the colleague at work who's an Influential Alumnus and says he knows the president of the college and can get your daughter in with a phone call, simply can't. It does not happen. Ask any admission officer.)
- The sensitivity to find the balance between prodding and insisting that the student take responsibility for meeting application deadlines and keeping appointments.
- The willingness to “let go”.

#### **B. What a college applicant does not need from a parent:**

- An unwillingness to listen.
- A closed mind.
- Usurping the right to decide where to apply and, finally, where to go.
- Usurping the application process itself by crossing the line between *helping* with forms and *interfering* (writing or heavily editing essays, etc.).
- The insistence that he or she apply to certain colleges, particularly “brand-name” schools, that may be inappropriate or inaccessible, and its corollary:
- The insistence that the student apply to inordinately large numbers of colleges “just to be sure.”
- The attitude that “you have to get used to rejection; it's part of life.” The philosophy is not wrong, but misplaced in this context. To have the whole process of applying to college culminate in a pile of letters of denial can be emotionally devastating; most kids are not as tough as we think. Furthermore, in the understandable, if mistaken, view of some students and their families, those decision letters define not merely the success of the college search, but the value of the high school education and even the student’s sense of self-worth.

An excellent book for parents of college-bound seniors is *Letting Go: A Parents' Guide to Understanding the College Years*, Fourth Edition, by Karen Levin Coburn and Madge Lawrence Treeger. Published in 2003 by HarperCollins, it provides a thorough, practical yet compassionate discussion of the topic, starting in the high school years and carrying the reader through to the end of college. We recommend it highly.