

Counselors' Corner

Views and opinions from school counselors about the counseling profession

The Six Words About College That Disappoint Parents Most

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I had a chance to discuss the bigger world of college admissions with some local counselors at a recent college breakfast, where admissions officers from five colleges gave us brief updates on life at their campuses. They opened up their presentation to questions at the end, and it's my habit to ask them about advice for parents—if colleges could give one recommendation to the parents who have to watch their children apply to college, what would it be?

I've asked this question of many college admissions officers over the years, and the response is always the same—Let the Child Drive the Bus.

Long before the helicopter/snowplow/lawnmower parent, it was clear to colleges that many students were applying to college in name only. It was easier to tell this when all applications were filed on paper, since the handwriting of many students—particularly the boys—looked remarkably like that of their mothers'. Most applications are online now, but that doesn't mean colleges can't sort out when parents have played too big a part in the application process. And according to most colleges, any part parents play in the completion of an application is too big a part.

Colleges urge parents to let their child take charge of the application process for one simple reason—it's the child who is going to college. A student who's "too busy to apply" (a favorite excuse parents use to fill out the form) is making a statement about what they'll be able to give to the college experience, and the student who's "too shy to talk about themselves" may get admitted thanks to the bolder tone of the essay a parent writes—but that isn't the voice the college will hear in classroom discussions or in community activities. Colleges use the application to understand who they're getting if they say yes to the applicant, and they take plenty of shy or busy students. They just need to know that's who the student is.

A second reason colleges want the student to own the college application process is because of the training it provides for college. Applying to college is typically more than just filling out a form. It's about

conveying information, brainstorming essay topics, editing ideas, organizing others in the submission of teacher letters and transcripts, meeting deadlines, seeking help from a counselor on the direction of your college search, and honoring the integrity of the process by being honest in all of your answers. Since these are many of the same skills that will lead to successfully negotiating the college experience, the college application is a test drive of a big part of college. Your transcript may tell colleges you can pass tests, but your application is supposed to tell what the experience behind all that test taking has taught you.

This “student first” attitude is just as important in any communication with the college. Parents hoping the counselor will “put in a good word” for the student don’t understand that colleges much prefer hearing from the student than from the counselor, and parents who pester the college admissions office with questions are certainly making their child memorable, but in the wrong way. There’s nothing wrong with speaking up for a student who may get lost in the shuffle, but assuming that’s going to happen from the start speaks volumes about the parent’s faith in their child, and in the college. They didn’t become a state champion soccer player by having Mommy or Daddy kick the ball. Applying to college is no different.