

COLLEGE PLANNING STARTS EARLY

by: Sonja Montiel

No more than a few years ago, college planning started in 12th grade where it was the first time students learned about the SAT tests and build their list of colleges. Times have change with many students currently beginning their planning as early as 9th grade. While some may argue that beginning the college process this early is ridiculous, the truth is that it's quite necessary. Keep in mind that asking young students in 9th grade what colleges they are applying to does not define good college preparation; however, asking them if they would like to keep the educational doors open after high school is a conversation that must happen early on. Before reviewing the aspects of good college advising, let's look at three major influences that have impacted the way we plan for college.

Competitive Labor Market:

According to the Current Population Survey conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau in 2003, 77% of students who receive a high school diploma will enter the labor force compared to 85% who receive a bachelor's degree and 91% who receive a doctorate's degree. The same survey also revealed that the average earnings in 2002 increased with each education level with high school diploma workers earning an average of \$27,280 annually, compared to the average annual income of \$51,194 earned for the bachelor's degree holder (Stoops, 2004). The pressure and expectation of students attending college is no longer a "dream" or family quest, but more a requirement in order to obtain a career that gives a decent paycheck.

Population and Demand:

With competition increasing due to the sheer numbers of high achieving students, students and parents applying to college are feeling the pressure to prepare early. The panic of becoming the "top student" or "winning the race" has evolved into an obsession that leads students and their parents to push the college planning envelope as early as possible. The good old American "competitive spirit" is out there, and although often having negative effects on student performance (if this competitive spirit is not nurtured appropriately), the desire to become number one demands early college planning. It also ensures successful results in getting students in the college of their choice.

Increase Colleges Choices

With over 3,000 colleges and universities in the United States and the bridging of a more global world, the encouragement of students to attend a college or university out of state has increased as well as the encouragement for students to consider applying to more colleges. At the same time, these colleges and universities have become aggressive in their recruitment and marketing techniques introducing more attractive opportunities that a student has to choose from. As a result, students must begin researching what colleges seem the "best fit" for them deciphering the difference between persuasive marketing messages. Just a reminder that finding the "best fit" does not mean finding out about the likelihood of being admitted. Instead, finding the "best fit" college means to conduct campus visits, research their personalities and atmosphere, and asked themselves "where do I really fit best?" All this requires more time for investigation and planning outside regular high school counseling hours.

It's evident that the college going culture is growing by the minute, and in order for students to end up happy and successful (in that order), the college conversation needs to start early. Be aware, however, there is a damaging assumption that in order to help students prepare for college, we must use tactics that instill (intentional or unintentional) anxiety, fear, and uncertainty to the process such as national rankings and statistical GPA and SAT averages. On the contrary, students who are most successful in the college process are those who can reflect on their own needs and interests, and more importantly act on those needs and interests, as well as establish good study habits and time management skills.

Also, keep in mind college admissions review student's academic and extracurricular activities for the entire 4 years; not only 11-12th grades. Many students who do not have a sense of what colleges expect of them risk the surprise of not meeting specific requirements or not having enough time to build on their interests in time. In order for students to reflect on what makes them tick, we must challenge our students to find their voice early in life, introduce the ideas of what a college education means in terms of opportunity, and prepare them to be advocates for themselves as they decide which high school courses to take and which activities to be involved in. This is the process of finding their voices, and it is

their voices that will drive the college process as we as educators, counselors, and parents become their cheerleaders.

About The Author

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