

The Match Game; Making the Right College Choice

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For anyone who has ever bought or is contemplating buying a house, we know that we tend to ride the wave of the market. If it's a seller's market, buyer beware; a buyer's market, seller beware. Finding the right college for your child is as a major decision and investment as buying a house. You want to make sure the best choice is made.

According to Dr. Jerry Israel, *Biggest Myths About College Admissions*, if you have time for two myths about college admissions, consider these: Myth 1, It is a seller's market in which colleges have control and Myth 2, Success in life depends on which college you choose. Here's the reality check, it is a *buyer's* market where you have many good choices and secondly, success in life depends not on which college you go to, but whether you graduate from college!

Statistically speaking, almost 50% of the students entering college don't get to finish the experience. Several factors contribute to this number, however, choosing the wrong college is a pretty prominent one. When riding the college wave, it is important to remember that **you** are the consumer paying for services and are looking for the best opportunity for "you". Colleges pride themselves on their recruitment programs and have no problem with pursuing you as a prospective client. After careful research and weighing the pros and cons, if you are not satisfied with the bang you're getting for your buck then think twice about moving forward with that particular institution. Remember, without student's colleges would close!

As a college consultant, I will tell you that college choice is a process. In the junior and senior years of high school, many families spend an inordinate amount of emotional energy, wasted time and money following college leads for the wrong reasons. Some of the common mistakes made are:

- Selecting a college because your friends are going there and getting caught up in the hype.
- Parents listening to idle talk from those who seem to know what they're talking about without doing their own research.
- Waiting too long to ask for help and missing opportunities and due dates
- Trying to get into a "good" college rather than the right college. By the way, all colleges are good, however, the best college is the one that is right for you.
- Applying to colleges that don't match your GPA (grade point average), interests, test scores and needs.

This past year, Harvard University had a record applicant pool. This gave the University an opportunity to be even more selective than years past. They rejected more applicants than ever before in their history. Out of a 27,462 student applicant pool, 1,948 students (7.1%) were accepted. Did all of those applicants meet Harvard's application criteria? Everyone wants to go to Harvard, right? Read *Harvard Schmarvard* by Jay Matthews, he can give you a bit more insight.

So, let's talk about this methodical process for a minute. There are over 3,000 colleges in the United States to choose from, are you prepared to research and visit all of them! So, we need a game plan and thus, comes "the process".

When I work with students, especially high school juniors and seniors the goal of the initial meeting is to ask the right questions so I can get to know the student a little bit better. We talk about various things such as likes and dislikes, music, video games, interests and hobbies, friends, family, sports, school and future aspirations. This information begins to paint a picture of the student and gives a general idea of what direction the student is moving. A Career Interest Inventory is given to the student which provides an objective overview of student interest, skills, field of study and **possible** career choice.

Over the course of other meetings, with both student and parent(s) information is gathered so an initial list of potential colleges can be created based on the results of the Interest Inventory and information as described above, family finances, GPA, Test Scores, potential college locations and several other factors to be considered. This initial list may include 15-20 colleges and is revised several times during the course of junior year.

There is continuous research of these schools and updating of the list, both on the part of the consultant and the family. The research may include virtual campus tours, soliciting admissions materials and information from the schools, conversations with the high school guidance counselor as well as talking to familiar students who may attend a particular school on the list.

Families then decide which campuses to visit and usually plan their tours by visiting several colleges in close proximity to each other in the same trip. During the campus visit, how can you tell if the college is "good" for you?

Gather and record your facts:

- Talk to students on campus
- Using your campus tour guide as a barometer for your interest in the school is sometimes not a good way to go
- Analyze the whole school and school culture
- Read copies of the student newspaper
- Eat the food in the student cafeteria
- Are the activities on campus of interest to you?
- Wander the campus and think about if this is the right "feel" for you and do you feel safe?
- Walk and drive around the community surrounding the college
- Is there public transportation?

- Do you want to be this close or far from home?
- Speak to the department chairperson of the academic area you may be considering. Does the college suit your academic needs?

Subsequent to the campus tours, ideally, by the end of junior year, the student has taken the SAT, maybe more than once and now has a final or near final list of choice-match colleges based on research, personal observation and the right-fit feel.

As we move into senior year the student should be ready for college applications, an impressive resume of sustained activities, the college essay, recommendations and all kinds of deadlines.

College acceptance letters are generally mailed in April and schools will provide a deadline for decision. Now that the hard work has been done, students have to make a final choice of which college to attend. Relax, you've done your homework and have many "good" choice colleges from which to choose; you've been a competitive player in "The Match Game".