

Tips for Parents in the College Application Process

9/22/2009 presentation

Please note these suggestions reflect our experience with having 2 children apply to 25 colleges of various sizes and types. Our experience may not reflect the experience of Hinsdale Central guidance department and are only meant to be a means of sharing information. We have tried to state information that may not be obvious to the family that has never been through the process.

As a parent don't ever think that being involved in the process is not your job. It is your students' responsibility as they search for the "right fit" but parents need to help navigate the process. The process is time consuming, long, and at times emotional. Your student will need your support and guidance in helping to manage it all. Above all, keep looking forward and enjoy the process!

Preparation and Resumes

Beginning with Freshman year keep a running list of everything your student is involved in for use on their resume. Include school activities, athletics, community and church activities and any volunteer and work experiences. It is easier to do this each semester rather than trying to remember all of it when they are putting their resume together during their Junior year.

It's never too early to get your student on a campus. It doesn't need to be a formal college visit during their freshman and sophomore years. Just getting them on a college campus helps them to see what is ahead.

By fall of Junior year, start developing a list of potential schools and begin visiting those schools if time and resources allow. Plan to continue visits throughout the Spring and summer. It is generally best to see schools when they are in session.

Make sure you know what tests are required for admission. Check out SAT subject tests as some of these can be taken as soon as high school course work is completed. In some cases this can mean at the end of Freshman year.

"The List"

One of the most difficult parts of the process is developing the list of schools they are interested in. The Guidance Department, books, college websites and Naviance are all very helpful; in our mind this is one of the most challenging steps.

Be aware that most schools do everything electronically. This includes registering for a visit, the application and submission, housing, scholarships and financial aid, and admission notification to name a few.

Essays and Teacher Recommendations

Help your student "brain storm" in order to make a list of experiences that might make for an interesting essay. They may not use any of the ideas but the list serves as a starting point.

The best essays must be in the voice of the student. The admissions staff want to be able to feel like they really know your child and their unique characteristics. Effective essays are memorable, move the reader emotionally and communicate knowledge of the college to which the student plans to attend.

Make sure your student asks for teacher recommendations during their Junior year. Teachers are very busy and frequently will only do a certain number of recommendation letters. Follow up with teachers at the start of Senior year. Unfortunately some teachers have to be pushed to get them completed.

Application Management/Timeline/ Deadlines/Naviance

Create a college folder for each school in order to keep materials that are mailed to your home.

Communicate with your student often about any electronic information they receive from schools they have an interest in. Depending on the school you may get an abundance of printed materials in the mail or your student may get electronic information. Have them forward the emails to you if it is a school on their list.

During the summer, before or at the start of Senior year, map out a timeline of work that needs to be done in order to meet application deadlines. Make sure you know which schools use the common app and which ones don't, as more time will be needed for schools that don't use the common app. Most schools will have their application up by August and all deadline dates posted. Constructing a timeline can be a challenge especially if the student is applying to more than 6 schools, but it will make for a better experience. If you have a student that is involved in a Fall sport it is critical to develop a plan for when the work will get done. Don't be fooled into thinking that your child will get their college applications done over the summer.

In the case of selective schools, applicants may be required to submit a supplemental application. These applications can involve additional teacher recommendations and 3 to 5 additional essay questions.

Make a master spreadsheet of all college websites, id numbers, user passwords and admission notification dates of the schools you are applying to so you can check on the progress of the application at each school. More than likely you will be able to track the movement of the app through the admission department.

In addition to the master spreadsheet mentioned above, use the "College Application Organizer" found in the back of the College Planning Guide you received during your Junior planning conference. We found it helpful to add a few more areas to the sheet. They are: applied for housing /date, housing deposit sent/date, merit scholarships due and admission notification date.

Use the Naviance site under the Hinsdale Central website. It is a great tool to aid you in the college process. The scatter grams, college visit schedule and scholarship information are especially helpful.

Scholarships/Financial Aid/Merit Scholarships

Allow enough time to apply for scholarships/merit aid. These applications are frequently due early-November 1st. Each school does it differently, for some no application is needed, for others detailed applications are needed.

If you are completing the FASFA, know that it and the PROFILE do take time to complete. They really can't be done in a weekend and tax information is needed in order to complete them. They can be completed before you have done your taxes using information from the prior year but you will need to update them when you get your final tax documents completed.

Housing

Make sure you understand the housing application and deadlines at each school you apply to. In some cases (large state schools) housing applications can be due BEFORE the admission application is due. If your student is undecided on their college choice it is a good idea to make a housing deposit to their admitted schools and then ask for the deposits back in May after the final decision has been made. Making a deposit can be a form of insurance so that your student knows he/she will have a place to live. Make sure you keep track of housing deposits on the "College Application Organizer" found in the back of the Hinsdale Central College Planning booklet you receive at your Junior planning conference.

Admission Notification

Keep track of admits, waitlists and denials and encourage your student to share that information with their counselor.

In the case of wait lists, if it is from a school that fits your students profile and they believe it is their first choice make sure you discuss the situation with them and their counselor so that everyone is on the same page. Counselors will help you but they need to know that it is your 1st choice. If you decide to proceed, keep sending updates to the school on anything that has changes since the application was submitted. This includes achievements, honors, grades, awards and scholarships. Keep the line of communication flowing. Note that you may be on a wait list one week or up to 3 months.

For some schools (especially large state schools), the longer your student delays the decision the more likely they will have difficulty getting a summer orientation session during a time that works for their schedule. In some cases they will have to register for their classes at the start of school, which may mean that many classes will be full, they might end up taking classes they aren't too excited about.

Athletics

If your student is planning to go to a Division 1 school make sure they register with the NCAA.

Work with your student's high school coach and their counselor in order to be sure you understand the recruiting process. Another good resource is the NCAA website for information and rulings on recruiting student athletes.

If a college coach has indicated an interest in your child make sure that your child keeps up the contact with that coach if he is interested in that school. This can be done via email. Also, we felt that the focus should be about the academic program first and then the athletic program, have this discussion with your child. Many athletes do not compete all four years due to injury or lost interest, which is why the school and academic program is more important than the athletics.

Just because a college coach has indicated an interest in your child does not mean you will get preferential treatment at the admission office. Some coaches have no say in admission decisions and some do.

If your student does end up being recruited be sure they make a visit to meet the team, see how their particular program is structured at that school, and whether they click with the coaching staff and students on the team.

Realize at the Division 2 and 3 levels there are no athletic scholarships offered.

Really Going

Be aware that freshman orientation sessions vary, large schools usually do them in the summer and small schools usually so them when students arrive on campus. This might not be an issue but it can cause a bit of anxiety when their friends have their freshman schedule 2 months before you even get to register for classes.

Summer will be busy for you and your student. It will be filled with parties, Doctor and Dentist appointments, orientation sessions, buying supplies and shopping.

If you are going to a school that is far away, use the services of Bed, Bath and Beyond. You may choose what you want at a store here and place your order. Your order will then be ready to pick up at a store near your college campus.

If your student will not have a car on campus make sure you have your auto insurance policy changes to reflect an "away at college status" for your student. You can save money by doing so.

Make sure your student is familiar with the student health services at their school before they get sick.

Key Takeaways

- Get started early – Freshman year.
- Visits can be very helpful. If possible, include large and small schools.
- A school where your child feels comfortable and will be successful is key.
- Narrow your list if possible. As attractive as applying to 14 schools sounds, it is way too much work (in my opinion).
- You will be excited – until your child leaves. Your child may not be excited – until they make a decision and leave.
- Be aware of deadlines (apps, housing, etc.)
- Engage your child so you know what they are thinking.
- It is all about fit. And they decide – you enable.