

# Parents, Know Thyselves In Your Child's College Admission Process

Willard Dix  
May 29, 2018

In my last entry, I mentioned a film that could have parents and students talking about the feelings and motivations surrounding the college admission process. In this one, I want to suggest a few specifics that parents should consider as it begins to heat up for real. While you may be well-meaning, you may be unintentionally inspiring some negative backlash. Each of these behaviors can usually be reined in by asking yourself, "Why am I doing this?" and finding an answer for yourself.

1. Are you pushing your offspring to a particular set of colleges, even if he or she may not seem that enthusiastic about it? If so, ask yourself why. Are you worried about what the neighbors will say? Are you afraid that your child might be a failure? Don't be like the parent who told me, "If Howard doesn't go to Harvard, he'll be a BUM!"
2. If you're afraid your child might be a failure, is that because you feel you haven't been a good parent? Is getting into the "right" college a sign of your success or failure as a parent? Don't be the parent sobbing on my office sofa, petrified that her son might have to go to Tufts instead of Brown. (Neither of which I'd consider "failure.")
3. Are you starting to make the plans, keep the calendar, make the appointments and do the college research for your student? Before you stop doing that (as you should), ask yourself why you're doing it in the first place. What are you worried about or fearful of? That none of it will get done? That you'll have a slug living at home with you for the rest of his life? What's your anxiety?
4. All college counselors dread the parent who says, "We're thinking about applying to Brand A College." Don't be that parent. It's like when men say "We're pregnant": Sure, you helped make it happen, but you're not doing the hard work of carrying the baby or experiencing the morning sickness. You reared your child and now it's time to bequeath the hard work to him or her. Ask yourself who should be in charge here and why you're trying to make it about you, because that's what you're doing.
5. Maybe you've had kids go through the college admission process before. Maybe they landed where they wanted or close to it. But that doesn't make you an expert on the process. Are you fighting with your child's college counselor? Challenging his or her expertise? Are you quoting U.S. News? One of my favorite expressions is, "Why buy a guard dog if you're gonna bark yourself?" If you're lucky enough to have an experienced school counselor or a good private consultant, get to know him or her and listen to their advice. Again, ask yourself why you're resisting a professional's opinion when that person is trying to be helpful. (Exception: If a counselor tells you,

as one I knew of once did, that the SAT is easier in one state than it is in the student's home state, then it may be time to push back.)

6. College admission procedures evolve, grow, molt, reform and reconstitute themselves almost annually, like Avengers movies. Demographics change year to year, admission targets adapt to a college's current needs and the orchestra may have more oboes than it needs. Past performance does not guarantee future results. Yes, there are patterns and probabilities, but rely on them only as rough guides, not as psychic predictions. And don't rely on psychic predictions, either. Stay in the present and pull back when you find yourself projecting too much.

It all comes down to trusting that you've done your job as a parent up to this point. Of course, you'll have doubts and worries, moments of panic and a sense that you're losing control of your student. And in a genuine sense, you are, but not chaotically, just in the natural process of separation. That's probably the hardest thing to acknowledge. Do your best to be present with that knowledge and admire your offspring's readiness to take the next big step.

Hopefully, you and your spouse will support each other in this big moment, maybe balance each other out. Not in a "good cop, bad cop" way, but in reminding each other to trust your child enough to be guides and supports rather than directors or drill sergeants. A key element of mentoring is to "guide without steering." That's good advice. Take it.