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Applying to College – Make It Work for You!

By KD Maynard, Oak Meadow College Counselor

The process of applying to college can be grueling and intimidating. There's another side to it, though – it can be a wonderful culminating activity that can wrap up your early schooling and launch you into an engaging and fulfilling college experience, later segueing into a similarly satisfying life. College is not the right path for all students leaving high school, and there are other options available, so keep an open mind as you go through this process. I encourage you to look at the process of gathering information and making a 'what's next' decision as a celebration of yourself as an individual and the launchpad into the next phase of your life. It's exciting!

If you are pursuing a college experience, here are some tips, regardless of how old you are or the nature of your aspirations:

The college search process is about FIT. Who are you as a student, and what is important to you? What setting would provide the appropriate mixture of comfort and challenge, the mix of academic and non-academic options, and so on? A good college search involves a lot of introspection and prioritizing; first looking inside, and then researching programs to best accommodate identified needs.

Isolate criteria that are most important to you, the student. There are myriad features to consider. Look at the content of the academic programs and other options, the campus climate, the sense of community and connection, and so on. For one student, a large international population will be essential; for another, a hands-on engineering program; for another, proximity to home or perhaps a city; for another, the ability to make one's own decisions about curriculum. Figure out what's important to you, and go after it!

Plan ahead. Regardless of how soon you will be applying to college, there are points to consider and steps to take to position yourself for the best result. Check out recommended (or required) high school course programs, "normed" options (e.g., standardized test scores or college courses that evaluate your learning against a larger population and can also put you in competition for scholarship money), your state's regulations regarding diplomas, and – vitally important – the comprehensive documentation of your learning over time.

Research. Explore what's out there, track what looks interesting or promising, tap into multiple sources of primary and secondary information about schools and programs. Familiarize yourself with the structure of colleges, the steps to the application process, and the characteristics of places that 'feel right' and those that don't. These are all part of an organic process that takes time to gestate and grow. Start anytime, and don't skimp. It's an investment in your future.

Strategize. If you do this research thoroughly, you'll be able to make strategic decisions, such as whether to apply early to a school, whether to apply to a selective major or just seek entry to the school, or whether there's any possibility you might be able to afford to attend a school with a scary price tag. It's an iterative process of ruling options in and ruling them out, and it's best to keep opportunities open for as long as you can.

As a homeschooler or a student who didn't follow a cookie-cutter educational path, you bear a certain burden of responsibility. Don't assume that admissions people understand homeschooling or the choices you've made. You need to educate them! Provide ample documentation (e.g., syllabi, reading lists, and project descriptions).

If offered an interview, DO IT and be prepared with an 'elevator speech' about your educational choices and why you are primed and ready for college. You WILL stand out as a student who is accustomed to making choices and pursuing them . . . but you need to paint the picture for the admissions office.

Don't succumb to sticker-shock. College educations are expensive – startlingly so. But don't dismiss a school you love because of the price tag. Dig deeper. Look at the average cost of attendance ('tuition discounting' often brings down the cost of attendance, even for students who don't qualify for financial aid) and put yourself out there. Be realistic and apply for schools you know you can afford, but if you're excited about a costly school, give it a whirl. My daughter was able to attend a private liberal arts college halfway across the country for less out-of-pocket than attending her state school (where my job afforded her a tuition waiver). It can happen!

Recognize the value of the college search process, and take time to appreciate it. Yes, you can approach it as an annoying hassle unworthy of your time, but that won't change the fact that you have to go through it if you want to get a college education. Accept the challenge to look closely at yourself and what you want next; savor and share your high school successes; and position yourself to be a motivated, curious and eager college student. Keep looking until you find that college that will 'fit you like a glove.'

Oak Meadow's free college counseling webinars are geared to address various segments of the college search and application process in detail. We aim to provide background and recommendations, regardless of where you are in the college search process. Join us!

KD Maynard's professional experience has revolved around assisting high school and early college students to find a fit in their choice of college and academic program, thereby enabling them to engage fully and to successfully meet their goals. She has held roles in college admissions, college counseling and financial aid, academic advising, teacher training and curriculum development, and administrative/leadership positions. She has worked at Brown University, World Learning, Marlboro College, The Putney School, Community College of Vermont, and University of Massachusetts Amherst. KD's liberal arts background (AB from Brown and MALS from Dartmouth) provides her with a worldview that seeks to make connections between and among people, ideas, and a sense of a greater good.