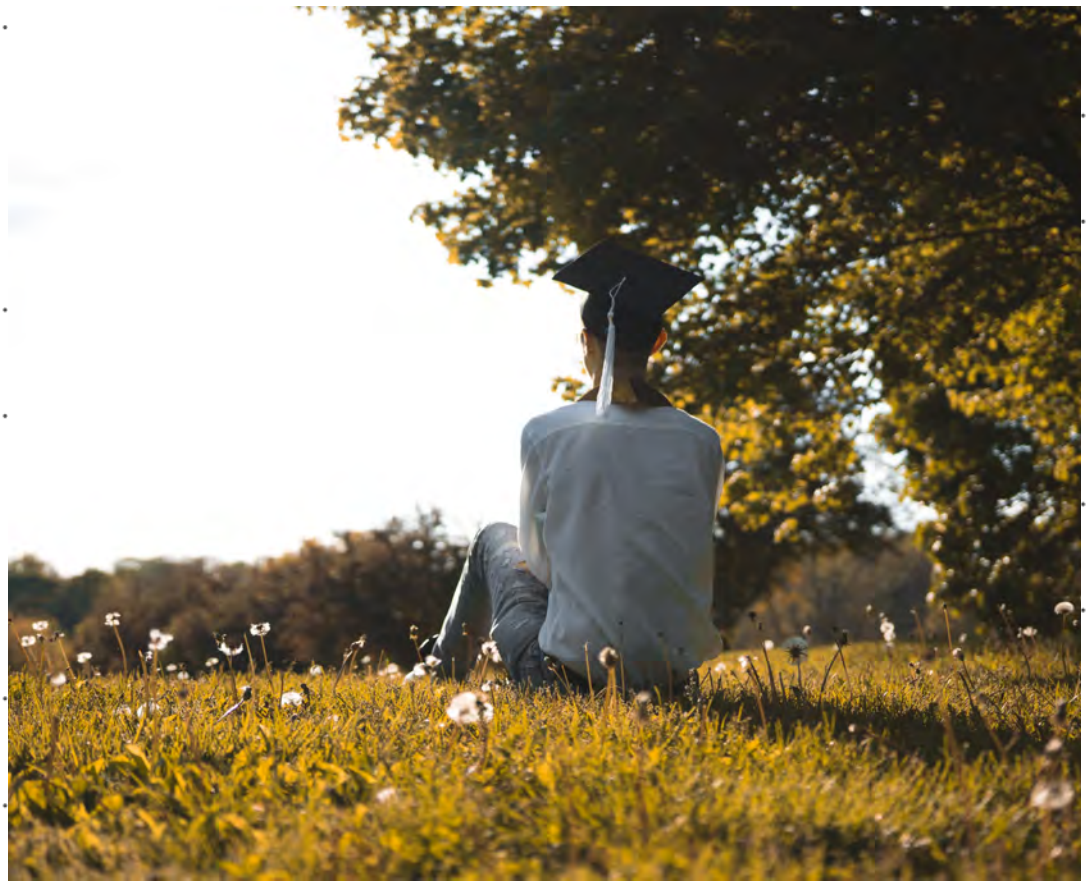
THE FIVE MISTAKES PARENTS MAKE IN THEIR CHILD'S COLLEGE SEARCH

A GUIDE TO FINDING COLLEGE
WITHOUT LOSING YOURSELF



BY THOMAS C. GOLDEN, PH.D.

THE FIVE MISTAKES PARENTS MAKE IN THEIR CHILD'S COLLEGE SEARCH

I remember the first time I held my oldest child in my arms; I'm sure you remember that moment for your family too.

Me, in a head-to-toe gown and a greenish-yellow shower cap conveniently hiding the sweat slicked hair I was sporting that day; it is at this point I should mention that my wife was in labor a total of 72 hours at this point. Yeah, my wife and I don't do anything half-way.

Andrew, our oldest, fresh off of acing his APGAR tests (he's a smart cookie) there in my arms calmly lying in a hospital blanket and looking in my eyes with an almost sympathetic gaze as if to say, "You

really have no idea what you're doing do you?" What I remember most though was that he was softly opening and closing his mouth like a goldfish, which in baby language, means, "Feed me you idiot man."

Despite months of nerdish baby book study, the awesomeness of this moment hit me. That I was indeed put in charge by the universe to feed, clothe, teach, and above all, love and nurture this beautiful . . . fish-person.

"Trying to parent without a sense of humor is like being an accountant who sucks at math." -Amber Dusick, Blogger

As parents we accept this responsibility to raise and care for our children through all of life's challenges and pathways: from skinned knees and boo boos, to how to share, through breakups and crushes, from the highs of victory to the pain and doubts that come with defeats. Woven through these life events, with your own colorful thread, is your attempt to teach your children how to persevere, to love, to keep going, to fight, to yield for a greater purpose, to accept, to celebrate, and to never stop believing in themselves.

* * *

Think of the phrases you say a lot to your children. Is there a pattern? A favorite of mine is "Don't tell me what you are going to do. Show me." It's on repeat most days in our house when one of the twins is on the Xbox but was supposed to have cleaned his room which has, by then, begun to look like a crime scene. You know, the kind of scene from Law and Order where the first thing Ice-T says when he enters is, "There appears to have been a struggle."

It's my reminder when he says, "I'm gonna do it, Dad." It's gotten to the point now where I only have to say the first part, "Don't tell me what you are going to do," to elicit the sarcastic call and response for which I'm looking.

Maybe like you, my wife and I try (and fail a lot) to help our children approach life's challenges, both big and small. You make choices, face the consequences honestly, learn from them, and decide what choices you will make in the future. It's a kind of roadmap for growth that doesn't really depend on the circumstance. Maybe you teach your children to pray when they face challenges, or perhaps to talk to a loved one about what they are

facing, or simply to go take a walk to clear their head and think. Whatever it is, I bet you have tried to keep that road map for parenting as consistent as you can. It is your way to teaching them how to adult.

THROWING OUT THE MAP

I worked in university admissions for more than two decades, and I have had the fortune to be able to interact with thousands of students and families as they navigate the college search. What I have noticed is that in the college search, parents often adopt a different approach to helping their children prepare and navigate one of the more significant life challenges they have yet faced. It's as if the road map they had been using to help their kids sort through life's difficulties was no longer helpful: as if they had entered a new land, like they were now in Chicago holding a map of Detroit.

Yes, it is true that college admissions have become more complicated in the last 20 years and the field of vision is getting more crowded with

options, advice, brochures, emails, and acronyms - oh so many acronyms. The college application and scholarship processes are indeed confusing and complicated because they were designed that way. Why? Because they weren't designed for you the parent or student; they were designed for the efficiency and convenience of the people doing the admitting and packaging of financial aid. Today's average admissions professional cut his or her teeth in the 1990's and/or 2000's which featured a) tremendous growth in high school graduate populations, and b) a huge uptick in direct marketing expenditures specifically to drive up the number of applications a college or university had. Direct Mail is a marketing strategy that hinges on the targeting of an individual through the postal mail delivery of print advertising, which saw a boom in use in the 1980's and 1990's, with mail order sales growing nearly 10% annually from 1990-1996. Maybe you remember Skymall catalogues? Oh the magic.

In short, the university admissions field is used to a seller's market, while over the past 5 years have seen a radical shift toward a buyer's market.

According to the National Student Clearinghouse,

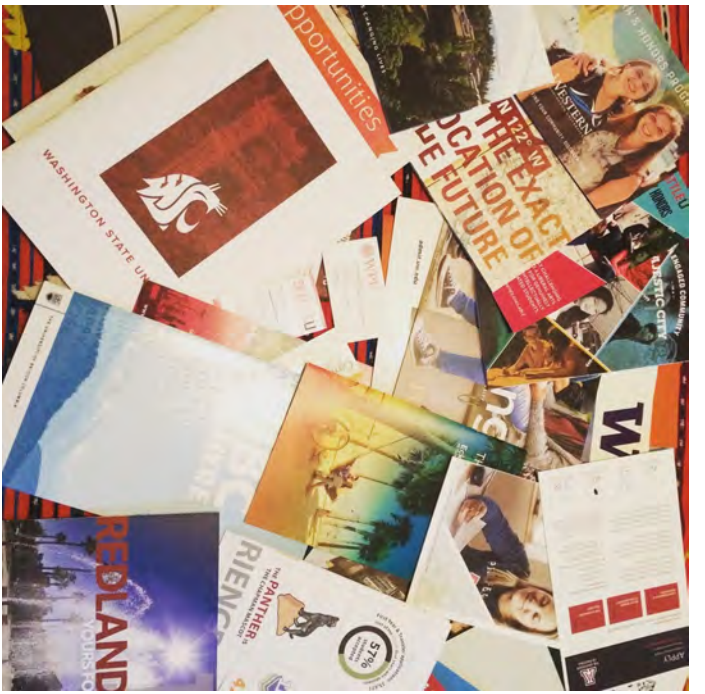
34 states saw overall higher education enrollment declines in 2018, with the greatest declines in the Midwest and Northeast. 2018 also marked the 7th straight year of enrollment declines in the U.S..

May 1st is the nationally agreed upon day by which students must submit their enrollment deposit to secure their spot for the Fall. As of the May 1 national response deadline, 62% of colleges missed their enrollment targets, as of according to a 2018 Inside Higher Ed survey.

A 2018 Inside Higher Ed and Gallup report found that nearly 1 in 4 CFOs at private non-profit universities believe their institutions will face closure in the next decade.

So what are you left with at the end of the day? This on your kitchen table:

* * *



It's understandable that both parents and students are overwhelmed with this wall of noise that hurtles toward them as the junior and senior years approach. When you layer the intensity focused on college attendance as an equivalent to life success, specifically attendance at a small subset of highly selective colleges, you can see why college admissions stress is its own category of adolescent and parental anxiety. This focus on hyper-selective

institutions is driven in part by a media culture that thrives on scarcity and exclusivity to generate clicks and revenue. This creates an echo chamber of stress. A kind of industrial-anxiety complex, if you will. There is of course, a much better way.

THE COLLEGE SEARCH AS A TEACHABLE MOMENT

So, let's take a breath and look at the college search for what it is: a moment. It's a moment in time when students must take stock of their lives as they know it at that moment, all of their experiences, perspectives, ambitions, and credentials and communicate it all to a set of strangers who will review and render some form of judgment. While it may seem unique and different to both you and your student, when you think of it that way, you as a parent have experienced this process dozens of times. You have experienced it, not only in your own education, but also with every job you ever applied to and every mortgage you ever sought to secure. Sure, I'll admit that the college application process might at first blush

appear to be daunting, with all the different deadlines, requirements, tests, and terminology. In truth, it's a process that will repeat many times over for your child, as you, amore seasoned adult, can well attest. Your son or daughter will experience this process when they apply for internships, leadership positions in college, grad schools, and jobs should they decide to move out of your house after college. (Kidding.)

So decide to use the college application and scholarship processes as teachable moments, with the goal of helping young people grapple with the messy art of adult decision-making.

At Golden Educational Consulting, we wake up everyday and work to inspire young people to find out what inspires them. We do that by teaching families how to prepare their kids for the challenges of the college search. We provide highly personalized one-on-one college search coaching and educational assessments to families all over the globe.

We see lots of things that can get in the way of a healthy college search. We define the following outcomes when the college search is done and

dusted.

- The student and the family should:
- Learn something about themselves in the process,
- Feel supremely confident in the applications being put forward,
- Experience a healthy and peaceful detachment from the process once applications have been submitted, and
- Look back on this whole experience with positive memories (e.g., they are still talking to each other).

As a means of helping you navigate your child's upcoming college search, here are the top five mistakes we see parents make in their child's college search.

FOCUS EXCLUSIVELY ON THE COLLEGE BEING CHOSEN INSTEAD OF THE CHOOSER

A central article of faith in the aforementioned industrial anxiety complex is the notion that a student's path to success is largely facilitated by attending a "good" college. I experienced this first-hand as an admissions professional at a top 20 university (at least according to U.S. News and World Report). Every year, I would watch families leverage all they had, accumulating mountains of debt to send their child to the college at which I worked. I would hear it in the comments from parents that if their son or daughter were to be admitted at my institution that one way or another, they would financially "figure out a way." While I

admire that kind of commitment to investing in your child's future, I cannot help but note that such an investment is based on a flawed system of beliefs.

Having studied the college search for decades (literally, I did my doctoral dissertation on this stuff), I have yet to see compelling evidence that indicates that attending one college over another significantly affects a person's level of professional success and personal happiness. I realize that this runs counter to a lot of the cultural narrative that surrounds the college search, so let me explain what I mean.

Stacy Berg Dale of the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and Princeton economist Alan Krueger conducted a critical study of the effect of attending one college over another on a person's professional success and personal life satisfaction. Their research design allowed for a much more "apples to apples" comparison as they studied students who were admitted to highly selective and top-ranked universities, but who attended less selective colleges. So for example, they identified groups of students who were admitted to a school like the University of Pennsylvania as well as Penn State University. They followed up with the students who attended and graduated from Penn, and those who

attended and graduated from Penn State.

They found two very interesting results:

1) students who were admitted to top-ranked universities (e.g., Penn) but who attended less selective schools (e.g., Penn State) were just as successful and happy as those were attended the choosier schools.

2) Even the students who applied to more selective schools and were denied admission, were also just as happy and successful as those attending top ranked schools (this is likely due to a selection effect, as students with better grades and test scores tend to be more successful, and tend to apply to higher ranked colleges.)

This is great news, as it indicates that the more important variable in students' future success are the students themselves. The student's drive, determination, creativity, insightfulness, and personality, these are the raw materials that construct future success. A college cannot give these to a student, nor can they take them away. That's why we emphasize personal growth and learning in the college search process.

DOING THE COLLEGE SEARCH FOR THEM

When I was back working in campus-based admissions, I would keep track of what the split was between parents and student phone calls. On a given day of being on-call (when all of the questions coming in on the phones would be routed to you as an admissions officer) I would average 9 parent calls for every 1 student call. Now that I am working with families in the college application process, I regularly face the temptation by families to "help out" a student with some of the tasks involved with applying to college. I get it. The student is super busy with practice, recitals, and homework and there just isn't enough time for all of the:

Filling out forms

Calling colleges and asking questions
Setting up appointments
Requesting transcripts
Writing essays . . .

I could go on. The college and financial aid processes are full of minutiae and tasks, and taken as a collective, they can be annoying at best, overwhelming at worst. But each and every one of them are important, and taken as a group, they present an organizational challenge for students that is even more important. Do not steal this from them.

When they are older and are stuck in a less fulfilling job, which is also working them 60-70 hours a week, will there "be time" for searching for another job, or perhaps working on building their own business so they can be their own boss? Not likely. That's why adults understand that the things we make a priority in life are the things we make time for. This is no different.

Think back to when you were teaching your son or daughter to drive (or when you learned to drive if your children aren't old enough). The learner is in the driver's seat, the teacher (i.e., the parent) sitting right next to them. Everyone knows the deal:

* * *

1) The driver is responsible for all of the small tasks of driving.

-Blinkers
-Headlights
-Checking the mirrors
-Watching weather and road conditions
-Etc

What would be the point of reaching over and flipping the blinkers for them?

2) Everyone in the car knows that you are there to teach and that at some point, you will not be in the car with them. They must learn how to drive independently. That's the deal.

3) You are in the teaching seat by virtue of you being a more experienced driver.

These principles also apply to the college search as the student is attempting to master the skills of adult decision-making that come with it. As you were literally sitting next to your child while they learned to drive, so too are you figuratively sitting next to him or her as they learn this fuzzy art and

science of making adult decisions. You have a vital role to play because you are not going to college with them, and they will need to make positive adult decisions without you. Teach them well and let them struggle while you are there by their side.

NOT GIVING THEM A BUDGET

Imagine being assigned a major, potentially career-making project that will be seen and scrutinized throughout your entire company, without knowing the budget of the project. I mean, there is a budget, someone knows what it is for your project. They're just not going to tell you. Kind of like flying blind right? Not sure how to evaluate the options right? Exactly, because in most adult settings, staying within some sort of budget is a condition of successfully meeting an objective.

But that is exactly the position in which most families put their adolescents when searching for colleges: evaluate all of these choices and then let us know which ones you like and we'll let you know if we afford it. Most parents we meet are quietly

panicked that their child will be academically able to attend a college that they will not be able to afford. That's why we sit down with every family that works with us for a family budgeting meeting in which everyone, student included, knows what kind of net price (total cost of attendance - financial aid) is in range.

Can you think of many major adult decisions that are made without a single consideration for cost and affordability? I can't.

Knowing what options are affordable to the family empowers the young person to make confident decisions because they know that the family will be on firm financial ground, no matter which college they choose. Keep in mind that there are over 4,000 unique colleges and universities in the U.S., some cutting down on the list is a good thing. Besides, we need them to see first-hand the role that a budget plays in adult decision-making. When they graduate and get a job, we want them to know that while that super trendy loft apartment in the hip part of town may be amazing, if they cannot afford it, it is not an option.

BELIEVE THAT WHAT KIND OF COLLEGE THEIR CHILD ATTENDS IS A REFLECTION ON THEIR SUCCESS AS A PARENT: THE GOOD COLLEGE FALLACY

When you help families prepare for college for a living, summer barbecues can be an interesting affair. Inevitably people you don't know start asking about college which entreats stories of recent college searches, which usually ends up with one or two parents bragging about the amazing top ranked college and/or scholarship their kid got. All the while, younger kids are hanging around, absorbing and internalizing ever word. It's at this point that I excuse myself for more guacamole.

* * *

We've already established that when economists and scientists study the patterns, they find that attending one college over another has little impact on future success and happiness. I didn't say anything about whether our culture agreed with that. For a portion of our society, having their child attend a prestigious university is the ultimate goal, worthy of considerable sacrifice and effort. We see this most prominently among parents who enroll their child in private college preparatory schools. Attending a "good school" is often seen as the payoff for investing in private schooling. The typology and level of prestige of the institution therefore is on the balance scale as parents try to weigh the question of "did we prepare our child well enough for going to a good college?"

Let's be honest with each other, the college admissions and search pressure in our culture is real for both the student and the parent. It is natural to feel and respond to the messaging that "good parents send their kids to good colleges." But that doesn't mean we can't push back on this messaging. The reality is that the higher education landscape today is considerably different than when today's parents when to college. Not only is college considerably more expensive, but that are

significantly more options than there has ever been. Online learning programs have gained credibility, experiential learning experiences are growing in popularity, and the idea of a singular major leading to a singular career is crumbling. We are living in a world in which it has never been easier to learn anything that you wanted to know. The pathways to success are widening as those options increase.

Don't get me wrong, these "good schools" are wonderful places of learning and personal growth, and we have assisted dozens of students in enrolling in them. But to be hyper-focused on a small subset of prestigious colleges would ignore the hundreds of equally amazing institutions that may actually be a better fit for that student, helping them become a happy, healthy, and prosperous young person. And ultimately, isn't that what every parent wants?

PREVENTING OR DISCOURAGING HARDER COURSES

Physical strength is built from the healing and accompanying growth that results from microscopic tears in muscle tissue from lifting heavy objects. While not literally the same, brain functions also can benefit from figuratively lifting heavy things. When we challenge ourselves to learn new things and to make mental connections we had not had before, we grow. Similarly, we slow our growth by repeating tasks we have already mastered, not to mention how bored we get.

We often get asked what we recommend when it comes to honors, advanced placement (AP), or dual-enrollment courses. Our response is simple, whenever possible, a student should take the most

rigorous course load he or she can reasonably handle. The key is in the balance here between a student's skill level and the challenge at hand.

Famous psychologist Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi described the fluid relationship between challenge and mastery as it affects how we experience various challenges. When the challenge of an activity is greater than our skill in that activity, we experience anxiety, while in the opposite (when skill is greater than the challenge) we experience boredom. It is only when our skills are equal to the challenge we face when we experience excitement and happiness (a state Ccsikszentmihalyi called flow).

Applying this to your son or daughter, if they are reporting that they are bored in class, we often assume that it is due to the fact that their skills have outpaced the rigor of the class. However, when a student reports that they are anxiety-ridden and falling behind, often the natural reaction is to remove the student from that class because it was "just too much for them." While every situation requires a case-by-case sensitivity (you know your child best of course) our usual recommendation is to focus on skill building when that occurs. Have the student assess their in-class behavior, conduct an

audit of their note-taking and homework routines, and teach them proper help-seeking behaviors, such as seeking help from the teacher or a tutor. This is how you can begin to get back to the challenge and skill levels being more equivalent.

WHAT TO DO NOW

Ok, honesty time. Did you find yourself feeling a little sheepish because perhaps you have made one of those mistakes with your child? Don't worry, you are in good company. It is never too late to start treating your son or daughter's college search as the powerful learning opportunity that it is. We can help.

We would love to have a one-on-one conversation with you about what challenges and opportunities you are facing in your son or daughter's upcoming college search

What are your challenges?

1. So many deadlines

2. So many requirements
3. So many choices
4. So many essays
5. So much stress
6. So expensive

The college search process can be difficult to navigate with all the different requirements, deadlines, and acronyms. Oh so many acronyms! With more than two decades of experience helping families navigate the college and financial aid processes, we've got your back. Let us handle the small stuff while you focus on your family and future.

Let's talk about what challenges you and your family are facing and what we can do to help.

Schedule a 30 minute conversation with Dr. Thom

Doctorthom.com/talktothom