

How to get into the right college in 5 easy steps!

In almost every aspect of our lives we have a myriad of choices and challenges. There must be more than 20 varieties of SUVs these days when there used to be just a couple! The decision you make to buy any of those SUVs comes with a price and consequences that go way beyond, buyer's remorse or "oh well..." and a sigh. Cars, homes, medical care...college....wait, yes, college can cause insomnia for months if we let it.

Can you or your scholar ever know completely whether he or she has cozied up to the absolute best pathway or solution for post secondary education? Absolutely not! So some say, pare it all down to affordability. The name of the institution on the undergrad degree doesn't really...truly...honestly matter that much. Come on you've heard that right, especially from those who didn't attend their school of choice. We as adults justify the fact that you just don't quite know what is best and scarier yet...ignorance costs soooo much!

Well I've got a solution! Chunk it, yes, chunk it! I don't mean throw the baby out with the bathwater chunk it. I mean make it a process, take the steps. Here are some that I've learned over the years which are influenced by my experience going on a slew of college tours to a variety of institutions on the East Coast, the South, and here in Texas. Obviously Texas is in a category all its own! It's also influenced by reading, my own college experience, taking family members through the process, and working last year with our seniors. So here it is...

- ***Know thyself*** - Start Planning in the first semester of the 11th grade.

Explain to your scholar the importance of knowing what they enjoy and that there is a way to create a pathway that speaks to their unique skills, talents, and interests. College isn't the same compulsory experience of high school. Help him or her recognize or understand the value of his or her motivations, strengths, and achievements. Don't spend a lot of time at first guiding their thinking. Let them brainstorm. This can be done as early as the 10th grade.

Planning also means applying time management and coping skills with everyday life so that the focus is performing at the highest level possible. Your student must keep in front of him or her that their junior year courses are basically what will determine in a very major way acceptance into most institutions and also in many ways...money for school.

Most of all, research and visit as many schools as time and opportunity and resources allow so that the narrowing process can be as intentional as possible. It's best to have at least 4 choices. Think about have Reach schools (those difficult to get into but that are interesting), Good Matches (those that are a solid choice with a decent chance of getting into), and Safeties (those that are very likely to get into).

- ***Math, Reading, and Writing Oh My!*** - Take the SAT / ACT.

Simply put standardized testing for entry into college is still a thing. It's a really big thing indeed! Score ranges have changed, expectations may have changed, the controversy about the importance of testing is louder, and choice of tests have changed. However the fact still remains that scholars should take one or the other at least twice. I suggest once in the Spring of the junior year and once at the beginning of the summer or the first administration in their senior year at the very very latest. Be reminded though that taking the SAT / ACT in the Fall of the senior year is not completely recommended because by the time scores are received, essential time has passed for applying to choice schools. Many young people are applying in the summer before their senior year now.

As far as scores and which tests to take...review the requirements of schools of interest

- ***The Early Bird, Worms and College...Random...or Not*** - Apply early.

Schools accept applications many times in the summer before the senior year. Also know the difference between the benefits of Early Decision (binding...scholars commit to that school with an early acceptance) and Early Action (non-binding...scholars benefit from knowing but do not have to commit right away). Sometimes it's all about money. Early decision could possibly lock in funding while Early action may still not make a big difference. Look up your schools of interest and find out what each choice guarantees.

- ***Money, Money, Muuhnaay!*** - Complete the FAFSA in October and also apply for aid and scholarships.

The FAFSA (Free Application for Federal Student Aid) is available each year on October 1st. The application provides an opportunity for schools to certify or identify those who qualify for financial aid. While completing the app has nothing to do with merit based aid or scholarships some schools require it before awarding a financial aid package, period. Do some research on schools of interest to find out if completing the FAFSA is suggested or required.

Also, the federal government requires all schools to reveal the cost of attendance on their websites. This is important because you can find out how much school will cost including tuition, room and board, and other incidentals. Usually a cost calculator is embedded on the website to help create a more individual understanding about what is needed to comfortably afford attendance.

- ***A - C - C - E - P - T! Find out what it Means to Me!*** - Choose the best package and pathway.

Acceptance letters will start to come in during the Fall semester based on how early your scholar starts to apply. Create a chart or a document that lists the pros and cons for each school. Help your scholar create a discriminating eye with regard to choosing the absolutely best pathway at the time. Most careers will need a master's degree to become upwardly mobile.

Build in room for growth for your scholar so that you are planning not only just the first year, but for all of the years of attendance. Know that college students change majors, have moments when they sometimes want to take time off, or have disappointing relationships. They also can just learn to see the world differently and want to make decisions based on observation and new experiences. Knowing that challenges are coming helps you and your scholar

Planning, finances, testing, and knowledge are all vital points in creating an effective pathway to college. However, nothing trumps support. Make decisions based on the system of support you know your scholar will or will not have. In what ways are you teaching resilience? How are they prepared for a world different from the insular world of UME and or life as a child in general. Getting into the right college can seem daunting but without support and a way to make sure they can get home or to those who are concerned about them, an acceptance letter is not worth the paper it is printed on indeed.