

Changing Times in College Admission

By Elizabeth La Scala, Ph.D.

As a college advisor, I am often asked the question “Why has getting into college become so stressful?” What was once simple and straight-forward is now more complex. What has changed? First, thanks to the Baby Boomer generation, there are greater numbers of high school graduates and more of them want to go to college. For many, a college degree has replaced the high school diploma as the minimum standard of educational achievement. In response to the greater demand for an undergraduate degree, colleges have escalated marketing efforts to attract qualified applicants. And, of course, technology makes it easier than ever to access college websites, take virtual tours and prepare college applications.

But this is only part of the answer. Digging a bit deeper, we see that more students are applying to the 100 most prestigious colleges and universities in the country. Simply put, more students are competing for the same number of spots at the most highly selective institutions. Heightened by media attention, it appears more difficult to gain college admission. The overall impact on students and parents is

stressful. The pressure mounts to take more challenging coursework, register for increasingly earlier test prep, and hire expensive consultants to help students “get into” to the right college. With all the hype, it is easy to lose sight of the fact that it is the student who should be highly selective in the college he chooses.

My goal as a professional college advisor is to offer a few simple guidelines to help students and their families streamline the college admission process. First, control what you can control. This involves figuring out what’s important to the student, her needs, interests, and academic aspirations. It also means taking an honest look at areas for improvement and focusing on these during the academic year. Next, plan ahead and start early. The senior year is far more fun and rewarding if you prepare the groundwork by doing what needs to be done in the sophomore and junior years. It is important to do a thorough college search, take the necessary tests, adhere to deadlines and prepare strong applications. No matter when you get started, the secret is good organization and planning, and applying to colleges that are a good match. It is

helpful to remember that a good, even a great education can be had at more than 2500 colleges nationwide, and most of these institutions accept 50% to 80% of their applicants.

My column will appear regularly through the college cycle from application to acceptance. Parents and students can look forward to a timeline of what needs to get done and when. The topics will include admission requirements, options for standardized testing and how to prepare, the college search, college applications, essays and personal statements, how and when to ask for teacher recommendations, college visits and financial aid. I will provide some practical guidance and suggest websites and other resources for more information. For now, enjoy the last few weeks of summer. In August we will get to work



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