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What's Wrong with the "Best Fit" College?

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the fact that we counselors work with 17-year-olds who are largely unshaped, although certainly full of possibilities and potential. Fixation on fit has been so distorted by the media that it distances our youth from self-awareness. It plays to normal teen feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt by masking them with grandiose visions of college life. All young people want to succeed and find some happiness in their college experience. In order for that to happen a good dose of self-knowledge about what type of college environment best suits them would help.

If the idea of 'the perfect fit' preys on teen inexperience and naiveté and encourages unrealistic expectations, what can teachers, counselors and parents do to support young people? We can start by pointing out that real college life will be filled with good and not so good teachers, exciting relationships and dramatic breakups, cramped freshmen quarters and more spacious sophomore suites where you may make friendships that last a lifetime. We can help by reinforcing that real university life turns out to be just life, not some romanticized version of it.

But before we throw 'fit' out the proverbial window, there are some concrete ways to evaluate a student's college readiness and success. For example, a few nonacademic factors that have been demonstrated to affect a student's success in college include personality and temperament, which are often tied to study habits. A more introverted student who prefers to work alone and demonstrates a high level of achievement may not have the need or desire for much teamwork; such a student may be utterly isolated at a college where collective knowledge borne of student collaboration predicts greater success. Other qualities students should consider are their experience and success with long-term goal setting, decision-making, self-control, time management and organizational skills.

Changing the language from finding 'the best fit' to finding 'a better fit' is important. Then we must act accordingly by encouraging students to better understand themselves by asking the right questions when they start to research colleges. Questions about how a student studies and learns, how he prefers to socialize and recreate, if

About a year and a half ago my youngest daughter, Angela, announced in a distraught voice, "It didn't happen, Mom. I didn't feel any of the colleges we visited was 'the right fit.' What am I going to do now?" She had been offered admission to a few fine US colleges and universities and was uncertain where she wanted to attend. Well-intentioned others assured her that she need not fret...just go and visit the colleges that accepted her, and she would 'just know'-in fact, in all likelihood she would 'know' the minute she set foot on campus. We had just completed visits to these colleges and Angela was disappointed that the magic had not happened. She was terribly discouraged, and nearly convinced that there was something wrong with her for not recognizing her 'best fit' school.

That's when I started to rethink the whole notion of 'college fit.' Clearly, colleges have latched on to the concept of 'the right fit' like no other and drench our high school students with glossy guidebooks filled with colorful photos of attractive students holding test tubes in labs or studying under large oak trees on manicured lawns; other photos depict students engaged in sports in gleaming athletic facilities complete with climbing walls, or lounging in new and spacious dorms. Many colleges will assure students that their campus is not too big and not too small; that it is, in fact, 'just right'- as was Goldilocks's porridge in the famous children's tale.

As a college advisor, I am trained to guide students toward discovering colleges that are the best match for them. Yet I find the statement 'finding the right fit' to be overused-sort of a mantra that we repeat to families as well as to other college counselors to avoid conversations that are more difficult. The mantra stifles opportunities for productive discussions about how to actively help our students move past the obvious factors like national ranking, campus size and region of the country and focus instead on those features of college life that will contribute to student success. And that process involves guiding students toward greater self-awareness.

As I gave this more thought, I also came to grips with

she enjoys mostly leading or following should help students and their families to seek out the truly important aspects of college life to consider. These kinds of explorations lead to greater self-discovery and hopefully better, albeit not perfect, college choices.

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