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Surviving the College Search

A guide for independent school families on
common myths and realities
the parent's role
a planning timeline
financial aid



myths & realities

of getting into college

Myth

There's only one right college for my child.

Reality

Of the 4,000 colleges in the United States, there are dozens where any student at almost any achievement level can make the most of his or her potential. Don't limit your child to the handful of colleges you hear other people talking about. The search process is all about finding the best match *for your child*.

Our family paid dearly for independent school tuition. That investment had better pay off in admission to a prestigious college.

Independent schools do offer a solid return on investment by providing a challenging academic environment and rich opportunities to participate in sports, the arts, and other extracurricular activities. Nevertheless, it's up to students themselves to take advantage of their opportunities. What they make of their high school years is the biggest factor in where

Myth

Reality

they're admitted to college.

Paying for a great high school is like paying for membership in the best health club. You can spend a lot for access to state-of-the-art equipment, but if you don't actually exercise, you won't get results. Students who fail to apply themselves will find their college choices limited, regardless of the quality (or cost) of their high school.

Getting Bs in the harder classes that independent schools offer will hurt my child's chances of getting into a good college.

College admissions officers appreciate the difference between an *A* in basket-weaving and a *B* in AP Statistics at any school. They also realize the importance of considering the whole person, not just individual grades. That said, regardless of where students go to high school, earning high grades in challenging courses is the best predictor of success in a highly competitive college. Posting several Cs is a good predictor of so-so performance at such a college—and gives admissions officers a good rationale for rejection.

Myth

No student gets into a good college without all As, 1400-plus on the SATs, and a dozen activities.

Reality

Selective colleges do require high grades in the most rigorous classes, solid test scores, and a record of meaningful activities (though depth is more important than breadth). But again, even students with less-than-stellar records can get admitted to a good college—if you define “good” as the college that meets their needs. Keep in mind these comforting statistics:

- Only 10.5 percent of all four-year colleges accept less than 50 percent of their applicants.*
- Some 58 percent accept 75 percent or more.*
- And 91 percent of students get accepted by their first- or second-choice college.†

* Source: *The College Board's 2001 Annual Survey of Colleges*

† Source: *UCLA Higher Education Research Institute's "The American Freshman: National Norms for Fall 2001"*

It's a label-conscious culture. If students don't make it into a big-name college, they'll always lag behind those who did.

What students make of their college education is more important than where they attend. A number of long-term studies challenge the popular assumptions that graduation from one of the big-name universities has any effect whatsoever on long-term success and overall happiness. In addition, although many successful people emerged from prestigious colleges, plenty of others did not. In “Where

Myth

Reality

Did Our Heroes and Heroines Go to College,” *Washington Post* education writer Jay Mathews noted, “No one is quite sure where greatness comes from. But I think we can agree that it does not have much to do with the name of the college on top of the person’s diploma.”*

** Learn more on this topic from the Resources section, page 15.*

If my child goes to the “right” independent school, the combination of its reputation and its counseling staff will get him or her into the right college.

Most independent school students do have the advantage of a rigorous curriculum in a supportive environment. And their counselors are indeed a valuable resource. They can offer advice based on both personal knowledge of a given student and a variety of colleges, and they have a useful network of contacts. Occasionally, they can even make overtures to help a college see an individual student more accurately.

All that said, colleges make their own decisions about whom to admit. No high school counselor has the power to get a student accepted or to reverse a rejection letter.