



Thoughts on Choosing a College

My oldest daughter is now a senior in high school. As she has been going through the college selection process, it has given me an up-close and personal opportunity to review the steps our kids take in selecting a college.

From my perspective, with each passing year, the opportunity and choice continue to expand. In my day, growing up in a large family, life was much simpler; with 10 kids to educate my family really focused on public universities. I remember my parents telling me: "You can go to any college you want -- Washington or Washington State." For the record, the Huskies came out on top, with six of us kids choosing the University of Washington, and four choosing Washington State University. In hindsight, one of the most valuable lessons my parents ever taught us growing up was the importance of education. To this day, I am incredibly proud of my family having sent and graduated all 10 children -- a truly great accomplishment!

Having only two children in my own family, my wife and I have tried to instill in our kids this same love of learning and importance of education. For all those new parents, I don't think you can start these lessons too early. Reading to and with your children is a vitally important first step.

While I would be incredibly proud of my daughters if they choose to attend a state college or university, my wife and I have encouraged our daughters to also look beyond the borders of Washington state when considering schools. In our case, visiting college campuses when we were on vacation or attending athletic competitions was a great way to help our kids begin to understand what was out there. This process began very early for our kids -- in our case, middle school.

In talking to many families over the years, I have found that a significant percentage of families don't even consider private colleges out of fear that they are simply too expensive. While it is true that private colleges can cost two to three times what an in-state university costs, the cost of attendance doesn't tell the whole story. Many private colleges have significant endowments and are willing to help make college affordable to students who they believe will enhance their college's reputation. At many private colleges it is not that uncommon to see financial aid awards of \$20,000 to \$40,000 -- often fulfilling 100% of the expected need.

As our children have progressed in high school and started to develop their academic records, another invaluable tool was the College Board website

(www.collegeboard.com). On this site, you can begin to understand what kind of grades and test scores it typically takes to be considered in the middle 50% of first-year students, as well as understanding the cost of attendance and how well that particular college or university meets the expected need.

While it has been my experience that grades and test scores are important to most universities, they are certainly not equally important to all, and most schools look at many other factors. In addition to academic performance and test scores, most schools take a close look at teacher recommendations, extracurricular activities, accomplishments, and the student's goals, passions, and interests -- attributes conveyed through essays and personal interviews. Not all high schools are created equally and most schools are looking for students who have taken advantage of whatever opportunities their high school provided. The point being, most colleges are looking at the "whole student" and putting together a strong application takes time and energy, and should not be put off to the eleventh hour. Starting on college applications during the summer between your student's junior and senior year can really take the pressure off such an important decision.

Bottom line: there are few decisions more important than helping your son or daughter find the school that's right for them. It's been an eye-opening experience helping my daughter, as the application process is far more intense than when I went to college, and the range of possibilities afforded by her strong academic record far wider than I had. I've learned to be open to possibilities, and am grateful for the experience.

-- Joe Hebert. Posted 11/16/09.