

Kat Cohen College admissions counselor

## The Truth About Name Brand Colleges: Why Fit Matters More Than Prestige

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The college admissions process is all but wrapped up for the high school class of 2015, and from now until the fall, graduating high school seniors will be constantly answering the question, "Where are you going to college?"

For some, the answer is Harvard, Stanford, Princeton or another highly selective institution. For others, it might be State U, a small liberal arts college or even community college. Whether the college student's answer is a private, top-tier institution or large, public university, it should be their best-fit option -- not the best sounding name.

Admission rates to some of the country's top institutions have been dropping for years now, with many admitting less than 10 percent of applicants. This makes these colleges all the more desirable to some applicants because of the idea that validation comes from being admitted to one of these highly selective colleges.

The truth is that selectivity or name brand doesn't make a college a good choice for you. Just ask one of the students who was admitted to all eight Ivy League colleges this year. He turned them all down to attend the University of Alabama, which best met his financial and academic needs.

When building a college list and preparing for the application process this summer, students' priority should always be on fit -- not the weight of a school's name.

### Why is "fit" such an important quality in admissions?

Just like anything else in life, when something is a good fit, it works. Students that attend colleges that match their academic, social and financial needs, while still providing an academically challenging environment, are more likely to thrive and graduate on time. On the other hand, students who attend colleges that are not a good fit -- either because they're too academically rigorous, not rigorous enough, socially stifling or too expensive -- are more likely to struggle, feel anxiety and stress and not get out in four years. In fact, some of the colleges with the highest graduation rates aren't in the Ivy League. It's good fit that leads to good outcomes -- not the name of a school. Just look at some of the colleges with the highest starting salaries. Colleges like Montana Tech and Oregon Health and Science University are among the top 10 colleges with the highest early-career salaries -- with Stanford and the Ivy Leagues barely making the top 25.

No single college is going to be a great fit for every student, and this especially applies to the Ivy Leagues and other prestigious colleges. Just because an institution has a recognizable name doesn't mean it's going to guarantee success in college or your career.

### Colleges look at fit, too.

When evaluating college applicants, admissions officers aren't just looking for the applicants with the best grades and test scores; they're also looking to see who would best fit into the campus community. Every college is different in terms of campus culture, academics, college life and more, but they're all looking to build a well-rounded class of specialists that will not only thrive and graduate in four years, but also meet the school's institutional needs.

If a student is impressive on paper, but doesn't seem like a good fit for the campus culture or has needs the school can't fulfill, he or she probably won't be admitted. Rather than just take all the best applicants, colleges want to admit students that will make an impact on the school and contribute to the community. In admissions, fit goes both ways -- students should look for best-fit colleges while colleges look for best-fit students.

### What to look for when choosing a "good fit" college.

When researching colleges for your balanced college list, fit should be a priority. But how do you know if a college is right for you? Consider the things that matter most to you, including academics, size, location, athletics, activities, research opportunities, etc. A college that's a good fit for you is going to meet most, if not all, of your priorities.

For example, a small liberal arts college with limited STEM programs might not be the best fit for a student looking to become an engineer. A student who is looking for an intimate classroom experience at a small college in a rural area might not thrive at a large university in the middle of a big city. This is where fit and preference trumps name brand. Don't apply to Stanford just because it's prestigious when you actually want to study at a small college on the east coast.

The college application is stressful enough without having to compromise your needs and goals in order to attend a college just because of its name.

Remember, the college experience is what you make of it, so apply to colleges where you'll be happy and successful -- not the schools you think will sound most impressive.

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# Home Away From Home

by Taylor Springs  
Junior at North Carolina State University

**D**uring my senior year, all I could think about was going away to college. I was eager to have more freedom, experience hands-on learning, meet people from around the world, build my social network, and embrace other cultures. When I began applying, my computer desk was scattered with pro/con lists of each university I considered attending. I compared each potential school's usual list of criteria: majors offered, professor-to-student ratio, cost of attendance, location, the surrounding area's activities, the number of students attending, student organizations on campus, etc. The application process itself wasn't difficult; it normally was the same for each university: a few essays based on leadership, community service, high school transcript, personal statement, etc. The hardest part was when I received an acceptance letter and had to imagine myself at that school. It was challenging to picture which university would be my "home away from home" for the next four years. It was an overwhelming process to weigh my options, balancing the idea of the institution and me fitting together to make a final decision!

I needed a school that would not only have stellar academics, countless research opportunities and remarkable professors, but also provide the chance to become a part of a community. I grew up with a Hawaiian background that instilled the ideas that family and community are one of the most important values. My culture taught me that they are my strongest supporters. They are the people I can turn to for anything and who will always push me

to better myself. For 18 years, I always had family around me. Now that I was going to college, who was going to be my family? Who was going to be my *henai ohana* (adopted family)? I needed to find a school that was going to understand and provide community intertwined within other offerings.

One cannot gain a sense of "family" through brochures or university websites. I was down to two schools and I needed to make a decision ASAP, so I was off to campus tours... but not just any. My family and I went to the multicultural visitation event for accepted students at North Carolina State University. There, I was able to walk the campus, meet staff/faculty, see the different student organizations, talk to student representatives, and learn about the various colleges at NC State. I gained more than what was promised. As I toured, I saw how much each student loved this school. I saw how strong the relationships were among the faculty, staff and students. I saw how diverse the campus population was—not only by culture but also by student involvement, passions, beliefs, politics, etc. The campus was humming with diversity and community.

As my family and I walked around, everyone we encountered was friendly, smiling and positive. Even when we got lost (it is the largest campus in North Carolina), a random student took time out of her day to walk us across campus to our intended destination! Of course I used that opportunity to my advantage and asked every question I could, especially how she had made NC State her home. She emphasized that the

Tell them to go beyond classroom sizes, professor-to-student ratio, and the rankings of their basketball team. Instead, look to the student population and read the "vibe" the school is giving off.

university had so many student organizations to join and that there was something for everyone. Within each one, one could find their "niche," their "family" and their "home away from home." That particular encounter affirmed my decision—I would be a part of the Wolfpack Fall of 2011. I wanted to be surrounded by people like that—people who would help complete strangers for no particular reason and people who would genuinely care. I wanted to be in a positive and inviting atmosphere for four years. I knew then and there that I could make this place home.

So my advice to share with your students is to make their pro/con lists address deeper qualities. Tell them to go beyond classroom sizes, professor-to-student ratio, and the rankings of their basketball team. Instead, look to the student population and read the "vibe" the school is giving off. Try to get an understanding of the various types of people who are potentially going to be your classmates, professors and colleagues. It is not a home if there is no family. It is not enough to love the school and not the people. I found my "home away from home" and my own sense of community, and I hope your students will too.

The New York Times

## The Choice

Demystifying College Admissions and Aid

### 'Some of the More Mundane Moments in Life Make Great Essays'

By DAVE MARCUS

Here's an essay that's sure to make an admissions officer reach for the triple grande latte to stay awake:

*"I spent [choose one: a summer vacation/a weekend/three hours] volunteering with the poor in [Honduras/ Haiti/ Louisiana] and realized that [I am privileged/I enjoy helping others/people there are happy with so little]."*

Yes, the admissions folks have read it before. Many times.

"I would love to have a student answer the question, 'Why is it that you have everything and they have nothing?' " said Cezar Mesquita, admissions director at the College of Wooster. "Or 'What did others learn from your participation in the trip?'"

For many seniors, choosing the topic for a personal statement is more difficult than actually writing the piece. But don't fret. "Some of the more mundane moments in life make great essays," Christopher Burkmar, Princeton University's associate dean of admissions, assured guidance counselors at a conference last month.

For example, Mr. Burkmar said he had recently savored a few hundred words about a family's dinner conversations.

"The best essays make us laugh, cry or wince," said Matthew Whelan, Stony Brook University's assistant provost for admissions and financial aid. "They help us understand why we want the applicant here."

One of Mr. Whelan's current favorites: "The young man who puts his siblings on the bus in the morning because both parents are working, then gets them off the bus, cooks them dinner and helps with homework because both parents are still working."

At times, taking a risk pays off. Stacey Davey, associate director of admissions at Adelphi University, said she was impressed by the raw prose of a girl who battled an eating disorder. She wrote a letter to her former best friend -- it was addressed to her skinny jeans. "She realized that getting into them was self destructive."

Humility is often attractive. The Rochester Institute of Technology was intrigued by a valedictorian who wanted to take an arc welding class in high school. Her high

school rebuffed her because she was an honors student, but she persisted. On the first day of class, she burned her hand.

"I remember the essay, her name and her school from 17 years ago," said Robert Springall, who was at R.I.T. at the time and is now Bucknell University's admissions dean.

On the other hand, Mr. Springall was working at Cornell when an applicant revealed that while waitressing she got angry at a customer and spit in his food before serving it. "Immediate red flag," Mr. Springall recalled. "She makes poor choices."

Denied.

Last winter, I spent a week observing a Stony Brook admissions officer as he pored over applications. I was struck by the number of students rhapsodizing about expensive travel or service projects in exotic locales, seemingly unaware that classmates were pinched by a recession.

Also avoid breezy David Letterman "Top 10" lists, which raise more questions than they answer, said Jennifer Fondiller, admissions dean at Barnard College.

Some subjects are inappropriate. A few years ago, a top student applying to Texas Christian University reminisced about torturing frogs when he was younger. The admissions dean, Raymond Brown, kept reading, hoping for at least a few words of apology or epiphany. Nothing.

The applicant was rejected.

"Probably not a good choice of topic," Mr. Brown explained, "when you're applying to a school whose mascot is a frog."

Have you got essay advice to pass on, borne of personal experience or otherwise? Use the comment box below to let us know.

*Mr. Marcus is the author of "Acceptance: A Legendary Guidance Counselor Helps Seven Kids Find the Right Colleges - and Find Themselves" (Penguin Press), and a former education reporter at Newsday and U.S. News and World Report. At the end of this month, he will take on a new post directing public relations for the New York Institute of Technology.*

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*The New York Times*

## **The Choice**

**Demystifying College Admissions and Aid**

### **Note to Applicants: Admissions Officers Do Read What Your Teachers Say**

By *MARTHA C. MERRILL*

*Martha C. Merrill is the dean of admission and financial aid at Connecticut College.*

I'm often asked about the wild card in the college application: the teacher recommendation. Prospective students have quite a bit of control over their applications -- they choose where to apply, they write and rewrite essays, they work hard to keep their grades up senior year and they are mindful of deadlines. But then there is that teacher recommendation.

Most students want to know if the recommendations matter, if we even read them. At Connecticut College, we require two teacher recommendations, and yes, we read them.

Whether or not they matter depends on the quality of the recommendation.

A good recommendation -- well written with strong praise for the student -- will certainly help us make our decision. And, of course, we will take note if the writer has reservations about recommending the student. But if the recommendation is poorly written or clearly a form letter with the name of the student simply filling in a blank (you'd be surprised), we won't include it in our review.

In short, a good recommendation can help, but we don't hold it against the applicant when we receive a poorly written one.

To give students the best chance of securing a strong recommendation, I have a few tips:

**Ask early.** The more time a teacher has to prepare the recommendation, the better it will be.

**Choose wisely.** You want to be absolutely positive the teacher will write you a good recommendation.

**Follow instructions.** Admission officers will likely read only the required

number of recommendations. If you submit too many, you leave it to chance which ones will be read.

**Think junior year.** Junior year teachers tend to be best, since they've seen a full year of your recent academic work. But, if you feel confident a senior year teacher knows you well, that can also be an appropriate approach.

**Don't bombard the English teacher.** While English teachers do tend to be strong writers, they can also burn out quickly when asked to write too many letters. And if you're interested in pursuing a specific subject in college, it's wise to ask a teacher from that discipline to write on your behalf.

**It's O.K. if you didn't ace the class.** Sometimes the best letter comes from the teacher of a class in which you struggled and sought help.

**Talk to the teacher.** Get a feel for what might end up in your letter, and offer some suggestions. Reminding your teacher of your academic strong points may help focus the letter and differentiate you in your teacher's mind.

*To respond to what Ms. Merrill has written -- particularly those of you who've composed, solicited or received teacher recommendations -- please use the comment box below.*

*In "Tip Sheet," The Choice periodically posts short items by admissions officers, guidance counselors and others that might help applicants and their families better understand aspects of the admissions process. Click here for an archive of essays in this series.*

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<http://thechoice.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/10/08/teacher-rec/?src=mv>

## **Top ten admissions tips for parents**

By: Lauren Starkey

Most parents easily remember the work and the stress of college admissions: visiting schools, taking standardized tests, filling out applications and financial aid forms, and waiting, and waiting, and waiting for those acceptance letters to arrive. When they have a child going through the process, they want to help, and may even want to take charge. What's an appropriate level of involvement, and what should your role be?

You can help your child get into college without becoming a helicopter parent, without losing your sanity, and without straining your relationship with your son or daughter.

Here's how to get through the admissions process unscathed:

1. **Determine how much help and guidance your child wants.** Don't assume. Ask him or her directly about how they envision the process, what they expect from themselves, and what they expect from you.
2. **Get educated.** The college admissions process has changed since we went through it, and is affected by many factors, including today's economic hard times. A great place to start is with the book *College Admission: From Application to Acceptance* (Three Rivers Press, 2012).
3. **Provide access to information about colleges.** Don't rely solely on school websites—they're primarily marketing tools. Sites such as [collegeboard.com](http://collegeboard.com) and [petersons.com](http://petersons.com) offer basic information plus unbiased views.
4. **Help plan trips to visit schools.** What you can do: set an itinerary, book the hotel, gas up the car, pack your suitcase. What you can't do: choose all the schools, call to arrange interviews, or call to make a reservation on a tour or at an information session.
5. **Fill out the FAFSA.** This form is needed for any kind of financial aid, requires a tax return and other information your student doesn't have, and should be completed even if you think you won't qualify for aid. Go to [fafsa.ed.gov](http://fafsa.ed.gov) to learn more.
6. **Don't nag, belittle, or otherwise engage in negative interactions.** There's enough stress in junior and senior year—be the refuge from it, not an addition to it.
7. **Be realistic.** Your son or daughter should be applying to at least one safety (high probability of acceptance), one match (reasonable probability), and one reach (medium to low probability—but who knows?) school. You can suggest or guide him or her to choices that meet that mix.
8. **Keep track of deadlines if your student needs help.** Creating a calendar with important dates (deadlines for applications, teacher recommendations, transcript requests, financial aid requests, etc.) at the beginning of the application process is useful.
9. **Do some homework.** Most applications require students to exhibit knowledge of the school, much as you are expected to know about a company when on a job interview. If requested, you can help in this area by researching on the Internet, and finding out if there are alumni in your area who conduct informational interviews. Do not contact schools directly, though.
10. **Maintain perspective.** The college admissions process is not a reward for or indictment of anyone's character. Getting into the college of one's dreams doesn't assure future success any more than getting rejected sets one up for failure. Remind your son or daughter of this as often as necessary.

<http://www.examiner.com/article/top-ten-admissions-tips-for-parents#print>

# **Parents, Read This if Your Child Is Applying to College**

By JEREMY S. HYMAN, LYNN F. JACOBS

Holiday time is family time. And family time, in many families, is apply-to-college time. Many parents, despite their best intentions, do more harm than good to their college bound children during this anxiety-ridden time. So we invited visiting blogger Marilee Jones, former dean of admissions at MIT and coauthor of the book, *Less Stress, More Success: A New Approach to Guiding Your Teen Through College Admissions and Beyond*, to offer some advice to parents of children caught up in the college application maze. Here are her eight "guiding principles":

- 1. Understand the college admissions process for what it is.** Many parents think of college admissions as a competitive battle to be won. But, in truth, it is a key developmental phase to be experienced. This is your child's initiation into adulthood and, at the same time, an important moment in parenting. Your job now is to become your child's "grounding cord"—the calm and confident adult who keeps things safe as your child is exposed to the judgment and serendipity of college admissions officers.
- 2. Realize it isn't happening to you.** We are so connected to our children that we sometimes lose the boundaries between our own issues and theirs. You are not applying to college; your child is. Being clear about this affords you the distance to help him or her calm down when he or she is most scared. When your own anxiety spikes, walk away and firmly remind yourself that the college admission process is not happening to you.
- 3. Watch those pronouns!** Think carefully about the messages you are sending your child. You may think it's OK to refer to your child's application as "our application." But chances are your child will hear something like, "You aren't mature enough to get into college on your own, so I have to help you." This is your child's initiation into adulthood. Your job is to lift your child up, not bring him or her down.
- 4. Keep your anxiety to yourself.** Parents of college applicants have much to worry about, such as, "How can we afford this?" "What if my son or daughter gets rejected?" "How can I be old enough to have a child going to college?" While your worries are real, it's important that you do not share them with your child. Your fears will only amplify his or her own. Keeping a peaceful household is the goal now, so share your feelings with a trusted friend or peer. And if you're really at your wits' end and have no trusted friend, buy one: Now could be the perfect time to get professional short-term counseling.
- 5. Work with your team.** Never act as your child's one and only adviser. The most effective parents team up with their child's guidance counselor and follow his or her lead. Even if that counselor is a 20- or 30-something, he or she still knows more about college admissions than you do.
- 6. Teach self-soothing.** Sometimes we collect information because it helps us feel more in control. We ask our child such questions as "What did you get on that test last week?" or "How do your SAT scores compare with your classmates'?" These questions imply judgment to our child, something that teachers, school administrators, college admissions officers, and peers might already be offering in large amounts. When your child is expressing anxiety, offer reassuring responses—"Don't worry, things always work out for you," "Everything is going to be OK," "It seems scary now, but better days are ahead."
- 7. Look for the grief—yours.** It may surprise you to know that some of the upset you feel about the college application experience may actually be grief over your child's leaving home soon. Because grief is about loss, it's more comfortable for many people to turn it into another emotion that's easier to feel, such as anger. Rather than create more turmoil for you and your family, it is best to recognize the grief for what it is, feel it, and then move on.
- 8. Develop Plan B.** It's not surprising that the main source of anxiety in the college admissions process comes from being unable to control the result. So here's a secret: In order to maintain an inner sense of calm, prepare yourself in advance for your worst case scenario—e.g., your child gets rejected or wait-listed everywhere—and work out a plan to deal with that. Then file the plan away somewhere and get back to focusing on success. Knowing that you have a backup plan in place will keep you more relaxed throughout the process so you can be that positive, steady influence for your child during the anxious moments ahead.



# College Admissions and Learning Disabilities

Does your teenager have a learning disability? If so, the whole college process might seem even more daunting.

With these parents in mind, I recently talked with Joy App, a college consultant in Houston, who has worked with many teenagers with learning disabilities. I am passing along some of her advice for parents of learning disabled teenagers.

To start, I'm sharing a book that App highly recommends for parents with students with a learning disability. She calls this book her bible: College Sourcebook for Students With Learning & Development Differences, which was written by Midge Lipkin. Sorry folks, but you can't find this title on Amazon, but you can buy it directly from the publisher – Wintergreen Orchard. In App's opinion, this book is superior to this popular title, K & W Guide to Colleges for Students With Learning Disabilities.

## Schools With Strong Learning Disability Programs

App also shared with me schools that are considered strong for students with learning disabilities. She said in her experience private colleges and universities typically have better programs for these students than state institutions.

- **WEST:** Whittier College University of Montana, University of Denver, University of Arizona
- **SOUTHWEST:** University of Tulsa, Baylor University, Southern Methodist University, Schreiner University, Texas Tech University, University of Houston
- **SOUTHEAST:** Lynn University, Flagler College, University of the Ozarks
- **MIDWEST:** DePaul University, Southern Illinois University (Carbondale), University of Indianapolis
- **NORTHEAST:** Mitchell College, Landmark College, Curry College, Franklin Pierce College, Lesley University

I'm adding two more schools from the Midwest to this list – Westminster College (MO) and Augsburg College.

If you want to recommend other schools, please share in the comment box below!

## Should You Disclose a Learning Disability?

During the college admission process, many families struggle with the disclosure issue.

"I've had people say to me that this will hurt their children's chances," App says. The Texas consultant, however, reassures parents that the admission and disability offices at any college are prohibited from talking to each other. Consequently, revealing a student's issues with disability staffers will in no way jeopardize a student's admission chances.

Of course, this leads to the inevitable question of whether a student should reveal to an admission office that he or she is dyslexic, ADHD or possesses some other learning issues. I agree with App who says students should disclose this.

It's important to know if the institution is going to be friendly to LD students. "If a school is like Princeton," App says, "and isn't friendly to LD students, I want to know." And, she added, if a school holds a disability against an applicant, that's not the kind of school the student should attend.

I ran a guest post on my [college blog](#) last year by [David Montesano](#), one of my favorite college consultants, who is based in Seattle, that suggested that disclosing a disability to an admission office can actually increase a child's admission chances. You can read the post [here](#):

## **Getting Into College With Learning Disabilities**

Here are a few other facts that I picked up about learning disabilities when I attended a session at the annual conference of the [Higher Education Consultants Association](#) earlier this summer:

Only 14% of high school students heading to college know what their diagnosed learning disability is. Strange as this may seem, parents don't tell them. (Not a good idea!)

Colleges and universities are creating more structured learning support programs for their students with learning disabilities. There is a demand for these programs, but they can also be moneymakers for the institutions.

Just because a teenager gets into a school doesn't mean he or she will be accepted into the learning disability program. For instance, students who get accepted into the University of Arizona are not automatically accepted into [SALT \(Strategic Alternative Learning Techniques\)](#), which is highly regarded learning disability program. Students must submit a second application to get into SALT.

### **Next:**

In my next post I will share questions that App says that families need to ask a disability services office when visiting a college campus.

*Lynn O'Shaughnessy is the author of the second edition of [The College Solution: A Guide for Everyone Looking for the Right School at the Right Price](#).*

<http://www.thecollegesolution.com/college-admissions-and-learning-disabilities>