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College Decision Week: Parent Insights

Posted on April 12, 2012 by Debra Eckerling
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While students are making their lists of pros and cons of their top schools, parents across their country are anxious to help their children make the “right choice.” But how much influence should a parent have on this all-important decision? We asked parents and experts to weigh-in on the subject from their own experiences.

“Ideally, parents should check their own fantasies at the door and provide a sounding board for kids to figure out what is the best for them,” says Carol Barash, [Story to College](#). “In reality parents’ own memories, hopes and dreams are often intertwined in their children’s college decisions. And if the parents are still supporting the child financially, they are almost like an early round investor who has a legitimate claim to be involved in deciding where the money goes.”

Elizabeth Venturini, president of [Scolasticus](#), concurs that how much influence a parent should have in his or her child’s decision depends on “who is paying for it.”

Venturini continues, “Since parents are the primary source for funding college costs, they have significant influence on the choice of college. I am seeing more and more in my college career practice that money is the primary determinant on where a student will go to college, regardless of the student’s grades, abilities or college admittance test scores.”

“As with all things in parenting, this needs to be a conversation between parents and kids that takes into account their different needs, and gives each of those needs its due,” explains licensed psychologist and author [Wes Crenshaw](#), who has a 15-year-old daughter at the start of her college-search process.

“For teens, the need here is autonomy – the desire to establish a unique identity as a young adult and to author their own story, in this case where they want to go to college. For parents, there are several needs: To manage the budget, to help teens thing through life decisions that they are not fully prepared to make yet and to assure that the investment they make in college is a smart one.

“Where parents go wrong is trying to dictate choices rather than participate in the conversation. ... On the other hand, teens need to be willing to at least look at ideas their parents have for college. More than one high school student has come back from a tour they expected to hate, with glowing things to say about the campus, the admissions department or the coursework.”

“I’m in the process right now with my last/second child,” says Maryland parent Ann Mowrey. “It has not been an easy process, I’ll tell you that much! Between the moodiness of adolescent teenage girls, the stress she’s feeling about finding the right school and the belief that her parents don’t know anything despite having college degrees ourselves, I can’t wait for a decision to be made!”

That being said, Mowrey continues, “I think parents can only guide a child and try to point out legitimate issues for their consideration. The child is the one who has to live with the decision for the next four years and needs to feel comfortable in the environment. They should not choose the school because Mom and Dad can see them there – they have to see themselves there and happy.”

Michael Saltzman’s daughter took charge of her [college search](#). She decided what she was looking for in a school, then gathered information from her guidance counselor, as well as the colleges that visited her high school. After narrowing down her choices, Saltzman, his wife and daughter traveled from Los Angeles to Chicago and Boston to look at the schools together.

“She took notes about each school and kept track of things she liked or didn’t like about the school. She took pictures of things that made an impact on her visit so she could remember. ... When she walked on to the [Northeastern](#) campus, she looked at me and said, “This is the school!”

Fortunately, according to Saltzman, the school that she “fell in love with” also chose her.

“My wife and I have given her guidance most of her life, however, the ultimate decision is hers,” Saltzman continues. “As I keep reminding her, she is going to college the next four years ... not prison. So, if she finds she’s made a mistake, she can transfer. At 18 we respect her decision. But if she wants to make a change, we would support that also.”

Parents. what advice do you have for other parents in this situation? Share your

Questions about college? Ask our Experts

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...article, that advice as you have for other parents in this situation. Share your experience in the comments.

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