

More “Caring” College Admissions: 5 Tips for Parents

The college admissions process is a major rite of passage and a formative experience in which students receive powerful messages from adults—including parents, guidance counselors and admissions officers—about what these adults and society value.

As a parent, you have a vital role to play in ensuring that this process reinforces important values and motivates your children to undertake meaningful activities that will better enable them to contribute to others and thrive as an adult. The college admissions process can also be a wonderful opportunity to get to know your children in a deeper way—to understand their hopes, worries, values, dreams—and what will help them thrive in college.

Below are concrete steps that we as parents can take to make the college admissions process meaningful and constructive for our children. These steps are based in part on our report, [Turning the Tide: Inspiring Concern for Others and the Common Good Through College Admissions](#), which Making Caring Common developed in collaboration with the Education Conservancy and a wide array of college admissions deans and other stakeholders in the admissions process. The report has now been endorsed by more than 120 stakeholders in the admissions process. It seeks to inspire in students greater concern for others and the common good, reduce excessive achievement pressure and level the playing field for economically diverse students.

1) Choose service that is immersive, sustained and authentic:

Why: Many college applicants believe that for community service to be valued by colleges, they need to show leadership and initiative—launching or leading a major project, say, or providing a service in a distant country. But what is actually most important to colleges endorsing *Turning the Tide* is whether an experience is *immersive, sustained, authentically chosen and a powerful learning experience*. Are high school students immersing themselves in an experience that increases their ability to take other perspectives, to care about people different from them in terms of race, class, political ideology and other characteristics? Do students have a chance to reflect with adults or peers on what they may have learned about how society functions? Are students able to commit to a single community engagement or service activity for at least nine months? This type of sustained engagement is more likely than brief service to build ethical awareness and character and often is a strong predictor of college success (Sedlacek, 2011).

How:

- **Don't view community service as an achievement.** Instead of focusing on community engagement and service opportunities that are high-profile or “impressive,” talk to your children about activities that are likely to be meaningful and might even be transformative for them. What types of activities might deepen their understanding of themselves and help them figure out who they are and want to be? What types of activities might hone their capacity to both appreciate and evaluate their communities and society?
- **Explore what's meaningful to your child.** Ask your children to imagine a variety of possible service experiences—e .g. working on an environmental challenge, working with others to prevent bullying in school or the community, feeding the homeless, volunteering in a senior center—and to consider what types of experiences are mostly likely to be meaningful both to them and to those they are assisting. Talk about community service and engagement experiences that have been meaningful to you, and explore with your children how their interests might be similar to or different than yours.
- **Remember that many kinds of service can be meaningful and count.** Community engagement and investment in the common good can take many forms and can be motivated by many different political perspectives, moral ideologies and faiths. Working on a Republican or Democratic political campaign, for example, can generate greater investment in the common good and is valued by those endorsing this report.

2) Think about how your child can “do with”—not “for”—others:

Why: Too often, service can be unintentionally patronizing to recipients and doesn't develop in students a rich understanding of other perspectives or other cultures.

How:

- **Encourage experiences of diversity.** Talk with your children about the importance of working in diverse groups to solve community challenges—whether the challenge is reducing substance abuse among teens, closing the achievement gap between students of different backgrounds, or preventing cyberbullying. Colleges are looking for service experiences that are not just “doing *for*” others, but “doing *with*” others. Experiences in diverse groups are not only important for your children ethically and emotionally, but can enable

your children to develop key cognitive skills, including problem-solving skills and group awareness, that are key to success in work and life.

- **Guide your children towards working in diverse groups that are thoughtfully constructed and facilitated.** Deep appreciation and understanding of those who are different than us in terms of race, class, culture, religion, political views, sexual orientation, or gender identity and expression is not simply facilitated through proximity or by working together on a common task. In fact, diverse groups that are constructed or facilitated poorly can actually reinforce divisions and stereotypes. Guide your children toward diverse groups that have an experienced facilitator who can build a cohesive community within the group—and talk to your children about what they find both beneficial and challenging about these experiences.

3) Make sure to report substantial family contributions:

Why: Many children are unable to engage in community service or activities outside the home because they spend substantial time supporting their families. Tasks like assisting an elderly relative or working at a job to contribute to the family income are commonly unreported in the college admissions process. Yet these demanding responsibilities can make it hard for teens to also undertake community service. At the same time, these responsibilities can help teens develop attributes like compassion, selflessness, perseverance and respect—traits that are clearly important in themselves and that are also valued by college admission officers.

How: Make sure to discuss these contributions on college applications. Our report states clearly that these contributions count and are important to share.

4) When it comes to achievement, choose quality over quantity:

Why: Many high school students believe that they must rack up numerous extracurricular activities and Advanced Placement (AP) and honors courses for their college applications. But colleges endorsing our report are sending a fundamentally different message: What counts in college admissions are not long brag sheets, but the depth and quality of students' civic and intellectual engagement. Instead of listing a dozen activities in their college applications, students can list two or three activities and describe why they have been meaningful. While students in many communities do not have access to AP courses, in other communities students are

overloading on AP courses. Students should carefully consider their course offerings—and should not feel pressured to take a large number of AP courses.

How:

- **Start with your children.** Help your children think through what types of activities will be engaging and valuable to them and how they might pursue these activities. Engage in the complex choreography of leading *and* following—guide you children toward activities that they express interest in and then check in to see if an activity really resonates with them. Encourage your children to choose activities that they have a legitimate interest in—not those that they *think* admission officers will value.
- **Consider reducing activities and AP courses.** Encourage your children to focus on those activities that they truly care about and insist that they reduce activities if they are overloaded and stressed. Talk to your children about the amount and type of advanced coursework that is right for them.
- **Look at the big picture.** Find the time and space to have relaxed conversations with your children about their activities and how they relate to their goals. Consider these types of questions: *Why is this activity meaningful to you? What goals does it achieve? What have you learned about yourself, others, and your communities?* These conversations are important in themselves, but they can also help your children develop a clearer sense of what energizes them and can help you get to know your children in a different and deeper way. In addition, when your children are more aware of their own goals and passions, they will be better prepared for college applications.
- **Set a limit for standardized tests.** Discourage children from taking the same standardized test more than twice. Many of our report endorsers make the point that taking standardized exams more than two times rarely improves student scores. Instead, repeating these tests can leave students feeling anxious and takes away attention from other meaningful activities.

5) Encourage children to be themselves:

Why: Students and parents often feel like colleges are looking for a certain “type” of student, and many applicants try to bend themselves to fit that type. But when applicants aren’t honest with themselves—or the colleges they apply to—they can wind up in colleges that simply aren’t a good fit. College admissions officers also tend

to be alert to inauthentic or “trumped up” applications. It’s best for applicants to be themselves.

How:

- **Preserve your child’s voice.** Work with your children to ensure that their authentic voice and identity remain at the center of their applications. That doesn’t mean that applicants should ignore information about the kinds of applicants colleges are looking for; in fact, it’s important for children to learn how to present themselves in an informed way in an application. But underline the importance to your child of staying fundamentally true to him or herself.
- **The right fit might not be the “best” college.** There are a broad range of excellent colleges across the country. Encourage children to look beyond school rankings and think about which schools have the programs, faculty, culture, location and core philosophies that will support them socially and promote their intellectual and moral growth. If you’re able, try visiting colleges with your child to get a feel for life on campus.
- **Prioritize your children’s wishes.** Many of us have intense feelings—or at least strong opinions—about where our children should go to college that can interfere with our ability to guide them in finding the right fit. While often we have rational motives for hoping our children will attend a certain college, we often also have irrational motives that we aren’t fully aware of. We hope, for example, that our children will go to the college we dreamed of attending, or we believe our children’s choice of—or admission to—college is a clear and public reflection of our success as a parent. We may have status concerns or competitive feelings with other parents that can drive us to push our children toward certain colleges. The college admissions process provides a powerful opportunity for parents to disentangle their own wants and needs from those of their child. It is also a time when we as parents can begin to undertake the critical task of understanding how our children are different from us and how we can most effectively guide them in taking a key step down the path to adulthood. This may mean wading into ourselves and taking a hard look at our own motives—and getting feedback from trusted loved ones—so that we have a better handle on the irrational forces that may be influencing us.
- **Resist the urge to over-coach.** It is natural to want to help your children put their best foot forward in college applications, but yours is not the voice that colleges want to hear. Try to limit your role in essay writing, form

completion, and test preparation. If your children are working with teachers, counselors or coaches to complete college applications, work with them to ensure that their role is limited, defined, and constructive.

- **Talk about the admissions process.** In some communities, college admission pressure can set in as early as middle school. When it does begin, talk with your children about their feelings and experiences. How do they feel about the application process? If they feel stress around the application process, what type of stress do they feel and where does the stress originate? Is the process pushing them to compromise their values? Do they feel less like “themselves?” These questions are ones that college admissions officers encourage students to think about—and they can help to ensure honesty, integrity, and an original voice throughout the application process.

References:

Sedlacek, W.E. (2011). Using noncognitive variables in assessing readiness for higher education. *Readings on Equal Education*, 25, 187-205.