

Toby Waldorf: Teens need to match selves with schools, not follow herd

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By **TOBY WALDORF**

Every year at this time, otherwise intelligent teens who seem wise beyond their years will do something shortsighted that will inexorably affect their futures.

They will apply to the wrong college. Just because "everybody else is doing it."

About this time each year, magazines and newspapers come out with their annual rankings and other bunching of "top schools" and "hot schools." Students use these lists to make decisions, with nary a thought as to how they will fit in or thrive at any of the schools. Moreover, they will likely get support from parents who want their kids to be at the best of the best.

While the lists are informative and helpful, they often have little relevance to any individual student's potential fit. Still, who wants to say you're not going to a school that's on one of those lists?

Well, maybe you should think again. Some people might think that an urban public school is not the best footing from which to reach lofty goals. However, such a school seems to have done quite well in propelling Colin Powell into the highest job in the U.S. military and the office of the secretary of state.

Simply having a 4.0 grade point average and high SAT score does not mean that a student will thrive at any given school. For example, some students may set their sights on Harvard, when the high-tech edge of Stanford is what they really need. They apply only to MIT, when the social ease of UC Berkeley will set them on the right course. They set their sights on Columbia, when the structure of a military academy would mold them for a lifetime of success.

Kids often choose wrong, relying on the "lists" with little guidance. In short, they have an idea of what they want, but no clue as to how and where to find it. Today's schools have a ratio of 477 students for each guidance counselor. While they put in more hours than their students will ever know, many of these counselors, by virtue of this unmanageable ratio, cannot offer in-depth personal guidance.

It would do kids and parents well to note that lists of "hot schools" are no guarantee of individual success, but rather "hot matches" are. It is far more important to make sure that the student and the school are well suited to each other's outlook, behavior, interests and activities.

In my 15 years of professional experience in matching kids with schools, I've found one certain truth: Selecting a college is a lot like selecting a mate. After all, anytime you opt to eat, sleep, celebrate, congregate and deliberate with someone, exclusively, for several years, you need to make sure you are a good match for each other. Simply downloading applications from every "hot university" Web site is not a true selection process.

Parents and students should review in depth not just the hard attributes of schools, but also their environment and campus' culture and spirit and how it fits with the student's personality.

No matter how much a student wants that big school name to put at the top of a resume, finding the right fit institution for that student is far more important to a life of success and achievement.

Of course, it would be disingenuous to submit that there is no value in having a big name on a resume. Being admitted to the universities everyone applies to can be a good thing, but finding the right fit for a student's personality is a far better thing.

College applicants and their parents should all remember what parents have told children for centuries: "Just because everyone else is doing it, doesn't mean you have to."

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