

Matchmaking tech IDs 'perfect school'

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Finding the perfect college--it's a dilemma faced by millions of high school seniors every year. Now, the same matchmaking technology behind one of the internet's leading dating services aims to help college-bound students land the school of their dreams.

Like the popular internet dating service E-Harmony, Destination-U combines personal surveys with personality traits "to find the right match"--not for love, but for learning.

It's estimated that more than 1.5 million students will apply for acceptance to a four-year college this year. For most of them, the search begins in the school guidance office, often wading through stockpiles of brochures to get a sense for where they might like to spend the first four years of their long-awaited independence.

Unfortunately for many students, that's about as much "guidance" as they're likely to get, says Destination-U co-creator and independent college counselor Toby Waldorf. With student-to-counselor ratios nationwide ballooning to 477 to 1, most high school guidance counselors don't have time to sit down with every college-bound senior and walk the student step by step through the murky application process.

But that doesn't mean students have to go at it alone, either, says Waldorf--who, along with her son, Greg, invented Destination-U as a sort of virtual counselor.

"We're very passionate about helping kids find the best possible fit," said Waldorf, who recommends students pick schools that offer opportunities for both social and academic growth.

But finding the right school isn't easy, she acknowledges. For students, she said, "it really is their first real adult decision."

When it comes to applying for college, every parent and student has heard the horror stories--from increasingly expensive application procedures to the oft-dreaded personal essay and, of course, the weeks and sometimes months of waiting, asking: Will they accept me? Am I good enough? Or, should I start thinking about my safety school?

The Waldorfs believe Destination-U will help ease some of that anxiety. "Kids and their families really want this," said Greg Waldorf. More than anything, he

said, parents and students need a research tool that will allow them to decide whether a school is worth applying to or not.

The idea is to help students "eliminate the schools that aren't a good fit," so they can put their time and money into applying to schools at which they are most likely to thrive, suggested Greg Waldorf, who said he was surprised "that no one had developed a web-based tool" to help solve some of the fundamental issues surrounding the college decision process.

Destination-U begins with a simple philosophy. Instead of asking students what schools they want to attend, students are asked to talk about themselves, said the younger Waldorf. Rather than fit kids into a predetermined mold, the idea behind Destination-U is to build the school around the student and work from there.

At the heart of the Waldorfs' academic matchmaker lies the research. Unlike a number of college match services, which tend to rely almost solely on data provided through the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES)--including such information as school size and the number of students enrolled in university-sponsored meal plans--Destination-U offers a hybrid approach that combines the raw data from NCES with a survey of more than 18,000 full-time college students. The survey, which asks about everything from personal tastes to individual academic needs and overall social behavior, is intended to represent a cross-section of the school's academic community, thus providing a blueprint from which to recommend schools based on students' individual responses.

The technology is based on students' use of two primary tools. The first tool, called U-Finder, is a free survey, or personality assessment, that asks students to explain what type of person they are--from social tendencies and personal interests to study habits. Upon completion of the questionnaire, Destination-U users are given a customized report, called a U-Factor, that provides information regarding their survey responses and helps them understand what types of colleges might be best suited to their needs and academic interests.

During the survey, students are asked a variety of questions--from whether they'd prefer going to school in a big city versus a rural setting to how open they are to meeting new people as opposed to associating with the same groups of friends they knew in high school.

At this point, students also receive free access to Destination-U's College Application Planner. Designed to help students stay on track during the application process, the web-based planner sends out deadline reminders via eMail in hopes of encouraging students to get their materials handed in on time. Like teachers, Toby Waldorf said, most college admissions offices are sticklers for due dates. Miss the application deadline, and you might as well move on to the next school on your list, she said.

Once a student completes the questionnaire and receives a U-Factor report, he or she can decide to purchase a Fit List--a selection of potential colleges based on the results of their personal U-Factor assessments. The price: under \$50, according to Greg Waldorf. From now until the end of December 2004, students can receive the service--which lasts until they graduate high school--

for an introductory price of \$29.95.

So how can you tell which school is "the one?" It's different for every student, contends Toby Waldorf. "What we try to do is to get to the heart of students' preferences," she said. Destination-U isn't intended to be the sole factor in a student's final decision, but at the very least, it should help narrow the field.

The Waldorfs estimate more than 60,000 people have visited the site since it went live in September. So far, Greg Waldorf said, at least 6,000 people have registered for the service.

Links

Destination-U

<http://www.destination-u.com/>