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13-YEAR-OLDS AND COLLEGE PLANNING

Many of my peers in the private college counseling realm believe that college planning should begin in middle school, so that kids understand why they are taking certain courses in high school, can plan a rigorous curriculum, and are motivated to do well. Although I am a strong believer in advance planning, in this case I disagree.

Teens are under enormous pressure today. They are expected to do it all – earn top grades while taking the most rigorous courses available at their school, be deeply engaged in at least one extra-curricular activity and have consistent involvement in several others, hold leadership positions, perform community service, and more. If they don't do these things, they won't get into the most selective colleges in the country (or wherever their parents went, although their parents would probably not get in today). Kids are bombarded by stories of peers who have become tech multi-millionaires, are famous performers, or have other world-class achievements – nothing is hidden in an age of social media and internet access. All of this pressure starts when they are barely out of childhood. It's no wonder that eating disorders and depression are increasingly prevalent.

I think college admissions are part of the problem. Here are some of the ways:

We talk about “right fit” colleges but then counsel students to take the most rigorous academic program available to them. For many students – even most students – the most rigorous academic program available is not the right fit. If a student hates foreign languages and is terrible at them, then does she really need to struggle through three or four years of language study just to get into a more competitive college? Isn't the “right fit” for that student a college that prizes her study of graphic arts and communications instead? Suppose our language-averse student tried Spanish for two years, earning B grades through enormous effort, but also worked on the school newspaper (eventually becoming editor-in-chief), took digital arts electives, had an internship at the local news station, wrote a blog piece for an online magazine, and in the summers studied photography and drawing. The same student has taken four years of English, Science and Social Studies, with a couple of honors and AP classes in that mix. The “right fit” college for that student might be someplace like Emerson or Ithaca or Syracuse; it is unlikely that s/he won't get in, if otherwise well qualified, because s/he took just two years of foreign language. Yet most college advisers would counsel sticking with Spanish for all four years.

We expect kids to be planning for college at age 13. We college counselors are supposed to start meeting with families when their kids are in middle school, and advise our students to follow a generic, difficult, “challenging” curriculum throughout high school. Then, as students start to look at colleges during junior year, we tell them to focus on “fit” rather than prestige. But who can determine “fit” when we've pigeonholed students into a generic curriculum instead of letting them be who they are and then finding the right school for their continuing education?

This is not to say, of course, that students shouldn't be aware of or consider following a general college prep curriculum in high school. But some kids are going to decide, eventually, to become chefs or hairdressers or actors or launch a landscape business. If we push every student onto a college prep conveyor belt beginning at age 13 or 14, then they may never have a chance to find out who they really are. I believe that the truly driven kids, who belong in Ivy League schools, are going to naturally gravitate to the most challenging curricula and will sort themselves out. Yale's admissions office puts forth this notion: *Ask yourself - Overall, is my four-year high school program among the most challenging programs available at my school?* **The kids who belong at Yale will be taking the most challenging courses because they want to (and can handle the rigor). Those who are taking the most challenging courses in order to get into Yale (not because they want to) probably belong somewhere else.**

For me, **this is the difference between high school kids focusing on the journey, or focusing on the destination.** I believe that most college counselors push too hard toward the destination. I think kids at ages 14, 15, and 16 should be focused on finding themselves – trying drama, fencing, or photography. For those who already have one or more passions, our competitive society requires incredible sacrifice and devotion – theater kids rehearse for hours every night for months at a time, and young athletes practice or train four or five days a week outside of games. Do we really want them staying up until 1am or later, night after night, to finish the homework for their AP Calculus and American History classes after they've finished their Honors English and Science homework and studied for their SATs? They are only kids once. They will probably never have the opportunity to indulge in their sport or art at this level of intensity again. If we keep nudging them to round out their college profiles with leadership positions and volunteer work, and remind them to work harder so they get top grades in the most rigorous courses available, it is no wonder that they end up cutting themselves and take pills for stress.

As a college counselor, I'm more than happy to start working with kids the summer before junior year, when they've already begun to emerge naturally as who they are. We can find a great college choice for every student. I'm happy to talk with families who want to do advance planning, even for a middle school kid, but I don't necessarily encourage anything other than a consult to understand the college admissions process. If I see parents pushing a kid too hard early on, I feel sorry for that kid. My views put me at odds with many others in my profession, but I believe that kids have to be kids first, and college applicants second. ***“Right fit” can't just be a misnomer for you didn't do well enough to get into the Ivies so let's look elsewhere.***

I realize that my philosophy makes me the wrong college counselor for some families, and I am fine with that. There are plenty of advisers who have Ivy League admission as their primary goal, whether the student is right for that environment or not. Don't get me wrong – I like helping kids get in to selective, prestigious colleges, too; most are outstanding places to spend four years and I work with plenty of students who are perfect candidates for admission (and they get in!). I just want kids to be who they are and not let college admissions set them on a path toward a brass ring when platinum will serve them better.