

What Parents Look For in a College for Their Kid

Deciding where to apply requires research galore

By Victoria Goldman

What do parents think is important when looking for a college?

A comfortable, good fit. A springboard for graduate school. A network for the future.

Those are the qualities that seem to resonate most among parents of college applicants.

To be sure, everyone's different. Families differ, live in different places, have different values, incomes and expenses, aspirations, goals and ideas about where and what type of colleges their children should be looking at.

To some parents, where their children go to college validates them sometimes in spite of, or because of, where they themselves went to school. For instance, if parents went to Harvard, then getting their kid into Harvard could be their standard. Alternatively, if they went to a less renowned university, then they might feel the need to send their children to an Ivy League school.

Any way you slice it, what parents can expect from the college admissions process is that it's probably not going to be a piece of cake.

It takes lots of time and research, and it's best if you have a kid who has demonstrated a willingness to work like an ox.

Here's what a few parents and experts say.

Ann and Stuart Schwartz of Dallas have a son, Geoffrey, who's a junior:

"It changes all the time," remarks Ann. "But we don't need him to go to Harvard."

The top priority for the Schwartz family is that Geoff plays tennis.

"That's truly number one," his mother says, "he wants to go to college to play."

After tennis, all the Schwartzes agree, the next considerations are where and how big Geoff's school is. The Northeast is where Geoff would like to be, and preferably at a smaller or mid-size school. Says Geoff's father, Stuart: "A medium-size school with strict requirements and strong academic rating, very high quality, like Tufts, Amherst or Swarthmore."

Meanwhile, Stuart is talking to the tennis coaches and doing the research.

Ann, a Russian immigrant, came to this country when she was 17 and attended Brooklyn College. Stuart grew up in Great Neck and graduated from Colorado State College in Fort Collins. Their dream: that Geoff takes a different and better educational path than they did.

By all accounts, their dream should come true. Geoff's PSAT scores were stellar, equivalent to combined SAT scores of

around 1,500, and he boasts an A average at his private school in Dallas. He also will benefit from his commitment to tennis and the fact that he's from Texas.

Next, consider an almost-typical New York City family with two teenagers, one a freshman and the other a sophomore, both at private schools.

"So far," the mother contends, "we're picking people's heads, and encouraging our children to do the best they can to maximize their options."

She has found out that at some Ivy League schools, like the University of Pennsylvania, if parents are alumni but their child does not apply early to that school, then their chances of gaining an acceptance may be hurt.

This sensible mother emphasizes: "We're gathering tidbits now but don't think it's appropriate or reasonable to form opinions this early. We're waiting — and that's doing everyone a huge favor."

Lana Morrow is a neuro-psychological remediator. She administers all types of educational and psychological tests, and she's the mother of a middle-school-age child in a very competitive private school.

At that school, says Dr. Morrow: "Parents are looking for prestige, and quality education, believe it or not." She adds that the affluent parents who have kids with lots of A's tend to apply mostly to such schools as Harvard, Princeton, Yale, Duke and Stanford.

She feels average Americans are more accepting of certain schools, such as Brandeis, Bowdoin, Vanderbilt, Washington University in St. Louis and Carnegie-Mellon, "because they're ranked high and have children who are succeeding and appear motivated as students and are really applying themselves."

This well-informed mother further points out that Duke has improved the quality of its teaching dramatically by enrolling such students. "They've hired great professors and have a good learning-disability department," she says, noting also that Duke fields great sports teams.

"The profile of students has changed at Duke," asserts Morrow, who says that it ranks among the top schools in the country in every respect, and has become a school where many parents want to send their children. One reason: that Duke manages to enroll athletes with A averages, not just B's and C's.

"More brainy students now play sports well, and Duke offers both," she says.

Whatever you're looking for, it's out there — but you must be flexible and be sure you're not chasing rainbows. ■

Next: What kids look for



Geoff's PSAT scores were stellar, and he boasts an A average.