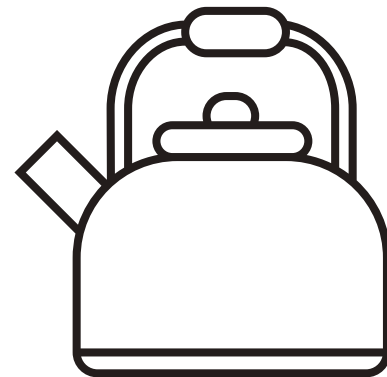


HOW TO WORK WITH PARENTS TO REDUCE EXCESSIVE ACHIEVEMENT PRESSURE

A healthy, sane college admissions process depends on high schools and parents working together effectively. College counselors are often the bridge between schools and parents and have a crucial role in this collaboration.

This resource is designed to guide counselors in their work with parents. It is designed for school communities where students experience excessive achievement pressure in the college admissions process.



OVERVIEW

- 1** Be proactive in deflating pressure, including constructively framing the college search process early on.
- 2** Highlight hopes but acknowledge anxiety.
- 3** Use the college admissions process as a powerful opportunity to cultivate students' ethical development.
- 4** Commit to a compact.

4 TIPS FOR WORKING WITH PARENTS

When achievement pressure gets too great, it can lead to anxiety and depression and other mental health troubles, undermine meaningful learning, and crowd out attention to cultivating in students key aspects of character, including caring for others and their communities.

Below are concrete strategies, informed by conversations with high school counselors and admissions deans, that school counselors can employ when working with parents to make the college admissions process meaningful, constructive, and healthy for students and that can promote caring for others and other key aspects of ethical development.

1. Be proactive in deflating pressure, including constructively framing the college search process early on.

Why?

It is easier to stop a runaway train before it has gathered speed. While the narrative once was to limit the conversation about college until the end of high school, this can allow misinformation and anxiety to build. It's important to start the conversation in a low-key way early and to set the terms of the college search process.

Try this:

1. Expose students to a wide range of colleges.

Too often students lock in to a small group of highly selective schools early in high school, even when there are hundreds of great colleges in this country that might be as good or a better fit for them. It's vital to aggressively and strategically counteract this wrongheaded focus on a small number of elite schools and to lift up the strengths of a wide range of colleges.

Schools might organize book clubs for parents and students with thoughtful readings like Frank Bruni's *Where You Go Is Not Who You'll Be*, Loren Pope's *Colleges that Change Lives*, Lloyd Thacker's *College Unranked*, or other titles that encourage parents to think about a wide range of wonderful colleges. Use newsletters, Facebook pages, and other social media platforms as effective ways to push out articles that focus on these colleges. Suggest to parents schools that you think

might be an especially good fit for a student that may not be on their radar, and encourage parents to visit these schools with their teens.

Expose students and parents to a variety of voices and perspectives. Use the voices of admission deans to reinforce your messaging and reduce pressure; you might start with the list of *Turning the Tide* endorsers as potential presenters to your parent body. Be explicit about the messages you hope they will send. Don't always use admission staff from highly selective or local colleges for programming; by incorporating a range of college and university voices from around the country, you will expand awareness of the many diverse opportunities in higher education.

Finally, schools might rely on former parents whose children did not attend highly selective colleges to share the success stories of their children. Think of it as a college admission support group. High schools have had success organizing informal coffee chats that bring together veteran parents and first-timers. Choose the alumni parents carefully and prep them for some of the issues that you hope they will address.

2. *Engage parents and students in a blind college fair.*

Unlike the traditional college fair with banners and marketing materials for every school, each college admission representative is asked to submit a list of five distinct characteristics or programs at their college, which are then printed on a bland, white sheet of paper. Then students move from table to table focusing on the programs or experiences colleges may offer. Next, students and admission officers gather as a group to debrief the experience, at which time they reveal the school names where each representative works. They discuss what the students—and admissions officers—learned, what surprised them, and how their preconceived notions were challenged. Finally, they allow the college representatives to return to their tables (with brochures, literature, banners, etc.) and meet with students again. This format encourages less focus on name and more on how the schools match a student's values or criteria.

3. *Combat harmful commercial rankings.*

Commercial rankings, such as US News & World Report's "Best Colleges" list are flawed indicators of quality and match. Schools can provide families with more relevant data, such as four-year graduation rates, student engagement or satisfaction data, retention rates, or information on affordability and outcomes. Rather than linear rankings, schools can suggest other statistics such as which school has produced the highest number of Fortune 500 CEO's. (University of Wisconsin with 58% acceptance rate). Share evidence that where you go to college actually matters very little, but whether you're engaged in college matters a lot in terms of long-term salaries and work satisfaction (see *Challenge Success, A "Fit" Over Rankings: Why College Engagement Matters More Than Selectivity*).

4. Create a picture of a healthy college search process.

Talk with families about what healthy achievement and engagement looks like and how extreme pressure can be destructive. Case studies or profiles of students who are balanced—achieving at reasonable levels, not suffering undue stress, and caring community members—can be helpful to families in guiding the process. These red flags can also help families understand how much is too much pressure (from parents or self-imposed by students). Such examples can also reveal what it means to be ethical stewards in this process.

2. Highlight hopes but acknowledge anxiety.

Why?

The college admissions process can highlight parents' great hopes for their children, and it can also tap into their biggest fears and anxieties. Leading with hope but acknowledging anxiety can help parents and students communicate more effectively and reduce stress.

Try this:

Encourage parents to articulate their hopes for their children's future. Survey parents of seniors anonymously about what their greatest hope is for their child in the college admissions process and then share the responses with both students and parents. Rarely does this exercise result in responses about admission to selective colleges or high achievement; rather, parents are likely to talk about balance, well-being, purpose, and other characteristics that underlie a positive culture. When parents' hopes do focus on acceptance to selective colleges, it provides an opportunity to engage in dialogue about issues of match, definitions of success, and research on engagement.

Confront concerns head on and discuss strategies for dealing with any stress that parents feel around college admission. Some schools have found it useful to have mental health professionals and other specialists talk with students and family groups about honest communication, stress, and anxiety.

Often parents' stress is exacerbated by myths and rumors about college admissions, and it's important to address these head on. Some high schools organize specific workshops for parents to allow these myths to surface and be confronted. Call them "Word on the Street" sessions, "Parent Pickups," or some other creative name and either ask parents to submit questions beforehand or at the event. Come prepared to give factual evidence or quotes from admission deans that debunk ill-conceived perceptions.

3. Use the college admissions process as a powerful opportunity to cultivate students' ethical development.

Why?

The college application experience provides a critical opportunity to engage students and families about how to be ethical citizens, people of integrity who care about others, and the larger world.

Try this:

Instead of just talking about strategies to “get into” college, take advantage of the admission framework to create dialogue with students and parents about college access, integrity in reporting activities or discipline infractions, and other ethical issues.

Is the college admissions process fair for students across the country? Why or why not? What would a fair admissions system look like? How can we get there? Why is it important to engage in community service? What kinds of community service are likely to be meaningful for students and constructive and positively received by recipients? What types might be patronizing and undermine recipients?

Initiate conversations about affirmative action, legacy admission, athletic recruitment, and other controversial topics related to college admission to help students and families sort out what is fair and what their ethical obligations are in this process.

4. Commit to a compact.

Why?

The best way to ensure a healthy partnership between schools and families is to clearly articulate the roles and expectations that everyone will abide by.

Try this:

Create a compact between high schools and parents that outlines how each constituent will contribute to a college admission experience that reduces achievement pressure, encourages ethical engagement, and levels the playing field for economically disadvantaged students. Making Caring Common created a template that schools and parents can adapt.