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Getting Into College: What Your Guidance Counselor Won't Tell You and Your Parents Don't Know

The pressure is on. Will you get in to your top college? Did you apply to the right school? What if Harvard accepts you, but you know in your heart that you'll hate it? What if all your schools reject you and you have to live in your parents' basement forever?

And who dreamed up a system that puts this much pressure on teenagers, anyway?

Let's review, class.

It is hard to get into college, harder now than ever before. If your parents freak out when your top schools turn you down, share the following information with them.

These days, about 66% of high school graduates attend college. Put another way, roughly two-thirds of high school grads attend college and one-third don't. There are significantly more students applying to college today than when your parents were eighteen years old. The competitive bar has risen, too. More and more baby boomers can afford to give their kids the tools to put them ahead in the college race: SAT prep classes, special tutoring, even hiring private admissions experts to guide their kids through the maze. More students are applying to college and more of them are highly qualified. Being accepted by a competitive college is like playing a high-stakes game of musical chairs. Not everyone is going to find a seat.

And guess what? Getting in to college means absolutely nothing. Are you shocked? You should be. So much of high school seems to be aimed towards "getting into the best school" that we lose sight of the real goal. The bottom line is that you need to develop your passions and abilities so that you can find a decent job and create a fulfilling life. Being accepted at the college of your choice is just the first step. You actually have to *finish* college, too.

The college drop-out rate is a dirty little secret in American education circles. While rates vary from school to school, the national statistic is that only fifty percent – half – of the people who enter college will graduate from it. That's right – half.

So you are obsessively checking your email or pacing by the mailbox or staring at a stack of applications and wondering – what does this all mean?

First – getting a college degree does make a difference. Every statistic shows that people with a 2-year or 4-year college degree will earn more money than people with just a high school education. Male college graduates earn 60% more than guys with just a high school degree. Female college graduates earn 90% more. While money won't buy you happiness, having career options because you went to college will make life easier. It is hard to get by in America without some kind of post-secondary education.

Second – know what you want to get out of your college experience. If you aren't sure why you are going to college, then it is time for some soul-searching and research. If the only reason you apply to or attend a specific school is because other people expected it, chances are you will be miserable. Decide for yourself why you are going and what you want.

Third – if you get to college and you don't like it, then speak up. Most people who drop out do so between their freshman and sophomore years. Be strong enough to ask for help. Many schools have developed programs to assist with the college transition. If you truly loathe your school, consider transferring. Sometimes the school that was a perfect fit when you were 18 is two sizes too small when you turn 20. It is estimated that nearly one-third of college students will transfer before they graduate. It is better to transfer to the school that is right for you than it is to drop out, or suffer through a rotten experience.

Take a breath. Make some herbal tea and talk to your friends. Look for colleges that will appreciate you – your strengths, your weaknesses, your passions, and dreams. If a college rejects you, don't take it personally. It just means that particular school is not a good fit for you today. You have many, many options. College is a step on your journey, but it is not the final station, not by a long shot. Relax and enjoy the ride.

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SOURCES

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