

IN THE FINGER LAKES

{Choosing a College That's Right for You}

by Kimberly Price

The first hurdle in a college career happens to be a large one – choosing which college to attend. Students, at just 17 mind you, must decide what they'd like to do with the rest of their lives. Next, they must find a major that correlates. Only then can the college search commence.

So many schools have seemingly wonderful programs for virtually any major. A student looking for a program dealing with computers can find one anywhere, from the nation's top private universities to the local community college. But how to narrow it down to just one school?

"The dream-world way of picking a college is looking at your interests, finding a career that matches those interests, and then finding a college that offers a good program in the career field you want to go into," said Patrick Clark, a guidance counselor at Corning-Painted Post West High School. "But honestly, a lot of kids don't really do that because they're not sure what they want to do."

During his 16 years of counseling students, eight of which he's spent at the high school, Clark has helped countless students find a college that suits them. Clark says a primary concern is whether kids can get in to the college they want. While it's okay to dream big, it's also important to be realistic.

"You definitely want to pick a safety school so you know that if all else fails, you'll get into that school," said Clark, who has known students to apply to

competitive universities only and then have to scramble in March to find a college with open enrollment. "That's the absolute worst way to pick a college."

The four guidance counselors at West High, each takes on roughly 250 students, meeting with the juniors and seniors about colleges each year. Senior interviews, as they are called, are conducted in September, during which time seniors are essentially given a roadmap for college applications and finances. Junior interviews begin in January; these get the younger group thinking about the upcoming reality of college.

Since many students are busy with extracurricular activities during the school year, Clark encourages juniors to prepare applications during summer, setting a goal for completion by mid-November.

"Admissions counselors always say, 'It's human nature to wait until the deadline,'" said Clark, "and some of these bigger colleges get tens of thousands of applications at the deadline. I always encourage kids not to get into that mix."

Applying early provides admissions counselors the time they need to look over all application materials, even taking extracurriculars into account. Further, the additional time is essential in the financial aid process.

"There is more financial aid if you apply earlier," said Clark. "I've seen many instances when students with higher GPAs and SAT scores miss out



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on financial aid from a school because it's given out on a first-come-first-served basis."

Clark always shares the following story with the seniors he counsels:

"There was a girl who had all her applications in by mid-November. She went to the school's financial aid website and applied to all the scholarships by mid-December. After an interview, she came back to the guidance office jumping up and down because she ended up receiving a \$26,000-a-year award – and she knew this before she left for Christmas break."

The girl had a 91 GPA. "Same school, same year, different kid. He's got a 96 GPA and waits till the deadline." The student's acceptance letter came in February with a \$36,000 price tag. When he called the financial aid office, they said all the awards had been given out.

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"So the girl with the 91 received \$104,000 over four years," said Clark. "He had a 96 and received nothing simply because he waited too long."

In Clark's experience, the financial aspect of considering colleges has always been a bigger issue for parents than students.


"All the way up through your senior year of high school, you don't really deal with the finances," said Clark. "Your parents are dealing with that stuff. After one year of college, it becomes real."

Another important thing to consider is dropout rate. If it's high, that's

not a good sign. "One thing shocked me when I first started doing this job: 50 percent of kids going from their senior year at high school into a four-year college do not finish there after their first year," he said.

"As I always say, if you don't know what you want to do, \$50,000 a year is a lot of money to try to find yourself," Clark said.

He said that a student reading a textbook for how to do it would pick a college based on the career they they'd enjoy most. Realistically, however, that's not what ends up happening most of the time, and that's okay.

Students should research what they think they might want, apply early, negotiate finances and apply for scholarships. If they're still unsure or want to improve their grades, they should consider attending a community college. 

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