The Fear (of Not Getting In)

Beginning in April of each school year, I sit down with my juniors for their first official college meetings. However, before they step onto the proverbial diving board and prepare to dive head first into the college admissions process, something invariably stops them from launching into the waters below: Fear!

It has become a running theme during my conversations with my students, this fear that threatens to destroy their dreams: They will be *the one student* in the school that gets denied from every college they apply to.

What I have come to realize is that this fear-of-not-getting-in exists within virtually every student, from the valedictorian on down. So, during our first-sit down, and even before getting into those sizable conversations about what type of colleges they might be interested in, Fear needs to be put to bed.

There is a great misconception, a myth even, that it is difficult to get into college. At the risk of sounding flippant, it’s not. In fact, out of approximately 5,000 colleges in the country, a good amount of the 1500+ two-year community colleges are open enrollment, meaning all a student needs to do to get in is simply apply. Another 500+ four-year colleges have selectivity rates between 75% - 100%. This includes household names such as the University of Colorado Boulder, St. Bonaventure College and the University of Arizona.

The root of this misconception can be found with those other household names, the Yale’s and Stanford’s of the world, whose minuscule acceptance rates skew the reality of college acceptance rates in general. To be clear, it is extraordinarily difficult, shockingly so in fact, to get into the country’s most prestigious colleges. Students from around the globe are getting denied at a clip of 95% from these schools. For the number one ranked student at any given high school in the country, Harvard is a reach. So let’s just put those colleges in a different category for the time being because frankly, they are.

For now, let’s settle up with the Fear. The first thing I tell my student, the one sitting in front of me a pained half-smile fixed on her face, is that she will get into college. Multiple colleges. Guaranteed. And then I explain how we can ensure that:

1. By creating a balanced list of 6-8 schools that fit both their wants and needs. The ideal list should consist of:
   * 3-4 targets
   * 2 safe targets
   * 1-2 reaches

Creating a college list deserves thoughtfulness and diligence. Students should involve their parent/guardian, accept input from their counselor, and be sure that their final list includes the categories mentioned above. Follow this blueprint and the student should end up with multiple colleges to choose from when the acceptance letters have finished coming in.

1. By staying focused, setting and meeting checkpoint goals, e.g. “Complete final copy of the college essay by September 15th.” Students who keep pace with their goals will stay ahead of the process, keep deadlines at bay, greatly reduce stress levels, and ultimately produce stronger application packages.
2. By staying within themselves. If a student’s dream school is Vanderbilt University and they are a 3.0 GPA student who has never taken an AP or Honors course their entire high school career even though their school offers 18 of them, my strong advice is to take a pass, not a chance. Their time is better spent finding right-fit colleges that align with their transcript.
3. By loving their safe-target. If a student’s dream school is the University of Michigan, but it’s a reach, go for it! Work hard, however, to find that same – or similar! – love for a couple safe options.

Students, hear me out. The important thing to remember is that colleges are as interested in you as you are in them. Although the process can often feel completely one-sided, I assure you that colleges are looking for unique, thoughtful, civic-minded, enthusiastic learners who can bring diverse personalities, thought-provoking ideas, advocacy, and a sense of empowerment to their campus. They are looking for you!

Lastly, remember, you are not alone. Ask your friend at lunch or your lab partner in class, “Hey, do you have this fear that you won’t get into any colleges?” I can almost guarantee they feel the same way you do. Then go speak to your counselor and I *know* what they will tell you: “You will get into college. Multiple colleges. Guaranteed.”