



Counseling Families  
Through the Process

By Melissa Brock



# Fear of Flying

Parents and guardians often have more fear than their students about the journey off to college. They are unsure about fit, cost and value, distance, health and safety, an empty nest, and more.

COVID-19 has added even more factors into the mix. The pandemic drastically changed the way many colleges deliver instruction, as well as the ways students and their families evaluate prospective schools and determine a path forward.

Consider these recent findings from a December 2020 survey conducted by [Tallo](#) of 30 college



said she's seen a shift in parents' concerns for their children. "They're nervous about putting their children in environments that are unknown. They're worried about what college is going to be for their children," Chelst said.

loomed even larger for parents and guardians, according to the admission professionals surveyed. Fifty-six percent of Tallo respondents strongly agreed that parents and guardians of prospective students are highly concerned about how their college is handling the pandemic.

Safety concerns and financial challenges also abound, said Cicily Shaw, director of college counseling at Boston Trinity Academy (MA).

"Cost is really big this year. Can families actually afford to send their child off? There's been changes in income for some of our families," Shaw said. She's adapted by offering more tools and resources, such as the net price calculator, and says some families have gravitated toward a gap year instead of sending their child directly to college. "They say, 'Let's do the process but let's take a year and make sure colleges will provide the resources they say they're providing,'" she said.

For those families that move ahead in the process, evaluating college choices is tougher given recommendations from health officials to limit travel. "The hardest part is not being able to tour a campus of a college that my son has been admitted to in another state," shared Sheila Bloedow, parent of a high school senior in western Washington.

And in many cases, even when visits are feasible, families see a very different version of the school than the one they hope their student will one day experience.

*"Last spring, remote learning was subpar at best. This year has been better because my 19-year-old daughter is living off-campus and most of her classes are in-person, but she is still missing out on the social aspect of college life. Very limited sports attendance and Zoom sorority events just aren't cutting it."*

admission professionals. Despite promising news on the vaccine front, the pandemic remains a top concern of both students and their parents/guardians, survey results show.

One-third of respondents strongly agreed that prospective students are highly concerned about their institution's approach to COVID-19. And those worries

#### CHALLENGES ABOUND

Although the survey sample size is small, the findings back up what counselors and admission professionals say they have witnessed this year as families embark on a college search process that's rife with new challenges.

Dina Chelst, director of college guidance at Davis Renov Stahler Yeshiva High School for Boys (NY),

And accounts from current college students and their families often led to more handwringing.

Many parents have a story to tell about their students' experiences living and learning amid a pandemic. "One of the hardest parts is realizing that for almost a year now, they haven't been getting the true 'college experience,'" said Michelle Vecchiarello, of Hudson, New Hampshire. "Last spring, remote learning was subpar at best. This year has been better because my 19-year-old daughter is living off-campus and most of her classes are in-person, but she is still missing out on the social aspect of college life. Very limited sports attendance and Zoom sorority events just aren't cutting it."

### NEW OUTREACH EFFORTS

Mike Drish, director of first-year admissions at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, says his team has done as much as possible to combat the challenges of the past year. On his campus, the admission office offers several online events where prospective families can ask questions and learn all about the UMass Amherst experience.

But Drish admits it's tricky for prospective students to make a decision. "They can't say, 'Maybe I'll go to that comedy show or have dinner in the dining hall and see who's here and see how the students are interacting,'" he added. "Families are trying to make a decision based on videos and based on others' word-of-mouth"

The Tallo survey showed that a majority of admission offices experienced challenges in their outreach to prospective students in 2020. In fact, 63 percent of respondents said they believed their ability to communicate with prospective students was negatively impacted by COVID-19.

But that doesn't mean they're standing still. Drish and other admission leaders across the country have responded to the challenges posed by the pandemic by focusing their efforts on digital marketing, online platforms, and virtual recruitment events. At UMass Amherst, Drish said his team jumped on email, phone calls, virtual programming, college fairs, and virtual visits to connect with prospective students. The university even created a virtual program for admitted students.

"Our team has really risen to the occasion," Drish said. "You (take) all the travel prep time and staying in hotels and whatnot and replace it with an ability to respond to emails faster because they're not in cars or on an airplane. You work in admission because you love to work (with) and counsel (students). We aren't going to let the pandemic prevent us from proactively reaching out to families."

That credo has been adopted by a number of colleges this year.

Chelst, of the Davis Renow Stahler Yeshiva High School for Boys, said the colleges she's worked with have pivoted quickly. They've offered access points that hadn't been available before – through Zoom sessions, admission staff availability, and live web-based tours. "What's so beautiful about it, it made them more accessible to the students and from an access point, it's been really nice," Chelst said. "They can actually show me what they watched and what they saw. That has helped allay a lot of parent fears."

### ADDRESSING CONCERNS

Despite those positive steps, counselors and admission professionals agree that deciding on a college has become more difficult amid the pandemic.

### UNFINISHED BUSINESS

Counselors on all sides of the desk adapted in 2020 to better serve students under new and challenging circumstances. But they agree there's still work to be done in two areas of critical importance.

**Testing:** Many colleges adopted test-optional policies in 2020 in response to the pandemic. But Cicily Shaw, director of college counseling at Boston Trinity Academy (MA), says many of her families continue to wonder about test-optional and what it "really" means. "We have hybrid two days a week and we also have an online community because we have a significant international portion [of students]. We've had some American students choose to be hybrid... but they still went to take exams three-and-a-half hours away. So there was uneasiness around colleges going test-optional and a lot of it was driven by parents," she said.

Herbie Walker, director of admissions and counseling at Cristo Rey St. Viator College Preparatory High School (NV), agrees that a lot of questions have surfaced about whether students should take the ACT or SAT. "I have to advise kids based on GPA and overall school profile.



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The kids who have strong test scores, I encourage them to send them in." Walker says that he advised families on course selection, extracurriculars, and letters of recommendation. "Colleges want students who are passionate about something. They care if you're consistent with it, too. They want you to, say, build robots (for) three to four years—not just for one semester."

**Diversity and Inclusion:** The Tallo survey found that diversity and inclusion was also a factor on the minds of college admission professionals in 2020. Seventy percent of respondents stated that their college or university had implemented higher standards and/or expectations for diversity and inclusion in the past year. Furthermore, 87 percent agreed that their college or university has worked to end structural racism in higher education, including the possible racial bias associated with standardized tests.

Creating a test-optional environment helps put all students on a level playing field. So could rethinking the ways colleges address cost with prospective students, said Kenneth Welch, associate director of outreach and recruitment at Prescott College (AZ). "The cost is always an issue, the sticker price can be outlandish and outrageous," he said. "We are trying to go from a predominantly white college to a more diverse college to have more racial justice and inclusion, but in the marginalized communities, the sticker price scares them away." Prescott has been intentional about offering more scholarships to students with diverse backgrounds, Welch said. "Students think about sticker price but parents really know about it and that's a conversation we have to have," he added. □

Although each family's experiences and worries are unique, some common areas of concern have emerged.

Shaw, of Boston Trinity Academy (MA), surveyed the parents and guardians of college-bound students at her school earlier this year. Their worries fell into five general categories: access to college information amid a pandemic, campus culture within an increasingly polarized country, COVID-19 restrictions and their impact on final college choices, college cost and value, and student mental health and mental well-being.

Specific concerns shared included:

- Worries about access to resources in light of Zoom fatigue (i.e., being too tired to attend many of the online information sessions regarding the college process)
- Confusion on whether students should put the same emphasis on taking standardized tests amid the rise of test-optional policies
- Uncertainty over whether colleges truly offer a space where all voices can be heard within the context of an increasingly polarized country
- Unease over deciding on college without knowing if in-person classes will occur this fall
- Questions about mounting college debt, access to financial aid, and paying full price for a remote or hybrid experience
- Anxiety around preserving student development, health, and wellness throughout the college planning and preparation process.

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And even though some of the factors surrounding individual college choices have changed, much of the college prep process remains the same—an important reminder amid other uncertainties.

Students still take classes as high school seniors, apply to colleges, and eventually choose the right fit for them, said Henry DelAngelo, school counselor at Joel Barlow High School (CT). "The funny thing is that they're the same challenges," he said. "It's the acuteness that has changed, it's the totality of all of it, the gravity of the situation."



## HELPING FAMILIES MOVE FORWARD

Focusing on the fundamentals of college selection can help families move ahead in the process, even in these unprecedented times.

DelAngelo says academic, social, emotional, intellectual factors comprise the four pillars to choosing a college. "If they aren't in place, then the academic and intellectual part will kind of fall away and I think right now there's a lot of need for emotional support and validation," he said.

The fear of failure brings a lot of emotionality to the college search process, DelAngelo noted. "Teenagers are making the biggest decision of their lives and parents are saying 'It's so expensive, so make the right one!'" he explained. "Parents are paying for it monetarily but students have to pay for it because they have to live it. It's important to get a good sense

of where students will not only survive, but thrive."

DelAngelo encourages his students to look at the types of classes, achievement, and rigor that they're comfortable undertaking. He also encourages students and parents to control what they can control and start to think about the things that they want—and what they don't want—in a college or university. "Teenagers are anything but reflective, but that's the process of discovery and going through as many options as we can. If you've done it with fidelity, you're going to make the right decision based on the right information of what you had at this time..."

What can admission counselors do to support that important journey? Kenneth Welch, associate director of outreach and recruitment at Prescott College (AZ), believes it's

about better communication with all parties.

"I implore the student to bring their parents in on the conversation sooner rather than later. I also give the parents my contact information in case they have questions. Typically, parents want to be more hands-on, the student would prefer them to be more hands-off," he said.

Welch says guiding families through the process is all about striking the right balance so parents help with the decision, yet the student feels they make the best decision for themselves. "Once we can find that balance and trust has been established among all parties, then it is a matter of keeping them moving forward in the process," Welch added with a smile. ▢

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