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6 Tips to Help Diversify Your College Search

WACO, Texas, Feb. 23 -- My mom always said I was born with one foot out the door, but that doesn't mean that made the college search process any easier. It's hard. There are almost 6000 colleges in the United States alone, and when most of them are sending out emails and brochures every day, sifting through that noise isn't easy.

So what can you do when colleges are hitting you left and right with their "Why YOU Should Send YOUR Student Here" pitch constantly? Well, you do all the research you can. You go on visits. You track application fees. You try to justify the cost of the degree with the monetary outcome.

All of those things are good things to do, but it isn't everything.

The thing is, if you had told me back at the beginning of my college search that I'd end up at Baylor University, I would have laughed. My senior year I hit the road with my dad and looked at close to 40 schools. I applied to 25 of them. In Texas, I toured three schools, and as we left I declared that Baylor was at the bottom of my list. It was fine, but that was all it was to me.

So how did I end up at Baylor? Well, there's more to college than just what degree they can offer.

As someone who had to choose between 20 schools, my parents and I did a lot of deliberating. In the end, I ended up where I was supposed to be. Here's my tips on how to help your student find the best school and sift through the noise.

- **Make a spreadsheet.** While I would never recommend applying to 25 schools (sticking in the five or six range seems like a reasonable number), being able to see all the schools I applied to in one place helped a lot. My dad put information like how much the out-of-pocket cost was, what scholarships I'd been offered, the distance and average ranking overall. This spreadsheet was helpful when it came to eliminating schools as well.
- **It's not just about the degree.** A good degree plan is necessary, but college is also about the experience. When I was in my own college search, I wanted a college with a good community focus. This eliminated a lot of state schools purely based on their large size. Look for what sort of extracurriculars the school has and the opportunities they have to get involved. I didn't truly appreciate Baylor until I understood how much the faculty, staff and students value community and connection through campus events.
- **Take a visit.** There's no better way to understand a school than going and visiting. Often, tours include a stop at the dining hall which is important too, and something I'll talk about later. I can't even tell you the number of virtual tours I had to do as a senior, but none of them compared to the experience of seeing the campus in person. It also gives you a great insight into the college town. After all, the college experience isn't limited just to what's on campus.

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- **Know the meal plan.** This might sound unimportant, I mean, dining hall food is dining hall food. Surely, it doesn't need to be fancy. But for students with dietary restrictions, knowing what types of food they offer is incredibly important. Find out if the school you're visiting caters to dietary restrictions like peanut or gluten allergies. Baylor does a fantastic job with this; they have separate stations in their dining halls that are allergen free. As someone who can't have peanuts, this adds a level of comfort when I'm grabbing something to eat quickly.
- **Let's talk coffee.** If your student doesn't like coffee now, they might change their tune come finals season. Find out what kind of plan the school has for "dining dollars" so you know they (or you) won't be paying the equivalent of their tuition at Starbucks. Most schools have a system built in with the tuition payment that allows students to purchase items with something like their campus card.
- **Learn the living situation.** It's a harsh reality, but for many parents, your student will be gone most of the year. Honestly, a college's dorms can make or break a decision to go there. Not only is it important to figure out if your student will be comfortable living there, but it's also good to look into things like noise control and visiting hours. Sure, you can't control getting noisy neighbors or pranking suitemates, but you can find out if the school you're looking at has a quiet hour policy. At Baylor, quiet hours start at 11 p.m. and visiting hours end at 1 a.m. which really helps set the standard for a calm bedtime.

There's a lot to consider when you're trying to help your student both find and pick the right school. This is a great time to talk about your values and figure out together what's important outside of the degree plan. College is a great time to make connections and try something new, so see if the schools you're looking at offer something else your student would be interested in. Don't shy away from contacting admissions counselors either. My admissions counselor at Baylor was such a help when I was applying for further scholarship and looking into honors programs.

Most importantly, don't stress. Your student will end up where they need to be, it just takes a little searching.

About Baylor

Baylor University is a private Christian university and a nationally ranked Research 1 institution. The university provides a vibrant campus community for more than 20,000 students by blending interdisciplinary research with an international reputation for educational excellence and a faculty commitment to teaching and scholarship. Chartered in 1845 by the Republic of Texas through the efforts of Baptist pioneers, Baylor is the oldest continually operating university in Texas. Located in Waco, Baylor welcomes students from all 50 states and more than 100 countries to study a broad range of degrees among its 12 nationally recognized academic divisions.