

Parents are crossing the line in college application process

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Dear Augustana College,

My daughter, Susie, did not take school seriously for a long time, which explains her less-than-stellar grades. But she recently had a major turnaround. Did I mention she played Puck in her school's eighth-grade production of A Midsummer Night's Dream? Please admit her — and give her lots of scholarships.

Sincerely, Helicopter Parent

OK, that is not a real letter. But it's pretty close to the kinds of letters, e-mails and phone calls that college admissions officials say they started receiving a couple of years ago — and are getting more of every year. In these and other ways, admissions directors say, they are seeing more parents try to take control of the application process.

College officials laugh off some of it, chalking it up to the "helicopter parent" phenomenon. That's the term coined to describe the certain breed of the current generation of parents that continue to closely hover over their children's lives through college and beyond. It's also a trend that coincides with the escalating cost of college tuition, which parents often help finance.

But universities are growing concerned that some parents are crossing the line.

Kent Barnds, vice president of enrollment at Augustana, a small college in Rock Island, Ill., said the couple of dozen letters he receives from overzealous parents every year usually don't go over so well with his admissions staff.

"We're a little suspicious," Barnds said. "We wonder why we're not hearing directly from the students. I want to hear their take on it. I can't help but feel that if the parent calls or writes that they're making an excuse for the student."

One overbearing mother even asked Augustana if it could expedite its decision so she could give the admission offer to her child as a Christmas present. Barnds added incredulously that the student was "marginal at best" and "may not even be admissible."

George Wolf, the vice president of enrollment at Westminster College in Fulton, Mo., said he mostly laughs at the two dozen to three dozen letters he receives from parents every year.

"I can remember someone talking about how their kid did in peewee football — like that was going to have a big impact — and another about an award that a young lady won in sixth grade. I think it was in a spelling bee," he said. "While it was interesting, it's old news. We want to see what you're doing in 12th grade and 11th

grade."

And parents aren't just sending letters. In what some view as a more troubling trend, many parents are going so far as to fill out college applications and write essays for students.

FILLING OUT APPLICATIONS

Kate Engemann, the recruiting director at Williams Woods University in Fulton, suspects that up to 25 percent of the applications that come into her office are filled out by parents. It's a percentage that grows every year and that disheartens her.

It's not hard to detect when parents have filled out the application. One big tip-off is the response when her staff receives when they call students to thank them for applying.

"Who are you?" students will sometimes say. Or "How did you get my number?" Or "I applied?"

Some students who are caught red-handed will apologize and acknowledge that their parents filled out the applications. Some even withdraw their applications as a result, Engemann said.

Another dead giveaway is that parents often will unabashedly admit that they filled out the applications, having no clue that many schools frown on the practice, she said.

"I find it disappointing because if a student can't even fill out their own application for college, then what kind of an effort are they going to put forth as a college student?" she asked.

And moreover, does her college want that kind of a student?

"It's scary," she added. "What if I had my mom fill out my job application?"

Still, Engemann said she never has rejected a student or rescinded an offer of admission because of strong suspicions that parents filled out the application. For one thing, it can be hard to prove conclusively. And second, some parents may be so overbearing that the student may not have a choice in the matter, she said.

Instead, William Woods' recruiters emphasize "to no end" that students should do the work themselves, she said.

Niel DeVasto, admissions director at Webster University, said he also sees big clues that make it "painfully obvious" that parents are doing the work for students.

When admissions officers call students to inquire about missing information with their applications, students sometime respond, "You'll have to ask my mom."

DeVasto said he would prefer students use their own thoughts and words on the application so they give schools a true picture of who they are.

"Are we going to reject them if they are a B-plus student and have good scores?" he asked. "No. But it certainly works to students' favor if they take the time to visit campus and get to know us."

A student's level of interest will have the biggest impact when the student is borderline, he said.

Angela Whitlow, a St. Louis-area parent, said she made a pact with her son last year when he was a junior that she would be mostly hands off with his college applications. But she did check them over for grammar and made sure that he knew how much the family could afford to pay for college.

"I need him to take ownership of this decision," she said. "And I know that if it looks like a parent has filled out the application, it can be looked at negatively."

Whitlow is the program director for the Scholarship Foundation of St. Louis, which assists students with financial aid. In her work, she often sees the opposite of helicopter parents — those who never went to college who don't always know how to help, or are unwilling to do so. Without any support, those students who want to go to college don't often make it there because they can't make it through the application process.

LETTERS, ESSAYS

Wolf, of Westminster College, said he thinks college guidebooks and private college counselors are helping to give parents the idea to write unsolicited letters of recommendation.

He suspects parents are trying to make sure schools know everything about their children to see if they might qualify for different scholarships based on their background or activities.

While they often dismiss such letters, some admissions directors acknowledge that they have worked in a student's favor in some cases. Barnds recalled some cases in which a parent gave them helpful information about how a nasty divorce, a family tragedy, or a parent in prison might have affected the student.

DeVasto said sometimes a parent points out that a student scored higher on a standardized test after he or she applied and successfully argue that the student should therefore qualify for more financial aid.

Admissions directors also often see the influence of parents — or other adults — in the essays students submit. Several officials say they no longer use them to measure a student's writing ability because so many of the essays have been heavily edited. Some essays use such sophisticated language or outdated terminology that it is obvious to officials that they do not match up to the student's grades or demeanor.

"You are skeptical of them," DeVasto said of the essays. "You have to take them with a grain of salt and look at the big picture."

Usually, DeVasto said he uses essays more to glean more personal information about students.

In a handful of cases every year, Engemann said her staff will be interviewing students for scholarships and realize that students are not familiar with the content of the essays they submitted.

"We ask them a question directly related to their essay and they are caught off guard," she said.

In those cases, suspicions that a parent has written the essays do sometimes weigh into decisions about scholarships, she said.

Ultimately, college officials say they want students to take the lead in the college admission process because they want to make sure that their school is a good fit for the student.

"We really encourage parents to be more secondary in the process than primary because ultimately we want the student to choose us because they want to be here," Wolf said. "Sometimes the student ends up at a place they don't want to be but mom and dad want them to be there."

Bad fits often cause students to transfer, which is costly because students may lose credits in the process.

Besides, Wolf said, students need to learn to take responsibility.

"When the student comes to college, mom and dad are not going to be here to do their work," he said. "It doesn't really teach them to go off on their own."