

## **SURVIVING YOUR SENIOR'S INDECISION:**

### **Parenting the Reluctant Decision Maker**

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If you are one of those charmed parents whose high school senior has known since second grade that she wanted to be a physical therapist and has already applied early decision to Ithaca College, move on to a financial aid article. You don't belong here with those of us whose children have us in a panic because they just can't seem to get off the ground with their college planning decisions.

For those of you who belong in this article, settle in, put up your feet, and think about re-framing your perspective.

Actually, it was three years ago when my own daughter aged me about twelve years over a four month period in her senior year. She procrastinated, resisted my efforts to jump start her, and flip-flopped between seeming overwhelmed and seeming almost indifferent. The stress in our household increased proportionally to the decrease in weeks leading up to college application deadlines. And I'm a guidance counselor—this process was supposed to be much smoother for us! That experience prompted me to reflect on why some students have such an agonizingly difficult time making this first major life decision. I took a very literal look at what the First Major Life Decision means:

First. Not to overstate the obvious, but First means your child has never done this before. His indecisiveness or procrastinating behavior may simply be an indication that he doesn't have the skills or confidence to navigate a complicated decision making process that takes months to unfold. If this is your first child and YOU have never been through the college planning process, you may feel equally unprepared. Take heart; you don't have to be a college expert to effectively parent your child through this challenging task! *Focus on the process, not the decision.* It's a personal consumer decision much like buying a new car or a house. Demonstrate the process for your senior each step of the way. Show him how to: *Research* using college search engines, college web sites, and college catalogues. *Consult experts* such as guidance counselors, college admissions reps, and college ranking sources. *Match* his academic and personal profile with the admissions requirements of the colleges in which he is interested. *Visit* the colleges on your senior's short list. The critical point here if your senior is an inexperienced decision maker is that *you do these things together* so that you can *model the process*.

Major. Making a decision to move to a community where you know no one, agreeing to live in the same room with a perfect stranger in a house with a couple hundred more perfect strangers, committing to two or four years of a lifestyle with which you have little or no experience, training for a career you can't possibly be sure is right for you, and going deeply into debt to accomplish this would qualify as "major" to a seasoned adult. To an adolescent, it's, like, MAJOR, and certainly a cause for decision making paralysis. Talk openly with your senior about the emotional aspects of making high-stakes choices, and normalize the stress and fears associated with them: Fear of failure, fear of a

disastrous outcome, etc. Have your child verbalize the worst case scenario, then deflate the drama attached to it. So what will happen if you hate your college? You'll transfer to another, and along the way you'll have gained insight about your needs and preferences which will help you make a more successful choice the second time around. *Major* doesn't mean *irreversible*.

Life. The decisions your senior makes now and over the next several years will have a tremendous life impact, so it's important to focus on *her* hopes and dreams, not *yours for her*. If you have a reluctant decision maker, it's vital to ask the question "Do you want to go to college now?" Ask for their most honest response, and listen closely to it. Not every seventeen year old is ready to go to college right out of high school. There may be some very good reasons for postponing college for a year or two while gaining valuable real life experience. Maybe your student is ready for college but is not ready to leave home, in which case Broome Community College—a very well regarded two year school—becomes the college of choice. Or maybe your student will answer you with a resounding "Yes!" and you can follow it up with "So where are we at right now in the search process?" Whatever the answer, make sure you are helping your senior make this life decision in the context of her own independent future. (As a sidenote: Many parents still assume that a four year degree is preferable to a two year degree in terms of status, economic power, etc. This may or may not be true for your child. The fact is, in today's economy the most marketable skill set gets the job.)

Decision. You may get lucky and find that the best decision becomes crystal clear to your senior once you have worked through the process together. Or it may seem almost as obscure as it was when you started. It's important for you and your senior to understand that the formula for making this final decision includes not only the data you have gathered in your searches and college visits, but also your intuition, blind faith and dumb luck! Rest assured that this decision is not about identifying the ONE college at which your child can have a successful experience; it's more like eliminating the colleges which aren't such a good fit. Actually, there are no doubt many colleges at which your senior could find academic, personal and social satisfaction, and if you've worked the college search process effectively, you almost certainly have at least one of those on your list. This is the point at which you tell your senior to take a deep breath and follow his instincts. And you do that, too. In most decision making, but especially in this one, you need to gracefully accept the element of the unknown. A "good" decision can turn out poorly, and a "bad" decision can end up working out all right. This is simply a slice of real life: you make your best decision at the point a decision is required, re-evaluate that decision from time to time to make sure it's working for you, and move on accordingly.

That's the First Major Life Decision. May the Force be with you and your reluctant decision maker!