

HEARN CONSULTING

- Where Parents Fit In
- A guide to supporting the college process — what to own, what to ask, and what to leave alone.
- FAMILY GUIDE
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WHAT'S INSIDE

- Understanding Ownership — Why research shows that students who feel genuine ownership of the college process make better decisions and transition better to college life
- What's Yours and What's Theirs — A clear breakdown of roles: what students own, what parents support, and the gray zone where collaboration happens
- The Five Most Common Ways Parents Overreach — The behaviors that signal to colleges that your student isn't driving their own process, and what to do instead
- Conversations That Actually Help — How to ask open-ended questions, have honest financial talks, and show up in ways that build resilience
- When to Actually Step In — The difference between supporting your student and taking over, and how to know which is which
- A Timeline for Parent Involvement — Year-by-year guidance on how your role shifts from freshman through senior year

01

- Understanding Ownership

The college process belongs to your student. Research from Challenge Success (Stanford) shows that when students feel genuine ownership, they experience less anxiety and make better decisions.

THE RESEARCH

Students who feel ownership of their own process make better decisions and transition better to college life. If you're targeting selective schools (Top 50), this is even more critical.

With acceptance rates below 15% at most Top 20 schools and applications per student averaging 5–7 or more, authenticity and genuine fit now matter more than ever before. The admissions landscape has shifted dramatically.

Holistic review, test-optional policies, and yield protection mean that students who understand themselves and communicate their genuine interests outperform over-coached applicants every time. This is particularly important for families targeting selective schools, where student authenticity and fit — not just GPA and test scores — determine success.

02

- What's Yours and What's Theirs

The Three Domains

Your student's domain: writing essays, managing deadlines, choosing schools, having conversations with admissions, making the final decision.

Your domain: asking good questions, listening, managing logistics (transcripts sent, accounts created), having honest financial conversations, managing your own anxiety.

The gray zone: school list building (collaborative), campus visits (go together, process separately), financial aid (you handle FAFSA/CSS, they understand the results).

The Roles Table

STUDENT OWNS	PARENT SUPPORTS
Essay writing	Reading drafts (once), asking questions
Deadline management	Check in monthly, not daily
School selection	Share schools they find, listen to their reasoning
The final decision	Ask questions, share financial reality, then trust it

03

- The Five Most Common Ways Parents Overreach

1. Writing or Heavily Revising Essays

Admissions officers read hundreds of essays. Over-coached and heavily edited essays are obvious — admissions teams can distinguish authentic student voice from adult revision. Even a rewritten essay signals to the college that the application doesn't represent your student's actual voice.

	<p>What to Do Instead</p> <p>Read their draft once. Ask clarifying questions: "What did you mean here?" "Can you give me an example?" Let them revise. If they ask for line-by-line feedback, resist it. A good counselor can help with structure; you're there to listen.</p>
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2. Building the School List Without Student Input

You have a vision of where they should go. Based on their GPA, their potential, schools you've heard of. But if they didn't help build the list, they're applying to your schools, not theirs. Applications without buy-in are half-hearted. They show.

This matters especially at selective schools, where demonstrated interest and authentic fit are evaluated holistically. Students applying to schools they genuinely researched submit stronger applications.

What to Do Instead

Ask them what they're looking for. Then research together. Yes, you can share schools that fit their profile. But they need to own the list. In junior year spring, build it collaboratively. Aim for 5–7 reaches, matches, and safety schools they actually want to attend.

3. Contacting Admissions Offices on Their Behalf

Your student has a question. You email. Your email arrives in their inbox. Admissions offices notice. It signals that your student can't manage the process. It's a small thing, but small things add up.

What to Do Instead

Let them email. Let them make the call. If they're nervous, help them draft it. But the email needs to come from them. This is practice for college and beyond. Colleges want to admit students who advocate for themselves.

4. Making the Process About Status or Your Own Anxiety

You want them at a school you can brag about. A school that makes you feel like you've done the parenting right. But that pressure is toxic. Research by Suniya Luthar on affluent adolescents shows that parental achievement pressure is a significant risk factor for anxiety and depression, not a pathway to success. Your student feels it.

They start making decisions based on what will impress you, not what will make them happy. That distorts everything.

What to Do Instead

Get honest about your own fears. Are you worried they won't be successful? That they're not as smart as you hoped? Work through that. Your kid is not your validation. The goal is fit, not prestige.

5. Monitoring Every Deadline Instead of Teaching Them to Manage Their Own

You create a spreadsheet. Color-coded. You send reminders. You check in weekly. Your student never has to think. They'll head to college without the muscle to manage their own time, and you'll both struggle.

What to Do Instead

Let them miss a deadline. Let them panic. Then let them figure it out. Ask at the beginning of senior year: "What's your system for tracking deadlines?" Then trust it. If they're failing the whole class, step in. Otherwise, let them own it.

04

- Conversations That Actually Help

"What matters to you about a college?"

Not "Do you want a big school or a small school?" Not "Are you thinking public or private?" Those are yes-or-no questions that shut down thinking. Ask open-ended. What matters to them?

Maybe it's a strong engineering program. Maybe it's a city. Maybe it's proximity to family. Maybe it's the school's approach to mental health. Get curious about their criteria, not yours.

"Here's what we can afford."

Have this conversation early. Not vague. Not "we'll figure it out." Honest numbers. "We can contribute this much. Beyond that, you'd be taking loans." Or "We're paying for in-state public schools, or you need a scholarship."

This frames the real choices. It lets them research schools in reality, not fantasy.

"Tell me about that school."

After they've researched a school on their own, ask them about it. What did they find? What appeals to them? What worries them? Listen more than you talk. Your job is not to vet their research. It's to understand how they're thinking and what's important to them.

"This is hard. I'm here."

The college process is stressful. They'll have moments where they panic, doubt themselves, or feel paralyzed. Your role in those moments is presence, not problem-solving. Sit with them. Acknowledge it's hard. Tell them you believe in them. Then let them work through it. That's what builds resilience.

Research on family communication shows what matters: listening more than advising, asking open-ended questions, and creating space for your student to express doubt without judgment. When

families do this, students feel supported. When they don't, students feel pressured. The difference shapes how they experience the whole process.

05

- When to Actually Step In

Stepping in is different from taking over. You step in when something genuinely requires parental intervention. You take over when you're solving a problem your student should solve.

Step In When...

	<p>Your Student Is Paralyzed and Refusing to Engage You've asked repeatedly. Nothing's changing. This might signal depression or anxiety. That's when a conversation with a counselor or therapist makes sense.</p>
	<p>Mental Health Concerns Are Visible Anxiety spikes, they're isolating, their sleep or eating changes, they talk about not being good enough. These aren't college process problems. These are real concerns that need professional support.</p>
	<p>A Counselor or School Is Not Providing Adequate Support If your school counselor is handling 400 students, if your student can't get regular meetings, if there's a gap in guidance — you might need to hire an independent counselor. That's legitimate.</p>
	<p>Deadlines Are Being Missed With No Plan You've given them space. Deadlines are slipping. There's no recovery plan. At that point, sit down together. "This isn't working. Here's what we need to do." Then follow through with logistics support, not criticism.</p>

The distinction matters. Stepping in is short-term. You help, they take back ownership. Taking over is permanent. You do it all. The goal is always to build their capacity, not to replace it.

- A Timeline for Parent Involvement

Freshman and Sophomore Year

Low involvement. This is about academics and exploration. Your role: stay curious about what they're interested in. Ask about their classes. Notice patterns. Don't talk about college yet. The foundation is just: what does your kid care about?

Junior Year Fall

Start the financial conversation. Support their test prep decisions (tutoring, multiple attempts, study groups — their choice). Be available. This is when the work begins, but they're still driving it.

Junior Year Spring

Collaborative school list building. Visit campuses together. But here's the key: you visit the campus, they process it. You tour the engineering building, they talk to students. You stay in the background while they do the real work. Go together, process separately.

Senior Year Fall

Logistics support: make sure transcripts get sent, accounts are created, forms are submitted. Essay cheerleading ("I'm proud of how hard you're working"), not editing. Manage your own stress. They don't need to hear about your anxiety.

Senior Year Spring

Support their decision. If they choose a school you wouldn't have chosen, don't let that show. They made the choice they could live with. Your job now: celebrate it. Help them feel good about where they're headed. The choice that's right for them is the right choice, even if it's not the one you would make.

- What Actually Determines Success

The Research on Long-Term Outcomes

Parents targeting selective schools often worry: "If my student doesn't get into a Top 50 school, will they be successful?" The research is clear: where students go matters far less than how they engage.

According to the Gallup-Purdue Index, long-term career success and wellbeing correlate strongly with the college experience — mentorship, engagement, meaningful projects, supportive relationships — not the brand name on the diploma.

Frank Bruni, in "Where You Go Is Not Who You'll Be," documents how successful people come from all kinds of schools. The differentiation comes from what they did there.

At Selective Schools Specifically

This matters even more. The student body is competitive and talented across the board. The students who thrive are those who:

- Made an informed choice they owned, not one made under parental pressure
- Chose the school because of genuine fit, not just ranking
- Arrived with realistic expectations and genuine interest in their community
- Know how to manage stress and seek support when needed

For families targeting Top 50 schools, your role shifts: instead of managing the outcome, manage the process and your own anxiety. Help your student understand themselves. Support their research into genuine fit. Make sure they know you believe in their ability to decide.

That foundation — that ownership, that fit, that belief — predicts how they'll engage in college and beyond, regardless of which selective school they attend.

THE GOAL

The goal is not to get your student into the "best" school. The goal is for them to arrive at college having made a real decision — one they own, one they're excited about, one that reflects who they are. That's the outcome that predicts thriving. Not the ranking. Not the name. The fit and the ownership.

When students feel ownership, something shifts. They make better decisions. They transition better. They thrive.

YOUR ROLE

Step back. Ask good questions. Listen. Trust them. That's the work. And it's the most important thing you can do.