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Deans Can't Stand 'Helicopter Parents,' but They Hover, Too, When Their Kids Apply

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Admissions deans are often called upon to be the voices of reason in the college-application process. These elder statesmen and women offer calm reassurances and dispense sage advice to thousands of fretful parents and students. They can handle almost any question or predicament -- until their own children apply to college.

James S. Miller, dean of admission at Brown University, had worked in the field for more than two decades before his daughter began filling out college applications two years ago. Then everything changed.

"I thought the advice I've been giving for 27 years was great," he says. "But then I realized I was ignoring it all with my own daughter."

On campus tours, he insisted that they leave early if he did not like the tour guide, even though he tells parents and students to avoid letting one person sway their impression of a college. And his soothing words about not taking rejection personally seemed hollow after he watched his own daughter go through the "peaks of exhilaration" and the "depths of depression" that, he says, each piece of college mail can bring.

Being a parent is often described as a humbling experience -- and Mr. Miller and many of his colleagues say they have never felt as humbled as when they went through the college-application process with their own children. It was surprising, and sometimes amusing, they say, to realize how little their years of experience on one side of the desk prepared them for the role reversal. In fact, their vast knowledge of the world of colleges and admissions made the process even more nerve-racking.

"When it's all said and done, you're standing back and watching your child be judged in your own court," says Patricia F. Goldsmith, dean of admissions and financial aid at Scripps College, in Claremont, Calif.

Some deans enjoyed it more than others. All found the process educational, to say the least.

Admissions deans with high-school-age children, take note: Just because you know a lot about colleges does not mean your kids want your input. In fact, your expertise may make them want to keep you at arm's length.

Matthew X. Fissinger, director of admissions at Loyola Marymount University, in Los Angeles, was banned from tagging along on his son's campus visits during the past two years.

Brian Fissinger says that his dad was mostly helpful and never pressured him, but that the admissions chief's

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professional curiosity about other colleges finally led the teenager to leave him at home. Brian made that rule after spending an afternoon at a college he had no interest in, simply because his father wanted to check it out.

"I realized stuff like tours were going to be a lot easier to do with my mom," he says.

The elder Mr. Fissinger says he was still allowed to "interrogate Brian pretty thoroughly" about each college upon his return home.

Other children of admissions deans did not even want to set foot on a college campus. Katharine L. Fretwell, director of admission at Amherst College, thought she was doing her daughter, Southey F. Saul, a big favor by taking her to visit Haverford College the summer after her sophomore year in high school.

Although Southey applied early decision to Haverford, where she is now a sophomore, her main memory from her first visit there is that she was being robbed of precious summer-vacation days.

"It's only funny now," says her mother.

Richard Vos, dean of admission and financial aid at Claremont McKenna College, in California, was perhaps more fortunate because his son, Carl Vos, welcomed his presence on campus tours. But there were times on college visits in the past two years when Carl had to censor his father's questions.

"It wasn't that he was being patronizing, but in those information sessions he would have this tone of 'I know what I'm talking about and you don't,' " says the son. "I had to say to him, 'OK, Dad, don't make this like last time, where you sounded pushy and condescending.' "

There were also occasions when other parents would ask questions during the sessions, and the elder Mr. Vos would lean over and give his son a look of pure annoyance.

"He exercised great restraint," says Carl. "You could tell he got asked those same questions all the time, and he hated it."

Every admissions dean who has had a child apply to college has learned something valuable from the experience. A common complaint among the deans is that so-called helicopter parents are too involved in their kids' college searches and applications but it's easier to tell other parents to stop hovering than to follow that advice.

Mr. Miller, at Brown, says it was harder than he expected to let his daughter do everything herself, especially when she insisted on mailing off her applications without letting him see them. "I was like the little kid in the front row, saying, 'Ooh! Ooh! Call on me! I know the answer,'" he says. "But she looked at me like I was the Antichrist. ... I just felt like this was the only time in her life I could be this helpful to her."

On the few occasions when Mr. Miller's daughter sought his input -- to decipher the instructions given on applications, for example -- he saw just how confusing and ambiguous the process can be for high-school students. In many cases, he says, he himself had no idea what the colleges were asking for.

Early-admission programs, like helicopter parents, are criticized by many admissions deans. One popular argument against the programs is that they pressure students to commit to a college too early in the search process. Loyola Marymount's Mr. Fissinger had a change of heart, however, after his son applied early to seven institutions.

"I wouldn't have advised him to do that, because I thought it was a bit rushed," he says. "But I view early decision a lot more positively now because I saw how much it relieved his stress to already have a few acceptance letters when his friends were all scrambling to get in their first applications."

On the opposite end of the spectrum, a few deans say their own children's procrastination reminded them that even good

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students who are really interested in a college will forget deadlines for applications and then wait until time is almost up to decide which college to attend.

Barbara-Jan Wilson, who for nine years was dean of admissions at Wesleyan University, in Middletown, Conn., learned that lesson with her own son. He forgot to send his SAT scores to his chosen colleges, then at the last minute decided to apply to colleges he had never mentioned before. He is still deciding which one to attend -- and will probably wait until the 11th hour again to make up his mind, she says.

"As a dean, I always told students not to wait until the last minute, and I thought the kids who chose us at the last possible moment were not really that interested in us," says Ms. Wilson. "But now I realize how hard it is to make everything come together, and how agonizing this decision can be for kids."

A good dean does not necessarily make a good parent, but being parents can help admissions deans find ways to be more empathetic in their dealings with prospective students and their families. Ms. Goldsmith, of Scripps, has changed the way she relates to visiting families and applicants.

"My empathy level for parents and students went up one thousand percent," she says. "I began to understand what it means to invest a substantial amount of money, and your child, in an institution, and to see why parents might be suspicious of us."

She has rewritten the rejection letters she sends to students, after seeing how much one such letter hurt her son's self-confidence. In the revised letter, she tells students who were turned down by Scripps not only that she hates this part of her job, but also that the rejection was in no way a predictor of their future success. She has become more sympathetic to parents' financial-aid appeals as well.

During a weeklong tour of West Coast colleges with his daughter this month, says Peter Stace, he was seriously considering offering separate tours for parents and students at Fordham University, where he is vice president for enrollment. Observing other parents on campus tours has convinced him that kids feel a lot less pressure when they explore a college free of the shadow of parental opinions.

At Amherst, Ms. Fretwell has realized that Friday-afternoon visitors are bleary-eyed by the time they arrive on the campus, probably because they spent the whole week looking at other colleges. She also makes a point of telling students to give Mom and Dad a break.

"When I learn that a student is the oldest child in the family, I look the student in the eye and say, 'Be nice to your parents. Remember this is the first time they are going through this, too.'"

And despite the occasional overeagerness of their mothers and fathers, most children of admissions deans say having parents in the field has helped give them a healthy perspective throughout the process of applying to college. Nights of watching Mom or Dad pore over applications taught them that agonizing decisions often have to be made, and that getting in is often a game of chance.

"I knew that sometimes it's really surprising who gets admitted, and that sometimes quotas need to be filled," says Southey Saul, daughter of the Amherst admissions director. "I knew that it's not always a personal thing, and that Amherst rejects more valedictorians than they accept. It made me feel better having that information."

Carl Vos, son of the Claremont McKenna dean, says growing up around his dad taught him that there were many colleges where he could get a great education beyond the exclusive, well-known name brands. "I had a lot of friends who said I needed to go to an Ivy League school," he says. "For me it was all about wanting to have a good experience in college, even if it was at a no-name college, and finding the one that's best for me."

After much deliberation, he found happiness at Amherst, where he is a sophomore.

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And Brian Fissinger may have banned his dad from visiting colleges with him, but as he contemplates where he will attend college next year, he has come to realize that his father the dean has actually been quite useful during the past couple of years.

"All in all, he was really easy to talk to about it," says the son. "And I'm more fortunate to have him in that position than not."

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