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## FIVE FIRST-CHOICE COLLEGES

### A Change in Approach

By Barbara T. Conner

**Reach. Zone. Safety.** This approach to college counseling worked for years, but this model is broken. We need to change the language and approach we use with students and families in the college exploration and application process if we hope for better outcomes and less stress in this process.

As predictive admission models became less accurate over the past few years, student stress and anxiety rose. When students and parents realized that admission selectivity was becoming even more challenging, generalized stress resulted in students using a scattershot approach to creating the lists of schools to which they planned to apply. This scattershot approach led to students applying to an increased number of schools as a hedge against the unknown. Ultimately, this made it even more difficult for those on the college side

to determine which of the applicants were likely yields putting even more pressure on the process.

The scattershot approach, the result of admission uncertainty, causes its own challenges for students, families, and counselors. More schools to research and visit. More applications to submit and process. More uncertainty through the admission season. Inevitably, students were adding more schools to the top of the list—those schools unlikely to admit the students—instead of focusing on adding additional schools to which they were at or above the typical academic profile

of the school, and where they most likely would be admitted.

On the college side, these unknowns about the matriculation models led to waitlist wars with colleges waitlisting thousands of students as an insurance policy against their ability to predict and yield a full class. Waitlisted students added to the already stressful landscape. Teenagers are dreamers and waitlisted teenagers dream big with an uncanny ability to focus on the imperceptible chance of being in that handful of students deemed worthy enough to be selected from a waitlist. This caused a great deal of stress for secondary counselors who stayed positive and encouraging with students, while, at the same time, trying to remain (and encourage their students to remain) realistic.



We can address the reality of an unsure environment in the college admission process, while providing the best college counseling advice to our students and families, by changing how we talk about the process and by encouraging our students to follow a process—Five First-Choice Colleges—that sets them up for success instead of stress.

I have used this approach with my students for the past few years, and slowly, I am seeing a shift toward better outcomes in a process that benefits from less stress and level heads. When I work with my students, I encourage them to first know who they are, what they value, how they learn, and what their goals are for their college years and beyond. With a realistic understanding of their academic profile in hand, I encourage them to focus on schools where they are a solid match for the *typical admitted pool*. Where the goals they have for the social/cultural setting of a college matches what they are looking for in the process. I ask each student to find five schools for their application list that qualify as First-Choice Colleges.

To be one of the Five First-Choice Colleges, the student's current academic profile (not what he or she hopes to achieve during the fall of senior year) has to be within the college's typical admitted profile, the social/cultural piece has to be a fit, the student needs to have at least taken a look at the financial information, and *the student has to be excited about the school*.

This sounds too simple to work, yet it does. By asking each student to create a foundation of these five schools, no matter what the spring admission decisions bring, the student will have good, solid choices from which to select. During the research phase, if a student finds a school that fits the criteria, but where she doesn't see herself attending, it doesn't go on the list. Students can add additional schools to the list (from their dream lists, etc.) as long as they have five schools that meet the basic criteria.

How did I come to change the approach I use with students? Over the past few years, I have seen what I consider to be bizarre and unpredictable admission decisions, increases in stress on both sides of the admission desk, and an exponential rise in stress on the part of students and parents. I also witnessed students, more than in previous years, becoming so enamored of "reach" schools, hyped in part by the country's obsession with rankings, that admission to anything "less" than the reach school was considered a failure by the student. What a sad commentary on where we are when students being admitted to tremendous colleges which are terrific matches for the students are not seen as positive outcomes. The approach of "reach, zone, safety" is so ingrained in our culture that most people start with this as the default position. Un-teaching and reteaching takes focus, time, and energy. It will not be replaced overnight, but it is worth consistent effort.

Colleges in the students' "match" or "zone" category are likely to be the best fit for most students and that means that those schools should be the focus of this process. By creating the Five First-Choice college approach, I am trying to reframe the conversation toward better outcomes and less stress by putting the focus where it should be in the admission process.

There is nothing particularly magical about five. I chose five because transitions take time and I want students to have good choices each spring. Until the admission models become more predictive and college admission officers can better predict yields—which would lead to less reliance on the waitlists—students need a buffer in the process. Ultimately, "Three First-Choice Colleges" is an ideal approach for college admission.

Join me in adopting (or editing) this plan to meet your students' needs. Five First-Choice Colleges allows students to get excited about schools that are likely to admit them—places where they are more likely to find academic and social success.

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