

Dear Dr. Crawford,

MY SON IS A SENIOR THIS YEAR. He doesn't seem to be taking the college application process seriously. This is such an important issue that will make all the difference in his life. What can I do to get him motivated? Signed,
Starting to worry.

Dear Starting,

There are four sure signs that fall is here: 1) Relief from the brutal heat of Atlanta's summer; 2) Kids return to school; 3) College football returns to T.V. (my favorite); and 4) High school seniors and parents develop anxiety disorders around the issue of applying to and leaving for college. The latter is a predictable syndrome that I've witnessed for many years. There are the inevitable last minute visits to various colleges (accompanied by the inevitable disappointment of Mom or Dad that the "bonding" experience they hoped for did not occur on the trip). There are the predictable discussions/ arguments over which factors are relevant to selecting a university (e.g., an outstanding business curriculum vs. proximity to the ski slopes). And there is the daily question from Mom or Dad that, in one form or another, asks, "Just when do you intend to write that college essay?"

It is true that applying to college is more competitive now than in years past (more applicants for fewer openings). However, there are more than enough excellent colleges for the well-prepared student. Many very good students I've spoken with tell me that they feel as though they must be in the 98th percentile in every area of life in order to be considered by any college. This is beginning to filter down to juniors, sophomores, and even some freshmen. These younger students are developing panic attacks because they fear that a C on an exam will blow

their chances of getting accepted to the college they "must" attend. This is nonsense. I spoke to a parent group last year where one of the parents (an emergency room physician) shared with the group that she had treated several seniors following suicide attempts precipitated by stress over applying to and getting accepted into certain colleges. This phenomenon is what we psychologists call a "lost perspective."

Let me offer some specific comments regarding this issue:

- 1) If a high school senior cannot complete and turn in his college application without Mom or Dad constantly structuring him, he is probably not ready to attend college. After all, what will happen when the first term paper is due? He may not finish the applications when *you* think he should; however, if he's ready to attend college, he'll get it completed before the final deadline. In my experience, I've never seen a senior who is academically and emotionally prepared for college fail to complete the application process.
- 2) You don't have to attend one of the nation's top 10 universities in order to be happy, successful, and fulfilled. Take a moment to think of 10 people you greatly respect and admire. Do you care, or even know, where they attended college?
- 3) Your senior is graduating from a school that has academically prepared him as well or better than the vast majority of high school seniors in the country. I know dozens of Westminster graduates who shared with me that they were amazed at how well they were prepared for college compared to their college freshmen peers from other high schools.
- 4) RELAX. Parents can set the tone for this emotionally turbulent year of transition. Be careful that your own fears and anxieties don't spill over to your child. Remember that being ready for college means more than just being academically prepared and adding lines to his resume. It also means being able to prioritize; meet deadlines; manage time; and deal with stressful situations. Applying for college is a good "dress rehearsal" for the real thing. Let your senior know that you're there for help if he asks, and then leave him alone.
- 5) Realize that the entire senior year is a transitional one. Much conflict occurs from the tension that results from parents being in a mode of *preparation* (everything becomes an object lesson in responsibility) while the senior is in a mode of *separation* ("I'm out of here, so stop trying to tell me what I need to do"). Don't panic if you think your senior is nowhere near ready to leave for college. You may be amazed how much maturation will occur over the next 9-10 months.
- 6) Many "goodbyes" will need to be said by both seniors and parents over the course of this year. Recognize these, and don't hesitate to bring closure to these relationships. For some, it may be appropriate to resolve disagreements or resentments. For others, it may be important to express gratitude to those who have been important. Addressing each relationship and terminating appropriately will make the transition easier for all. As I often tell seniors, "There are many things you will want to take with you to college. Baggage from unresolved relationships

is not one of those things."

- 7) Finally, recognize and celebrate the transition. I've said many times that our society has abandoned too many rituals that mark important transitions. I would encourage every parent to hold their own "family commencement" with their senior. This would involve recognizing their growth and achievements over the past few years – let them know you are proud of them. Highlight the transition that graduation brings: clearly delineate the new responsibilities that the senior assumes as a college freshman, along with the subsequent rewards and consequences of taking on more responsibilities. Make expectations clear, and be specific regarding issues such as finances; holidays; etc. Let them know that as you "pass the baton" regarding a number of areas of responsibility, you believe in them and are there to support them in this new phase of life. ▣

—Mark E. Crawford, Ph.D.

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