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SESSION 2: THERE IS A COLLEGE FOR EVERYONE!

ACTIVITY # 3: EVERYTHING YOU EVER WANTED TO KNOW ABOUT COLLEGE BUT WERE AFRAID TO ASK

Opening Discussion:

In this activity students are encouraged to investigate the many characteristics of colleges and universities that should be considered as they explore options and what constitutes an appropriate match or “good fit.” In addition, students are introduced to reliable resources for college research.

Activity/Handout:

Charting Your Course for College—Part Two

Doing Your Research

Several college guidebooks and college viewbooks

Instructions:

1. Give every student the handout entitled “Charting Your Course for College—Part Two.”
2. Ask students to brainstorm a list of everything they would want to know about a college before deciding to apply. (For example: Is it in a city or the country? What majors are offered? Does the college have fraternities and sororities?) List these suggestions on a clean blackboard or fresh flipchart pages. Keep prompting until a relatively long list is created. Prompts might include questions like:
 - a. What about a location might make a difference to you?
 - b. What about where you will live at college?
 - c. What kinds of facilities might you want on a campus?
 - d. What will you want to do to have fun?
3. After the list is completed and all responses have been recorded, ask each student to consider and pick the three to five questions that are the most important to him/her. Make a checkmark next to each question picked.
4. Circle the top vote getters.
5. Ask students where they think they could find information about each topic/quality circled.

9. To conclude this activity, distribute handout “Doing Your Research” to be read at home.

CHARTING YOUR COURSE FOR COLLEGE (PART TWO)⁴

Here are some other important things to consider in selecting colleges:

ACCREDITATION AND PARTICIPATION IN THE FEDERAL STUDENT AID PROGRAMS: The goal of accreditation is to ensure that education provided by colleges and universities meets acceptable levels of quality. Accrediting agencies, which are private educational associations of regional or national scope, develop evaluation criteria and conduct peer evaluations to assess whether or not those criteria are met. To participate in the federal student aid programs, an institution must be accredited by an accrediting agency or state approval agency recognized by the U.S. Secretary of Education as a "reliable authority as to the quality of postsecondary education" within the meaning of the Higher Education Act of 1965 as amended. This is all very technical, but the bottom line is if a college or university is unaccredited, it will not be able to offer federal student aid. You should be very cautious about considering a school that does not participate in the federal student aid programs.

INSTITUTION SIZE: The size of a college or university will have an impact upon many of your opportunities and experiences. The range of academic majors offered, the extracurricular possibilities, the amount of personal attention you'll receive, the number of books in the library, will all be influenced by size.

In considering size, however, it is essential that you look beyond the raw number of students attending. Consider instead, average class size for both first year students and upperclassmen. Investigate not just the number of faculty, but also how accessible faculty are to students. Perhaps you are considering a small department within a large school, or vice versa. Large schools may offer extensive support services for students with special needs or those who are experiencing difficulty. Smaller schools may not be able to fund similar programs. On the other hand, extra support may not be necessary if faculty work closely with individual students.

LOCATION: Distance from home may be important to you. Is it important to you to be able to visit home frequently, or do you see this as a time to experience a new part of the country? Some of you will prefer an urban environment with access to museums, ethnic food, or major league ball games. Others will hope for easy access to outdoor activities or the serenity and safety of a more rural setting.

ACADEMIC PROGRAMS: If you have a good idea of something specific you want to study in college or a career for which you want to prepare, look for well-respected academic departments in this discipline at the colleges you explore. Talk with professors and students in these departments. Research relative reputation by surveying adults already in the field and using printed resources which rank academic departments.

You should not limit your selection process to academic program issues alone. Studies show that a majority of college students change college major at least once during their college years. Therefore, it is important to pick a college or university that will offer you many appealing possibilities. Look for unique options such as study abroad, unusual academic calendars, or cooperative education plans which enable you to include several paid internships with your classwork, as ways of enhancing your education.

If you are undecided, relax and pick an academically-balanced institution which offers a range of majors and programs. Most colleges offer expert counseling to help the undecided student find a focus.

CAMPUS LIFE: Be sure that you consider what your experience will be like at a college beyond the classroom. In order to grow in all ways, you will want a reasonable balance between academic rigor and an active social life. Find out what is available in terms of extracurricular activities, athletics, and special interest groups. Does the community surrounding the college offer attractive outlets for students? Are students truly welcomed by the community? Is there an ethnic or religious community in which you can participate? What influence, do fraternities and sororities have on campus life?

Colleges will often require that you live in campus housing for one or more years. So, in considering social life, be sure to look carefully at the quality of life in the dormitories. Many colleges now offer residential-life options, such as substance-free dorms and special interest floors for students who share academic, recreational or community service interests. Others will offer dormitory-based study assistance, computer facilities, and counseling services. Ask if housing is guaranteed to be available to returning students. If so, how are dormitory assignments made after the first year?

COST: Today's price-tag for a college education has made cost an important consideration for most students. At the same time, virtually all colleges work very hard to ensure that academically-qualified students from every economic circumstance can find the financial aid that will allow them to attend. In considering cost, look beyond the price-tag to financial assistance that may be available. Decide the value of a desired educational experience and how much sacrifice (usually in terms of work and loan) you are willing to make to obtain your goals. Work closely with the financial aid officers at the colleges to which you apply.

Two factors that are less obvious to many students, but very important in predicting the kind of experience you will have in college are:

DIVERSITY: You will learn much from your college classmates every day—in the classroom and in activities. Many graduates tell us that this was an important consideration in their college choice. Consider geographic, ethnic, racial, and religious diversity of the student body as ways of assessing your future learning opportunities.

RETENTION AND GRADUATION RATES: One of the best ways to measure the quality of a college or university and the satisfaction of its students is by learning the percentage of students who return after the first year and the percentage of entering students who remain to graduate. Comparatively good retention and graduation rates are indicators that:

- A college and a majority of its students are well-matched,
- Sufficient classes and academic programs are available, and that
- Responsible academic, social, and financial support systems exist for most students.

DOING YOUR RESEARCH

Today, there are so many resources available to students looking at colleges that it is hard to know where to start. If you are determined to do a thorough job of researching colleges you will want to use several of the following resources:

COLLEGE GUIDEBOOKS: Students often begin with one or two of the many college guides. Excellent and objective resources include *The College Handbook*, published by the College Board, and *Peterson's Guide to Four Year Colleges*, to name only two of the better known. These comprehensive references contain all of the data needed to answer most of your factual questions. Guides which address, in addition, quality of life issues and are based on surveys of enrolled students, offer subjective information. These include *The Fiske Guide to Colleges* and *The Insider's Guide* that is published by the Yale Daily News. If you want to get specific information about college majors, the College Board's *Index of College Majors* is a good starting place. Ratings of specific academic programs, though also subjective in nature, can be found in resources such as *Rugg's Recommendations on the Colleges*. Most public and many school libraries will keep copies of these guidebooks on shelves.

Beware of rankings that appear to make sweeping comparisons of the quality of entire institutions. You should know that these rankings are often based on data reported by the colleges themselves, the accuracy of which has recently been questioned. Such rankings often weigh factors, like acceptance rate of applicants or average faculty salaries, which have little demonstrable relationship to the quality of an undergraduate's education. Remember that all colleges have academic programs of varying strength.

COLLEGE-PRODUCED RESOURCES: Colleges will shower you with publications once you show any interest. Glossy viewbooks give a brief glimpse of campus, majors, student life, and the admission process. Videos produced by many colleges will give you some sense of a college's campus if you can't visit. Don't ignore the college catalog as a source of information, if it is available (most likely in your school library). It is the definitive place to:

- look for application deadlines and requirements,
- see the breadth and depth of classes offered in your areas of interest,
- find a comprehensive list of scholarships offered, and
- discover the academic credentials of faculty members.

COMPUTER RESOURCES: The computer has had a significant impact on the type and availability of new college resources. In the past few years there has been a proliferation of computer software which is tailored to the college search process. Check to see if your school counseling office has available a college-search program to assist you in your college planning.

PEOPLE RESOURCES: Your school counselor will help you assess your qualifications for a range of postsecondary options and share the experiences of students from your school who have attended various institutions. Plan to meet with college admission officers if they visit your school in the spring and fall. Be prepared with questions that go beyond information you can look up in guidebooks. Ask about student satisfaction, retention, campus safety, support services, etc. Feel free to follow up with letters or phone calls to this admission person. Alumni of your school, who are attending or have graduated from colleges that you are considering, will be an excellent source of information. Because they are likely to have entered college with a background similar to yours, their experiences are particularly meaningful.

Talk to people who are working in careers to which you aspire. Ask for their recommendations about college programs and preparation paths. Many professional associations provide resources to students preparing for specific vocations.

COLLEGE FAIRS AND OPEN HOUSES: Watch the bulletin boards at your school for announcements of area-wide college fairs or open houses hosted on college campuses. The National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC) holds large college fairs in many large cities throughout the country. In addition to the general fairs, NACAC hosts college fairs specifically for students interested in visual and performing arts. You may find information about the dates and locations of NACAC fairs at www.nacacnet.org. At a fair you will have an opportunity to meet and talk with representatives from many colleges and universities, ask questions which are specific to your search, and get on mailing lists for applications.

VISITS TO COLLEGE CAMPUSES: The very best way to gain first-hand knowledge of a college or university is to visit. At a minimum, make some visits to colleges and universities in your local area, which vary in size and kind. This will give you a baseline for judging the kind of environment you are seeking. It is very important that you visit the college you think you will attend, before making a final commitment. Arrange through the admission office to attend classes and stay in a dorm, if possible.

