

Park University's 10 tips to conquer the college application process

Applying to college can be unnerving and exhilarating. Students run a gantlet of deadlines, ACT tests, application essays, campus visits and life-changing decisions. Parents walk the line that separates encouragement and support from hovering and hounding.

The admissions office staff at Park University in Parkville, high school students, Park students and a parent recently weighed in on what they've learned from their journey into the Land of the Most Amazing College Application Process Ever. Here are their tips to help students and parents survive (spoiler alert: it's not all scary):

1. Start early

Admissions professionals encourage students to start looking at colleges their freshman year of high school. According to Katherine Springston, assistant director of daytime admissions at Park, students should not only take classes that will best prepare them for college but be cognizant of their GPA and its role in winning scholarships. "By the junior year, it's time to get serious and narrow down the list of potential schools," she said.

2. Diversify your list

Anna Menninger, a Park sophomore from Platte City, recalls that her list of six potential colleges included institutions large, small, public and

private. "You need a mix. You might think you like one thing and then discover you don't," she said. She chose Park when she realized she preferred small. "My friends in high school went to big schools, but after two visits to Park, I knew it was the right choice for me."

3. Keep an open mind

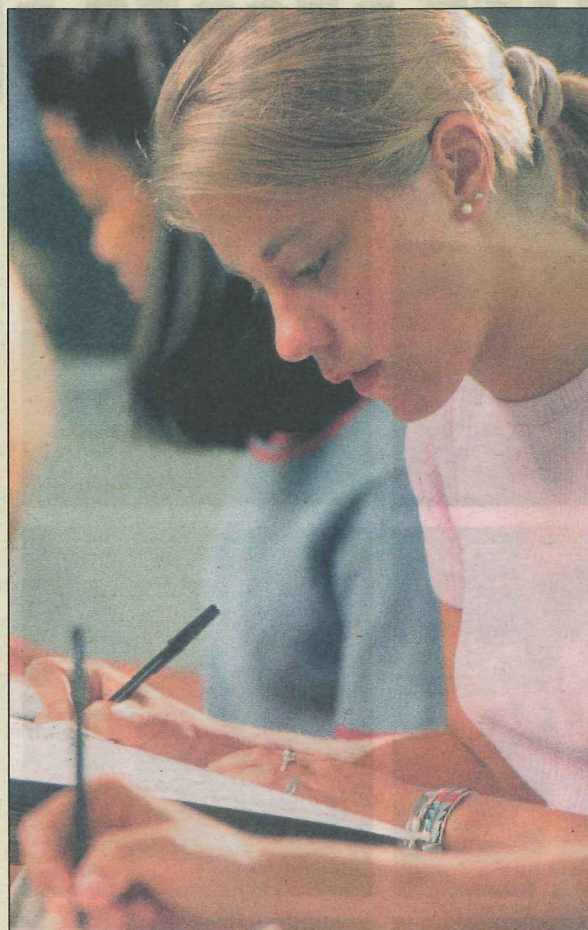
High school senior Haley Weatherford of Lee's Summit, was intent on "getting out of Missouri" for college. But then she attended a local college fair where she met a Park representative. "What really knocked my socks off was that Park didn't talk to me like I was a potential recruit, but because I was Haley and they liked me," she said. "The rep asked me to fill out a card 'because I want to know you.'"

Contrary to her original intent, Weatherford ended up applying only to Park. She also received a scholarship covering tuition and housing for four years and a study abroad stipend.

4. Know what's important

Students should make a list of what's important. On-campus housing, small classes, close to home? Athletics, access to public transportation and shopping?

"The role of admissions counselors is to really understand applicants," Springston said. "It's not just about the GPA but about the fit. At



Park we look for students who see the potential in themselves and are motivated to get involved in campus life."

5. Ask questions

Students sometimes fail to ask questions, especially if they're the first members of their family to attend college. "If a student doesn't feel like asking an admissions counselor, they should ask their high school guidance counselor," Springston said. "They're going to need a little extra bit of help, especially with financial aid processes. My advice? Use the resources around you."

6. Take the ACT... again

James Boyer is a homeschooled senior in Kansas City. His one piece of advice for applicants is to focus on the ACT, which, like most students, he ended up taking more than once. Most scholarships are highly competitive, high-stakes endeavors where ACT scores count. In the end, James was awarded a four-year, full tuition scholarship to Park. "I started early and did a lot of work," he said.

7. Don't fear the application

Andrew Baxley, a Park admissions counselor, says that Park has simpli-

fied its application process. "We try to make the process as unthreatening and easy for students as possible. There's a lot of fear about it but it's really straight forward."

8. Visit

In addition to tours throughout the year, Park sponsors several "Pirate Preview" days that connect faculty representatives from every department with prospective students.

Boyer said Pirate Preview gave him the best insight into what Park was really like. "I visited with a business faculty member and I could tell he really cared about students. I got a sense of the whole atmosphere at Park. Applicants should do more than just browse a college's website."

Sadie Mohr, a fifth-year Park senior from Hale, Mo., recalls her campus visit. "It was right after a heavy snow, and the campus was absolutely breathtaking. I was interested already in Park, but the campus tour intensified my interest."

9. Honor your instincts

This brings up a more subjective tip: honor your gut feelings when it comes to making a decision. Menninger was accepted by other institutions but visited Park and connected immediately. "I'm very nature oriented and I loved all the trees. I had this feeling that this is where I was supposed

to go." Menninger urged applicants to ask themselves, "Do I feel comfortable here?"

10. For parents: Network and do timelines

Joanna Boyer is a parent who has benefited from going through the college application process twice, first with her oldest son, now a sophomore at Park, and most recently with James. She felt she was at a disadvantage on the first go-round, having gone to college under a different system in Canada. Her solution was not unlike that recommended for students: She gathered information.

"I got in touch with people in my community and interviewed them," she said. "My advice? Find a few parents who have been successful, network and do as much research as you can."

This brings us back to our first tip. Parents, start early. Develop a timeline when your child's in the ninth grade. "Have a sense of the system and get a head start on gathering materials," Joanna Boyer said. "Having the big picture early on really helps."

Parents are vital partners in the whole college application journey, she feels. "My husband and I did everything we were invited to. I really appreciated that about Park, that they are focused on the family and included everyone in the process." ■