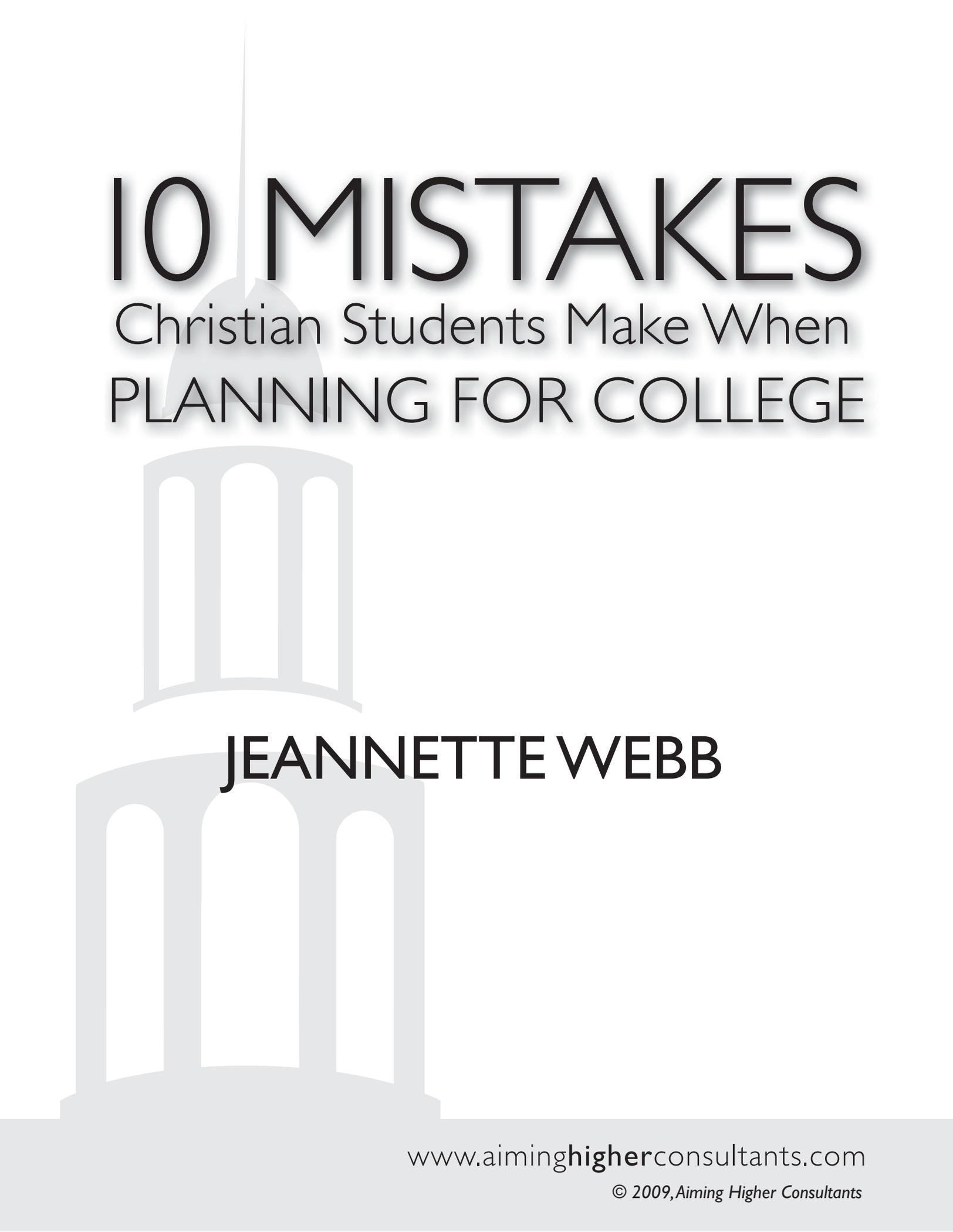


10 MISTAKES

Christian Students Make When
PLANNING FOR COLLEGE



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THE TOP 10

1. Fail to Pursue Rigorous Academics
2. Fail to Maximize Testing Opportunities
3. Mismanage Extracurricular Activities
4. Lack a Marketing Plan
5. Do Not Prepare Effective Documents
6. Fail to Develop Writing Skills
7. Do Not Make the Most of Recommender Letters
8. Do Not Prepare for College or Scholarship Interviews
9. Do Not Apply to a Range of Schools
10. Fail to Get Expert Help

10 Mistakes Christian Students Make When Planning for College

When it comes time to think about college, even the most proactive parent can begin to get nervous. We've all heard of impossible admission standards, ultra competitive students and drastically rising costs.

The Christian student has additional challenges as their life and faith do not line up with much of what is happening on some secular campuses. They also face pressure from other Christians who are fearful of achievement, higher education in general, and top-tier colleges in particular.

As a result, many Christian students will underperform in high school to be accepted by their peers or settle for a "safe" college where they will not be challenged and, ironically, not be safe either. Neither is a good option and actually flies in the face of Christ's calling to be salt and light. The good news is that God is at work on many of our country's most notorious campuses. The strong Christian student will find many others who share their faith and incredible opportunities to impact the culture.

Let's begin by looking at how to structure high school to open as many doors as possible for your student - good college options, scholarship opportunities, and life changing experiences. **What mistakes do most Christian students make?**



Fail to Pursue Rigorous Academics

Whether or not attending a top-flight college is your goal, it is essential to provide a good education for your children, one that will train them to think critically.

An ignorant populace is easily led and eventually enslaved.

Many books have been written about the sad fact that Christians have abandoned the academy, politics, and other culture-shaping institutions, so I will not elaborate on that here. Suffice to say that if you do not educate your children well, they will never have the opportunity to move in spheres of influence and be a force for good.

Rigorous academics matter! Not only will tough classes stretch your child and help them discover what they are made of, they must take the most rigorous classes available to them in order to be qualified for scholarships and even be accepted at better colleges.

If they are in a public or private school that offers AP classes, they need to be taking them. The more classes that are offered, the more they need to be taking. Homeschooled students need to take AP classes as well and can do so through any number of fine online providers.

If your school is lacking in advanced classes, encourage your student to demonstrate intellectual vitality by doing extra projects, working with mentors, or studying topics of interest alone. Ask your school what online options or programs might be available to boost your children's knowledge base. Perhaps you have a college nearby that could fill in the gaps of your high school.

Just keep in mind that top schools prefer AP classes to community college. And it makes sense with grade inflation so rampant. Who knows what an "A" means from your local college (or high school for that matter)? But an AP test is a standardized test that allows comparisons of students across the country.

Bottom line: you need 4 years of math, 4 years of science, 4 years of English, 4 years of history/social studies, 4 years of the same foreign language, and some electives to make your student competitive at upper level colleges.

Always remember that the academic side of your profile is 2/3 the weight of your college candidacy. If you are a superstar leader but don't push yourself academically, your application will be relegated to the bottom of the heap on a busy admission counselor's desk.



Fail to Maximize Testing Opportunities

In the same vein, many students fail to understand the critical importance of standardized testing.

We are talking about the SAT, ACT, SAT Subject, and AP tests.

Not only do students fail to take important tests (like the SAT Subject tests), but they do not prepare well for the tests they do take. Christian kids are notorious for taking tests just to see how they score. Perhaps they are thinking, "Maybe we can score high enough that we won't actually have to work at it." I've seen kids take AP tests a year or two after the appropriate AP class or walk into a SAT test cold. **This usually results in a disaster.**

We need to understand that in today's competitive college admissions process, test scores are all important. They are the initial cut in an admissions office. For homeschoolers, they become even more important as they are standardized and can show true ability. In an age of grade inflation (and distrust of mommy grades), these scores level the playing field and make it possible to compare raw ability.

So, what do you need to know about testing?

Before ever walking into the official testing facility, your student should know the type of test like the back of his hand. He should know the directions by heart, should know how many minutes he has on each question, and should know the material cold.

This is achieved through preparation. Obviously we hope their teacher is preparing them well. From my observations, the online teachers I recommend to my clients seem to be doing a good job with this; however, many high school teachers are not. That is a generalization, but it makes the point that your student is responsible for preparing, whether or not the teacher is helping.

I recommend 8-10 practice tests at home under regular testing conditions.

The student should evaluate each section of each test carefully and figure out what she is doing wrong and get it fixed. Find a tutor, study up, work more math problems to get faster. Whatever it takes.

To keep all doors open, you need to take:

- **AP tests** (a good number of the ones your school provides, 4-6 if you are home schooling)
- The **SAT** or the **ACT** test
- 3 **SAT Subject tests** in various areas. Many engineering schools require Chemistry and Math Level 2

To get the scoop on testing, visit **Collegeboard.com** and learn your way around the site. It's important!



Mismanage Extracurricular Activities

If your student is ultra busy in clubs and activities, if you find you never have time to sit down to dinner together, if you feel that you are little more than a glorified chauffeur, chances are your students are overcommitted to things that won't get much mileage at a top college. Why?

Because your student will look just like the other 25,000 applicants to that school.

Stop and think about it. At top schools, almost everyone is a National Merit Scholar, football team captain, or student body president. And you know what? They often look almost identical. Even homeschoolers who left public schools to pursue their own path wind up re-creating the same set of extracurricular activities, clubs, and busyness of the public/private school. They elect class officers, have a leadership council, participate in clubs or numerous competitions.

Is that a bad thing? Of course not. Is it the best thing? Probably not.

Constantly being a part of the herd is never in the best interests of any child. It can certainly be fun, but it doesn't encourage mature behavior, thinking outside the box, or creativity. Neither does it help our student stand out in a competitive college environment. Too often we settle for the good and totally miss the best. The heart of my job as a parent/teacher is to help my students determine their gifts and callings. To paraphrase Henry Blackaby,

We must always be on the search for where God is at work in the lives of our children and join Him there.

So the first step is to get your lifestyle in sync with what the Lord would have for you as a family. What is the unique ministry of your family? How are you supposed to spend your time? I can't tell you what this is. It's between you and the Lord and will take some time to figure out.

- Perhaps you need to eliminate some things
- Perhaps there are things you need to do differently
- Perhaps you need to add some things

You also have to figure out who your kids are - their strengths and weaknesses. Always remember that when you choose activities, you are essentially exchanging your lifeblood for them. You are investing your children's youth, so you must choose with the utmost care.

In college-speak, this is called shaping your **Nonacademic Profile**.

Many people pick activities based on:

- what looks entertaining
- what everyone else is doing
- what they think will look impressive on a résumé

None of these are good reasons. We need to work backwards, first determining skills that need to be developed, and then finding or creating activities that will help in that development.

I'll be truthful. I really didn't give a rip what colleges were looking for when I determined how my children would spend their time. I was more deeply concerned with who they were and that they be ready to handle whatever the Lord had for them.

As a young parent, I had to be painfully honest about who my son was and deal with it. He was a brilliant kid, a science geek, but really lacked social skills. He stuttered horribly, didn't like dealing with people, and really didn't like doing things he wasn't interested in.

So, we chose activities based on what needed to happen in his life, not what I thought colleges would be looking for.

We pushed the envelope of his strengths:

- I found a science mentor to guide his intellectual development
- We gave him plenty of time and space to think about science problems and read the literature in multiple fields
- I pushed him hard to develop his already strong writing skills
- We hired a tutor to help him with advanced math concepts
- We helped him apply to top-flight science programs

But, he also had some pretty major weakness and dreams that weren't backed by skills. For example, he wanted to be a professor and writer. That meant he needed great communications skills, both written and verbal.

We were good on the written part, but he hated speaking in front of people or using the phone. So, I created a communication emphasis for all his activities. I organized a public speaking club and required monthly speeches. I volunteered him to do programs at Boy Scouts. I arranged for him to speak at church. I "let" him make phone calls to make arrangements for programs. Was this easy?

Are you kidding?

He hated every minute of it. At least, until he got proficient. This took several years, but eventually he got to the point that he actually enjoyed speaking in public and became rather good at it. Then there was the issue of dealing with people. Leadership and admin-

istration did not come naturally to him as he was often impatient with others. So, at every opportunity we engaged him in leadership and administration. We built local, county, and state organizations together, handing off more and more responsibility as he got older. By the time he was a senior in high school, he was a gracious public speaker, an effective organizer, and easy around other people. What I want you to see is that instead of having a dozen good activities (a jack-of-all-trades and master of none mentality), he did a few things really well.

Compared to many students, we did very few activities. But, because of our commitment to building excellence in the lives of our children, top colleges around the nation rewarded the years of effort.

Some experts have said that leadership is the new community service.

Leadership matters to colleges. It also matters in the life of your child. Significant leadership builds character and changes lives. Interestingly enough, colleges are looking for students with a passion in a few areas, not someone who does everything. The trait of well-roundedness is no longer on the wish list of many colleges.



Lack a Marketing Plan

Most students sit down to fill out the college application by starting at question one and just filling in all the blanks in as short a time as possible. Then, without thinking about it, they write an essay. At the last minute, they ask a few teachers to write letters of recommendation.

The result?

A bunch of documents that do not tell a cohesive story or, worse yet, do not tell the same story. Sometimes it doesn't even look like the same student.

Each student needs a master plan for college applications, sometimes a slightly different plan for each college. It is imperative that the student knows who they are and how to present their life in an interesting way.

They must be able to articulate:

- what they have accomplished
- what is important to them
- what they would contribute to the campus life of that school

This takes some soul searching, some advance planning, and a lot of hard work.

I advise my clients to have 3 talking points - 3 things they want the admissions officer to fully understand about them that will be embellished throughout the application. Once these are determined, we look at each application to see how we can best address our talking points. As every application is slightly different, families must be prepared to give the same piece of information in different ways. For example, they must be able to tell about it in essay form, bullet form for an activity list, or in a short answer question. You never know which format you will be given.

Then, make a paper copy of the application form (focus on one application at a time). Read over the entire form and pencil in what needs to be highlighted in each section in order to make the most of the constraints you have to work within.

You need to keep your marketing plan in mind through all phases of the college application process:

- the college résumé
- the personal essay
- the paper application
- school documents
- letters of recommendation
- interviews

If you want a fighting chance of being accepted into a good school or have a shot at great scholarships, it is imperative that you formulate a marketing plan that tells your student's story in a compelling way.



Do Not Prepare Effective Documents

It goes without saying that the college application must be carefully proofed and any errors fixed (you would be surprised how many people fail in this area). However, I am referring in this section to supplemental documents that need to be provided to the college. There are several and need careful attention.

High School Résumé

All students need to keep careful track of information for their “résumé” activities. Through the four years of high school you need to record the number of hours they spend doing volunteer service. You also need a handle on how much time they spend in each of their activities. Colleges will actually ask you how many hours a week and how many weeks a year you spend on each activity. If you don’t start as a freshman, trying to re-create all that information is close to impossible. I have found that many students underestimate the time they spend in extracurricular pursuits.

I encourage students to create a résumé for college interviews, but it is actually the first step in narrowing down the activities so they fit in the 6-8 spaces provided on the normal college application form. It is a bit daunting to realize that four years of work boils down to this, but we have to make the best of it. And, we have to do it incredibly well.

Transcript

Students in public and private schools don’t have to worry about transcripts (other than checking theirs to make absolutely certain there are no errors), but homeschoolers must provide this document themselves. Unfortunately, they are notorious for submitting long and convoluted transcripts. Absolutely everything you need to report can be included on one legible page (and this includes standardized test scores, honors, and awards).

School Profile and Transcript Legend

Again, this is significant to public and private school students only in that they need to check the School Profile of their school and their particular transcript legend to make sure it is accurate and not damaging in any way. Homeschoolers have to prepare this document themselves and many have never even heard of it. Basically, it is a document explaining how the school works: who it enrolls, the grading rubric, what types of classes it offers,

its mission statement, and so forth. The transcript legend explains each class, how it was taught, textbooks used, and who taught it.



Fail to Develop Writing Skills

Perhaps more than most, Christians should appreciate the power of the written word. Clyde Kilby, formerly a Wheaton College English professor asks the question:

Does it make any difference that the Book we look upon as holy comes to us in literary form rather than in the form of abstract doctrine or systematic theology? Christianity is the most literary religion in the world - a religion in which Word has special sanctity.

It is important that we learn to **use our words well**.

When parents think about writing, they tend to think about research papers or debate cases. Those are important and must be done well to make top grades needed for scholarships and college entrance requirements. However, the type of writing skill so desperately needed to fare well in college admissions is the personal essay. It must tell your student's story fully without bragging. It must give an admissions officer an interesting glimpse into the life, mind, and motivations of the applicant.

I have rarely seen a high school student that handles this assignment well the first time through. They usually need an experienced writer asking them pointed questions to be able to understand what is needed. To write well takes much practice, many rewrites, and much patience.



Do Not Make the Most of Recommender Letters

Many students remember at the last minute that they need two letters of recommendation from teachers, so they catch an unwary teacher after class, hand him the required forms and then expect to get a good letter out to the college within the week.

Because of this carelessness, this most important letter rarely does much good for the student.

There is a better way! Ideally, by the end of the junior year your student will have identified the teachers that know them well (both inside the classroom and in activities outside the classroom or school). At the end of the junior year (beginning of senior year at the latest) they will ask the teacher if they are willing to write a letter and have time to do so. Always give them the option of saying no. You don't want a teacher to write a letter if they cannot say good things! Asking early gives the teacher time to think about your student and begin formulating ideas for a good letter. If the teacher is a popular one, remember that they will be writing many other letters as well.

At least a month before it is due, give your teacher the forms needed:

- The teacher evaluation form for each college (with your student's signature waiving the right to see the information)
- Prepaid and addressed FedEx envelopes (lets you track mailing and delivery)
- A letter explaining what you would like them to address (each teacher should have a different task in their writing, highlighting different marketing points)
- A copy of your résumé so they know what else you are doing

Aiming Higher Consultants will often work as a third party with recommenders in order to help our clients fully explain their candidacy.

If you are a homeschooling family, a parent will need to write the counselor letter. This is a most unique opportunity and should be handled carefully and honestly.



Do Not Prepare for College or Scholarship Interviews

Let's face it. Few people like to interview and fewer still are good at it. However, most people fail to realize that interviewing is a skill that can be learned and that it can be im-

proved upon with practice. I have worked with students for years developing this skill and it is a delight to watch this terrifying ordeal turn into a fun challenge.

First we start with the talking points discussed in the marketing plan. What are 3 things you want to get across to interviewers. Make sure at least one of them deals with academics (this is about school, after all).

Once your student figures out what to talk about, set up practices with friends who will also be interviewing for college. Students make routine mistakes and your child can see with their own eyes the mistakes of others, then correct it in themselves.

Then, practice with parents or other professional adults. Finally, try videotaping it. Watching it for themselves makes it very clear to students their mistakes and how little habits and nervous gestures turn into huge irritations if not corrected.



Do Not Apply to a Range of Schools

The horror stories are out there, like the one about the valedictorian and National Merit Finalist that didn't get into a single college. It happens, but there is no reason that it should.

No matter how outstanding the student, they should apply to a range of schools:

- 1 or 2 schools that are not very competitive in admissions (but might have great scholarships)
- 2 or 3 schools where you are a great fit (test scores, interests, potential majors) and are midrange on the competitiveness scale
- 2 or 3 schools that are a stretch, but you might have a shot if your application does its work well

Part of the job of a college consultant is to help you determine what schools are a great fit for you and how to spread the risk out so you wind up with a school that you love that helps you grow.



Fail to Get Expert Help

Most parents have figured out that college admissions have changed since they went to school, but few realize the extent to which it has changed. Some of the top colleges have close to 28,000 applications and only 1,500 slots to fill. With the advent of the Common Application and online submission, the numbers keep growing. Many families panic and apply to huge numbers of schools (I've heard numbers like 17 or 25) hoping to get in somewhere. All of high school turns into a mad scramble to impress colleges and families lose sight of the truly important things - health, family relationships, a closer walk with the Lord. It's a frantic mess.

And, it is totally unnecessary!

If you would like to walk away from the rat race and still help your young person have a competitive edge, contact us today. We'd love to help. ●

About the Author

Jeannette Webb

has worked with high school students for over 25 years helping them develop public speaking, leadership, and interview skills, and prepare effective applications for scholarship competitions. As Oklahoma State University's first Truman Scholar, she went



on to receive a B.S. in Human Development and an M.S. in Family Economics. She spent a decade with the OSU Cooperative Extension Service as 4-H and Youth Development Specialist and Resource Management Specialist before she became a home educator in 1993. She has been a homeschool support group leader, conference speaker, and trustee for the Oklahoma Christian Home Educator's Consociation. She currently writes the college admissions column for *Practical Homeschooling* magazine.

In 2005, Jeannette received the Presidential Scholar Distinguished Teacher Award from the U. S. Department of Education. That same year she founded **Aiming Higher Consultants** to meet the unique needs of Christian students with big dreams. To see what she can do for you, visit aiminghigherconsultants.com.



AIMING HIGHER

CALLED TO INFLUENCE

dear parent,

You know the possibilities for your child are endless, but sometimes it feels like you are all alone.

Not any longer!

I'm delighted you're reading this because I created **Aiming Higher Consultants** for parents just like you. Finally, there is a resource to help parents wade through all the decisions of the high school years - what classes to take, what tests to prepare for, what colleges to consider. And sometimes a shoulder to cry on.

Let me tell you a little bit about what we do. **Aiming Higher Consultants** is a college consulting firm dedicated to helping Christian students with undergraduate admissions to great schools. Our goal is to empower families to confidently navigate the difficult college application process by providing as much or as little assistance as is needed. We can help families to:

- Develop a comprehensive plan to promote the holistic development of each student
- Find the best college fit
- Formulate a marketing strategy that showcases the student's unique strengths
- Provide guidance for the entire college application process
- Evaluate the college essay topics and give feedback throughout the writing process
- Provide oversight as you design school documents
- Strategize how to solicit the most helpful recommendation letters
- Hone interview skills
- Prepare a résumé for interviews and scholarship applications

If you'd like to learn more about what we have to offer, please visit us at www.aiminghigherconsultants.com.

Blessings,

Jeannette Webb



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