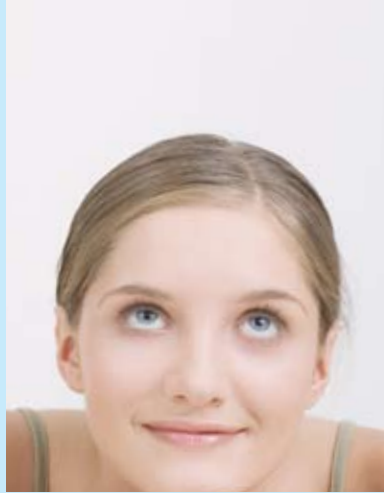


A close-up portrait of a woman with blonde, wavy hair and blue eyes. She is looking slightly upwards and to the right with a neutral expression. The background is a plain, light green color.

**The Rules Have Changed:  
How The Parent-Student Team  
Picks The Perfect College**

**LIPMAN HEARNE  
KEY INSIGHTS MAY 2009**



What is on the minds of parents as they go through the college decision-making process with their children? How has the economic downturn affected their level of involvement? And, how much weight does their opinion carry with their children? Lipman Hearne explores these issues and provides best practices and tips on how colleges can more effectively communicate with the parent-student team.

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## The Rules Have Changed: How the Parent-Student Team Picks the Perfect College

*Knowing what they're looking for offers opportunities for colleges to attract the right students, especially during the economic downturn.*

*By Tom Abrahamson and Elizabeth Farrell*

The decisions are in. Across the country, students have received their college acceptance letters and have compared their financial aid packages.

Before these high school seniors made the big choice, they considered a variety of factors, some more serious than others. The tuition bill, which has been an escalating concern for years, had a bigger than ever impact in this admissions cycle as many more families were forced to deal with greater financial uncertainty. Admissions and financial aid officers reported being flooded with inquiries and concerns about costs.

“I’ve been in admissions for 30 years, and this is a completely different year than I’ve ever experienced,” says Regina Morin, associate vice president for enrollment management at **Truman State University**. Financial considerations are having an enormous impact on college choice. “It’s a drastically different world,” she says. “Starting last year they were nervous about student loans. Now they are questioning everything.”

Yet other factors that are less bottom-line oriented still carry considerable weight in the final college decision. After all, students still want to attend a school where they will fit in and find their place in the world.

Which of these considerations have the most sway over the ultimate choice? As with all tough questions, there isn’t one definitive answer. But we know one thing for sure: As parents have become more influential in driving their children’s college choice, it has become all the more important for colleges and universities to figure out what type of information

parents are seeking about schools, and just how much sway they hold over their child's final college decision.

In our experience the dynamics of the parent-child team throughout the admissions process haven't been given the attention they deserve. Colleges are missing opportunities to effectively convey their attributes and value to both of these groups in ways that speak to their bottom-line needs.

Instead of focusing on whether so-called "helicopter parents" are good or evil (or even as prevalent as the media claims), we convened focus groups of parents and students, interviewed admissions professionals who were out there in the front lines this year, and sought out hard data from the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) Freshman Survey. A resource developed by the Higher Education Research Institute at the **University of California at Los Angeles**, the Freshman Survey has collected data on more than 13 million students since 1966.

Based on our analysis of this information, we created three guiding principles for colleges to follow, along with ideas and best practices drawn from our experience working with more than 250 colleges and universities. With the economy keenly in mind, we think these principles will clarify how colleges and universities can more effectively communicate with the parent-student team.

**Finding #1: Colleges need to talk about how their educational offerings will translate into career opportunities for students.**

Compared to their parents' generation, today's college students are more concerned with how their undergraduate degrees will directly help them achieve their goals for life after college. Proof is evident in the annual CIRP Freshman Survey. In 2008, a significant 77% of 400,000 college freshmen surveyed at 700 colleges and universities said "being very well-off financially" is an "essential" or "very important" objective. Back in 1976—about the time when senior college administrators entered college—the freshman response was closer to 50%.

Despite the importance that students give this objective, they are often at a loss for how to gauge a college's ability to help them meet their ultimate professional goals. After all, their career plans are often vague and undefined. That's where the parents step in, asking the questions and seeking information about the value of a college's career-preparation services.

Bronson Warren, the dean of students and enrollment management at **East Central University**, reports that "90% of the questions about career preparation come from the parents."

**Lehigh University's** dean of admissions and financial aid, Leon Washington, says that in his office's daily information sessions for prospective students, questions about career placement are quite frequent, coming up at least four times in every session.

Directly addressing how the significant investment in college will successfully launch a student into a career—perhaps by talking up the college career center, how graduates go on to professional and graduate schools, or even how college can help with summer jobs—can go a long way in appeasing worried parents.

## What Works

The biggest mistake colleges make when faced with questions about career preparation is to merely mention that they have a career center, and assume that students (and their parents) will not need a more detailed explanation until after they enroll.

A second mistake is simply telling students and their families that college will give students a solid foundation of knowledge and critical thinking skills.

In either scenario, a college isn't answering the question in a convincing way that resonates with parents or students. Education is an expensive investment—akin to buying a home or several nice cars—and consumers these days expect detailed proof that their dollars are properly spent.

## Focus on Timing and Quality

To satisfy their concerns adequately, colleges need to focus on the timing and specificity of the information they offer. Our focus group findings showed that parents are most heavily involved in the college selection process at the beginning and at the end. They will often draft a list of initial colleges for their children to consider (to set some boundaries), and then dive in again when their students are filling out applications.

For colleges, this means that the initial view-books, brochures, and other materials offered at college fairs and campus information sessions should prominently feature information about the opportunities for career exploration during the undergraduate years and job and graduate school placement rates thereafter. Students may not be thinking about this so early in the process, but for parents this consideration is already paramount.

A college can set itself apart from the pack by providing data and outside endorsements. While gathering this information may require more collaboration with the college career office, it's time well spent.

## Making It Happen

Take **Longwood University**: At college fairs, the introductory brochures for the institution include a list of employers where current students have recently completed internships. One of the key talking points that Johnice Brown, the associate director of admissions, makes sure to drive home to parents and students is that Longwood is different because it requires all students to complete an internship prior to graduation.

**Lehigh University** also presents similar information to parents and students: Every year, the school conducts a survey of the previous year's graduating class six months after they earn their degrees. The university then provides these detailed results to prospective parents and students so they can find out how the most recent class of graduates is faring in the job market. (Lehigh's study, which you can find at [www.lehigh.edu](http://www.lehigh.edu), has a remarkable 89% response rate for its placement survey. Nationally, colleges report 40% to 50% response rates and we have seen them as low as 5% of graduating seniors.)

When possible, the most compelling proof of a college's value to career seekers comes in the form of outside endorsements. The **University of Vermont** provides parents and students an independent evaluation of their departments and programs. Ohio's **Denison University** collects testimonials from successful and highly visible alumni, and **Colby College** takes a similar approach, by mailing their alumni magazine to parents of prospective students.

For proof of the success of such efforts, one need look no further than **Drexel University**. The university's co-op program, which places students in internships for college credit, is so popular that some students elect to remain—and pay tuition—at Drexel for an additional fifth year just to take advantage of more co-op opportunities.

## Finding #2: Transparency in financial aid procedures and offerings is just as important as the tuition price tag.

Conversations about money are rarely fun and often awkward, but they are absolutely necessary. Though parents are frequently more concerned than their children about the tuition price tag, students are also acutely aware of the financial burden their education will impose on them and their families. The current economic uncertainty has made this more apparent, and especially this year, students are more likely to understand why some colleges will exceed their budgets.

“In the past, students were more oblivious and parents were more realistic,” says Ms. Morin, at **Truman State**. “Now there is a turn for the better, and students are becoming more aware—they understand the harsh realities they must face in making their college decision.”

While few parents we talked to in our focus groups said they forbade their children from applying to a specific college based on the cost, they did impose limits on the final college choice based on financial parameters (for example, their child would have to take out loans if they chose a private college, or could not attend a pricey college unless they received a scholarship).

“That’s just the financial reality of it,” said one father in Philadelphia. “You can still get a quality education at any of the colleges you apply to. My wife and I have to look at the whole ball of wax.”

Data from the CIRP survey provides further evidence that parents have the final say, and that when it comes down to a student attending their favorite college or the one that is most attractively priced, the scale tips in favor of the latter.

In the 2008 CIRP report, 78% of students reported that they were accepted by their first-choice college, but only 61% were actually attending their first choice. According to John H. Pryor, director of CIRP, when these findings were broken down further to control for students who were offered financial aid by the college they decided to attend, there was a strong correlation between those who answered “yes” to receiving financial aid and attending another college besides their first choice, even though that school had accepted them. “That finding suggests financial considerations are having a much bigger impact on college choice than they used to,” says Mr. Pryor.

### What Works

Particularly for more expensive private colleges, the first step should be making discussions about the actual costs of their institution as comfortable and easy as possible. The biggest mistake a college can make is to assume they can just woo a student and a parent with their fabulous campus and hope that the family doesn't ask about the accompanying price tag.

Jennifer Schufer, associate director of admissions at the **University of Colorado at Boulder**, summarizes it best: "Let's face it: Some families are not convinced by anything but the bottom line."

### A Thoughtful Approach

The best approach is to be direct, sympathetic, and transparent in providing information about the costs and financial aid process, especially in the current economic climate.

It's vital for college admissions and financial aid representatives to remember that the process of applying for and deciphering aid packages is confusing and difficult. Even highly educated and financially savvy parents find the FAFSA and the CSS/Financial Aid Profile, the two most common financial aid forms, daunting and complicated to accurately complete.

Adding to the stress are all the other elements of a family's financial situation that can impact their financial aid package without their knowledge. Practices such as reducing grant and need-based aid when a student receives an outside scholarship are common at many institutions, but are unknown to parents and students until much later in the process. Colleges that provide extensive information on the financial aid application process can really set themselves apart from the pack, and are likely to gain a reputation from parents and students as being friendly and helpful.

### Making It Personal

At **Denison University**, Perry Robinson, the vice president and director of admissions, took a particularly proactive approach this past fall to reach out to parents and let them know that he understood their financial pain. Mr. Robinson sent a letter to all families of students who had indicated a previous interest in Denison directly acknowledging that these were stressful economic times and that a private education is a costly proposition. But he also encouraged families to follow through on their plans to apply to Denison even if they assumed it was too expensive, because they might be pleasantly surprised at the actual cost after they received their financial aid package.

Another way to face the financial challenge head on is to offer free seminars on the financial aid process—from FAFSA to work study programs—without getting specific about your own programs. **Drexel University**, for instance, offers all high school seniors and their families the opportunity to attend half-day financial aid seminars on their campus.

### Marketing Implications

Financial aid communications and in-person interactions are also marketing "moments of truth." Lipman Hearne has conducted many recall exercises with new freshmen, who, with clipboards in hand, are asked to walk around a large table and rate the ads, letters, website screen shots, and brochures for impact and memorableness. Invariably, the financial aid award letter is number one in recall among the dozens of communications these students receive from the college. The letter is a perfect moment to reinforce the lifelong value of the tuition investment as well as the key differentiating points about the programs and culture of the school. Leading business schools have smartly demonstrated their "ROI" knowledge of how to position tuition fees—undergraduate programs could learn from their example.

### Finding #3: You should still talk about the less tangible attributes of your college.

Making friends, learning about things that interest them, and living in a place they will enjoy for four years (or more) are still important to students, despite the growing emphasis they and their parents place on career preparation and tuition prices.

In fact, if a student feels strongly that a particular college is the perfect fit for them, even if it's more expensive than the other options available, parents can be convinced of the value of investing more money because they see the importance of their child attending an institution where they will be happy and thrive.

This may seem somewhat contradictory given the two previous findings, which indicate that job placement and college costs are top of mind for students and their families. But the CIRP survey shows that while those factors have greatly increased in importance for students, other priorities have not lost any of their significance.

When asked how important it was for students to “learn about things that interest me,” 77% of freshmen entering in 2008 listed it as the number one most important reason to attend college.

“If you look back a few decades ago, there were only one or two things that popped up as important reasons to go to college,” says Mr. Pryor. “Now you’ve got more like eight things, which tells us that their expectations are much more multifaceted.”

In our focus groups with parents, many talked about wanting their children to enjoy their college years as a time of enlightenment and growth. While practical considerations like money and job placement are important, parents acknowledged that these qualities would not do much for their children if they attended a college where they didn’t feel comfortable and part of the campus community. And among the students we talked to, we repeatedly heard them say that their parents “want me to go where I would be happy and could find things I really liked,” and that “they just want me to do what I want to do.”

### What Works

In general terms, it's vital for colleges to know their market and have a solid sense of their brand identity. Most institutions are savvy enough to realize that they cannot be all things to all students, but they should still emphasize the attributes of their institution that are consistent with what their prospective applicants are seeking.

In our travels to colleges and experiences with clients, we are repeatedly struck by how many of them have great programs and professors or other unique qualities that no one—including those in the admissions office—knows about, much less promotes.

### Connect With Your Audience

It can be quite challenging for a college to decide what it wants to say about itself and how to say it. We interviewed college admissions directors who talked about the struggle to define their institutions, and many of them said they were unsure if their efforts were effective, and felt they still had more work to do.

In our focus groups, parents and students talked about how difficult it is (even after doing research and visiting campuses) to figure out how one given college is different from another. Students typically narrow down their choices to institutions with similar attributes, and when they have that final list of colleges, many of them seem interchangeable because they all claim to offer the same things.

We find that most colleges have trouble going beyond describing their general “category” of institution (such as private liberal arts or midsized public). Or, when it comes to differentiating their school, they often promote benefits that may be unique to that college but are of little importance to prospective students and parents. What they really need to showcase is what's distinctive about their culture, program mix, and formula for success. The best way to understand differences that matter is to engage in brand research and planning, a practice familiar to the highest performing colleges (regardless of selectivity, type, or size).

### Alignment Is Key

Anne Marie Ferriere, associate director of admissions at **Lafayette College**, makes sure all of her staff members mention to students and their families that Lafayette is focused exclusively on undergraduate education, which means more personal attention from faculty members and opportunities to do advanced research. This is an important point, she says, because many of the other institutions that Lafayette applicants consider attending are universities.

Another helpful approach, also used by Lafayette, is to convene focus groups of current students and local high school students to get a sense of the type of information they would like to receive.

“We ask questions about what attracts them to a college, what they think of our viewbooks, and the questions they have that our materials don't answer,” says Ms. Ferriere. “We don't have college students on our staff, so it's a great inside look at what they want out of their four years.”

Lastly, it's important to realize that addressing all of these issues is challenging, and for a lot of colleges, involves a fundamental shift in the way they position themselves and talk about their institution.

“There was a time when universities would talk about how many volumes they had in their library, their faculty and science labs,” says Thomas Delahunt, vice president for admission and student financial planning at **Drake University** in Iowa. “Now they also talk about their health and wellness programs, job placements after graduation, and campus communities. It's not just about the educational component.”

**Tom Abrahamson** is Managing Director and Principal of Lipman Hearne. Tom has consulted with hundreds of organizations, including small and midsized private colleges, large multi-campus public universities, foundations, and global membership-based organizations. As a college administrator, Tom served as Associate Vice President for Enrollment Management and Dean of Admissions at DePaul University in Chicago. He currently serves on the Board of Directors of the American Marketing Association and is Chair, Board of Trustees, of the AMA's Foundation.

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*This report was completed with the assistance of Lindsey Duda, Whitney Kent, Katherine Narvaez, and Jennifer Webster.*



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