

COLLEGE COUNSELING PHILOSOPHY

In ancient Greece a legendary robber named Procrustes used to force his victims to fit a certain bed by stretching or lopping off their legs. While this approach served Procrustes well in his chosen profession, it would have made him a terrible college counselor. And he would not have stood a chance with Milton Academy students. True to our motto and to our rich history of individualism, Milton students are not cookie-cutter types. Each burns with a particular fire; each defies generalization.

The College Counseling Office at Milton builds its program around this individualism. We believe that the college counseling process begins and ends with the student. We know that each student has a different story to tell. We do not expect students to proceed lockstep through this process. Some students will camp on our doorstep from the first day and seek input on a regular, sometimes weekly, basis. Some will make only minimal use of our office and proceed quite independently. A few may find they are not ready for the college process at all and choose not to participate. We will be ready when they are. Our guiding principle is much like that of a good teacher: Meet the student wherever the student is.

At the same time, we expect students to take control of the process. Our job is to guide, counsel, probe, recommend, refer, suggest, and inform. We do not decide, require, command, or package. Decisions about where to apply, what to write about in their essays, and whom to ask for recommendations, must, in the end, be the students'. Students are responsible for submitting applications on time, signing up for tests on time, asking teachers for recommendations, sending test scores, and filling out forms. We do not do these things for our students – nor should their parents, guardians, or anyone else.

To do so, in fact, would be to short-circuit the developmental process that is so central to the college process. Michael Thompson, a well-known psychologist, has noted that the college process is really about separation or individuation, about students defining themselves as free-standing, independent adults. Where the student eventually goes to college is secondary to that first, profound step into adulthood. So it is incumbent upon the adults (parents, guardians, counselors, teachers, coaches) in students' lives to provide an atmosphere that allows students to find their distinctive voice in this process. The first utterances may seem garbled or misguided to our more mature ears, but they must be heard and responded to in a way that encourages the student to try again. We encourage family input as long as the student remains in the driver's seat. When adults begin to take over, they rob their children of an important "rite of passage" into an adult decision-making role.

Openness and sensitivity to a student's personal journey through the college process do not mean we sugar-coat the truth, however. In helping a student build a college list, we will be straightforward and honest in our assessment of chances for admission. To do otherwise would be a disservice. True maturity comes when a person's sense of self is grounded confidently in reality, not when it is flying on the gossamer wings of easy promise. While some find this honesty daunting at first, most come to realize that calling a school a reach does not mean that

we won't support a student's desire to apply. Students and their families need to be armed with accurate information as they make decisions. If a student decides to take a high degree of risk, that is a choice; our responsibility is to point out the possible fallout, not to make the final decision for the student. All adults must be voices of reason and reality. Ridiculously high expectations can create all kinds of psychological issues for the students. If, in response to outsized expectations, students focus only on the top and then simply add schools to which they have paid no attention, they can end up emotionally devastated.

Ultimately, students who are happiest about the college process are those who understand their abilities and needs best and who are, therefore, able to find schools that fit them best. They have researched their lists well, they have asked the tough questions, and, as a result, they have found good matches, schools they can truly embrace. Historically, Milton students have had the gumption and the self-awareness to make such matches. They listen to their hearts and their heads; they let insight, not college rankings, guide them. No Procrustean bed awaits them in their college dorm room. They sleep comfortably.