



COUNTDOWN TO COLLEGE

by meredith knight

Time flies when you're raising kids. One day you're watching him take those first tentative steps. The next you're calling him into the kitchen to reach that platter on the top shelf. One day she's content with her Disney Princess Barbie. The next some guy shows up at the door expecting to take her to a dance.

If you've survived sleepless nights, teething, the ABCs, state capitols and multiplication tables you're probably already thinking—worrying—obsessing—about college. How can you open every possible door for your child to attend an excellent college, excel in his studies and find happiness in the career of his dreams?

Relax. Living Magazine sat down with Private Educational Consultant Kim Simpson, director of Collegiate

Admissions Consulting Services' member of the Princeton Review National College Counselor Advisory Board and contributor to the 2009 edition of *The Best 368 Colleges* (Princeton Review) and picked her brain about all those college-related questions that are keeping you up at night.

HERE'S WHAT KIM HAD TO SAY.

LIVING MAGAZINE- How soon should I start preparing for my child to get into a good college and how?

KIM SIMPSON- Middle school isn't too soon to begin thinking about what classes he should be taking. Prospective colleges will want to see that your child has taken the most rigorous curriculum possible. They're actually more interested in a student with a lower GPA in challenging classes than a high GPA in basic curriculum.

Begin in middle school encouraging him to challenge himself with the most demanding classes available to him. But be realistic. You don't want to set your child up for failure by insisting he take classes that are academically beyond his reach. That will only frustrate him and you.

LIVING- But isn't it enough to have an impressive GPA and ACT scores?

KIM- As I mentioned, colleges are as interested in what classes your child took as what her GPA is. Many high schools today use a weighted grade system so that a student with honors or AP (Advanced Placement) classes will typically rank ahead of those enrolled in regular curricula, so GPA alone doesn't count for much.

Before your child starts high school, she'll be offered placement tests to determine the

level of courses she should take. Encourage her to take the most challenging curricula that is realistic for her. Colleges will take into consideration how much she challenged herself as well as her GPA, standardized testing and extracurricular achievements.

It's important that your child finish strong her senior year and not slack off on course selection and grades toward the end which they can be tempted to do. College admissions are always considered "conditional" until those final grades are submitted.

LIVING- What extracurricular and co-curricular activities will turn heads at the right colleges?

KIM- A college would rather see depth than breadth in extracurricular commitments. They'd rather see a student who is passionate and dedicated to a few activities than someone who spreads himself thin joining every club and volunteering for every committee. Encourage your



Kim Simpson consulting rising Senior Carolyn Mierl from Mandeville High School

child to join a club or two, take a top leadership role, consider some philanthropic endeavors, launch a charity project of his own. He should follow his passion and devote his time to causes that are important to him. Don't just commit to something to have one more activity on his resume. If it doesn't ring true in your life, it won't ring true on paper.

Foreign languages and writing are important now. Writing is a critical component of college and in the work force. Honing those skills is important. Also, in our global economy colleges and employers are looking for students who can speak a foreign language. Just look at what's happened in this area since Hurricane Katrina with the influx of Spanish speaking people. That's happening everywhere and not only with Spanish, but >>

other languages. I strongly recommend creative writing and foreign language classes in junior high and high school.

If your child knows their intended career or academic major early on—such as pre-engineering or pre-med—he should consider taking the appropriate math and science classes in high school. Colleges will be looking for students with strong math skills for engineering and a solid science foundation for pre-med curricula. (Your high school counselor should be able to advise you on which maths and sciences to take.)

LIVING - Should my child work part-time during high school?

KIM- Colleges like to see students who aren't afraid to get their hands dirty, who are self-motivated, self-starters and have proven themselves in the work force. Working can help your child develop time management skills and give her a chance to explore career options. But academics should always come first. The minute your child's grades begin to suffer because of a part-time job is the minute she should reconsider working. Internships, apprenticeships and volunteer work can also be meaningful experiences in high school.

LIVING - SAT or ACT? What's the difference and what do most colleges want?

KIM- Standardized testing is like clothing: One size does not fit all. Some students will score better on one test than the other. The ACT requires more science and a higher level of Math than the SAT. If Math and Science are your student's weaker areas, he might consider the SAT instead. If those are his strengths he should do well on the ACT.

The SAT is a longer test. If your child tends to peter out during long tests, that should be a consideration. Also with the ACT you have control over which scores are released to colleges. With the SAT, colleges see your entire grade every time you take it, although that will change as of 2010. Visit www.princetonreview.com to find assessment testing tools that can help you determine which test is the best option for your student.

Most colleges accept either test. I recommend that students take each test at least once. Visit the web sites for the colleges you're considering to see if they have a preference or you can go to www.commonapp.org which lists admission requirements, deadlines, etc for over 300 U.S. colleges.

LIVING - How many times should a student take the SAT or ACT?

KIM- I recommend no more than three times. Statistics show that scores typically level off after the third testing. When you apply to take your ACT or SAT be sure to pay the additional fee to receive a copy of your child's test and answers delineating exactly where your student may be deficient and where he has a clear understanding of the subject so you can identify exactly where his deficiencies lie and concentrate on improving those areas.

Before the next testing, he can study the areas that challenged him using the test prep CD Rom, a private tutor, tutoring company or take advantage of ACT/SAT workshops at his high school.

LIVING - What if my child has done poorly on standardized testing in the past? Is the SAT or ACT mandatory for college admission?

KIM- Not necessarily. There are a number of top colleges who are open to admitting promising students without standardized test results. The web site www.fairtest.org sponsored by the non-profit National Center for Fairness in Testing has a list of many excellent test-optional colleges.

LIVING - How do we go about selecting the best school for my child?

KIM- Begin by setting up an appointment with your child's school counselor to discuss her academic and career goals. Then research colleges through a guidebook such as the Fiske Guide to Colleges. The Princeton Review's ³⁶⁶ Colleges and Colleges that Change Lives based on things like school size and location, academics and extra curricular opportunities, Greek life, the natural beauty of the campus, night life and the prestige of the university to identify colleges you may want to visit.



Visit college fairs and websites and plan to visit as many college campuses as possible to see if your child can visualize herself there matriculating and attending for four years. The Mardi Gras holidays are an excellent time for students in our area to visit out-of-state colleges while classes are in session to gain a real perspective of campus life.

LIVING - What about financial aid? How do we find out what's available?

KIM- There are two main types of scholarships available to any student—those awarded by the institution and those that come from outside foundations or corporations. Don't assume that any scholarship amount isn't worth your time applying. A lot of little scholarships—\$1,000 here—\$500 there—can add up to a nice little scholarship package. You can begin looking for scholarships as early as your freshman year.

You'll want to start by filling out the FAFSA or Free Application for Federal Student Aid on line at www.fafsa.ed.gov which you can do any time after January 1 and before July 1 of your child's senior year of high school for in-state or check the financial aid office of perspective schools to see when to fill it out for out-of-state admittance.

The form is lengthy and you'll need the information from the previous year's income tax return or enough information to estimate the numbers. The student and one parent will need to establish a pin number to submit electronically.

The results of your child's FAFSA will be used to determine what student grants, work study programs or loan amounts you may qualify for and what your family is expected to contribute. Some private colleges will also require the CSS (College Scholarship Service Profile). In Louisiana one way to apply for TOPS is through your FAFSA.

You can also visit www.fastweb.com which is a free scholarship search engine where you can create a profile for your child and receive notification, deadline reminders, etc for only the scholarships that apply specifically to him to eliminate wading through the thousands that don't.

Many "thanks" to Kim for answering so many of our college-related questions. If you'd like more information, she will be sponsoring a local college forum in association with Princeton Review. The forum is called Getting In and will be held in Covington on August 13th at 6:00 p.m. For more information call Kim at 985.893.9260 or The Princeton Review at 504.865.1060 or email wsim4@aol.com to register. 

Embark on your college search and admission process with these helpful web sites.

www.princetonreview.com

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www.fairtest.org

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www.educationconservancy.org