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CLICKING ON CAMPUS

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As a high school senior who has changed her mind about her future career about seven times in the past year, it is no surprise that my parents call me "fickle." I like to think of myself as "open" to all of my options.

As a prospective college student, I was initially very overwhelmed by the number of options I had. With today's technology, high school seniors have the ability to virtually experience college life, plan their careers and finance their education in ways their parents would never have dreamed of doing. Instead of just attending the same college their parents went to, today's students have the technology to find the college that is right for them. However, finding your dream college is not necessarily easier because of that technology.

College mail began to flow into my mailbox at a steady rate toward the end of my junior year. Even now that I have made my college choice, I am receiving junk mail from colleges I have never even heard of before. Hence, my first word of wisdom to parents and students: be careful how many college mailing lists you put yourself on.

I soon realized you cannot judge a college by its glossy, picture-filled view book. While view books can be informative, they are no substitute for a college visit and are no basis upon which to base a college choice. Unless you are planning on going to the Air Force Academy, I would suggest beginning your college search in Minnesota and the surrounding states.

I began my search thinking I had to go somewhere perpetually sunny, and far from home. However I have realized there are many advantages to staying in state. First, I realized that since I am going to miss my family, it would be much cheaper and easier to travel home throughout the year if I stayed in Minnesota. For those who qualify for financial aid, the Minnesota State Grant is another incentive to study near home.

After visiting colleges both in and out of state, I came to value honesty in a college admissions person more than any other quality. Instead of answering my questions to the point, many students and administrators would take on the role of a salesperson and answer with a long string of reasons why their school was "the right school."

Not all colleges are equal. Each has its own personality. College visits are the only way for students to decide whether they like a college's personality or atmosphere. If the student can begin exploring and visiting colleges early in the junior year, the student will be well rewarded for his or her efforts.

Senior year can become very stressful and hectic if you have not started the college decision-making process. Although there are some disadvantages to the evolution of "college shopping," there are many advantages. Students can explore sites such as www.fastweb.com to find scholarships fitting their qualifications and obtain helpful advice, and www.usnews.com to compare colleges and view their rankings.

By using search engines, much of the college research can be done online. Some college Web sites even allow browsers to view a typical dorm room by downloading a short video.

For many students and parents, the cost of attending college is overwhelming at first. However, if families do their research, it is possible to find scholarships and grants for almost any student.

Not all scholarships are based on academics. Many are based on strong records of community service, while some are awarded to special groups such as left-handed persons. Federal and state governments also offer many different grants (many are need-based), which can be explored at www.ed.gov.

Families with financial need should not immediately eliminate the more expensive, private colleges. Many private institutions have the advantage of alumni support, enabling them to offer

scholarships and financial aid in addition to government aid. Oftentimes, it will cost a student the same amount to attend a private college as a state college, after the financial aid packages are awarded.

Finally, both parents and students should realize it is normal and healthy for students to be extremely indecisive about their career choices when trying to decide where to go to college. Most incoming freshmen do not know what they want to do after graduation. However, by using their time in high school to explore and eliminate career possibilities, students will be well on their way to making the right choice in time to graduate.

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