

Put Me in College, Coach

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A little guidance goes a long way

Choosing the right path in life is difficult at any age, especially when there are so many competing—and sometimes conflicting—sources of guidance. And for high school students deciding which college to attend and what profession to pursue, guidance has never been more crucial. Knowing this, Sherri Graf founded Imagine College Coaching in 2013 to help teens successfully navigate the next stage in life. Imagine College Coaching provides personal mentoring sessions, personality and career assessments, college application and essay assistance, and help finding scholarships.

“When I was in high school, I didn’t have financial resources or people in my life to guide, inspire, and motivate me towards a bright future,” Sherri says. “I needed guidance to find my strengths and a major that was a good fit. So I wanted to become the person that I needed.”

Sherri’s work began with researching scholarships to help put her children through college. Eventually she collected so much scholarship data that she had to create an organizational system to manage it. Sherri then turned the system into a phone app to make it user-friendly for teenagers. She built her company’s website herself, and now she helps her students build

their own websites. “It’s a living resume—a resume full of hyperlinks—to market themselves to admissions counselors and to display their community service record and their activities,” Sherri advises.

Students often have their own ideas about where they want to go and what they want to do, which is something Sherri encourages. “Once they tell me what they want, if I can see that desire in their eyes and hear it in their voice,” she says, “then my goal is to help them get there.”

Yet sometimes, what students say they want conflicts with what their assessment test results—and parents—say. In that case, Sherri aims to bridge the gaps and resolve the conflicts. She becomes the students’ middle man, buddy, mentor, and fan. “I go to their sports events, check on them, interact with them, and push them when deadlines approach,” she says. “The better I know the students, their personalities, and their tendencies, the better I do at recommending schools and alternative paths for them.”

To have a chance at getting into a desired college, Sherri says, it’s important that students start the process early and get guidance from someone knowledgeable. Students must find their “wow factor” to be competitive and stand out from the crowd. She knows this because she’s spoken with admissions counselors and made connections at universities in the United States and Europe. She’s visited hundreds of schools, visited dorms, and eaten in cafeterias. Having learned what’s expected of college students these days, she’s sure the college admissions process has never been more competitive.



Sherri and her team of consultants each work with 10 to 15 students per year, although some consultants are exploring group conference calls to accommodate the growing demand for their services from both high school and college students. College students receive help with staying on study schedules, obtaining mentors, creating a LinkedIn profile, and finding internships and jobs.

Sherri says some clients call her a modern Emily Post because she teaches her students professional etiquette—behaviors like maintaining eye contact, having a strong handshake, building relationships and networking, writing thank you notes, and being respectful. These are important skills that she believes will set her students up for success in life.

“My goal is to find and provide the right soil to the right person to flourish at this time in their life,” Sherri says, noting that in a way, her students are like plants. “I once brought home a tiny crepe myrtle and kept it in my laundry room. There were warmth, moisture, and sunlight there, so it grew and grew. It was beautiful and cheerful,” she recalls. “Then one day it was droopy, and the leaves were brown, and I discovered that the soil that was perfect for a season is the very same soil that could kill it later.”

Sometimes all someone needs to flourish is someone believing they can. Sherri remembers one high-school student that had been bullied and was doing poorly in school. She says he just wanted to escape, until his parents brought her in to work with him. “It was rewarding to help him believe in himself, to help him see that he has value and is good at something,” Sherri says. “Mom and Dad may feel compelled to tell you you’re great, but your college coach doesn’t. He realized someone else believed in him, too, and it turned his grades around. He was accepted into Baylor with a big scholarship.”

Sherri has found a common thread among young people: they all need people in their corner, encouraging them, and showing them that every person can have a bright future. “I empower young people,” Sherri says. “I help them find their natural gifts and talents. I love them, and I love helping them.”

Imagine College Coaching also helps place students in private, boarding, and day schools throughout the nation. A portion of all proceeds helps fund a small African school where Sherri worked this summer. To learn more about Imagine College Coaching’s services, visit www.imaginecollegecoaching.com.