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## Motherly Advice

### *One college president's vision for guiding her son through the college selection process.*

By Laura Skandera Trombley  
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Over the years my son Sparkey, now 10, has voiced several different career aspirations. At five, becoming a Power Ranger-specifically the red one-was a must do; at six he wanted to become a fireman who lived in a station located near our home so he could be on time for breakfast; during the past few years he has wavered between becoming an architect or a professional Lego builder.

To my ears, what I am hearing is that he is a perfect candidate for a liberal arts education. Naturally, I am biased. As president of Pitzer College (Calif.), a liberal arts college specializing in the social sciences and international study, I can easily envision him as a happy incoming first-year student. As a mother, I would love to be able to observe firsthand my only child's transformative educational experience. Reality, though-as all parents recognize-is often very different from our fond imaginings.

*I'll advise him to find a college that sees him as a treasure-his own person, not a statistic.*

Over the past four years, Pitzer has experienced an application increase of 48 percent, improving selectivity from 57 percent to 37 percent, thus making it one of the 30 most selective liberal arts institutions in the nation. While this certainly places the institution in an enviable position, gauging from the reaction from prospective parents and students, our success can be a bit daunting to their hopes for acceptance. Emotions and collective familial stress runs high, particularly from the high school sophomore to senior years.

Pitzer's annual spring On-Campus Day for admitted students and their parents, by coincidence, invariably falls on my son's birthday. Last year I spent the first part of my morning listening to my son's fourth-grade class sing him "Happy Birthday." Then I drove to the college to deliver my welcoming remarks. As I looked around at the nervous seniors and emotional parents, the two sides of my life as mother and president came together in a single moment. I told the parents where I had just been and shared with the students that their parents could still see them at that age joyously singing. What's more, their parents had to be utterly shocked by just how quickly all those years evaporated and how all too soon their former fourth-graders were about to leave home. I shared my dream version of the conversation I would have with my son when, in eight years, he is a high school senior. It's a conversation I have already rehearsed in my mind many times.

### **MOTHER-SON CONVERSATION**

I will invite Sparkey to come have a chat with me. After texting his friends that he won't be able to see them because he prefers my company to theirs, he will sit down and eagerly await my counsel with enormous enthusiasm. He will hang on my every word. (Remember, this is the dream version.)

My advice will be to look for a college like Pitzer-and to investigate the objectives and values of the institution and determine if what they say is what they do. He should seek a challenging curriculum, international study, clean and safe facilities, intramurals and athletics, and opportunities for engagement in student government and institutional governance. I will, most importantly, advise him to seek a college with an extraordinary faculty who will partner with him in his personal learning journey; in other words, a college that will regard him as I do: as a treasure, as his own person, and not as a statistic. Then he'll nod affirmatively, thank me for my advice, and give me a big hug.

This conversation may not play out as I imagine it, but I hope the fact he has grown up on a liberal arts campus surrounded by faculty whose central focus is to inspire, educate, and encourage young people figures strongly in his decision-making process.

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In concluding my On Campus Day talk, I assured the assembled parents that my hope for their children is the same as my hope for Sparkey. The college experience should begin with a conversation between a student and a faculty member. This dialogue will prove challenging and inspirational for both parties and will continue long after graduation. Whatever choice these parents' children make, that my child makes, we need to remember: the future belongs to them. Our responsibility as parents is to support them no matter what they decide.

Laura Skandera Trombley is president of Pitzer College in Claremont, Calif.

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