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High School Seniors Need To Make Up Their Minds: College Deposits Due Sunday

Faced with excellent choices, some lucky students find the choice difficult

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Don't feel too sorry for Patrick Campbell. Three of the top colleges in the country want him as a student next fall, and he couldn't decide where to go.

Just this week, he set Tuesday night as his deadline, but he blew through it. Plans to go out to dinner with his parents, discuss the options and make a choice didn't pan out. When he got home late, they ordered takeout Chinese and, as much as they talked, he couldn't quite decide.

Campbell, a senior at Valley Regional High School in Deep River, is choosing among Dartmouth College, Boston College and Georgetown University. He is in the lucky fraction of high school seniors whose college application effort was so successful that they now have several appealing options. They can't make a pick. But, now, the real deadline is at hand.

By Sunday, these waffling students have to make a decision and submit a deposit to hold the spot they have been offered in the Class of 2015.

It's the kind of stress that might be called "good stress," but it's still stress.

"I never thought I'd have such a hard time deciding," said Campbell. For months, he and others in his position were sweating over whether they would get into one school they would like. Now, faced with a pleasant choice, they struggle.

They revisit campuses, pore over college websites and college blogs such as "College Confidential," and talk to friends as they try to make their decisions.

When he started looking at colleges, Campbell said that others told him that he'd probably have a moment when he walked onto a particular campus and it would hit him: This is the place.

But that never happened. "I never had that 'Aha!' moment," he said.

Janet Rosier, a Woodbridge-based independent college consultant, said that many students share Campbell's experience, including her own daughter. "I told her you're never going to have an epiphany. I said not everybody gets it. . . . And not getting it doesn't mean that [a particular college] isn't a good choice."

When it gets down to the final days, Rosier said, the choice is less likely to be the result of carefully drawn up lists of pros and cons and more likely to be a gut decision.

Still, Campbell was talking about pros and cons this week. Wednesday night he said he was leaning toward Dartmouth — not only because of the excellent academic opportunities but because he likes to hike and rock climb and he wants to take up skiing.

On the minus side for Dartmouth, he said, is a "strong presence of fraternities and a very big party scene." That's not something he's interested in.

Georgetown has a great location and the opportunity to intern on Capitol Hill; BC accepted him into the honors program and he could do research there as a freshman.

Reality Hits

JoAnne Carter, an educational and college consultant based in Essex, said she's been spending a lot of time talking to students who haven't made up their minds.

"The last two weeks, that's all I've been doing," Carter said, "It's unbelievable."

She said a student may spend hours comparing curriculum offerings but then simply decide, "I really want to be in Boston."

"There's also a certain amount of cold feet. It sounds great to go to California when you're applying, but not so great this time of year," Carter said. "Reality is hitting. Students think: What happens if I get sick, if I'm in the infirmary and I don't know anyone in L.A.? When I can't go home for Thanksgiving?"

Financial aid is also a key factor, she said.

Michael Kinzler, a senior at Stamford High School, said it's between Bucknell and Colgate. Both schools have what he is looking for — they aren't too large and have beautiful campuses — but Colgate offered significantly more financial aid than Bucknell. Recently, he contacted Bucknell to see if it would increase his financial aid.

In some ways, he said, the decision is harder because the schools are similar.

"I pretty much predicted that this would be a difficult decision," Kinzler said, adding that he generally has trouble making decisions.

Choosing Between Futures

Neha Mehta's decision is difficult partly because the schools she is choosing among are so different. The senior at Suffield High School applied to 20 schools and got into 14. She's narrowed it down to UCLA, Cal-Berkeley, Duke or Brown. Also under consideration is UConn, where she was offered a full scholarship.

"I know if I go to Duke," she said, "it will be a completely, completely different experience from Brown. ... They are polar opposites. You see two very different futures."

The California schools are also tempting. "I would love the city life of L.A.," Mehta said.

Mehta, who wants to be a doctor, said that lately she has been researching how successful the colleges she's considering have been at getting students into medical schools.

Mehta said she plans to make a decision by Friday night.

Carter said she urges students to make a decision for their own sake as well as for colleges and wait-listed students. Don't make a deposit at more than one college, she said. "This isn't fair to someone who wants to go there."

Rosier said that students often can't decide because they think "there is only one good choice. They are afraid to make a bad choice."

In reality, she said, all of their choices are good ones. Whatever college they choose will "definitely have an impact, but kids shouldn't worry that their whole life will be different if ..."

Epiphany

At last call, Mehta hadn't decided yet. Nor had Kinzler. But Thursday afternoon Campbell said he had finally reached a decision.

He talked a lot with his parents on Wednesday night, and then slept on it. In the morning he knew: Dartmouth. It was the strong academics and the promise of an outdoor life that attracted him.

"I'm relieved and at peace," he said. "I'm glad it's over."