

Parents: College work starts now

by Jeanie Wyatt

Parents of high school seniors have probably released a big sigh of relief now that the academic year is under way. With any luck, schedules are settled, locker combinations are memorized and their kids have at least one favorite teacher.

But it's no time for parents of college-bound students to relax. Though school has barely started, it's the season to prepare for the college admissions and financial aid processes.

According to the student aid office of the U.S. Department of Education, September and October are generally the months that students should research the admissions requirements of their colleges of choice. Typically, November is the month to submit college applications, although early admission applications are often due in October. And of critical importance is that January and February are the prime months to turn in aid applications. More calendar guidelines are online at studentaid2.ed.gov/prepare/timeline.

Parents, ideally, your dear teenager has been getting ready for higher education since at least his or her freshman year, and you have been saving for college since the day he or she was born. But if this is not the case, don't panic. There is a locally based resource, the Minnie Stevens Piper Foundation, that provides valuable information on how your child can get into his or her preferred college and how to pay for that education.

"For seniors, what should be a priority right now is researching deadline dates for scholarships, admissions and financial aid applications for the schools that they are interested in," says the foundation's executive director, Joyce Ellis. "We try to supply that information."

For 40 years, the Piper Foundation has provided its "Compendium of Texas Colleges and Financial Aid Calendar." The publication provides admission requirements, types of financial aid available, application deadlines, tuition and fee information, and total expenses for private and public colleges and universities in Texas.

The 2006-07 edition is hot off the presses and should be arriving at your high schooler's counselor's office any day. Conveniently, the compendium can also be accessed on the Texas comptroller's Web site at www.window.state.tx.us/scholars. Ellis expects the new edition to be posted in mid-September.

I find that many parents worry very early on in their children's lives about how they will afford the cost of higher education. Single parents, especially, are concerned about where they will get the money. Early and consistent savings plans are the best course of action, but it is also my advice that parents have their children pursue scholarships.

In addition to data for specific colleges, the compendium supplies descriptions, application deadlines and contact information for federal, state and private scholarships, and financial aid programs for which students can apply directly. The scholarships are listed alphabetically and by subject of interest such as business or science.

Locally sponsored scholarships are made more accessible through the Piper Foundation's Bexar County Scholarship Clearing House. The foundation provides one standardized application for about 75 scholarships offered by area organizations. The forms are sent to high school counselors, who work with students to determine which scholarships they are qualified for, and the counselors send the information to the clearing house.

The scholarship sponsors can receive the applications and select recipients or have the decision made by the foundation's scholarship committee, made up of local educators.

The clearing house does not include all area scholarships, but it's a good start. Have your child also check with his or her high school club or extracurricular group, church or employer for other opportunities.

Another great admissions and scholarship research resource is the foundation's Student Aid Library. Students can walk into the library, in Suite 810 of the North Frost Center Building at 1250 N.E. Loop 410, and peruse catalogs for most of the undergraduate and graduate schools in the United States, Mexico and Canada as well as Texas junior and technical colleges.

Also at the library, students can use a computer program to search scholarships and other financial aid according to criteria such as ethnicity and college major. The program is a helpful complement to Web database services offered by www.fastweb.com and www.collegeboard.com, which match academic interests and qualifications to scholarship opportunities.

Technology has vastly assisted the foundation's ability to assist more students. Ellis, who has worked for the foundation for 32 years, remembers when students would visit the library and review scholarship information handwritten on index cards.

Though the foundation is primarily an information resource, it also offers a loan program for undergraduate juniors and seniors and graduate students who still have financial need after applying for aid through their school.

Founded in 1950 by oil businessman Randall Gordon Piper and his wife, Minnie Stevens Piper, the Piper Foundation has strived to keep up with the state's growing number of high schools and college-bound population. Every year its supply of compendiums is depleted, Ellis says. The foundation published 60,000 of the books for this academic year at a cost of about \$100,000.

Parents, when you check whether your senior is signed up to take the SAT or ACT college entrance test, ask about his or her timetable to apply for admissions, scholarships and financial aid. If you get a blank stare or unrealistic answers, take an after-school trip to the Piper Foundation's library or check out the Web site together. Both of you will probably discover that a higher education -- and paying for it -- is more attainable than you think.

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