



Matchmaking

I have recently been watching a Netflix show called *Indian Matchmaking*. In this show, the titular matchmaker, Sima, works to help her single clients find life partners. At the outset, she has each client establish their “criteria” for a successful match...so the resulting list could look something like: Tall, gourmet cook, loves poetry, hiking, and dogs. Then she tells them to expect a 60-70% match. “What?!” is often the client’s reaction...what do you mean I can’t have everything I want? The matchmaker then reminds them the value of adjustment and compromise and not overlooking the unsexy but essential quality of being a good person. Now, there have been many thoughtful articles and critiques about the cultural context of this show and exploring the impact of promoting and televising the benefits of arranged marriage to a modern audience—I have read many of these articles and have learned a great deal about a practice I knew little about. SPOILER: This is not that type of article. I kept watching because I honestly couldn’t look away! I was riveted, I think mostly because I was curious about these traditions and found the awkward, often sweetly endearing dates and accompanying blunt conversations about choosing a life partner, frankly, compelling.

Then it hit me, some of these “what do you want in a life partner?” criteria conversations were also a little bit familiar. Albeit in a different context. As a college counselor, when I meet with families, I also ask my students for a list of criteria. I ask, “what are you looking for in a college?” The resulting list could look something like this: Medium-sized campus, journalism major, temperate climate, varsity ice hockey team, strong Greek life, near a cool city. Then I get to work thinking about what colleges have these qualities. While I don’t consider myself as a “matchmaker,” finding a college that reflects a student’s criteria is always very much on my mind. But realistically, identifying colleges that check EVERY box isn’t always possible. Especially since high school students typically (and wisely) apply to a number of colleges...are they all going to check every box? Of course not. I am not sure what the *average* percentage of criteria met is, but I am guessing it could be around 60-70%. Hmm...not unlike the Indian Matchmaker! You know what else I emphasize? Adjustment and compromise! Stay with me here...let’s say my student is accepted at a mid-sized college, near a wonderful city, with a great journalism program and Greek life, but while the college is in chilly Illinois with a mean temperature of 27° in January, it doesn’t have a varsity ice hockey team. Is the decidedly intemperate cold weather and lack of varsity hockey a big enough deterrent to not consider an otherwise excellent fit college? My hope is that it wouldn’t be and that my student would buy an extra warm coat, realize that *club* hockey is a very big deal there, and be thrilled to get most of what was on the original wish list.

Here is another similarity that applies to both choosing a college and choosing a life partner; people are not fixed and static. Individuals develop, mature, change, and grow. This is obviously a good thing but can make the “list your criteria” exercise less relevant as time goes on. This is why, in college counseling we explore “what ifs?” For example, for my student above, we’d explore questions like, “What if journalism doesn’t work out and you don’t actually love this major?” We’d consider what other subjects might hold interest and whether this college would still make sense if the wish list evolved. Ideally, it would, because that possibility was built into decision making and the concept of being adaptive and open to adjustment is framed positively from the get-go. It is hard to be certain about everything you want out of college at 17 or 18 and acknowledging, even appreciating, this early on is sensible. About 1/3 of all college students change their major at least once, so being prepared for the “what ifs?” and not having a fixed mindset is excellent advice.

At the end of the day, what makes a “good person” or a “good college?” The answer will be highly personal and naturally be different across individuals which is what makes choosing a college—*not to mention a life partner*—complex. But if I have learned anything from watching this show (thumbs up from me!) and doing this work, is that while “must have” criteria lists are helpful places to start, they won’t always be fully met, won’t remain unchanged forever, and that 60-70% “matches” while not always perfect, can still be successful! Arguably, even more so.

Some of the practical lessons from *Indian Matchmaking* apply to building a college list as well. Finding your “dream college” is not unlike finding your true love. When I speak to students who have a dream college, they often share statements like, “*as soon as I stepped foot on campus, I knew, it was like love at first sight.*” While I don’t doubt this attraction, an intelligent college list must go beyond this infatuation. What makes a college list intelligent? In a word: balance. A balanced college list includes a mix of Likely (colleges where your chances for admission look to be 75% or higher - aim for 4), Target or Possible (colleges where your chances for admission look to be about 50% - aim for 4-5), and Reach (colleges where your chance for admission are less than 25% - aim for 3-4) colleges, for a total of 10-12. This mix of selectivity is critical since the most selective colleges are admitting such a tiny percentage of their applicants. This means that even extremely qualified students with extraordinary grades, scores, and talents are often denied admission at colleges with single digit acceptance rates. Knowing this, the Target and Likely colleges become increasingly important, and you know what? They are less likely to break your heart. When you are open to exploring a range of colleges, you might find love where you least expect it...I have seen it happen countless times. Having “likely” colleges on your list is not “settling;” it is smart since these are colleges where you have a strong chance of being admitted and who will reciprocate your love!

So, practically speaking, how do you express your interest in a college? This is something that high school juniors should be acting upon now. The colleges won’t know that you are interested in them unless you tell them...so: get on the mailing list, attend a virtual event, attend an in-person event, tour the campus, attend a local college fair, etc. For colleges that consider “demonstrated interest” these interactions are meaningful. Demonstrated interest is a little bit like flirting...you are letting the college know, “*hey, I’m interested!*” The ultimate expression of this interest is applying Early Decision which tells the college that they are your first choice, true love, and you will commit to attending if admitted. Some colleges really respond to this declaration and admit a higher number of applicants who apply this route. It’s a bit like getting down on one knee and proposing. You even sign a contract expressing this binding commitment.

Having a strategic plan for applying to colleges probably doesn’t sound very romantic, but in the long run, it is very wise. Knowing how to approach this process pragmatically, realistically, while ALSO still being open to finding love in unexpected places will serve you well!