

College consultant's advice for students

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(Photo: HEIDI HEILBRUNN/Staff, HEIDI HEILBRUNN/Staff)

If you're one of the roughly 22,000 high school students living in Greenville, Bill Dingledine has some advice for you as you're looking at colleges: don't base your choice on the sports teams.

The decision should not be made on a whim or because your parents went there or because you like the architecture of the buildings on campus, says Dingledine, an independent college counselor for the past 20 years.

'Where should I attend college?' is a decision that should be given thought and should be made through a process to determine the best fit among the more than 5,300 colleges and universities in the United States.

And so Dingledine, a man who has reached the pinnacle of his profession in a field that's changed rapidly over the four decades he's spent in education, tells students he works with to truly think about the decision – both for their own happiness and for the financial costs.

"It's not 'I was born in orange diapers and I've gone to every Clemson football game and I'm going to Clemson,'" Dingledine said. "And not that that's a bad choice, it's a great school. But nowadays it's a \$100,000 decision and that's not a good enough reason to make a \$100,000 decision."

Dingledine, the founder and owner of Educational Directions Inc. in Greenville, has created a career out of reading students, understanding their goals and apportioning advice.

And he wants you, high school student, to make the right choice for you.

There are three legs to the stool Dingledine uses to help students prepare to make their college selection.

First, students need to understand who they are and what they want to be.

Here, Dingledine quotes Fred Hargadon, former Dean of Admission at Princeton University: "The person you will spend most of your life with is yourself, and therefore you owe it to yourself to become as interesting as possible."

Second, they need to figure out and follow a process to make their decision.

Third, they need to evaluate how they make decisions. As an adolescent emerges into adulthood, the college choice can be a major step in personal growth. This is a process of learning about yourself, he said.

Dingledine makes these proclamations from inside the modest two-room windowless office he shares inside the University Center in Greenville.

As an independent college counselor, Dingledine has helped scores of students make their college selection, navigating their way from uncertain high school student to confident college freshmen.



(Photo: Nathaniel Cary/STAFF)

But he's really spent his entire 40-year career helping students prepare for college.

His chief goal is to eliminate the whim of a college choice and show students the many paths they can choose to higher education.



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And now his peers have said he's one of the best at his job.

Top of his craft

Dingledine graduated from the University of Virginia with a bachelor's degree in biology then earned a masters in education from Johns Hopkins University in 1973.

He taught at Boys Latin School in Baltimore for 12 years, rising as an administrator, then moved to Greenville in 1985 to become Assistant Headmaster and Upper School Director at Christ Church Episcopal School.

ADVERTISING

There, he developed the Greenville College Fair and improved the school's college counseling programs over the next 11 years before he decided he wanted to try something different, outside the school walls.

He'd been doing college counseling for years so he settled on becoming an independent counselor. His first clients came via word of mouth; he still had many connections to students at Christ Church. But over the years his network built to include students across all of Greenville's high school spectrum.

Essentially, he helps students from eighth grade through 12th grade figure out their educational goals beyond high school and what pathway to take.

"Most students and most parents think 'OK, middle school, high school, college and then job, and that's not always the best path,'" he said.

His preference is to work with students starting in eighth or ninth grade to determine their goals and shape their high school path to prepare them for their college pursuits.

More often, parents will call in a panic in the middle of a student's junior year or the beginning of their senior year, he said.

First he consults with parents and the student about their goals. Then he gives each student three tests to determine their personality, interests and abilities.

That helps both him and the student to find out who they are and helps him learn about the student, he said.

Then they talk about college and different ways to approach college and he begins to craft a list of colleges that the student may be interested in attending.

Some students want his help to get into a specific college or specific major – like an engineering school – while others don't know which direction to turn, he said.

Either way, "we work with a student and a family to make sure they're settled in the right place," he said.

He is not a broker for any colleges and he does not take over the entire college selection process for students.

He is an advisor. That is all.

"I don't fill out the applications for you," he said. "I don't write the essays for you. I don't fill out financial aid forms. I advise you, but you do all the work."
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He will talk with students about the essays and how admissions departments use them. He will help a student brainstorm topics and will read through essays "with the eyes of an admissions officer."

But it's vital that the student is involved in the decision and works toward the goal, he said.

Nic Poupore said he was looking at numerous colleges when he began to consult with Dingleline about his college search.

Poupore wanted to play soccer and wanted to attend a college with a quality science program.

Over a two-year period, he and Dingleline would meet to talk about his passions and interests to determine his best fit.

"A lot of times we ended up talking about interesting things just about life in general or about science or anything," Poupore said. "It wasn't always just focused on 'oh, what school do you want to go to?' and looking at statistics."

Eventually, Poupore chose Rose-Hulman Institute of Technology in Terra Haute, Indiana, a top engineering school where he could play soccer.

The first day of class, he was diagnosed with mononucleosis and had to withdraw. After soul-searching and consulting again with Dingleline, he switched

to the University of South Carolina's Honors College, where he is now a junior studying biology and planning to attend medical school.

Dr. Craig Horn said what he liked most about using Dingleline as a college consultant was it removed Horn and his wife, Judy Goodwin, from the process as their daughter, Lizzie, sought a small college with a quality biology program.

"It got us to not subtly push her in one direction or another, which I think you could do without meaning to," Horn said.

"A lot of the schools, of course, were places that we'd never heard of and would never have had any kind of inkling that they existed," Horn said.

Dingleline also encouraged Lizzie to apply for a little-known scholarship that she received, which covered a sizeable portion of her tuition.

"So he also saved us a ton of money," Horn said.

And recently, for his professionalism and dogged determination to allow high school students to take control of their college selection, Dingleline has been awarded a sort of lifetime achievement award from the nation's largest organization of professional college admissions counselors – the National Association for College Admission Counseling.

Dingleline choked up briefly at the mention, then said he wondered if they got the right guy.

"I get emotional just talking about it," he said.

The award hung next to his desk until recently on walls where pennants from a selection of colleges hung along with a decoration of a bicycle (Dingleline is a prolific cyclist).

And there's a photo of the Aspens, taken by his wife, Dale, who represents another side of their business.

Placement services

While college consulting represents three quarters of the work at Educational Directions, Dale Dingleline is responsible for the other quarter.

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As a psychotherapist, Dale Dingleline assists students and their families in finding therapeutic programs or alternative schools that may be a better fit for troubled students.

This portion of the business evolved from Dingleline's original plan after he began receiving calls from families whose children were facing significant behavior or educational challenges.

He consulted time and again with Dale, who has her own private practice, before finally asking her to come on board.

They will meet with parents, most who are at their wits end about their child's education, and they will provide some options, depending on circumstances.

Dale has built a Rolodex of therapeutic programs, boarding schools and summer programs that she will recommend and assist with placement depending on the circumstance.

Programs range from equine or music therapy camps to wilderness programs or boarding schools across the country. Dale, who attended a boarding school in high school, said she has visited every program she recommends.

Often, parents are to the point of wondering if their child will graduate at all, Bill said.

With a smile, he recounted stories of students who went through therapeutic programs or boarding school and found the right fit to tap into their desire to learn.

"Once the students find a good environment, it really makes a difference," Bill said.

Changes

The college consultant business has changed rapidly over the past 20 years. No longer are bookcases filled with college catalogues. Instead, those glossy catalogues have migrated online.

It's become more important for students to find their path before they get to college because it's increasingly difficult to switch majors while in school, Bill said.

But there continues to be a place for consultants to help families navigate the college selection process.

Bill said he has, on average, 30-35 clients each year that he's worked with extensively who graduate high school and head to college.

Now, after years of renting a space, Educational Directions is moving into a new office building, one it bought at 45 Greenland Drive in Greenville.

And he's not planning to slow down, though they now have three grandchildren.

Dingledine said he spends his mornings on paperwork or research and works with students most days from 3-8 p.m.

One recent night, Dingledine arrived home about 9 p.m. and thought he'd still be out working but needed to eat dinner.

Dingledine likes to explain to students the armillary that sits on his desk. It's a globe with an arrow through it, pointing up at an angle.

It represents the many paths ahead of them. Their lives are ahead of them, pointing up.

"But you need to head in a direction," he said.



(Photo: HEIDI HEILBRUNN/Staff, HEIDI HEILBRUNN/Staff)

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