

Newsletter helps take stress out of choosing a college

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Lynell Engelmyer speaks with Jacob Reich about college admissions and the financial aid process in St. James Square in Niskayuna. Photographer: [Barry Sloan](#)

After working for nearly a decade as an independent counselor helping teens get into college, Lynell Engelmyer of Niskayuna wanted to find a way to reach more teens and their parents.

The results of her efforts is a pre-college newsletter geared for those 13 and up and their parents called “Moving Forward: What Teens And Their Parents Need to Know in The Years Leading to College.”

“I’ve always enjoyed working with teens who might not otherwise get this information,” said Engelmyer, 40. “Their parents may not know what questions to ask because they haven’t been through it themselves, and there is this huge sense that all they want is something better for their children. That, combined with the fact that getting into college is so much more competitive today, really makes it intimidating.”

The goal of the newsletter is to take the stress out of choosing a college. The first copy is free. After that, it will cost \$36 for eight copies a year.

Some of the topics in the newsletter include “Teens and the Time Management Trap,” “A Few Words on High School Course Selection” and “Defining Yourself.”

“It’s designed in very bite-sized morsels,” said Engelmyer. “So if you read it over a period of time, you’ll be a better consumer, a better advocate, and you’ll understand the process better.”

Engelmyer estimates she has worked with more than 100 families in the Capital Region during the last decade.

Reaching more

“While I love the people I work with, I felt that I wasn’t necessarily touching the people that, in a perfect world, I would love to touch,” she said. “Hence my newsletter was born.”

Engelmyer said she loves to write in a style that is personable, a bit irreverent and funny, that even a teenager can find interesting.

“It’s basically to make people more educated consumers,” she said. “And to help teenagers understand that the choices they make today will have ramifications in the future.”

In her newsletter, she urges students to take the courses they need to fulfill their high school graduation requirements; to take what they like; and to take courses that challenge them.

While Engelmyer said she enjoys teaching people about financial aid and how to get into college, working with people is what she especially loves.

A graduate of the University of Pennsylvania with a master’s degree in higher education administration, Engelmyer has worked as the director of financial aid at Lebanon Valley College in Pennsylvania and in the admission offices at Union College. She has lived in Niskayuna for about 10 years.

“I never had any intention of doing independent college counseling,” said Engelmyer, the mother of two children ages 7 and 10, who is married to Dr. Eric Engelmyer, a urologist. “But people kept asking me for help, and I found myself enjoying the students and the families I was working with.”

Most parents don’t know where to begin, said Engelmyer. “It’s so much more competitive today,” she explained. “I think it leaves parents at a loss.”

Not all college students need independent counseling, she said.

“If you’re getting what you need out of your guidance office, take it,” she advised. “The problem is that the average student/guidance counselor ratio is 350 to one, if not higher.”

So some kids who don’t know where to start, need more structured guidance, she explained.

Getting teens to talk about themselves can be challenging, said Engelmyer.

“The one thing I’ve loved about all the teens I’ve worked with is I’ve found them to have great humility,” she said. “So I have to help them understand that there is a big difference between advocating for yourself and being arrogant or pompous.”

Engelmyer generally meets with teens and their parents three or four times. She also communicates via e-mail. She charges \$700.

“I spend a painstaking amount of time getting to know my kids during the first visit, then talking about what is unique about them,” she said. “Frequently, it’s what the student brings that is unique that will get them into a college.”

Engelmyer also volunteers to work with a few high-achieving, economically disadvantaged teens each year.

She said she begins working with approximately 40 percent of her families during the second half of their teen’s junior year, a small subset earlier, and the rest during the fall of their senior year.

Getting acquainted

During the first session, Engelmyer meets with teens and their parents for at least an hour to get to know them.

“The vast majority will change their major once they get to college. So the other piece for me is finding a school that is also a good interpersonal fit,” she said.

Next, she gets students a list of potential schools to apply to, worksheets to help them stay organized and a list of Web sites that are good resources.

She advises teenagers to visit the colleges they have chosen and to ask students, “If there is one thing you could change about this school, what would it be?”

“If somebody tells you, ‘The quality of the ground beef could be better,’ that’s a fabulous college,” said Engelmyer. “But if somebody says, ‘I can never get into class, and my professors aren’t accessible,’ that should raise a big red flag.”

When it comes to writing college essays, Engelmyer said the hardest part is figuring out where to start.

“Somebody is going to spend three to five minutes reading it. So we talk a lot about how to engage your reader,” she said.

As an example, she spoke about a high-school senior who had a challenging junior year. In addition to taking several honors courses and an advanced placement course, the student missed a lot of school because of illness. She suffered a stress fracture in her leg that kept her out of sports, and she got sick to her stomach while taking her SATs.

“She went on to write about the calamity of errors using a little bit of humor,” said Engelmyer. “The whole point of her essay was that she never gave up.”

Of the 15 students Engelmyer worked with last year, only two did not get into their top one or two choices. However, she advises students to apply to approximately 10 colleges to be safe.

“You have to take into account if you are going to get in, and are they going to give you enough money,” she said. “It’s really about making sure your risk has been spread.”

Satisfied client

Lou Manuta, whose 17-year-old son, Jesse, began using Engelmyer’s services when he was a junior, said the family found the process of applying to colleges overwhelming.

“Getting into any school is so much more competitive today than when I was in college,” said Manuta, 45. “You need a human guide to help you sort through it all.”

Engelmyer helped Jesse study for his ACT college entrance exam, and she helped Lou and his wife, Janet, fill out complicated financial aid forms. She also helped Jesse choose a college, Clark University in Worcester, Mass., that offered his chosen major, “Peace Studies.”

“It’s a relatively small school, and we had never even heard of it,” said Manuta. “But it turned out to be a good fit for Jesse.”

Jesse, who wants to be a rabbi, is going to spend his first year studying at the University of Haifa in Israel. He is one of 15 students in the United States chosen to study there.

“Lynell helped him with that application process as well,” said Manuta, who plans to use Engelmyer again for his daughter, Kayle, a sophomore in high school.

“Kayle’s interests will be different,” said Manuta. “I still think we need Lynell.”

Further information is available by contacting Engelmyer at Lynell@movingforwardnewsletter.com or looking at her Web site, www.movingforwardnewsletter.com