



Give it to Me Straight

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I spent most of my childhood believing that adults had everything figured out, which I’m sure is a sentiment that many can relate to. I also believed that the teachers, counselors, and advisors placed in positions of authority over my education had my best interests at heart and were genuinely invested in helping me succeed. However, my college application process dismantled these assumptions entirely.

I was, by the typical measures, the exact student the system is designed to serve. I had strong grades, a reputation for responsibility, and was “a joy to have in class.” Some might recognize these as stereotypes of the eldest daughter. Adults in my life responded to these academic results by telling me, repeatedly, that scholarships would come easily, doors would open, I was bound to be successful, and that my academic record would speak for itself. These assurances came from family and friends, as well as the high school guidance counselors and educators whose role it was to prepare me for this transition into college.

These reassurances did not prove to be true. While I did have many options as to where I was able to attend college, for which I am extremely grateful, the scholarships I had been promised were far scarcer than anticipated. I was forced to pivot late in the process, not due to lack of preparation, but because the guidance I had received was overly optimistic to the point of being misleading. I did my own research, submitted an application to the University of Alabama, a school eighteen hours away from home, and found a solution that worked for me. The position I am in now was because of research I did and actions I took. This process revealed something to me: The adults responsible for guiding me through one of the most important decisions of my life had not given me accurate information. I had to find my own path forward.

This is not an isolated failure of one disorganized school district or one unhelpful counselor. It reflects a pattern in how educational institutions communicate with their students. The guidance system, from high school counselors all the way to college advisors, leans towards reassurance. Students are told that they’re going to be fine, everything is okay, it’ll all work out. This kind of comfort can be harmful. When students are not given the realistic picture, they are unable to make informed decisions or build plans for when things do not go as promised.

Upon arriving at college, I found myself continuing to run into advisors who sugarcoated things and offered encouragement instead of honest counsel. I want to be clear: This is not an argument against using the institutional resources available to you. Office hours, advising appointments, ambassador meetings, and faculty relationships can be extremely valuable. The problem is not that these resources exist, it is that students aren’t taught to approach them critically. We are conditioned to defer to authority rather than to verify things we are told. Students need to understand that advisors operate within institutional guidelines that do not always align with the best interests of individual students. Fact-checking, seeking multiple perspectives, and doing independent research are acts of self-advocacy that the system should be encouraging. The students who navigate the higher education system most successfully are often those who learn to rely on themselves. This should not be a lesson that students are left to find out on their own. ●