**Be proactive.**

The earlier you start, the more options you will have. Waiting until the last minute WILL make your search harder, give you fewer options and cause more stress for you and your parents. Waiting can cost you opportunities to get admitted at some schools or a roster spot and scholarship money at another.

Do you know what the initial eligibility and clearninghouse is? What are NCAA’s academic requirements? How many scholarships are available? What is the NCAA’s amateurism center? How do I get test scores sent to a school? These are some things you’ll want to know but they pale in comparison to academic deadlines and scholarship timelines.

At some elite schools may have the ability to help your application along. If they do, it will be a very limited number and they will be much more likely to do so in the early action or admissions stages. Once coaches have used these slots, they’re gone so coaches use them selectively and early.

The same statement can be made for scholarships (academic and athletic) and roster spots. Athletically, once the letters of intent are signed and the available scholarship dollars are gone, there isn’t anything a coach can do until next year. Academically,“colleges are often more generous early on in the process” says Wabash’s Steve Barnes. He adds that colleges, “have a finite amount of money to give out, and as the year goes on, the competition for that academic money and admissions slots get harder and harder.”

That doesn’t mean you should sign early. In fact, for some athletes it may be beneficial to wait. Think of it like a race. You can go at your own pace, but the fact is if you aren’t ready to roll early in the process, you’re giving a head start to your competitors.

**Communicate Clearly and Effectively.**

Think of communication as a set of streets running in many different directions with and you’re in the middle. Are you stuck in the middle or are you the officer directing traffic? Keep the lines of communication open between you (the future student athlete) and not only the college coaches but between you, your parents, you your club and/or high school coach, your guidance counselor, and between you and any other resources you have available.

While it is OK for your parents to have a role in the process, the lines of communication should all run through you. Parental over-involvement makes it difficult for coaches to make decisions about student athletes and can in some cases hurt their kids. Minnesota State-Mankato coach Nathan Owens explains:

“If a parent does all the talking for their son or daughter during a face to face Q & A session, this might raise concerns for some coaches. Many coaches are seeking young adults that can demonstrate people skills, communications skills, and have positive interactions with others during a recruiting visit. If mom or dad dominates the conversations, then coaches may leave asking themselves if this young person is a good fit for their program.

**Tap Into Every Resource**

One of the biggest things recruits and parents do is neglect the information available to them. They include:

* **Guidance Counselors:** While you will (hopefully) only choose a college once and while your parents may know a bit more if they’ve helped older siblings through the process, guidance counselors are on the front lines of college recruiting having helped dozens or even hundreds of students and parents through the process. At a bare minimum they are needed to help process your applications, make sure your transcripts, test scores and recommendations are attached, and that things go out on time. They can also help generate a list of schools that match you academically, and even assist with essays and applications. They won’t know as much about the swimming side of the equation, but there are other resources for that.
* **Your Coaches:** Your coaches understand the sport and know you as an athlete and as such should have a role. They compliment our guidance counselor with perspective on the process, the players and where you might fit in. If you’re a highly sought-after recruit, you can bet that college coaches have already spoken with your coach about you. If you’re an up-and-comer, your coach can be an advocate for you and help you identify a place where you can be a college swimmer and get a great education.
* **Parents:** This one seems obvious, but isn’t always the case. At some point, you will need their input, assistance (and probably money). They probably know you better than you realize and will have insights into the right environment for you. Ask what they know and let them help. They want the best for you!
* **CollegeSwimming.com:** Imagine being able to search for a team by size, location, school type, cost and more. Now you can with Collegeswimming.com’s new School Search Tool It can help you narrow down the 540 choices. Build a list of schools. Compare them side-by-side. Even click “How I Fit” to see where you would rank on their depth chart. CollegeSwimming.com also provides exclusive tips and advice to registered recruits and their parents. You can register for free at www.collegeswimming.com/recruitme/.

**The search belongs to you**

Even though you will want to use your network of resources, remember, the search process belongs to you. You (not your parents, not your guidance counselor) need to be the one doing the work since it is your life that is most impacted by the decision at the end. College coaches can tell when the email came from mom or dad, the same way that the admissions officers can sniff out an essay written for the student rather than by the student. Coaches and admissions offices need to know that you are interested in their school, not mom or dad!!

**Don’t get tunnel vision or be a “snob.”**

It’s easy to get fixated on what you might see (especially at the start of your search) as the “perfect fit.” Consider two things, though as you search for the “perfect” fit. Second, there are other schools out there that are almost as perfect. If you get tunnel vision, you may miss out on some great educational and athletic opportunities.

Just because you (or your parents or friends) haven’t heard of a school means that it’s not any good. By the same token, don’t assume that you will be a perfect fit for each school. Dan Rhinehart at George Washington University finds that such assumptions are far too common. “I probably receive 20-30 emails each day from people who do not know that we are a Division I school - or they haven't taken the time to review our top times or "Recruitable Times" to see if they might be a good fit for the program.”

Even Division III schools face the same challenge. Oberlin’s Mark Fino turns the question around noting that just as there are many great programs, there are even more great swimmers. “I wish every kid and parent knew that there are thousands of them out there. “

There are 540 men’s teams and slightly more than 600 women’s teams out there and there are many successful people who went to colleges and universities you’ve never heard of. In truth, your search will be a fluid process because even the perfect fit is not as perfect as you think. There will be schools that drop from consideration and there may be a finalist on your list at the end that you wouldn’t have dreamed of at the start, so keep an open mind.

**This is your first BIG decision. Treat it accordingly.**

Selecting college and college swimming program is one of the first big picture decisions that you will make. If you don’t take the time to do it right will you have the time to do it over? Probably not, so gather information, do your homework, and use our resources to make the right decision. A great search process won’t just help you find a great education. It will prepare you to make decisions for life.

You are about to begin an amazing process. It will be exciting. It will be exhausting. It will be fun and it will be stressful, but remember that you can control the process and if you are proactive, open minded, and communicate with those involved, it can be rewarding and it will help prepare you for success in college and life.

Next, we will put together a calendar of things to do and consider as your junior year begins.