

Match Matters: The Big Idea

New to KIPP Through College? Start here to better understand KIPP’s recommended approach to college counseling and the critical research underlying our focus on “Match Matters.”

Here’s what we know:

1. **Where a student goes to college matters – a lot.** While every student is unique, a college’s statistical data can tell us how likely it is that students will graduate in four years. In particular, historic graduation rates help us identify colleges and universities with a demonstrated track record of graduating Latino and black students in four to six years. In general, a students’ likelihood of graduation increases dramatically based on the selectivity of the college they choose to attend. (Selectivity measures how difficult it is to get in.) It’s not an exact science, which is why it’s important to look at the data for individual institutions.
2. **Too often, first-generation students and those from low-income communities aren’t matriculating to their academic “Match.”** Consistent with national research, we know that KIPPsters are “under-matching” during both the college application and decision phases by not submitting enough applications to schools that align with their academic profiles. (Choosing, instead, schools that are not rigorous enough.) And, too often, they are choosing to attend schools with lower historic graduation rates than other schools to which they were admitted.
3. **There’s a way to reverse the trend.** Experts recommend students apply to a diverse portfolio of schools (tailored to students’ individual academic profiles) to increase both their choices and their chance of college success. By influencing and supporting our students in the college application and decision process (as well as the financial aid process), we can have a direct impact on the odds that they’ll graduate.
4. **Match works.** We’ve seen the power of this approach in action. KIPP students who follow our recommended strategy of applying to 6+ target and reach schools (based on their individual academic profiles) matriculate to colleges with higher historic graduation rates for black and Latino students than peers at similar academic performance levels who apply to fewer target and reach schools. And this is true for students at all levels of academic performance.

What this means for a strong College Match program:

A strong College Match program builds on research and our experience to support students in researching, applying, and matriculating to college. We support critical student behaviors and key performance indicators in the process:



- **Understand why Match matters:** Students should start preparing for match early, with a strong focus beginning in Junior Year. Work with students to follow the five keys (below) to ensure they have a solid foundation for the match process.
- **Build a Smart Wish list:** Ensure students build a “wish List” of nine or more schools, balanced across likely, target, and reach schools. (Think “3-3-3” for 3 likely, 3 target and 3 reach or a total of at least 6 “likely plus”, target, or reach schools.) Counselors can help students prioritize schools within each category (likely, target, reach) that have strong track records of graduating students, are more affordable, and are a strong fit with students’ preferences (e.g., location, majors offered, campus size, social life, etc.).
- **Submit applications early to all wish list schools:** Wish lists aren’t just an exercise; they are precise tools to guide where a student should apply to college. Work with students to ensure they’re applying to the right schools and track completion of each application component to ensure submission by Thanksgiving break.
- **Submit FAFSA and other financial aid forms before the priority deadline:** Work closely with families to help them understand the financial aid process and to ensure they submit forms well ahead of priority deadlines.



- **Make the best choice:** In the weeks before Decision Day, check in frequently to help answer questions, decode award letters, and help students prioritize acceptances that (a) have strong track records of graduating students, (b) fall below our suggested debt rule of thumb; and (c) are a strong fit with students' preferences (e.g., location, majors offered, campus size, social life, etc.).
- **Make a strong transition:** After students make their decisions, they have to complete critical matriculation steps to enroll and ensure success in the fall. Support students over the summer in drafting their college and career plan, registering for courses and paying their bill, and setting up other logistics.

Making this happen may look different depending on your region. No matter your model, we believe there are a few high-leverage things counselors can do:

- **Conduct 1-on-1s** with college juniors and seniors. During O3s, counselors can ensure students are on track, check in on critical milestones, and provide feedback on wish lists and application plans.
- **Use Data Tools** to influence decision-making. Our student and counselor Match tools give teams the data they need to talk about affordability, financial aid, and projected college graduation rate with their students.
- **Build Family Investment** at every step of the Match process. Support and buy-in is critical, and we've created resources with family investment in mind.

What it takes for students to prepare for Match:

We have learned that preparation is critical to the match process. We tell students that there are five keys to prepare for Match. Ideally, students think about these long before they actually applying to college (and by 9th grade at the latest):

GET AN EARLY START: Getting applications in ahead of admission deadlines ensures access to the largest pool of aid and, in some cases, increased odds of acceptance. Applying early also allows students to discuss Early Decision and Early Action options with counselors.

REFLECT ON YOUR GOALS: START COLLEGE AND CAREER PLAN: Search for colleges with goals in mind. If students build their wish lists considering their academic options and plans, they will be more likely to finish applications and consider matriculation.

PREPARE FOR THE COST OF COLLEGE: Navigating financial aid isn't easy for any applicant. But it can be particularly challenging for first-generation students and their families, who often lack the benefit of prior experience and knowledge. That's why ongoing financial aid education, counseling, and support is so critical.

KNOW YOUR NUMBERS: A student's GPA and college entrance exam scores (ACT, SAT) directly impact their likelihood of acceptance and their access to financial aid. Students need to take the time to understand the implications of their scores and how to improve them.

PREPARE TO BUILD A SMART WISH LIST: First-generation students often under-match because they don't apply to enough schools, especially enough target and reach schools. **Often, students fall into two patterns: either only applying to schools where they have a very high likelihood of getting admitted (we call those "likely") or only applying to likely schools and those that are a true long-shot (we call those a "far reach").**^[1] Put simply, we know students have to take more – and smarter! - shots to score the goal. We encourage students to apply to a portfolio of 9 or more colleges, including a smart balance of likely, target, and reach schools. This can be a mix of 3 likely schools, 3 target schools, and 3 reach schools (3-3-3), or a total of at least 6 "likely plus", target, or reach schools. Likely plus schools are those where (a) students have a very high likelihood of getting admitted AND (b) they have higher graduation rates. Introduce the data and rationale to students before wish list building.

^[1] Want to see the research? Check it out [here!](#)