

## Some Guidance for College Bound Swimmers and their Parents

### Introduction

I am writing this short guide at the suggestion of several SPY parents who, like me, are beginning the college search process with their children. Because they enjoy the competition and camaraderie associated with swimming at SPY, many of our children would like to continue swimming in college. The good news is that nearly 400 colleges have men's swimming programs – nearly 500 in the case of women. 18,000 men and women participate in these programs. These numbers, and the fact that the level of competition varies widely from program to program, mean that **any SPY swimmer who chooses to can continue to enjoy the sport in college.**

But with so many programs to choose from, how can families find the school that is the best fit for their child? In the pages that follow I share some of the information and advice I have received during the past six months as I have worked with my daughter to narrow her college choices. But before getting into the details, here are some initial, overarching thoughts:

**Focus on the college first – and the swimming program second** - The college experience is a critical stepping-stone for all young men and women. It is the time when they learn to live and think independently, and when they prepare themselves for their future careers. So before considering swimming programs, sit down with your child and answer some basic questions: What sort of academic environment is the best fit for your child? Are there specific careers or areas of study that you are interested in? Do you want to focus on large universities, small colleges or the many schools that lie in between? Is there an area of the country that you are most interested in? Once you have answered these questions, **then** begin to research the swimming programs in the schools that meet your overall criteria.

**Make your search for a swimming program an integrated part of your broader college search process** – Work with your high school's college guidance program as you investigate swimming at the college level. Let your college counselor know that your child wants to swim in college. Most counselors have experience in advising college-bound athletes, and can provide useful information and assistance. In addition, they can help make sure that colleges receive the admissions information they need on time (including information needed for NCAA eligibility).

**Play an active role in finding a swimming program for your child** – Most swimmers won't be actively recruited unless families seize the initiative first. With more than 100,000 boys and girls competing at the high school level, most college coaches will only contact swimmers who show an interest in their programs. This means that you and your child must do the research necessary to identify swimming programs that are good fits, and contact those programs to let them know you are interested. Nearly all college swimming programs have on-line questionnaires for prospective athletes on their web pages. Fill them out for

all colleges your child has an interest in. Contact coaches at your targeted colleges by email to learn more about their programs, and when you visit your top choices arrange to meet with the coaching staff.

**Put your child in the driver's seat ... but be a back seat driver** – Work to get your child excited about the college search process, and ask them to play a lead role in researching schools and swimming programs. And once you have identified potential colleges together, let your child initiate contact with swimming programs. Most coaches would rather communicate with swimmers than their parents.

**Keep your options open in the early stages of your college search, and don't focus on one school too early in the process** – Many college counselors suggest that high school students apply to five or six colleges, including both “stretch” and “safety” schools in the mix. To come up with this short list of colleges, most families begin by exploring a larger number of schools – typically a dozen or so – and then narrow their choices over time. This approach has several advantages. Students often change their minds about what they want in a college during the search process, and casting your net widely in the early stages allows students to compare colleges and make a smart choice in the end. In addition, actively exploring a range of schools is a good hedging strategy in case your child is not admitted to their school of choice or the swimming program they have targeted loses interest.

**Take advantage of the many online resources that exist for prospective college swimmers** – We live in the information age after all, so use the many college swimming web sites to help you during your search. Some of the more important web sites are mentioned in the FAQ section below. A good place to start is **collegeswimming.com**. This site has the most extensive coverage of college swimming news, has links to colleges with swimming programs and their conferences as well as message boards on a variety of swimming-related topics.

## Frequently Asked Questions

### **How can I identify college swimming programs that are good fits for my child?**

This takes a little legwork. Once you have a sense of what kind of colleges your child is interested in (big vs. small, academically selective or less so, etc.) use [collegeswimming.com](http://collegeswimming.com) to navigate to the web sites for potential schools. All college swimming programs, from top Division I schools through the smallest Division III programs, have team web sites. They all include results from recent meets. Compare the times from these meets to your child's times. You will pretty quickly get a sense of which schools your child can successfully compete at. In addition, look at the results from the many college swimming conference championships that are held each year to see how your child fits in. Supplement what you learn on line with conversations with other parents and coaches. Then contact the schools that look like reasonable fits to get more information, and talk with coaches and current swimmers to identify programs that you are comfortable with.

## **Can swimming help my child get admitted to his or her schools of choice?**

The answer is generally yes – but only up to a point. Swimming can often provide college applicants with an edge in the admissions process. At many schools coaches will work with admissions officers on behalf of recruited swimmers. But at the end of the day applicants need to fit within a college's academic profile. After all, no school (or coach) wants to admit student athletes who are unlikely to succeed in their course work. Coaches are often straightforward in communicating academic requirements to prospective swimmers and their parents. This is good for all concerned.

## **Where can I get information concerning NCAA rules governing the recruiting process?**

The NCAA has issued complicated rules that govern the recruiting process. They include limits on the timing and manner of communications between coaches and prospective athletes, and are too lengthy to explain in this document. A table that summarizes these rules can be found at the following link:

[http://www1.ncaa.org/membership/membership\\_svcs/recruiting\\_calendars/2006-07/recruitingchart.pdf](http://www1.ncaa.org/membership/membership_svcs/recruiting_calendars/2006-07/recruitingchart.pdf)

Another lengthier and very useful source of information is the NCAA Guide for the College-Bound Student-Athlete. This document discusses eligibility requirements and recruiting rules, and provides advice for student-athletes and their families. It can be downloaded in PDF format from the following address:

[http://www.ncaa.org/library/general/cbsa/2007-08/2007-08\\_cbsa.pdf](http://www.ncaa.org/library/general/cbsa/2007-08/2007-08_cbsa.pdf)

It is important that swimmers and their parents learn and follow the rules during the recruiting process to avoid putting coaches in an uncomfortable position.

## **What is the NCAA Eligibility Center and how does the academic eligibility process work?**

The NCAA Eligibility Center evaluates high school students' academic records to determine whether they are eligible to participate at the Division I or Division II level.

To register with the Eligibility Center, you must complete the Student Release Form and amateurism questionnaire online and send the eligibility center the registration fee (\$50 for domestic and \$75 for international students). This Student Release Form does two things: 1) It authorizes each high school you have attended to send the eligibility center your transcript, test scores, proof of graduation and other necessary academic information. 2) It authorizes the eligibility center to send your academic information to all colleges that request your eligibility status. The registration process must be

completed on-line. Prospective athletes usually register during their junior year in high school. The following web link will connect you to the Center:

<https://web1.ncaa.org/eligibilitycenter/common/>

### **What steps should swimmers take during their junior year?**

Train hard and continue to perform successfully as an athlete

Do well in school, and start noticing which academic areas interest you. Junior year academic performance is especially important.

Make sure you are taking tough courses- colleges prefer students who challenge themselves

You should take the SAT's in the spring- especially if you are applying early. Consider taking them more than once, since colleges will combine scores to give students the highest overall result.

Register with the NCAA Eligibility Center

Start thinking actively about where you would like to go to school. Make a list of 10-15 colleges that interest you. Consult with your parents, friends, and counselors to get their input on schools.

Evaluate swimming programs from different schools. Research team and conference results to see where you'd fit in. Don't be afraid of contacting coaches to get information about their programs. Emailing a coach is a great way of both learning about and showing interest in a particular program.

Make unofficial visits to schools in which you are interested. Keep a journal with notes about what you like or dislike about each college. Inform your teachers that you will be missing work.

### **What about financial aid and scholarships?**

College costs continue to escalate, and paying for college is a major challenge for many families. Swimmers and parents should get an early start in exploring opportunities for financial assistance. Some basic advice:

Make use of your high school counselors, college financial-aid office, and the Web. Call the financial-aid offices of your top-choice schools, let them know you're a prospective student, and ask if you have all the forms needed. You don't need to be planning to attend a specific school in order to call and ask questions or even set up a meeting with financial-aid officers. It's best to find out your options before applying.

The Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) is as important as filling out your college application. If you don't fill out the FAFSA, you won't be eligible for federal aid. Check in your counselor's office for a form, or apply online at [www.fafsa.ed.gov](http://www.fafsa.ed.gov).

Scholarships are one way to cover the cost of education without getting into debt. Give yourself plenty of time to search for scholarships and write essays. You can get scholarships based on your ethnicity, academic achievements, extracurricular activities, and special skills.

Due to the high cost of schooling, scholarships and grants often don't cover the cost of your education entirely. In this case, you may find yourself relying on loans. Federal loans, such as the Perkins Loan, Stafford Loan or PLUS Loan, are examples. Both the Stafford and the Perkins loans are taken out in your name. Your parents, on the other hand, can borrow through the PLUS loan program. Ask at your school's financial-aid office to see which lenders they prefer. Then, shop around to see who can offer what you need.

In addition to the financial aid options mentioned above, many Division I and II swimming programs also offer athletic scholarships to talented swimmers. The NCAA allows each Division I swimming program 9.9 scholarships for men and 14 for women. In Division II, schools are allowed 8.1 scholarships for men and women alike. Not all swimming programs are "fully funded" however – some offer fewer than the maximum number of scholarships, and some none at all. So you will need to explore the issue of scholarships with each of the schools you are interested in. Not surprisingly, the swimmers with the best times are most likely to receive scholarship assistance. To gauge your likelihood of qualifying for a scholarship look at a team's times from the past year. In addition, look at times from the relevant conference championships to see if your child would score points. Then talk to coaches at your targeted schools about scholarships during the recruiting process – but be realistic about your child's abilities.

## **Some last thoughts**

Swimming is a great sport. Swimming programs at the college level offer SPY athletes an opportunity to continue their swimming careers while creating a new network of friends. While swimming in college requires dedication and an often-serious commitment of time, swimmers often perform better academically than their fellow students. As noted in the introduction, every SPY swimmer who desires to swim in college can choose from a large number of schools that fit their abilities. It is my hope that this short guide will help these swimmers get started with their college search. I will try to supplement this document from time to time based on feedback from SPY parents and as I learn more.

I encourage parents and swimmers to work with your SPY coaches during the search process. Recruiting questionnaires uniformly ask swimmers to provide contact information for their club coaches. Make sure you let your SPY coaches know when you list them on these forms. And they in turn will let you know when they are contacted by a college coach.

Best of luck to all of you. I hope that everyone gets into his or her college of choice. Just remember that it is what you do once you get in that matters most.