SUPPORTING YOUR STUDENT

A Parent’s Guide to College Transition

High School graduation with all of its pomp and circumstance (the pictures, the signing of year books, the prom, the family dinner and celebrations) is an important milestone. It marks, to some degree, the moment that children become adults. These new adults have incredible decisions to make during and following this time. What do I want to do? Should I go to college? Should I work? What about the military? For them, after the flashes stop and mortar boards are tossed in the air, reality arrives with a list of things that they must attend to.

This transition is often down played. Many times people don’t recognize the enormity of this transition, not just for the student; but even more so for the parents. Society doesn’t see the countless sleepless nights spent up with a restless newborn, a sick toddler, or a “late from a date” teenager. Society doesn’t see the mountains of diapers changed, the tons of clothes washed, dinners prepared, and days where parents rearrange their schedules to attend a recital or sporting event. Most importantly, society doesn’t see how much the lives of parents become about their children. Because of this, society (higher education in particular) leaves parents out.

College representatives from all over the country flock to high schools and hand out glossy booklets rife with panoramic shots of their campuses. They talk to the students about “majors” and “credits hours” and tell them how much fun they will have, and how many of their students get jobs after they graduate. The students are sent tons of information about programs and are given applications…all the while the only correspondence for parents are lists of how to pay for college. This, for many parents, is very difficult. For eighteen years, they have been involved in every facet of their children’s life from what they eat to what they wear. Then, suddenly, they are treated as though irrelevant, or worse, as an ATM.

This is the story of thousands of parents, working to do what is best for their children. This however does not have to be so. There are a few things that each parent can know, to help through this process!

1. **Understand that this transition is difficult for your student. Do what you can to keep the lines of communication open!**
   - This is likely their first major decision, and most students are overwhelmed. The last thing they need is an equally panicked parent! Here is one great way to keep the lines of communication open!
     i. Ask questions vs. making statements – Asking questions allows you to know where your student is. From there, you can both begin to explore their interests together. The more you ask, the more you know. The more you know, the more you can help!

2. **Don’t play the Name Game**
   - Students initially want to go to the well-known schools. If you ask a high school freshman where they want to go to college they will likely say: Wisconsin, UCLA, U of I, or Michigan. But that is only because they KNOW the names. However, many people graduate from: Edgewood, Carroll, North Central, and Albion (all of which are in the same states as the schools mentioned before).
   - Letting your student put the pressure on themselves, or you putting the pressure on your student to pursue “prestige” may not be the best approach. Help them think outside of the box! Here are some great questions to ask about the schools:
     i. What do you like about the schools you mentioned?
     ii. What do you think you’d like to study?
     iii. Would you like to look at some other schools that are similar and have the same programs just for comparison?
3. Help your students develop selection criteria!
   - As previously mentioned, getting students to think about what they want in a school will help them find a school that fits them. Often, there are programs at smaller schools that are actually as good, or even better, than the programs at larger well-known schools. However, students won’t come to that decision on their own, so if you help them develop a list of criteria for what they are looking for, they will actually eliminate schools that are not a good fit! Here’s some samples of criteria:
     i. Size – Do you want to attend a large, midsized, or small school?
     ii. Public vs. Private – Do you want to go to a public or private?
     iii. Cost – After financial aid, what is the cost of the school?
     iv. Campus Life – Do they have clubs you are interested in? Is it a commuter campus?

4. Set up a college visit
   - College visits are one of the best ways to evaluate a school. All schools look good in brochures; it takes getting on campus, talking with the admissions office and current students, sitting in on a class, and taking a tour to really help a student decide if this college is the right fit for them. College visits can be done throughout the year, just contact the admissions office to set up a tour and/or an appointment. You can also see if they host special visit days throughout the year.

5. Finding a Major isn’t that easy: Don’t panic! They will decide
   - This is a great piece of advice. What it means is don’t get bent out of shape about things that aren’t really a big issue. Particularly, parents get afraid when their students are not sure about what major that want to pursue. This is a big communication trap; this is where parents can really hurt their ability to partner with their students in this process.
   - Remember that the majority of people that have professional jobs don’t actually work in the fields in which they studied. This has its limitations, but for the most part, remember that college is about developing skill sets and acquiring knowledge, and worrying about job prospects does not actually create more of them. Encourage your student to get involved, often through this they will find something about which they are passionate (or at the very least have interest) and the ‘problem’ will solve itself.

6. Acknowledge and engage your student’s decision in a major. Don’t openly criticize their choice.
   - Your phone rings. On the other end is your excited daughter, she found her major! (Cue the music). Full of pride and excitement, you think to yourself ‘could it be law? Engineering? Education?’ Impatiently you ask: ‘what is it?!’ She says: ‘Sub-Saharan Reptilian Archaeological Photography’

     Inwardly, your brain breaks in half. You have a choice: you can understandably, begin to berate her for this ‘foolish’ decision; or you can acknowledge the fact they she made a decision, and engage her interest and work to understand how she arrived at this place. Some great questions are:
     i. I don’t know much about that; could you tell me more about it?
     ii. What do you like most about the program?
     iii. I know you’ve been trying to figure out what you want to study, and I am glad you made a choice, what led you to this program?

   These sorts of question keep the lines of communication open, and still allow you to get the answer to the real question you had which is: ‘what were you thinking?’ Except, this time, they will want to tell you the answer!

7. Don’t preoccupy yourself with career paths – Jobs and Success are not determined by majors
   - This has been touched on, but it really needs its own point. As a parent, I remember the day my son was born. I remember holding him for the first time wrapped in a grey towel with a white cap on to keep his head warm. The moment I looked at him, without warning, my mind begins to cast visions of who we would be. However, I constantly have to remind myself that those visions are mine and not his, and although I want him to have a smooth path to success, I know in reality there are no paved roads to our destiny; they all have bumps, potholes, and if you’re from Illinois, they have tolls!

   - So, what am I saying? Do not hold them to that magical vision you had at their birth. Remember that success is not determined by the degree you get; but related to the skills you acquire and employ to reach your stated goals. Martha Steward majored in history…but she is the Do It Yourself guru and has a significant financial empire as a result. Let them explore, just be there to make sure they don’t end up in a ditch. Remember: There is more than one way to get just about everywhere. You can be a companion or an adversary, companions can help navigate and get them to where they really want to be; adversaries aren’t even along for the ride.
8. Don’t let the initial cost stop you from looking at a school
   - Sticker Price vs. Actual Price – Both parents and students panic when they see a large number next to the name of a school. Many times, they will immediately dismiss it as an option. They react to what we call “The Sticker Price” this is the advertised cost that they see. However, the actual price could be MUCH lower.

   - You will discover in our financial aid information related to calculating financial need, I am going to give you the basic version, and then you can read our “Financial Aid Process” fact sheet and see it in action! The short version: when you fill out a FAFSA it will generate the “Expected Family Contribution.” This is the estimated number you will be expected to pay for school. Now, before you get upset or panic! (Too late?) It is important to know that the EFC is really just ONE PART of a larger equation. This is an important equation because it will determine what financial aid you get!

   - So I mentioned an equation…what else is a part of it? Well, the first part is actually the Cost of Attendance (COA). This is the actual amount of money it costs to attend school, live there, eat, pay for books, etc. This number, in some cases, is actually larger than the sticker price! Again, don’t panic because the BEST part is coming.

   - The equation then: COA – EFC = Financial Need. What does that mean? The long and short of it is that you get packaged financial aid based upon your financial need. Since your EFC stays the same in all equations, changing the price of the school changes the financial need you demonstrate. So the Paradox of Federal Student Aid: It may be more financially advantageous to you to attend a more expensive school because you will demonstrate more financial need vs. going to a cheaper one. Meaning: you **could** pay less at a more expensive school! So don’t disqualify them based on the sticker price!

9. Help your students learn how to budget
   - College students, except in very rare cases, do not possess extensive wealth! For this reason, it is important that they learn how to think about the financial aspects of college. Though most would love say otherwise, students are not all that adept at handling money in a long-term sense. This is where you are extremely valuable. Helping them to set up a realistic budget (with fun included) will help them frame and conceptualize their experiences and make better choices.

   - Like all of us, if we don’t really see how much we do or don’t have, we won’t be judicious about how we spend our funds. Obviously, these are good habits to form…and being a parent, you managed to do it for your adult life! This is a great conversation to have BEFORE your student leaves for school because it is more effective to have that lens going into the process.

10. Don’t be afraid to ask for help
    - People, in general, feel like a burden when they have to ask for things. There is this little voice inside them that tells them that they ‘should’ know this information. For this reason, questions are more of a test of courage and will, than a vehicle by which to gain information. However, it is important that you ask questions.

    - The simple rule that I give: If your student applied, you can ask pretty much any question you want. Schools don’t put this out there, but they typically don’t answer questions about specific things like financial aid until your student has applied. If they have applied, you have the golden key to ask what you need to know. Even without applying, if you want to know something…Ask. The only dumb question is the one that is not asked.

Thank you for taking the time to read this information. I will actually have the MP3 version of this soon, so that you can listen to it. I would recommend keeping this list. As a professional in this field, I have seen the power of parents choosing to be companions rather than adversaries. Also, as a parent, I wrestle with a lot of the things that are mentioned in this work.

Please know that according to me: Parents are important tool! Together, we can help support your students and watch them become the people they were meant to be!

Thank You,

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