



CollegeReadyParent™

HANDBOOK

**For Parents of University of Central Arkansas'
Family Network**



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ABOUT COLLEGEREADYPARENT™

We want to equip parents to become more effective supporters of their student's success. In our respective positions at universities, we work with students when they are first arriving and trying to adapt to the college experience. We have firsthand experience with the influence that parents have on their student's success. And, as parents ourselves, we want to gain insight - and share that insight - about what it takes to succeed in college, and how parents can help students succeed. CollegeReadyParent.org is designed to provide information, insights, and guidance for parents and other adults who want to provide positive and effective support to the students they love.

MEET THE AUTHORS



AMY BALDWIN, Ed.D. is a renowned educator and educational entrepreneur. She wrote the first, ground-breaking student success textbook for community colleges and the first student success textbook for first-generation students. In response to nationwide demand, in 2011 she founded Educational Frontiers Group (EFG), which provides educational services, such as consulting, professional development, and educational novelties. After 18 years as an award winning community college professor, she now serves as Director of University College at the University of Central Arkansas.



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TRANSITION FROM HIGH SCHOOL TO COLLEGE

Question: I know college professors are different than high school teachers, but I am not sure what they do that is so different besides teaching fewer classes and not communicating with parents directly.

Answer: One of the biggest transitions that first-year students have to make is in how they view the person at the front of the classroom. Although professors and high school teachers might appear to have similar roles, responsibilities, and backgrounds, they are quite different in many ways. Here are some important insights about college professors:

College professors

- **Usually do not have a degree or background in teaching.** This does not mean they are not good at teaching or don't care about teaching and learning; it does mean that many were not formally trained and are most likely not completely evaluated on their teaching.
- **Do have a background in their discipline or subject matter and usually have an advanced degree or two in that subject matter.** What this means is they are often committed to the pursuit of new knowledge about their area of expertise. For example, an economics professor may be involved in research on community-based economies of third-world countries. They often use that expertise to inform how they teach students.
- **Want to teach curious students.** They will have little patience for students who don't want to do the work or are not interested in the subject matter because they see no relevance.
- **Have a full plate of duties outside the classroom.** They are most likely serving on a committee or two; running a research project or lab; coordinating student workers; writing books, articles, and grants; and participating in the governance of the institution. This is, in fact, a short list and most professors are doing everything on that list and more!
- **Expect that students act like adults and take their classes seriously.** Most professors have not dealt with classroom management issues that high school teachers face on a daily basis. Therefore, they may be intolerant of students who show up late, make appointments that conflict with their classes, try to use their smartphones in class, or do not participate in class.
- **Come from all backgrounds and experiences.** Your student's college professors may be more diverse than her high school teachers. Because of this diversity, it is imperative that your college student act and speak with respect and don't make assumptions about a professor. They may learn about another culture or world view from their professor, which is part of their learning process if they are not used to diversity in their instructors.
- **Expect professional-level communication at all times, especially in email communication.** This means they prefer to be addressed formally as "Dr." or "Prof." rather than "Mr." or "Ms." They also expect that unless they otherwise encourage a more informal class environment, students are to treat their classes as a formal environment in which the professor is afforded a great deal of respect and students act with professionalism.

Question: I keep hearing about how important the syllabus is. I hate to ask, but what is a syllabus and why is it so important?

Answer: You may have heard someone at the university call the *syllabus* the "contract" of the course, and professors see it as a document that outlines what they will be doing in the course and what students will be doing in the course. A syllabus usually contains the following information:

- **Instructor contact information.** Some provide email addresses and others include phone numbers.
- **Instructor office location and office hours.** Where the professor will be and when he is available to meet with students on a regular basis. He may be located in an office area that is open from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday through Friday, but his availability may be only from 2 p.m. to 4 p.m. on Thursdays.

- **Course resources.** This is where students can find what is required and what is recommended for the course. Your student will need to obtain (through purchase, rental, or loan) the required resources for the course.
- **Learning objectives.** This is where your student can find out what she will learn throughout the course and what she will be able to do by the end of the course.
- **Grading information.** Your student will be given information about how he will be graded throughout the term.
- **Assignments.** Tests? Papers? Projects? There should be information in the syllabus about the scope and frequency of the required work.
- **Other Policies.** These usually entail attendance, late and make-up work (if any is accepted), academic integrity, and disability needs.

When there is an issue or a misunderstanding between the student and professor, looking at the syllabus is usually the first step to resolution. Your college student needs to keep every syllabus she receives at least until the end of the term.

Question: My daughter talks about how no one takes attendance in college and that she can pretty much attend as many classes as she wants to as long as she shows up for the test. Is this true?

Answer: This is where a little bit of myth can run smack into a big dose of reality—and no one really wants to get caught in the middle of that collision. Yes, your daughter most likely has had professors who say they don't take attendance or they don't care who attends as long they show up for test day, but we also bet your daughter has had professors who have been much stricter about attending and have even told students that they would be dropped if too many days are missed. Both can possibly be true, and it is most likely that your daughter has a combination of faculty who care and don't care about how many classes their students miss.

However, missing classes even in a class where attendance will not affect grades or status in the class is a slippery slope to a bad idea. Most first-year students don't know the ropes well enough to determine for themselves whether or not they are able to miss classes and still learn the material well enough to be successful in the classes. That is why we strongly encourage all students to go to every class they can. Even if your daughter doesn't think that the professor is covering anything "important," she may miss an announcement or a tip about completing an assignment accurately. Plus, she can demonstrate how much she cares about the class and grade by going to class.

Question: I want my son to give me his login information so I can get into his university email account and check for any important information. What should I be looking for?

Answer: Parents should not ask for or use their student's login credentials. It's your student's responsibility to monitor his emails, and, in most cases, such practices are forbidden by the University's information security policies. Parents who ask their students for their login credentials may be causing the student to violate campus policies and jeopardize their access to the university's technology resources.

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TIME MANAGEMENT AND STUDY SKILLS

Question: My student earned good grades in high school. Does that mean she will be able to transition more easily to college?

Answer: It depends. Does she have a mindset to understand that she can better at something through more effort? Did she work very hard and use a variety of study strategies to earn top grades? Did she overcome any setbacks in her work to figure out how to do better? Is she a “self-starter” and knows what she needs to be doing to prepare for class and study without being prompted?

If you answer “yes” to most of those questions, she should be able to weather the transition pretty well. What challenges some students about the transition is that they are used to being told what to do and when to do it in high school. In college, most professors will not tell them “Be sure to read the next 75 pages and take notes while you read” or “I am going to give you a study guide to help you figure out what is important and what is not.”

First-time students often get lulled into the belief that they just have to show up, take notes, and then do a little studying the night before the test. Reality usually sinks in after that first test—when the grade is not what they are used to earning—or when they realize that they have to apply the content from class in new and distinct ways by comparing or synthesizing ideas or even creating new idea.

We encourage students to over-prepare for class and for tests until they get a good sense of the amount of work they need to put into their classes to be successful. Helping your student learn to self-monitor and make adjustments as needed can help them make the transition more smoothly.

Question: My son never learned to manage his time. In fact, I had to wake him up every morning or he would have been late to school. I also told him where he needed to be and when for classes and after-school activities. Will he be okay in college managing his time himself?

Answer: Yes, your son will be okay, but given how much he relied on your oversight, he’ll have to go through a period of adjustment that will be tough on both of you. Young adults are a resilient bunch. However, your son may need to do some things to help him get a better handle on managing his time. First, he needs an operable alarm clock. We don’t recommend using *only* the cell phone alarm. We are thinking bigger and better: one of those old-fashioned, wind-up ones that you can hear throughout the residence hall, even if the electricity goes out. Regardless of the alarm he chooses, we also suggest having him place it across the room each night so he is not tempted to hit snooze and roll over.

Next, we suggest that he gets a planner that allows him to view both the week and month for the entire academic year. He should use both the weekly and monthly views to write down due dates and plan his time around completing his work. If he has other activities or a job, he will need to keep track of when he has to be where so he can maximize the time he does have for studying and going to class.

While we don’t advocate micromanaging his schedule, we do encourage you to ask him every few weeks how the planning and keeping track of assignments is going. Encourage him to self-reflect on times it works well and on times it doesn’t and to figure out ways to make adjustments to his schedule.

Question: My daughter is only in class for 15 hours a week, so I think she could easily hold down a part-time job to help her pay for expenses during the year. She thinks she won’t have time to have a social life and study if she works, too. Who is right?

Answer: Would it be a cop-out to say you *both* may be right? The answer is that depends on how well your daughter can handle multiple responsibilities, how challenging those classes are, and what the job entails. A student who works the night shift for a packing company for 20 hours a week may be giving up a regular sleep cycle that could have a detrimental effect

on her studying and wellbeing. A student who is taking 8 hours of intense science courses may need to put far more than the average number of hours a week into the courses and labs, especially if she is trying to get good grades to propel her to a specialized STEM program such as nursing or physical therapy. Then, there is the need for balance in her social life. If she uses her social activities as a means to network or fulfill a need to help the community or recharge her own energy levels, then diminished time spent socializing could have negative consequences.

There is research to suggest that a student who works *some* hours (usually 15-25 hours a week) actually fare better in terms of grades and graduating on time than those who do not work at all or those who work a full-time job and go to school. Thus, the research is in your favor, but your own student's needs may outweigh the research in this case. We suggest that whatever you encourage your student to do—work or not—that you have a conversation about the expectations including what to do if working begins to interfere with grades and health.

Question: What do college students *really* do with all that time on their hands? I know they should be studying, but how can they possibly spend all that time reading their textbooks?

Answer: The reason that college students are—or should be—so busy is because we expect them to do far more outside of class than read a textbook. Whether we tell them explicitly or we gently suggest these things, there are numerous things students can and should be doing to help them be successful in their college experience. While we don't expect them to participate in each activity every week, here is a brief list of what students should be doing with all that "free time" throughout the semester:

- Visiting professors during their office hours
- Participating in study groups
- Completing assignments
- Going to the tutoring center
- Revising and rearranging their notes for clarity and sense
- Creating practice tests, taking them, and reviewing the results
- Writing reading notes and summaries that they use as the basis for their lecture notes
- Completing online assignments and "homework"
- Reviewing what they missed on tests or feedback on papers
- Participating in additional lectures and enrichment activities that are assigned for outside of class
- Cultivating relationships with faculty, staff, and students

All of these activities take time, lots of time, during the semester and they should be used to augment what they experience in the classroom, which is only a fraction of the time they will spending learning and building relationships.

As a general rule-of-thumb, a student should build time into her weekly schedule to study 2 hours outside of class for every hour she is in class. A student enrolled in 12 semester units of classes during a term and who is scheduled to be in class for 12 hours per week should thus allocate another 24 hours outside of class for studying and completing assignments and projects. Thus, you can see how a student who is enrolled full-time can quickly fill their schedule with classwork, not to mention other activities like leadership opportunities in a student club or a part-time job.

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GRADES AND PROGRESS

Question: What is F-E-R-P-A?

Answer: Pronounced “fur’-pah,” the initialism stands for the Family Education Rights and Privacy Act. The law basically says that when a student turns 18 or enters college (specifically “a school beyond the high school level”), the rights you used to enjoy as a parent to inspect educational records transfer to your student. You may ask your student to sign a FERPA waiver, which allows you or whomever you designate the ability to talk to school officials about your student’s educational records. Your student can usually get a FERPA waiver from the Registrar’s office. Just be aware that your student can go back to the Registrar at any time and rescind the waiver by signing another one that grants no one else permission to review her records and transcripts.

Question: Is there a system I can log into and check my student’s grades during the term?

Answer: The quick answer is “No.” Due to the restrictions related to FERPA, there is not a parent portal where you can see your student’s grades and averages. The good news is that you can use this opportunity to establish communication requirements with your student. For example, you may ask that they let you know what their first assignment grades are or what their mid-term and final grades are.

Question: But what if I am paying the tuition, fees, and everything else? How can I be sure that my student is telling me the truth about his grades?

Answer: As a parent, you may set whatever rules you want in relation to your student. Some parents tell their sons and daughters, they will only provide extra spending and gas money if they make satisfactory progress (defined by parent and student, of course). Others have asked their students for a copy of the transcript before they write a check for tuition and fees for the next term. Finding a strategy that works best for you and your family is the key to getting clear communication.

Question: Can’t I just email professors when I have a question or concern about my student?

Answer: Technically, you *can*, but that doesn’t mean you *should*. The professor will most likely tell you that without a FERPA waiver, she cannot even confirm your student is in her class. Unless it is an emergency, we strongly suggest that you leave the communication between student and professor. Of course, if you feel that you need to get additional information to a professor or another university official, you can usually talk to the Dean of Students to convey important information such as a family emergency. If you do get a FERPA waiver, we suggest contacting professors only in emergency situations. If your student overslept, didn’t study, forget to turn in an assignment, or did poorly on a test and wants to explain that to the professor, let the student do the talking.

Question: Besides a Grade Point Average, what else do I need to be aware of that my student needs to do to stay in college and graduate?

Answer: A solid GPA (usually above a 2.0) is a must for a student to continue in good standing with the university. However, your student also wants to earn as many credits as he can each term. For example, if your student registers for 15 credit hours in a term, he will want to earn passing grades in all those hours and minimize dropping classes or failing them.

There are a few obvious reasons (and some not-so-obvious reasons) to make progress toward the degree:

- The credits were paid for and there is likely no refund for credits not earned. This translates to money that was spent on something and nothing to show for it. We tell our students all the time that they don't want to pay for one course twice (or more!) because they only get credit for the one time they took it and passed it.
- Universities often have a "satisfactory academic progress" policy that requires students to advance toward a degree each term. The policy may state that students are suspended if they don't earn a certain number of credits in a certain number of terms.
- Most universities designate whether a student is a freshman, sophomore, junior, or senior not by how many years they have been at the institution, but by how many credit hours they have earned. Students who are juniors because they have more than 60 credit hours, for example, often get to register earlier than freshmen and sophomores, and they have access to upper-level classes that are designated for those who have completed lower-level classes.
- Last but not least, we all want our students to graduate in a timely manner. Although some students take five and even six years to graduate with a bachelor's degree, there are costs to elongating a four-year college degree unnecessarily. The obvious costs are the additional expenses associated with college. Less obvious ones include the money lost from *earning* a salary in a job.

Question: How can I make sure that my student is making satisfactory progress toward earning a degree?

Answer: When your student chooses a degree plan, count how many total hours it will take for her to complete it. Be sure to include any preparatory courses that may not be listed on the degree plan, but that are required before certain courses can be taken. For example, your student may need an introductory course that is not listed but is a pre-requisite for getting into a required course for the degree.

Most bachelor's degrees are about 120 semester credit hours (or 180 quarter unit hours) and you can check your progress toward graduating in four years by aiming to complete about 30 semester credit hours (or 45 quarter unit hours) each academic year. Of course, your student can do more or fewer, but to stay on track, she may need to take classes during the summer or between terms that are designed for students to catch-up.

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BUILDING A COMMUNITY AND A SENSE OF BELONGING

Question: How can I help my student make friends and connections in college?

Answer: The most important – but challenging – realization you need to face as the parent of a college student is that the choice to become part of a social community at college is their choice, which they will need to make in their way, in their own time, and with the people they choose. For parents who have been very active in monitoring and influencing their students' social lives, this can be a very challenging reality to accept. The comforting reality is that there is virtually no social institution in this country that provides more opportunities for students to get connected and to feel like they belong than the university campus. Universities have programs, professional staff, facilities, and a wide range of other resources to help students get connected and feel like they belong.

You can help them by encouraging them to seek out new people to meet and activities to join. We know the research shows that students who make at least one significant connection during college are much more likely to complete their degree and be satisfied with their experience in college. As much as like to think that college is all about academics, we, too, realize and encourage students to get to know their classmates, advisors, and professors. These relationships are often built on mutual interests and can have many benefits well beyond the college years.

Question: How do today's college students get connected and feel a sense of belonging?

Answer: The university environment and today's college campuses provide an environment that is very conducive to making connections (even without relying on social media!). Roommates, residence hall neighbors, dining hall acquaintances, classmates, fellow members of clubs, fraternities and sororities, intramural sports teammates, fellow mobile gamers, movie, or TV fans, co-workers (if your student chooses to work), and fellow church/mosque/synagogue attendees are some, but not all, examples of potential sources for friends and social connections. To help students overcome nervousness, hesitancy, or awkwardness around meeting new people, universities offer a number of programs, activities, events, and competitions that provide a structured and fun environment to help students get connected across all interests, backgrounds, and personalities.

Question: What should I do as a parent if my student calls me while at college and tells me that he's not meeting anyone or doesn't feel like he belongs?

Answer: First, recognize that at least half of first-year students experience some form of both homesickness – missing their family and loved ones back home – and anxiety and frustration about making friends and feeling like they don't belong at college. Thus, don't be surprised if you hear this from your student. This is quite normal and predictable. If you get this call from your student, the most important thing you can do is listen carefully to their thoughts *and* feelings, and empathize with them. Don't try to disagree with them, or tell them why they shouldn't feel that way, or even try to solve the problem for them. Be there to listen, understand, and empathize.

Second, once you've listened and empathized with their feelings, reassure them that what they are experiencing is quite normal, and many students have similar feelings. The most current research about 'sense of belonging' among first year college students is that by simply reassuring students that it's quite normal for them to feel lonely and not connected, it can help students feel better about themselves and persist through the process of creating their new social connections and identities in college.

Finally, if you hear your student say anything or exhibit behavior that you've never seen or heard before or which causes you concern about their mental or physical health, don't hesitate to reach out to your University's counseling center to express your concerns. They have deep expertise in how best to work with students who are facing challenges, and you can enlist their help if you have a strong intuition that your student is really struggling with issues of belonging and social connections.

Question: Are fraternities and sororities a good way for my student to get connected at a university?

Answer: Like other student clubs and organizations, fraternities and sororities can be a great way for students to get socially connected and feel a sense of belonging at college. But, these social organizations can also serve as a negative influence on your student, depending on the organization itself, its leadership, culture, and traditions. By the time your student has reached college, you have instilled in them an ability to apply critical thinking to their decisions about the friends they spend time with and the peers who influence them. This doesn't mean that your student has made perfect decisions all the time, or that her friends have always been a positive influence, but even the negative experiences can provide to be great learning experiences to help your student choose friends and social connections wisely in college.

Fraternities and sororities can offer an avenue for your student to get connected to other students and the university and local community in a positive way. The important factor is for your student to take time to learn about the fraternity or sorority they might wish to join, and carefully search for information about that organization's reputation, activities, and how well students in that organization perform academically and in their careers. For example, it would be good to know the average GPA of graduates from that particular organization. In the same way that you've taught your student not to get into a car with a stranger or someone who is driving irresponsibly, you can reinforce with your student that should only join an organization that they know well and is demonstrating positive habits and behaviors.

Question: I'm worried that my student will have trouble making friends, or make the wrong friends, or not feel like they belong when they get to college.

Answer: Your worries about your student are very understandable, and clearly reflect how much you care about your student and want them to have a great experience. It's important that you differentiate your own feelings and anxieties from those that your student may be experiencing. In some cases, when parents drop their student off at college for the first time, it's the parent that is struggling even more than the student because they are experiencing old memories of their own college experience, or, if they didn't go to college, they struggle with the unknowns and uncertainties of the college experience. All of these worries, concerns, and uncertainties as a parent are quite normal, but always remember that they are yours, not your students.

Your student will be *independently* experiencing his own feelings of exciting, anticipation, independence, and, yes, some anxiety and uncertainty. As you prepare yourself to drop off your student at college and transition through the first year of college, the best thing you can do is recognize that everyone in the family will be experiencing new emotions and uncertainties as everyone adjusts to this exciting new chapter in your family's life. Finally, we want to remind and reassure you that today's college campuses provide a rich variety of programs, activities, facilities, events, and staff to help students get connected socially and feel a sense of belonging. Making connections and feeling a sense of belonging takes time, more time for some than others, so take care of yourself and your family as you walk through this journey of transition for your college student.

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ENSURING MY STUDENT'S HEALTH AND SAFETY

Question: As a parent, how can I make sure my student will be safe at college?

Answer: We are parents, too, and we know and understand that both health and safety are not absolutes; they are a matter of degrees. Some places and activities are safer and healthier than others, but there are no places or activities that do not have some degree of risk associated with them. You've probably heard the example that while airplane crashes receive far more attention in the media and by the public, the statistical probability of being injured or killed in an automobile accident is far higher than in an airplane.

The most important thing you can do to help your student be relatively safe in college is to instill a sense of personal responsibility in their behaviors and choices. Students who have experienced both the rewards and consequences of making relatively healthy (and unhealthy) and safe (and unsafe) decisions are in a much better position to make healthy and safe decisions when they arrive at college.

Question: What are the primary health risks for college students?

Answer: The most common types of health risks among college students are associated with some degree of neglect or excess such as a poor eating choices, insufficient sleep and exercise, excessive alcohol consumption or drug use, or neglect of mental health issues that a student may have been effectively managing prior to college. The relatively close living quarters associated with residence halls and cafeterias on campus can also contribute to the spread of viral-based illnesses like the cold and flu. Perhaps the best perspective to use when considering these risks is the fact that most universities are like cities, with all the corresponding activities and risks. In the same manner that cities have public health and safety risks that they manage through police and fire safety personnel, hospitals and medical services, and mental health services, including counseling, so too will your student's campus.

Question: Are college campuses safe?

Answer: Interpreting campus crime statistics is a complicated task, but the overall reality is that campus crime in the U.S. has fallen over the last 10 years, including a decline in the incidence of rape and other sexual assault. Furthermore, the incidents of rape and other sexual assault is much lower for students of college age than for the rest of the college age population that are not students.

We certainly need to teach our students to be vigilant and make good decisions to protect themselves and their property, but we should find solace in the fact that the campus environment is a relatively safe place. When crimes do occur on campus, they receive a great deal of media attention, which naturally leads some parents to fear for the safety of their student. Let the facts calm you, and keep your focus on what you can control, like driving safely and without distractions to campus when you drop off your student during move-in day, and instilling a sense of personal responsibility in your student.

Question: What are the primary safety risks for college students?

Answer: The most common types of crimes committed on campus are associated with the theft or damage of property, such as the theft of electronics and bicycles. Other common safety risks for college students tend to be associated with excessive alcohol consumption and drug abuse, which lead to harmful behaviors such as driving while impaired, sexual and physical assault, and poor health outcomes such as alcohol poisoning, drug overdoses, and sexually transmitted diseases (STD's). Clearly, these safety risks can be reduced and minimized when students take responsibility for their choices and their consequences, and when the campus upholds a strong culture of safety and protection.

Question: What resources do universities provide to support student health and safety?

Answer: Because universities are like cities, they provide public safety services including police and fire protection and health and counseling services. Universities provide a variety of options and activities to promote healthy habits among students, including educational programs, recreation centers and intramural sports leagues. Universities also provide a range of counseling and mental health services to support the wellbeing of the whole student.

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SELECTING AND PLANNING YOUR DEGREE

Question: What's the difference between a degree and a major?

Answer: A degree is the official title that will be conferred to your student when they graduate from the institution. A major is a specific area of focus or specialization within that degree. For example, if your student is pursuing a “Bachelor of Science in Business Administration,” the “Bachelor of Science” portion describes the degree and “Business Administration” is the major. Most undergraduate degrees are either in the form of a Bachelor of Science or Bachelor of Arts, with the Bachelor of Science, or ‘BS’ typically requiring a greater intensity of math and science courses. Most universities offer a wide range of majors across those two types of degrees, including business, engineering, health sciences, and others.

Question: How can I help my student pick the right major?

Answer: Picking a major can feel like a complicated and stressful decision. It can be challenging because students are asked to select a major before taking classes in that major and before learning a lot about the careers that are most closely aligned with that major. It can also be challenging because you and your student may have different opinions about which major would be best. Our advice on this topic is threefold.

First, we think it's best for parents to empower their student to own this decision and take responsibility for it. Second, we recommend that students use their first year in college as a time of learning and exploring their major in more detail to better understand the classes they will take, the type of people they will be learning and working with, and the types of careers that major will support. Finally, we encourage both parents and students to recognize that a choice of major is an important decision, but it does not have to be a permanent or irreversible decision. These points can help everyone feel more calm and confident about selecting a major.

Question: What does it take to finish a bachelor's degree in four years? (And why is this important?)

Answer: With the exception of undergraduate degree programs that are designed for a five-year program of study (such as architecture and some engineering degrees), most degrees and their majors can be completed in four years. This is an important accomplishment because it reduces the total cost of the degree, reduces student debt, and helps students begin earning salaries in their careers earlier. According to a study by NerdWallet, the total cost of taking two extra years to get a four-year college degree can cost students up to almost \$300,000 in tuition, interest on loans, and forgone income and retirement savings (<https://www.nerdwallet.com/blog/loans/student-loans/victory-lap/>).

To complete their degree in four years, students should:

- Develop a four-year degree completion plan in which they build a term-by-term schedule of the classes they plan to take and a checklist of the other degree requirements they will have to fulfill such as an English writing requirement;
- Include plans to take classes in the summer, especially lower division general education courses that can be taken online or at a local community college;
- Study and practice the class registration process that occurs every term when students select and enroll in their classes for the next term;
- Meet regularly with an academic advisor to make sure the student is taking the right classes at the right time to stay on track towards completion in four years;
- Meet regularly with someone from the Financial Aid office to make sure that the student has a financial plan and financial aid eligibility for the entire four-year plan. Students transferring from community colleges, for example, sometimes become ineligible for additional financial aid during their junior or senior year of undergraduate study if they used more than 2 years of eligibility in community college.

Question: What are the best majors for students to choose today?

Answer: There are differences in employment rates and average salaries between different majors, but those differences are far less than the difference between those who have a degree vs. those who do not. Therefore, the most important goal is to complete a degree, and the choice of major is an important, but secondary, consideration.

The best major for your student is the one that they will find interesting and the major that puts them in contact with the types of students and employers that appeal to them the most. There are certainly some “hot” majors that tend to yield the highest average salaries and employment rates, including those in the sciences, technology, engineering, and mathematics (often called ‘STEM’ fields). Certainly, if your student exhibits a predisposition to do well in and enjoy certain topics and courses in high school, those could be indicators of potential majors. For example, engineering tends to favor students with an inclination towards mathematics, while the health sciences favor students who enjoy and do well in classes such as chemistry and biology.

For sure, there are majors on your student’s campus that are the “most popular” and are known for launching students into high-demand, lucrative careers, but don’t be swayed by majors that are popular and lead to well-paid positions straight out of college. Instead, encourage your student to balance a clear career pathway with their interests, skills, values, and passion. Talking with advisors, career counselors, and faculty who teach classes they like can help your student discover a major (or combination of a major and minor) and a potential career that interests them.

Question: Who can help my student make important decisions about their degree and major?

Answer: There are several individuals and offices who can help students. Academic advisors are particularly useful to help students identify the required courses to fulfill their degree as well as other degree requirements. Faculty can offer excellent guidance both to inform a student’s selection of specific courses as well as to understand the types of careers that a major can support. Career services advisors or counselors have tremendous expertise in helping students connect majors to careers and in offering advice and support for students to become prepared for a career and successfully engage in the career search process. Peer mentors are upper-division students (i.e., juniors and seniors) who help students who are freshmen and sophomores navigate the various questions and concerns that can arise during the process of planning a degree and completing a major. And finally, alumni are graduates from the University who can offer advice about life after college and how to make the most of the college experience to support a successful career after graduation.

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CHOOSING AND PLANNING FOR A CAREER

Question: As a parent, how can I help my student choose a career that's best for them?

Answer: The most important way you can help your student make a career choice is to empower ownership of that choice to them. It's not a choice you can make for them; they need to make it for themselves and own the responsibilities and consequences of that choice. Once you've empowered ownership of that choice, you can direct them to resources and contacts that can be helpful. For example, if you have career experiences of your own, or if you have friends or family members with career experience, offer those experiences to your student by taking them to work to share your own career or arranging 'informational interviews' with people you know who can help your student learn more about various careers.

Have some comfort in knowing that your student will have opportunities to seek out assistance in the process, so if you are unfamiliar with a career choice, for example, there will be others on the campus who can guide them through the process.

Question: What are the best and worst career options for today's college students?

Answer: The best career option for a student is a career that is a good match with your student's talents, personality, and passions. Similarly, the worst career option for a student is a career that doesn't match their talents, personality, and passions. There are a number of online assessments and other tools that can help students find the best career match for who they are. The Career Services office at your student's University should also have helpful resources and support to help your student find a good career match.

Another great way to find the best career match for your student is through internships. Internships, whether during the summer or school year, give students a chance to 'test' a career by working for a specific company in a specific industry and career for a limited period of time. Often, the best way for a student to discover what she really wants to do is to first experience some internships that teach her what she really doesn't want to do. Internships are ideal for this purpose, because both the student and employer can choose to part ways after a period of time, as opposed to a full time position that imposes stronger expectations for a long term commitment.

Some parents and students place too much emphasis on the average earnings of college graduates in certain careers. It's certainly useful to know that certain professions, like teaching, tend to pay less than others, like computer science or other fields in engineering, but average salaries should not be the primary reason for a student's choice of career. Why? One reason is that average salaries don't tell the whole picture. Some careers pay relatively well during the first five years, but then plateau and don't grow very much over time, while other careers pay less in the beginning, but have tremendous potential for growth over time. A second reason is that a graduate who finds themselves in a career they dislike will eventually discover that it's more important to find a career that's a good match for who they are rather than a career that pays the most. If your student is interested in a career that doesn't pay as much as other careers, they can still be financially successful as long as they adjust their lifestyle and spending to align with that career.

Question: What should my student be doing during college to prepare for a career?

Answer: The first thing that students can do to prepare for a career is to perform well academically in their chosen major. Employers will favor students whose grades are relatively high, particularly in classes that are in that student's major. Second, students can join and pursue leadership positions in clubs and student organizations that are aligned with specific careers or industries. For example, there are student clubs affiliated with the accounting industry and various fields in engineering. Third, students can actively pursue internships during the summer and/or during the academic year. Finally, students can compile a record of their activities and accomplishments in the form of an e-portfolio, a LinkedIn profile, and a resume, so they can demonstrate to prospective employers that they have skills, knowledge, and experience that would make them a great employee.

Question: What resources are available for students to help them choose and plan for a career?

Answer: The Career Center at your student's university is the best resource for your student to use on a regular basis, starting freshmen year, to develop an overall career selection and search plan with the help of professional career advisors. Professors in your student's major are also a great resource, particularly to help your student make connections with prospective employers. Alumni, who are graduates from your student's university, can offer both advice and connections. Your student can meet alumni through such professional social media sites as LinkedIn and through university-sponsored alumni events. Industry and career web sites and publications are also a great resource to help your student learn more about a particular career, industry, or company that is of interest to your student.

Question: As a parent, how can I help my student prepare for a career that I don't know very much about myself?

Answer: Many industries and careers have changed dramatically since you were college aged, and in some cases new industries have emerged or prior industries have disappeared over time. As a parent, it's OK if you don't have a college degree, or if your career experience is limited or is not recent. You can still help your student find and select a career for themselves by encouraging them to seek help and advice from the resources we mentioned in the prior question, and by reinforcing important values and qualities that you and your family hold in high regard. For example, employers in any industry will value employees who consistently demonstrate integrity, hard work, and a willingness to learn. Continue to demonstrate and reinforce those types of values and habits in your family, and you will help your student prepare themselves to be successful in their career, regardless of what that career choice will be.

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HOW TO HANDLE THE FINANCIAL CHALLENGES OF COLLEGE

Question: How can I know for sure how much my student's college will really cost?

Answer: Most colleges and universities have a web page with the title "Total Cost of Attendance", that is often linked to their Financial Aid office. The Total Cost of Attendance calculations usually include tuition and fees and cost estimates for housing, dining, textbooks, lab fees, transportation, and personal and miscellaneous expenses. When you find this information for the university your student attends, be sure to note differences in tuition and fees, in particular, for out-of-state students or international students. If your student plans to take classes in the summer (generally a good idea to help them finish their degree in four years), you should factor in those costs, also, as well as any special classes or programs your student might wish to pursue such as study abroad programs, fraternities and sororities, or athletic programs like intramural sports.

As you know, the costs of attending college seem to rise each year. In addition to budgeting for the current expenses, be sure you watch for information about any changes (usually increases) in tuition, fees, and costs for housing and meals. If your student participates in any other activities or organizations such as Greek life, there will be additional costs as well that need to be figured into the overall costs of attending.

Question: How do students and their parents pay for college?

Answer: Every family has its own unique financial resources and plans, so different families pay for college in different ways. In general, the primary means for paying for college include:

- Savings, either by the student or parent, such as a 529 college savings plan;
- Pell grants for students and families that qualify;
- State-specific grants for eligible students and families, such as California's Cal Grant program;
- Scholarships, either from the University itself or from outside organizations;
- Tuition reimbursement arrangements from employers, the U.S. Military (e.g., GI Bill recipients), or other sponsoring organizations;
- Student loans both federal and private;
- Parent loans;
- Student earnings from part-time or full-time employment.

Speaking with a financial aid officer every year to make sure that you not overlooking an opportunity for funding and to adjust needs based on changes in your circumstances are keys to appropriately budgeting and paying for college each year.

Question: What is a reasonable expectation for how much my student should pay for his own college costs?

Answer: It's important to have an open, honest, and informed conversation in your family and with your student about how much college will cost, how much (if anything) you can and will pay for as parents, and how much your student will need to pay for themselves. There are a variety of opinions about this issue, and some parents can afford to pay more for their students' educations than others, but our general opinion is that it's best for your student to make some direct financial commitment to their college costs so that they have a vested interest in their own success, are motivated to graduate in four years, and have an incentive to make wise choices about spending while in college. One idea, for example (and assuming you have the resources), is for you as parents to make a commitment to pay for tuition, fees, and housing for four years, leaving your student responsible for their own dining/food and personal/miscellaneous costs, as well as any costs they incur if they take classes beyond the first four years.

Question: What can I do to help my student learn how to manage her finances?

Answer: If your student is already in college, their financial management skills will depend largely on the habits they've already established. But, you can still help them become a more effective financial manager by mentoring and coaching them to establish a monthly budget, accurately track their income, spending, and saving, and encouraging them to limit (or avoid) the use of credit cards. Also, if you are asked or required to co-sign for your student's loans, apartment leases, or other types of financial contracts, establish clear, written agreements with your student and make sure you receive and monitor copies of relevant documents, including bills, payment receipts, and loan agreements. Be forewarned that you are taking a risk by co-signing for your student, so proceed cautiously!

Question: What is the FAFSA and why is it so important?

Answer: FAFSA is an acronym that refers to the Free Application for Federal Student Aid. It's a form that your student can complete each year and will help your student's university determine their eligibility for student financial aid. Even if you don't think your student will be eligible for financial aid, it's a good idea to complete and submit the FAFSA every year, because there may be opportunities for aid that could emerge, or the standards for financial aid might change over time. Take some time to review the financial aid office website of your student's university for more detailed information, and put the burden of responsibility for completing the FAFSA on time on your student, with the understanding that you'll help to provide some of the necessary information. For example, you'll need key information from your tax forms to help your student complete the FAFSA.

Also be mindful of the deadlines for filing the FAFSA and the deadlines your institution has for processing FAFSA forms. Filing as early as possible will help your student get the funding—if eligible—he needs in a timely manner.

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