16.6 Supporting First-in-Family College Attenders

Applying and transitioning to college is very complex, even for students from families in which parents or other relatives went to college. Now think about a student who will be the first in his family to navigate this process.

Even the most supportive families may not have the contextual knowledge to help students decode this process if they haven’t done it themselves. We as educators can be a tremendous resource to these first-in-family college attenders—but it takes some direct outreach and specialized information to make sure they have the support and resources they need to succeed.

Organization and action planning is very important for all students, but for youth encountering the college application process for the first time, it is critical. Share checklists like these with your students—they should implement a plan and think about this transition as early as 9th grade.

**Freshman Checklist**
- Take personal/PSAT readiness inventory to identify areas.
- Take a four year plan of high school courses, taking into account college requirements and vocational goals.
- Take college readiness assessment. What you take is as important as the grades you make.
- Become a member of the ACT or SAT study sessions organized by your high school counselors.
- Talk to your counselor about what college you want to attend and what types of financial aid you might apply for.
- Visit higher education programs on campus and talk to students and alumni.
- Attend college orientation sessions for upcoming freshmen.

**Sophomore Checklist**
- Begin to complete career path and possible fields of study.
- Take ACT or SAT in the fall.
- Visit college campuses.
- Begin to write college career and transfer plans.
- Begin planning financial aid and find the college that best fits your needs.
- Visit your local community college and Career Readiness Center.

**Junior Checklist**
- Register to take the ACT and SAT in October.
- Register to take the ACT in August and the SAT in October.
- Visit college campuses.
- Contact college counselors to get a better idea of what is out there.
- Register for career or college programs.
- Information is available on each college website.
- Visit the campus.
- Visit your local community college and Career Readiness Center.

**Senior Checklist**
- Submit your college applications.
- Submit your FAFSA.
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Consider this scenario, in which Saskia, a second-semester junior who would be the first in her family to attend college, talks with one of her teacher’s about plans for the future.

**Teacher:** Saskia, we haven’t talked much about your plans for graduation. I know you’ve been in a human services program of study and volunteering at the hospital. Are you thinking of pursuing a career in the medical field?

**Saskia:** I don’t know what program I would need to take. I don’t think my family can afford much. We haven’t really talked about it.

**Teacher:** Well, there are a lot of options and some of the decisions you make this year will affect which ones you are eligible for.

**Saskia:** Like what?

**Teacher:** Here’s a checklist of things juniors should be thinking about. There are also some placement tests and scholarship deadlines specific to the medical field you’ll definitely want to be aware of to keep your options open. Tell you what. Why don’t we invite your family in and make an appointment to talk to Miss Lange in the counseling department. She can explain the different options and we’ll make an action plan for you.

You’ll notice this teacher suggested bringing Saskia’s family in to the school—again, that’s a best practice for all students, but especially for families of first-generation college attenders. They may have misgivings or misconceptions about post-secondary life, be fearful of sending their child into the unknown, or want their child to stay home to contribute to the family business or income stream. On the other hand, sometime families are so excited about sending their first-generation student to college that they fall prey to predatory lenders or for-profit institutions with poor graduation outcomes. Either way, it’s a good idea to keep those lines of communication open so everyone has access to thorough, accurate information.

Speaking of accurate information, let’s look at one more scenario that looks at a dynamic that many first-generation college attenders experience—feeling shy to connect with others.

**Professor:** “Hi, Mario, thanks for coming in.”

**Mario:** “Hi, how are you?”

**Professor:** “Good! There’s something I want to talk to you about. I noticed that you haven’t attended any of the study groups for this course. Any reason why?”

**Mario:** “I don’t know. I guess I just like to try and figure out things on my own.”

**Professor:** “That’s OK, but attending study groups is a really great way to share knowledge and reinforce the material. Also, it’s a really important part of your college experience—studying with your peers and learning from one another.”

**Mario:** “I guess so—it just makes me kind of nervous.”
**Professor:** “Listen, there’s a group meeting in my room after class today. I think you could really get a lot out of it if you came. They’re going to be going over questions for the upcoming test.”

**Mario:** “I could use the help. What time are they meeting?”

Mario might have a number of reasons for not wanting to join a study group. He may be afraid that if he doesn’t know everything, it will mean he doesn’t belong in college. Or, he might feel like studying with others means he can’t “get” the material on his own.

Either way, by exposing your students to college-level expectations and study norms in middle and high school, you can help students like Mario develop the contextual knowledge to maximize their experience, ask for the help they need, and feel like they truly belong. After all, as first generation students, they had to work even harder than most to get to college—and they should know that kind of perseverance counts for a lot once they’re there!