

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 personality/self-study inventory to learn about yourself.
Make a four-year plan of high school courses, taking into account college requirements and vocational goals.
Take challenging coursework. What you take is as important as the grades you make.
Develop good study habits, organizational and time management skills.
Be serious about grades. GPA and class rank are seriously affected by 9 th grade courses/grades.
Talk to your counselor about how grade point averages and ranking affect your record and your opportunities for college and jobs.
Explore your reasons for going to college.
Talk to adults in a variety of professions to determine what they like and dislike about their jobs, and what kind of education is needed for each job.
Get involved in community. Colleges are very interested in your community service record. Visit your counselor to get a list of clubs, organizations, and other extra-curricular activities at your school.
If you haven't chosen a career pathway, work with your counselor and your parents to begin to plan your future.
Talk to your counselor about completing an interest survey to help with a career choice.
Attend career fairs/job fairs.
Review your 4-year plan and graduation plan to decide future courses. Counselors will be visiting students in the spring to register them for next year.
Start a file at home. Keep report cards, test scores, awards, honors, school and community service records, and leadership positions. These will come in handy when putting together a resume for college, job, and/or scholarship applications.
Start planning with your parents how your higher education will be financed.

Sophomore Checklist

Begin to formulate career goals and possible fields of study.
Take challenging coursework. What you take is as important as the grade you make.
Develop good study habits and time management skills.
Talk to your counselor about how grade point averages and ranking affect your record and your opportunities for college and jobs.
Talk to adults in a variety of professions to determine what they like and dislike about their jobs, and what kind of education is needed for each job.
Get involved in community. Colleges are very interested in your community service record. Visit your counselor to get a list of clubs, organizations, and other extra-curricular activities at your school.
Take the PLAN test. PLAN is a practice test for the ACT and also contains an interest inventory that gives you valuable career information. The test is given in October. Talk to your counselor about registration.
Take the PSAT. This is actually an 11 th grade test but you can take it for practice.
Plan your 11 th grade year with your counselor in the spring. Update your 4-year plan based upon your chosen career pathway.
Begin planning your post high school education with your parents. Visit the College and Career Resource Center or the Counselors' Office.
Take advantage of opportunities to visit colleges and to talk to college students.
Attend College and Career Nights.
Attend career fairs / job fairs.
Take advantage of special summer programs and internships to gain experience in your field of interest.

Junior Checklist

Spring

Register to take the ACT and SAT in October. Registration materials are in the counselor's office, or you can register online at www.act.org (for ACT) and www.collegeboard.com (for SAT).
Make good grades this semester. Colleges look at your ranking at the end of six semesters.
Visit college campuses. Consider visiting during Spring Break and/or the summer. Contact the campus to arrange a campus tour.
Register for summer pre-college programs. Information is available on each college's website.
Line up a summer job(s).
Visit your campus College and Career Resource Center.
Begin using the web for college and scholarship information searches. See RESOURCES for useful sites.

Summer

Review and choose course selections for the fall. Take the most rigorous courses possible. Remember that fall grades are important for "mid-year" reports.
If you are considering participating in college athletics, you must register with the NCAA Clearinghouse at www.usacklearinghouse.net . There is a fee that requires a credit card.
Complete correspondence courses.
Compose your resume.
Read literature on colleges and careers of interest.
Make a preliminary list of six potential colleges.
Prepare for the October SAT and ACT tests using workbooks, computer programs, and SAT and ACT sample problem booklets.

Senior Checklist

September/October

Check all course requirements to ensure you are meeting the requirements for your desired graduation plan.
Register for the ACT and SAT Reasoning Test (and SAT Subject Tests, if needed) as early as possible. Registration materials are in the counselors' office, or you can register online at www.act.org (for ACT) and www.collegeboard.com (for SAT).
Study! Remember that colleges will see your first-semester senior grades if you are applying in the spring or if they require a Mid-Year Report (many private schools use these).
Check out your school's College and Career Resource Center to research colleges, financial aid, military, and career information.
Be sure that your resume is in final form, and make multiple copies.
Give teachers, counselors, and other adults the necessary recommendation forms with a resume.
Begin working on your college application essays. Find someone to proof them for you.
Start first drafts for your application forms.
Order transcripts as necessary in the registrar's office.
Make a college visits early as possible.
Take the TAKS tests if necessary. These tests are required for graduation.

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!