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Guiding Your Child to College

by Sanford M. Pelz, Director of College Guidance, The Browning School

The applications are in and the decisions will soon arrive. There will be much anguish, as your child sorts through the “admits” and wrestles with the disappointment of the “denies.” A flurry of visits and receptions in April, accompanied by endless soul-searching (or, at least, lists of pros and cons) will finally produce a single destination. The incredible, interminable, seemingly endless stress of the admissions process will finally be over. Now comes the hard part.

Independence = Taking Responsibility

Probably more than any other single factor, high school students are looking forward to “independence” when they travel off to college in the fall. Most of them can’t wait to get away from the countless adults who nag them incessantly. The English teacher who corners them at lunch: “So, where’s that second draft you owe me?” The faculty advisor: “What science elective are you taking next term?” And, of course, the parents: “It’s time to get up; you don’t want to be late for school.” “You need to eat those vegetables.” “You’re not getting enough sleep.” “You don’t look well; let’s call the doctor.”

Our students, hovering at the precipice of adulthood, want us all to just go away, so, for them, college cannot come soon enough. Yet, as we know, we adults serve critically important health and time management functions in our young people’s lives. When a student leaves home without all of us in tow, who will assume those functions? The only person left is the student himself.

“But, they’re not ready!” I hear you say. Well, most of them are; that’s what this process is all about. They do, however, still need some guidance. The most important thing we, as parents and educators, can do at this point is to help them make wise decisions and understand that the responsibility for those decisions is now theirs.

Brain researchers tell us that judgment is one of the last cognitive functions to develop, coming later in boys and often not until age 25. So we should expect these kids to stumble occasionally, but we should also continue to train those judgment centers. The admonition we drilled into their heads when we were teaching them to cross streets (“Stop and look both ways”) should be dusted off and freshened up for their decision-making at college (“Think before you act”).

My own physicist background surfaces when I distill this advice into an equation I write repeatedly on the blackboard every spring for the young men (Browning is all boys) I am sending off into the world: Independence \neq Unbridled Freedom. College is not about being able to do anything you want, it’s about learning to take care of yourself, and, by extension, those around you. It’s about responsibility: intellectual, personal, and social.

Making Academic Choices

Course selection is one of the first tasks colleges expect incoming students to tackle, and students view this challenge with a combination of positive and negative anticipation. They are excited about the enormous smorgasbord of academic offerings available and the ability to delve into subjects they have been yearning for along with others they are curious about. At the same time, that very abundance makes them nervous. How do they choose appropriate levels? How do they decode course numbers and titles? How do they pick the “right” teachers?

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Here, the single most important piece of advice to drill into them is to consult an academic advisor. Only someone versed in the myriad offerings at their specific institution can help them craft a sensible academic load. Students who spend time thoughtfully consulting their advisors invariably have more successful academic transitions.

There are, however, some general guidelines that students should consider. I always recommend balance and variety, particularly in the first semester, when they are just beginning to learn the academic ropes of their new setting.

First and foremost, liberal arts institutions often have some form of core or distributional requirements. Study them and pick one, or perhaps two, that really pique your interest.

In this vein, one common strategy, often recommended by a parent, is to fill the freshman year with required classes. That way, the logic goes, you'll get them out of the way and be able to devote your upper-class years to pursuing your interests in depth, without any lingering requirements.

Harvard professor Richard Light, in *Making the Most of College*, warns against this approach, which he finds often leaves student disenchanted with the academic environment. Distributional and core requirements are often larger lecture classes, rather than the smaller seminar style setting these bright and engaged thinkers are anticipating. Stick to one or two such courses each term during freshman year.

If a student has a major in mind, review the departmental requirements and choose one of the entry-level options. For the student who is clearly set on a particular major, this is an essential step to moving on to the more

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challenging (and often more exciting) upper-division electives. And for the student who is "shopping" for a possible major, this may be the "litmus test" that helps him decide if

the major is what he had in mind.

Most liberal arts institutions offer a slate of classes aimed specifically at freshmen. Frequently dubbed Freshman Seminars, these classes are often inter-disciplinary explorations of topics dear to the faculty who teach them. Enrollment is capped and limited to freshmen. As a bonus, most of these classes satisfy some core or distributional requirement as well.

Each entering freshman should enroll in one class that pushes him outside of his comfort zone. For me, it was a Freshman Seminar called "The Economic Novel." I signed up for it because it seemed the least objectionable option for the time slot I needed to fill and because the little bespectacled man behind the Economics Department desk at registration spoke so highly of it. "It's taught by the chairman of the department," he said brightly. A single-minded and intellectually pretentious future physics major, I was

crestfallen. “Economics” and “novel” were two words I had presumed would never be contained in the title of a course I actually chose to take. Nonetheless, the course would become one of my two or three favorite and most rewarding academic experiences in college. Nearly forty years later, the books, the discussion, and the lessons are still fresh

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in my memory, including the day we decided to have class on the lawn. Eight new freshmen, emboldened by that status alone, announced to the Chairman of the Economics Department (who was, by the way, the little man behind the desk) that we were going outside and that he was welcome to join us. (He did, thankfully, although he admitted later that he took some good-natured ribbing from his colleagues, because he had never before done such a thing.)

In general, entering freshmen should avoid most upper-division classes until they have been in residence for at least one term and have a clear sense of what the climate in those classes will be like. The academic expectations of college professors differs significantly from those of most high school teachers and students need to become familiar with the new landscape before tackling higher level classes. The student who enrolls in three upper division math classes will end up in academic trouble as quickly as the one who signs up for French and chemistry classes without regard to proper placement level. An advisor is likely to catch such missteps.

Learning to Live with Others

Another arena that kids approach with a stressful mix of excitement and trepidation is “The Roommate.” I find it a curious cultural evolution that students today will share intimate details of their personal lives online yet resist sharing a room with another human being. However, I still contend that having a roommate at college, at least during freshman year, fulfills at least two critical needs, one immediate and one long-term.

Sometime around Labor Day, parents load their “babies” (and, it appears, all their worldly possessions) into cars and then abandon them at college campuses around the country. Knowing not a soul, it is incumbent on these young people to establish entirely new social networks. Having a

roommate accelerates this process. On Day One, the student with a roommate has an eating companion, and the value of this is not to be underestimated. In a new place, with new people, having a second set of eyes and ears can only help speed up the essential process of finding out where things are, when stuff is happening, and what you're supposed to be doing. In addition, as each roommate meets new people, social circles increase twice as fast, increasing the likelihood of meeting people with shared interests who will become real friends. My best advice to those kids who find themselves in singles: Open your door.

Along the same lines, kids who are going off to college with a high school classmate often want to room with the friend. I advise against this partly because rooming together can put a severe strain on even the best friendships and partly because, if each student has his own roommate, it increases everyone's social circle even faster.

The longer-term benefit of a roommate lies in developing the critically important life skill of being able to share close quarters with another human being. Later on in most of these kids' lives, they are going to choose to live with someone with whom they have a deep emotional attachment. That will not be the time to discover that it really matters to them whether

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someone squeezes the toothpaste from the middle of the tube or the end; whether one replaces the toilet paper with the sheets unrolling from the top or the bottom; whether it is acceptable to leave the wet towel on the bed or not. The student who has had a roommate has likely already weathered

such encounters and may, I contend, be more amenable to working them through in a way that protects the relationship.

Time for Them to Take the Reins

Parents often face a more difficult transition than their children, and the parents who have been the most involved in the day-to-day lives, academic and/or personal, of their child have it the worst. Coddled by high schools with quarterly or even weekly grade reports and regular calls from (or to) advisors and teachers, many parents are completely unprepared for

the wall of silence at their child's college. Once those babes turn 18, the Federal Educational Rights Privacy Act (FERPA) prohibits colleges from sharing students' grades without their permission. Some parents make a contract with their college-bound children: "We will pay the bill, if you sign this grade release."

Parents should not, however, consider such an authorization blanket permission to meddle with their children's academic lives. Your primary mission has changed: you are no longer advocating for them, you are helping them learn how to advocate for themselves. Under no circumstance should you contact a professor directly. Instead, make sure your child knows about "Office Hours" and takes advantage of them. Many colleges now have excellent web, print and personnel resources aimed at parents; find them and use them. Be knowledgeable but not intrusive. Remember: responsibility.

Finance – and Frankness

Finance is another area where parents need to do some research and set the tone. With college costs so high, I believe that all parents should have frank discussions about finances with their college-bound children. At most colleges, the student ID card now doubles as a debit card, valid at the cafeteria, the bookstore, and at many eateries and stores both on and off-campus. On tours, student guides will often point to ATM machines and say, cheerfully, "And when the balance on your card runs low, you can always add more 'CampusGold' dollars at one of these machines," conveniently neglecting to specify the source of that additional cash. Kids

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need to know precisely how those cards work, what they will be charged for, and where the funds will come from. You should have answers to these questions and address them before your kid needs to ask. Set a spending limit for your contribution and let your child know about it.

Take a Good Look at That Meal Plan

Investigate meal plan options. I recommend a 20-meal-per-week plan for all first-semester freshmen. Until they establish a daily routine that

works for them, it is essential that they have full access to three cafeteria meals each day for the entire term. Many colleges offer plans that mix pay-one-price (cafeteria style all-you-can-eat) meals with a-la-carte “Dining Dollars” spendable at snack bars and food courts. How do those dollars work? Are they interchangeable with the “CampusGold?” Is it possible, for example, for the student to use up his meal plan funds before the end of the term, by over-spending at the local pizzeria or even the bookstore?

Taking Their Own Temperature

Finally, make sure they know where the infirmary is and what to do if they’re not feeling well. You won’t be there to feel their forehead and tell them to see a doctor; they need to know what the warning signs are themselves. Learn the symptoms of the communicable ailments common on college campuses – meningitis in particular – and teach them to your child.

Learn to Step Back

Read *Making the Most of College* and help distill the salient points into language your child will appreciate. Review the school’s academic policies and make sure your child understands the major ones, particularly those that are dramatically different from high school, such as attendance policies (miss three classes and you fail, period, is common) and “good standing” (fail two classes in a term and you may lose it). Help your child research the academic, housing and meal plan options, offer him advice, and then let him make the decisions. Be clear about your expectations and then take a small step back. Let him know you’re still there, but that he must now shoulder the responsibility for his day-to-day choices. And wait a while before you redecorate his room.

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