



Higher Education: How Parents Can Support Their Children

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An important goal for parents includes preparing youth for the world of work. For some, supporting their high school students to follow a career path through college and other higher education options presents a new and challenging experience. Because parents want their children to succeed (February, 2016), they can find ways to support and encourage their child's post-secondary educational aspirations—even when they have no prior experience with the American higher education system. Parents can also help in the process of understanding and evaluating college and career options in higher education.

Ensure Family Conversations

The journey to college begins with early and frequent conversations. As early as possible, talk to your children about their future and encourage them to think about college as a pathway to a career. Discuss things they like to do, talk about their dreams and goals, and help them see themselves continuing their education after high school. For example, during a walk or a casual conversation you may prompt them to talk about what kind of work they would like to do and where they want to live when they grow up.

Stay Informed and Engaged

As they approach their middle and high school years, ask your children about their coursework, pay attention to ongoing school events, attend parent

teacher conferences, and prepare to ask questions to support your students' academic performance. Most importantly, use the communication tools provided by their school, such as email and texting, to receive time-sensitive information, the school district website where news and upcoming events are posted, and the school's student information system portal or "PowerSchool" where parents can login to view their children's grades and attendance. These tools are designed to help students and parents stay informed and aware of school activities and also of important events related to post-high school educational opportunities.

Research Available School and Community Resources

Determine to meet your child's schoolteachers ("Get Involved," 1998) and counselors. Teachers can encourage further conversations at school about college and share their own higher education journey. Counselors can help compare college and career options, connect your student to recruiters, provide information about scholarships, application deadlines, financial aid, and other useful resources to prepare their applications (Knopf, 2017). Parents can also introduce students to role models in the community or help them identify mentors; namely, someone who has graduated from college or has helped others learn how to apply. Look for opportunities to attend together college fairs,

schedule campus visits, or arrange for your child to do so.

Identify Admission Requirements

Perhaps more than one college or institution meets the interests of your son or daughter, but each places greater emphasis on different factors to determine admission. Several institutions look at high school coursework, grades, and test scores rigorously. Others weigh additional factors such as a student’s essays, community engagement, and

extra-curricular activities. Many more offer open admission and access to everyone.

Understand Higher Education Options

Table 1 summarizes some of the major educational institutions and their admission requirements to help you and your children think about best fit such as their career interests, available financial resources, tuition rates, funding opportunities and others (“Higher Education,” 2016).

Table 1. Higher Education Options Summary

INSTITUTION TYPE	DESCRIPTION	SELECTION CRITERIA
Research Universities	These big, research-focused, 4-year universities offer a wider variety of careers options than smaller schools. They also offer advanced degree programs such as masters and PhDs.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Selective based on GPA • SAT or ACT required • Most require essays • High school diploma required • High school coursework reviewed
Regional Universities	They offer a full range of undergraduate programs and graduate level classes, but few, if any, offer doctoral programs. Most focus on teaching and not on research.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Less GPA-selective • SAT or ACT required • Most require essays • High school diploma required
Private Liberal Arts Colleges	These generally smaller institutions focus on educating undergraduate students in smaller classes, exposing them to a broad array of humanities, social sciences, and science courses as opposed to preparation for a specific career.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ranges from selective to very selective based on GPA • SAT or ACT required • Essay(s) usually required • High school diploma required
Junior or Community Colleges	They offer the first 2 years of general education coursework for students who want to transfer to a 4-year institution, providing a more affordable way to pay for the first 2 years of college. They also offer specialized occupational training, certifications, and 2-year associate’s degrees.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Open admissions • Open access
Career/Technical Colleges	These schools provide specific training or trade skills in a shorter amount of time, ranging between 12–18 months, depending on the program.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ranges from open admissions to relatively selective based on GPA • SAT or ACT often required • High school diploma required
Distance Learning at Online Schools	These online degree programs offer great flexibility for students to pace their progress toward a degree.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Open admissions • Open access

Understand College Language

As both you and your student learn about higher education, familiarize yourselves with new terms introduced in the process. For example, Table 1 references three terms: GPA, ACT, and SAT. The abbreviation *GPA* stands for *grade point average*, or a student's overall grade. The terms *ACT* and *SAT* refer to college entrance exams to determine students' readiness for college-level instruction. By understanding such terms, you will gain confidence to navigate post-secondary opportunities ("The College Application," 2012).

Take Away

Consistent and frequent encouragement, support, and involvement are simple actions that parents can take to make a big difference in the future of their children. These actions, proven by research, show that "when parents and families get personally involved in education, their children do better in school and grow up to be more successful in life" ("Get Involved," 1998).

References

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