The largely invisible and often crushing struggles of young African-American men come vividly — and heroically — to life in *All the Difference*, which traces the paths of two teens from the South Side of Chicago who dream of graduating from college. Statistics predict that Robert and Krishaun will drop out of high school, but they have other plans. Oscar®-nominated producer/director Tod Lending’s intimate film, executive produced by author Wes Moore, follows the young men through years of hard work, sacrifice, setbacks and uncertainty. As they discover, support from family, teachers and mentors makes all the difference in defying the odds. A co-production of *American Documentary | POV*. The film is part of *American Graduate: Let’s Make It Happen*, a national public media initiative made possible by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB).

For more information on the film, resources, and ways to get involved, visit [http://www.pbs.org/pov/allthedifference/](http://www.pbs.org/pov/allthedifference/)

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**For Your Student: Online College Bound Students Handbook**

As a resource for your student, we’ve also produced an online, interactive *College Bound Students Handbook*, featuring the real-life college experiences of Robert and Krishaun. Written by Marcia Cantarella, Ph.D., and introduced by Wes Moore, the handbook is intended for first-generation students to use in their college prep and throughout their college careers. It covers topics such as college selection, financial aid packages, time management, networking, academic majors, stumbling blocks and more.

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One of my favorite quotes in our documentary, *All the Difference*, is by Urban Prep Vice President of Student Affairs, Evan Lewis, when he explains why a college education is so important for not only first-generation students, but for their families as well.

“It really only takes one generation to right the course for any family...We are giving these guys the chance to rewrite the future for their families.”

But a college education does more than change the direction of that family’s future. It changes the present of the parent-child relationship in profound and complicated ways. It changes family finances. It changes how the family spends its time together. It changes family dynamics from that once dependent child to a liberated and impressionable young adult who is trying to figure out their role in a new frontier. And with all the different and unpredictable experiences the student will encounter, it will also change the way parents see and deal with their own new world.

With these Family Tips that follow, I rely on my own experiences with my three children, those of friends and family and research I’ve conducted to share some of the situations you might face as your own family embarks on this new and wonderful journey. It may seem daunting at times, but the road to a college degree can be navigated successfully if you know some of the shortcuts and strategies along the way.

- Joy Thomas Moore, Executive Producer, *All the Difference*
NURTURING YOUR CHILD’S FIRST-GENERATION COLLEGE AMBITIONS

If your son or daughter will be the first in your family to go to college, you probably have as many questions and fears as they do about if and how to make this dream a reality. The good news is that no matter what your background or circumstances, there are many ways that you can help steer your child toward a successful outcome. There are myriad sources of help to walk parents through the process; here are some steps along the way. (I thank friends who have added their own experiences, in their own voice, to enhance this tip.)

1. **Sow the seeds early.** Even if you, your spouse/significant other or other family members have never attended college, set an expectation from an early age that your children will go and graduate successfully from college. Constantly encourage them to strive, challenge themselves and try their best. Reinforce how a college education will help them to achieve their career goals and have a rewarding and financially secure future.

   “We lived in a crime-ridden area, but my sister and I grew up knowing we would go to college,” says Kelli. “My mother wouldn’t even let us learn to type, because she was a secretary and she wanted us to do better.”

   “My mom raised seven of us without a husband, but she was adamant that we would grow up to be successful,” says James. “She always pushed us to go to school and study hard. We never missed a day.”

2. **Encourage reading and learning.** It is never too early to build a love of reading and learning in your child. Talk, read and sing to your children so that they constantly hear and learn language; incorporate numbers into conversations; visit libraries; seek out educational and cultural activities and try to make everyday events an opportunity for questions and discussion. If you can’t respond to their questions, teach them to research the answers.

   “One of the most critical things for me was being able to read and comprehend the world beyond what I knew,” says James. “I read about life in other places and it opened up a whole new world for me. I wanted to go to those places and explore those things.”
“My father never went to college, but he took us to the library once a week and encouraged us to take out boatloads of books,” says Doris. “He would always get an extra copy of one of our books to read himself so that we could discuss it.”

3. **Seek and rely on mentors.** Often a teacher or guidance counselor who glimpses a child’s potential is instrumental in putting that student on a college path. (Sadly, there are some counselors that may do the opposite because they have lower expectations of what your child is capable of. If this happens to your child, run as fast as you can to another counselor who can be more helpful. I learned long ago to never let someone else put limits on your child’s future.) Make sure school staff members are aware of your child’s college ambitions and that he or she is a first-generation college candidate. Seek their guidance in choosing the right courses to be college-ready and the right resources to prepare for admissions tests. Encourage your child to connect with educators, counselors, coaches, family friends and other trusted adults who can help them navigate college and financial aid applications.

“It is really hard when you are a kid to see the end result when all the other kids are hanging out and you are doing all that homework,” says Kelli. “Find a teacher, a mentor, any adult you trust and respect to give you advice and motivate you, and align yourself with kids who are like-minded and want to succeed.”

“My parents struggled to send me to a Catholic school. I worked as a salad girl at a restaurant and turned over half of my check to my parents to help them pay tuition,” says Doris. “One of the nuns encouraged me to apply to a college run by her religious order. She drove me there to visit the school, helped me to get a full scholarship and made sure teachers and administrators there knew who I was.”

4. **Encourage extra-curricular activities and leadership.** Colleges seek young people who have passions and skills beyond the classroom, so help your child explore activities that tap into their physical, intellectual and creative talents through after-school and summer activities. Inspire your children to seek leadership roles in school, neighborhood, faith-based or volunteer groups. Encourage a strong work ethic, whether in volunteer roles or an after-school job. Employers and coaches can serve as great college references.

“Even though it was hard for my brother and me to work, it made us more invested,” says Doris. “We knew where we were going.”

5. **Get informed about scholarships.** You are bound to be daunted by college costs, but don’t let those fears overwhelm you or your child. Billions of dollars in scholarships are available based on financial need, academic qualifications and other factors such as athletic prowess.
Public universities and community colleges are generally the most affordable, but choosing a private college can be just as realistic with the right grants and financial aid. Seek help from counselors and mentors with experience navigating available resources, applications and deadlines. Some colleges are specifically interested in first-generation students, and those from families with low incomes may qualify for waivers of test fees and college application fees.

6. **Look for opportunities to visit and learn about colleges.** Seek opportunities for your child to go to college fairs and information nights offered by their school, and take college tours organized by their counselors or friends. Scholarships may also be available for high school students to enroll in college classes or summer programs to get hands-on experience. Learn about programs such as Upward Bound for first-generation and other at-risk students.

7. **Finding help once your child gets to college.** Getting into college is only the first step toward success. Nearly a third of students who go to college are first-generation students from low-income families, but statistically they face more challenges in earning a degree. Knowing what resources are available on campus is critical, since first-generation students may feel insecure and experience greater “culture shock” than the typical first-year student. Colleges and universities have free support services to help all students facing stumbling blocks, but many also offer special programs and services geared toward first-generation students. Work with a counselor to identify such resources ahead of time, and encourage your child to stay connected to these sources of help and to cultivate mentors on campus. A great resource on how best to do this can be found in Marcia Cantarella’s blog: The Virtue of the Noisy College Student—http://huff.to/Vn7rDa.

“Our parents of first-generation students worry that if you go away to school and become more educated, they will lose you,” says Doris. “But don’t inhibit your children’s choices because of your fear. The more supportive you are, the easier it will be to maintain strong ties.”

If your child walks into this new situation with the confidence of knowing that you are physically and emotionally there to help navigate this new path, then you’ll have a college student that’s got a fighting chance to make it all the way through.

**Additional Resources:**

IT was a simple question, but we couldn’t find the answer in any of the paperwork the college had sent. How long was my family supposed to stay for orientation? This was 1999, so Google wasn’t really a verb yet, and we were a low-income family (according to my new school) without regular Internet access.

I was a first-generation college student as well as the first in our family to be born in America — my parents were born in Cuba — and we didn’t yet know that families were supposed to leave pretty much right after they unloaded your stuff from the car.

We all made the trip from Miami, my hometown, to what would be my new home at Cornell University. Shortly after arriving on campus, the five of us — my parents, my younger sister, my abuela and me — found ourselves listening to a dean end his welcome speech with the words: “Now, parents, please: Go!”

Almost everyone in the audience laughed, but not me, and not my parents. They turned to me and said, “What does he mean, Go?” I was just as confused as they were: We thought we all needed to be there for freshman orientation — the whole family, for the entirety of it. My dad had booked their hotel through the day after my classes officially began. They’d used all their vacation days from work and had been saving for months to get me to school and go through our orientation.

We all made the trip from Miami, my hometown, to what would be my new home at Cornell University. Shortly after arriving on campus, the five of us — my parents, my younger sister, my abuela and me — found ourselves listening to a dean end his welcome speech with the words: “Now, parents, please: Go!”

Every afternoon during that week, we had to go back to the only department store we could find, the now-defunct Ames, for some stupid thing we hadn’t known was a necessity, something not in our budget: shower shoes, extra-long twin sheets, mesh laundry bags. Before the other families left, we carefully watched them — they knew what they were doing — and we made new shopping lists with our limited vocabulary:

*Those things that lift up the bed, we wrote. That plastic thing to carry stuff to the bathroom.*

My family followed me around as I visited department offices during course registration. *Only four classes?* they asked, assuming I was mistakenly taking my first semester too easy. They walked with me to buildings I was supposed to be finding on my own. They waited outside those buildings so that we could all leave from there and go to lunch together.

The five of us wandered each day through the dining hall’s doors. “You guys are still here!” the over-friendly person swiping ID cards said after day three. “They sure are!” I chirped back, learning via the cues of my hallmates that I was supposed to want my family gone. But it was an act: We sat together at meals — amid all the other students, already making friends — my mom placing a napkin and fork at each place, setting the table as we did at home.

I don’t even remember the moment they drove away. I’m told it’s one of those instances you never forget, that second when you realize you’re finally on your own. But for me, it’s not there — perhaps because, when you’re the first in your family to go to college, you never truly feel like they’ve let you go.

They did eventually leave — of course they did — and a week into classes, I received the topics for what would be my first college paper, in an English course on the modern novel. I might as well have been my non-English-speaking grandmother trying to read and understand them: The language felt that foreign. I called my mom at work and in tears told her that I had to come home, that I’d made a terrible mistake.

She sighed into the phone and said: “Just read me the first question. We’ll go through it a little at a time and figure it out.”

I read her the topic slowly, pausing after each sentence, waiting for her to say something. The first topic was two paragraphs long. I remember it had the word *intersectionalities* in it. And the word gendered. And
maybe the phrase theoretical framework. I waited for her response and for the ways it would encourage me, for her to tell me I could do this, that I would eventually be the first in my family to graduate from college.

“You’re right,” she said after a moment. “You’re screwed.”

Other parents — parents who have gone to college themselves — might have known at that point to encourage their kid to go to office hours, or to the writing center, or to ask for help. But my mom thought I was as alone as I feared.

“I have no idea what any of that means,” she said. “I don’t even know how it’s a question.”

While my college had done an excellent job recruiting me, I had no road map for what I was supposed to do once I made it to campus. I’d already embarrassed myself by doing things like asking my R.A. what time the dorm closed for the night. As far as I knew, there’d been no mandatory meeting geared toward first-generation students like me: Aside from a check-in with my financial aid officer when she explained what work-study was (I didn’t know and worried it meant I had to join the army or something) and where she had me sign for my loans, I was mostly keeping to myself to hide the fact that I was a very special kind of lost. I folded the sheet with the paper topics in half and put it in my desk drawer.

“I don’t know what you’re gonna do,” my mom almost laughed. “Maybe — have you looked in the dictionary?”

I started crying harder, my hand over the receiver.

“You still there?” she eventually asked, clearly hiding her own tears. I murmured Mmmhmm.

“Look, just stick it out up there until Christmas,” she said. “We have no more vacation days this year. We can’t take off any more time to go get you.”

“O.K.,” I swallowed. I started breathing in through my nose and out through my mouth, calming myself. “I can do that,” I said.

My mom laughed for real this time and said, “Mamita, you don’t really have a choice.”

She didn’t say this in a mean way. She was just telling me the truth. “This whole thing was your idea, remember?” she said. Then she told me she had to go, that she needed to get back to work.

SO I got back to work, too, and Get back to work became a sort of mantra for me. I tackled the paper with the same focus that had landed me, to everyone’s surprise — even my own — at Cornell in the first place. I did O.K. on it, earning a “B-/C” (I never found out how a grade could have a slash in it, but now that I’m an English professor I understand what he was trying to say). The professor had covered the typed pages with comments and questions, and it was in his endnote that he listed the various campus resources available to me.

My mom didn’t ask outright what grade I earned — she eventually stopped asking about assignments altogether — and I learned from my peers that grades were something that I didn’t have to share with my parents the way I had in high school.

My grades were the first of many elements of my new life for which they had no context and which they wouldn’t understand. With each semester, what I was doing became, for them, as indecipherable as that paper topic; they didn’t even know what questions to ask. And that, for me, is the quintessential quality of the first-generation college student’s experience. It’s not even knowing what you don’t know.

Jennine Capó Crucet is the author of the novel “Make Your Home Among Strangers” and an assistant professor of English and ethnic studies at the University of Nebraska in Lincoln.
The first time I had to fill out a Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) form, I cringed. Looking at this overwhelming piece of paper, I wondered if I could ever get through it. But as the All the Difference College Bound Students Handbook notes, applying for financial aid is one of the most important things a student will do before going to college. I knew I had to get past the fear. Here’s why: the federal government, your state government and your child’s college or university will use the FAFSA to determine the amount of financial aid they are eligible for, including grants, loans and scholarships.

It’s not easy. The FAFSA is a 10-page form with 108 questions. It comes with a 72-page instruction manual. But don’t be intimidated. The following tips can help you simplify the process for you and your child. (And don’t forget to use the College Bound Students Handbook’s “Financing College” resource section for additional help.)

1. **Know the deadlines.** Say your child wants to start college in August. Their FAFSA will need to be submitted to federal financial aid officials no later than June 30th of that year. Remember, your child can submit the FAFSA as early as January 1st. But the federal deadline is not the only one you and your child need to know. Different states have different deadlines for when the FAFSA needs to be filed. Colleges and universities may also have earlier deadlines for their own scholarship programs. A student planning to attend Indiana University in the fall of 2016, for example, will need to file the FAFSA no later than March 10, 2016. An easy way to find out your state’s FAFSA deadline is to go to this section of FAFSA website, which lists the deadlines for every state.

2. **Get out your income tax returns.** Information about your income/assets and those of your spouse or ex-spouse is needed to calculate what the FAFSA calls the “expected family contribution,” or the amount a child can reasonably expect their family to pay for college each year (yes, the FAFSA has to be submitted every year). If the prospect of sharing income tax information with your child is cause for anxiety, don’t worry — you’re not alone. In almost every family talking about money is difficult for any number of reasons. It can get even more complicated in cases of separation and divorce, when you or your former spouse may not want to disclose certain information about income and assets. The good news is that the FAFSA form anticipates and has answers for a wide range of these and other family circum-
stances. As do the financial aid advisors at the colleges and universities to which your child is applying. Call them for help. Edvisors is a popular website for many parents who need help with the FAFSA process, and offers an online tutorial that can walk you through how to report your income and assets on the form. And don’t forget what may be the most valuable sources of information — friends and relatives who have been through the FAFSA process with their own kids.

Realistically, there are parents who, for whatever reason, don’t file income taxes and therefore cannot fill out the FAFSA. Unfortunately, this disqualifies their children from receiving federal loans or grants. However, as the College Bound Students Handbook states in the “Financing College” section, there are some financial aid offices that might help in finding private funding sources for the student. An article on Fastweb.com addresses this dilemma and offers a couple suggestions on how to continue their education without the family’s financial support.

3. **Take advantage of the option to file the FAFSA electronically.** Filling out and submitting the FAFSA online means you will get information about the amount of financial aid your child can expect from the federal government faster than if you mail it in — in three to five days, as opposed to seven to ten days. The online application also comes with tools that can help answer questions you or your child might have, and flags typos and other simple errors that can be corrected right away. In addition, the online application can retrieve income tax data from previous years, which makes the annual submission of the FAFSA much easier. This Edvisor tutorial walks you through the process of helping your child set up a FAFSA account.

4. **Keep the FAFSA process in context.** The FAFSA is long and asks for a lot of information. It may feel onerous to complete, but it’s worth it in the end. There are a number of policy makers and elected officials who are working to simplify the FAFSA so that more students and families use it to get the aid they’re eligible for. By some estimates, nearly $3 billion in federal Pell Grants — which award up to $5700 per year for college tuition — was available but went unclaimed in 2014 because the students and families eligible for the grants didn’t file or complete the FAFSA. According to the U.S. Department of Education, only 40 percent of high school seniors complete the FAFSA. They also estimate that, every year, more than 100,000 high school seniors who start filling out the form never finish it. If you don’t let the FAFSA intimidate you, your child won’t be one of them.
Whether you’ve spent weeks or years wondering how to help your child go to college, the topic likely to make you worry the most is how you’re going to pay for it. At one time I had three kids in college at the same time and I can tell you I had many a sleepless night.

But I decided not to let my fear get the best of me. It was going to happen. I just needed to figure out how. I was not one of the fortunate few who could foot the whole bill, so it took a lot of homework and talking to parents who had been where I was about to go—College Financing 101. I found that there are a number of sound options for securing help, and learning about them will ease your anxiety (as it did mine) and help you make informed choices. If you are hesitant to see your child incur heavy debts, one form of assistance you should investigate is the Parent PLUS Loan.

Parent PLUS loans are provided by the federal government specifically for parents to help their dependent children pay for college tuition and expenses not covered by other forms of financial aid. In order to qualify, you must be the parent, stepparent or adoptive parent of a child going to college at least halftime. You must also have a good credit rating. Repayment is officially set to begin 60 days after funds are fully disbursed, but it can be deferred until six months after the student graduates. Grad PLUS loans are available for graduate students to take out on their own.

Since the Parent PLUS loan is in the parent’s name rather than the student’s, it will not saddle your child with debt or affect their credit rating upon graduating from college. Another advantage is that PLUS loans are set at a relatively low fixed rate (currently 6.84 percent, which is lower than the rate for regular consumer loans) for the life of the loan.

In 2010, President Obama approved a measure that makes it easier for students to repay federal loans. Borrowers can choose an income-based repayment plan that limits payments to no more than 10 percent of their incomes. Those who have been making their payments faithfully can have their debt forgiven after 20 years. In addition, public servants, including teachers, nurses and military personnel are eligible to have any remaining balance on their loans forgiven after ten years. While parents using PLUS loans typically do not qualify for these terms, they can become eligible for income-contingent repayment and public service debt forgiveness if the PLUS loans are refinanced into a Federal Direct Consolidation Loan.
There is also flexibility in repayment options for PLUS loans, which can be paid in bulk or in installments, using fixed monthly payments or graduated payments. PLUS loan interest payments may also qualify as tax deductions.

The most obvious downside of choosing a Parent PLUS loan is that current interest rates are much lower for private student loans, which are based on borrower credit and can be secured at fixed or variable rates. Parents also have to complete the complex needs-based FAFSA, have their credit checked and maintain a good credit history to qualify for a PLUS loan, and they must reapply every year. Some parents prefer to have their children use private loans with less stringent requirements and lower interest rates, and then help them with repayments until they become more financially secure. Just be aware that if you choose this option you may still need to co-sign for the loan and thus bear the burden of any adverse impact on your credit. Also, loans with variable interest rates may start out low but increase and become unmanageable over time, and the federal loan forgiveness options will not apply.

For these reasons, most financial advisors recommend supplementing scholarships and other forms of assistance with federal loans such as Parent PLUS and avoiding private loans to the extent possible.

Parent PLUS loans can be used most effectively in combination with other forms of federal aid, so it is important to understand the array of federal aid available. Mark Kantrowitz, senior vice president and publisher of the Edvisors Network, suggests using Federal Stafford loans before tapping Parent PLUS loans. “Before parents borrow from the Federal Parent PLUS loan program, it is best if the student exhausts eligibility for the Federal Stafford loan first, since [it] has lower interest rates and fees,” he advises. This strategy “will save the family money,” he adds.

To avoid or eliminate debt altogether, consumer expert Clark Howard offers some cardinal rules such as: looking for four-year degree programs or community college options that keep costs down for specific types of degrees; exploring on-campus jobs, such as resident assistantships, that reduce tuition costs; looking beyond the standard academic scholarships for unusual offerings through sources such as CollegeGold.com; or even moving to select rural communities that are so anxious to draw talented residents that they will forgive some of your student loan debt.
Finally, involving your child in financial planning for college and beyond is critical. “Far too many parents make the mistake of not discussing money with their students while they are still in college. You must take the time to sit down now and discuss their obligations regarding student loans. In *All the Difference*, both Robert and Krishaun faced with huge sticker shock in their senior year about the amount of money they would owe at graduation. Remind your student to start visiting the financial aid officer in their freshman year so that they can keep track of their loan situation. “Explain interest rates and payment amounts so you can think about a repayment plan together,” writes Jodi Okun, a financial aid consultant and founder of College Financial Aid Advisors. “Understanding financial obligations now will help your student make smarter choices about the choice of college and field as study, and budgeting needs. When a parent becomes a student, everyone gets smarter!”

**Additional Resources:**

Edvisors: “Parent PLUS Loan Overview.”

Edvisors: “Parent PLUS Loans vs. Private Student Loans.”
https://www.edvisors.com/college-loans/federal/parent-plus/compare/


http://bucks.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/04/09/a-student-debt-repayment-option-for-some-parents/?_r=1
Although some may think of community colleges as places primarily offering vocational and technical training, more and more students are using them as a stepping-stone to degrees from four-year colleges and universities. Nearly half -- 45 percent -- of all U.S. undergraduates attend a community college as full-time or part-time students every year. According to the American Association of Community Colleges, in 2012 a majority of community college students were planning to pursue degrees in liberal arts and sciences.

New pathways to career and college success

Community colleges are seen by many education experts, policy makers and elected officials as one way to solve a big problem: The rising cost of college keeps too many young people from getting the skills and training they need to compete for good paying jobs, or saddles them with too much debt from student loans.

In 2015, President Barack Obama proposed a plan to pay the bulk of tuition and fees for any community college student who is enrolled at least half-time, maintains a 2.5 GPA and is on track to graduate on-time and/or transfer to a four-year school. The idea driving the proposal is to cut the cost of higher education. Some students would get the first two years of a four-year degree paid for; others would be ready to join the workforce without having to pay back thousands in student loans.

Making the decision whether to attend community college will require that you and your child do careful planning, ask and answer tough questions, and know the facts. Two of my children went this route and those were the best decisions both could have made at the time.

Start with an end in mind

But what about your child? Do they want to enter the workforce in a specific field or go on to a four-year college? Community colleges offer a path to both, but starting out with a clear direction avoids the double whammy of no degree and massive student loan debt. High school counselors can help you and your child put a roadmap in place, as can academic advisors at the community college your child is considering.

Don’t forget to also talk to friends and relatives with experience navigating community college, because they can offer all-important practical advice about parking, public transportation, class schedules or just good places on campus to study.
Certificate programs: Lower costs and potential for higher rewards

Some community colleges offer one-year certification programs that will prepare students for jobs that are in high demand in their local economies. The *New York Times* recently reported on how community colleges in Texas and Louisiana re-tooled their curriculums to meet growing demand for welders from companies drilling for oil off the Gulf Coast. Now students there can earn certificates—usually in a year—that will qualify them for welding jobs that pay up to $20 an hour starting out and into the six figures later on.

At most community colleges, students can earn certificates in accounting, computer programming, construction trades, health care and other fields that may allow them to get a good paying job soon after they finish high school.

Degree programs: Navigate the risks and opportunities

More than 80 percent of students who start community college have the goal of transferring to a four-year college to earn a bachelor’s degree. Yet relatively few accomplish this goal. According to the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, only 16 percent of students who started at community colleges in 2008 completed a degree at a four-year institution by 2014. But the good news is that students who transfer from community colleges to four-year public universities graduate at the same rate—60 percent—as full-time four-year students.

Interestingly, the Clearinghouse found that most community college transfer students who earned a four-year degree from public universities did so without first earning a two-year degree.

So the lesson here is that it might make sense for you and your child to explore the option of transferring to a four-year college after a single year at community college. This is the path my son’s program BridgeEdu takes in Maryland.

Beyond costs, in the *College Bound Students Handbook*, Marcia Cantarella lays out the benefits and opportunities of community college:

- **A chance to catch up:** High schools across the country do not prepare students equally for college. For example, some high schools do not have adequate lab facilities for science courses. A community college can provide a space to strengthen key knowledge in English language and writing skills, math and science. This will provide needed background preparation for higher level classes at a four-year school.

- **More vocational focus:** A community college is more likely to offer more courses of study that are vocationally focused, and the two-year degree they offer may effectively serve a student’s purpose in choosing postsecondary education. This may also be true for adult...
learners seeking a change in career direction or enhanced skills. Faculty may be part-time, working in fields directly related to a student’s job or career goals and able to offer job specific advice. An advertising executive, for example, could be teaching a marketing course. But remember, if the goal is to transfer to a four-year college, taking vocational-specific courses may not be transferable, so choose your courses carefully.

• **Small classes:** Community colleges are less likely to have the kinds of huge lecture classes that are found in large four-year institutions. That creates more opportunities to connect with faculty—a very important asset.

• **Comfort zone:** Some students may find four-year schools intimidating because their classmates come from more privileged families or have greater familiarity with what college offers. First-generation college students, in particular, may find it easier to learn about college culture in a less intimidating space. This is also an opportunity to build their academic records, which will make it easier to transfer in a year or two.

• **Life style and accommodation:** Community colleges may have more classes and resources available during evenings and weekends, especially for those students who have to work full time and/or have family obligations. Adult students who are career changers or need additional training for a new field may also find the flexibility and courses they need in a community college.

While there are some definite pluses to going the community college route, there are some cautions to consider:

• **Getting trapped in remedial courses:** Some students are required by community colleges to take remedial or developmental courses in math and English before they are allowed to get on track to earn a two-year or four-year degree. Placements into these courses are determined by student scores on entrance tests—including ACCUPLACER and COMPASS—used by community colleges to determine readiness for college-level courses.

About 60 percent of students entering community colleges are required to take remedial courses based on their placement tests, but some research indicates that, for many students, these courses can turn into dead ends. A study by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching found that 70 percent of community college students taking remedial math courses never complete them, which means they can’t earn a degree.

Studies from the Center for Community College Research (CCCR) at Columbia University’s Teachers College indicate that high school GPAs may be a better guide to placement in college-level courses than placement tests. When just the test scores were used, researchers
found placements in remedial math and English courses were in error up to a third of the time.

“Using high school transcript information instead of test scores was predicted to lower severe placement errors by 10 to 15 percent,” said the CCCR study. “Using the best of either placement test scores or high school transcript information was predicted to lower the remediation rate by 8 to 11 percentage points while reducing placement errors and increasing college-level success rates.”

Bottom line: If your child got decent grades in math and reading in high school, they may not need remedial courses, even if their placement test scores were low. Work with the community college’s academic advisors to determine alternative to remedial courses, which might include re-taking the placement tests and/or taking college-level math and reading courses, even if placement scores are low.

- **Making sure credits transfer from two-year to four-year degree programs:** Transferring credits earned at community college to a four-year school is not automatic, and some students may find they will have to start almost from scratch if they want to earn a bachelor’s degree.

Researchers at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York found that roughly 14 percent of community college transfer had fewer than 10 percent of their credits accepted by the four-year school they transferred into. Less than 60 percent were able to move all their credits into four-year degree programs. The study also showed that students who were able to transfer most of their credits were 2.5 times more likely to earn a four-year degree than their peers, who lost more than half of their credits.

Parents and students should carefully study credit transfer programs between their community colleges and neighboring universities. If the goal is a four-year degree, then every community college course a student takes should count toward it.

- **Lacking consistent advising and other supports:** Community college can be a confusing place for many students, and not just because the coursework is demanding. Getting to and from school, buying books, registering and paying for the right classes, finding tutors—all of that can frustrate students who may also be working full or part-time, taking care of their families or raising children.

That’s why students need to find and stay in touch with their academic advisors. They should also make sure they have reliable transportation to and from school, and enough money to pay for courses, fees and books.

A recent study of the City University of New York’s Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (ASAP) shows how important those things can be to earning a degree on time.

Students in the program get lots of advising and tutoring, as well as help with tuition, books, and transportation. After three years, 40 percent of students in the program had earned an associate’s degree, compared to 22 percent who did not get those supports.
• **Making a decision on whether to attend full or part-time:** An important element of the ASAP program is that students in it attend community college full-time. Making the decision to do that is tough for married students or parents who may need to work full or part-time or believe they can’t afford to be a full-time student.

Keep in mind, however, that community colleges are substantially less expensive than four-year colleges. According to College Board, tuition and fees for a full-time student at a public two-year institution averaged $3,130 compared to $8,660 at public four-year colleges. When Pell Grants and tuition tax credit were factored in, College Board says that most full-time students could get up to $1,220 of that tuition cost refunded—money that can be used for transportation, food and housing. The National Postsecondary Student Aid Study estimated that, in 2012, community college students who received a Pell Grant had most of their tuition and fees paid for.

Community colleges can be a great launching pad to either a four-year college or a career. Astronaut Eileen Collins got her start at one, as did Star Wars creator George Lucas, actor Tom Hanks and baseball player Jackie Robinson, to name a few. All that’s needed is a plan and the passion to turn the experience into the first step to a very successful life that doesn’t begin with extensive college debt.

**Additional Resources:**


One of the scenes that really surprised me in *All the Difference* was the one where Krishaun’s family threw him a “trunk party” before he left for Fisk University. I had not heard the term before but I soon found out that it’s actually quite common. In fact, you can register for it like you can for a wedding or baby shower.

Over the years, trunk parties have become quite a popular way to honor and say goodbye to the college-bound student. They also provide an opportunity for a community of friends and family to help contribute to the expenses associated with college. Trunk parties can range from small, intimate affairs to very large ones with dozens of people coming out to say goodbye and good luck. This is especially true in families and communities where the student is the first to go to college.

Trunk parties are actually becoming a big part of the party planning business, but most of these parties are do-it-yourselfers that need not be overly expensive affairs. There are numerous free online invitation sites, but if you prefer paper invites, Hoover Web Design provides free templates that can be used. The invitations should spell out the Who, What, When, Where and If the student is registered in a particular store. Buzzle.com says that guests will bring in what they think is right when gifts are not specified. However, that could mean a lot of duplicates, so registering might not be a bad idea. The nice thing about college registries is that, unlike many wedding or baby registries, college supplies like pens, paper, paper clips, staplers, etc. can be relatively inexpensive, so guests have numerous options for useful but affordable gifts for the student. It is important to note that a dorm room is a small space, and your child may not have room for everything they otherwise might receive. The more specific your child can be around what will be needed, the better for everyone. A college’s website may also provide information about the size of the room, furniture, storage space, etc.
In the College Bound Students Handbook, Marcia Cantarella points out that there are other essentials that should be considered for the trunk party list. Some of the items may be a bit pricy, but this could provide an opportunity for a group of people to get together on a single gift. Here are some suggestions:

• New clothes, depending on the climate in which the school is located
• Contribution to health insurance if the student is not on the parent’s plan
• Student fees
• Books or lab fees
• Required deposit for a dorm room
• Bedding and other household items for a dorm room
• Funds for transportation to and from college
• Laptop computer
• Cell phone or pre-paid calling cards
• Gift cards for merchandise or donating airlines or train points so the student can get to and from campus to visit home

Day Of

Because most of these parties are during the summertime, fun foods like hot dogs, hamburgers or corn-on-the-cob are appropriate. You can add a twist by customizing the foods with names that mean something to the student. For example, if Krishaun’s party had french fries, they could have renamed them “Fisk fries.” Hamburgers could be “College Burgers.” Or, since the Fisk mascot is a bulldog, hot dogs could be renamed “Bulldogs.”

The actual location of the trunk party can be decorated with images of what’s to come. Ehow.com suggests decorating with the colors of the college the student will be attending. This can be done with balloons, streamers, table cloths, cups and plates, and if you can get hold of one, spotlighting the college pennant.

Of course, at center stage in any trunk party, regardless of size, is an actual trunk. It’s as much symbolic as it is a convenient place to collect the gifts. Once deposited, that’s really the last time the gifts are the focus of attention. The rest of the time is spent dancing, eating, giving the student life advice and playing games. Questions for the games should all relate to the student’s next phase in life—like the question about Krishaun’s major in college. The answer was wrong but it brought out laughter and discussion about his real interests.

Finally, pictures should be taken throughout the party so that a scrapbook can be made for the student to take along with them. Nowadays, it may be an online album or one made through Snapfish or Shutterfly, but whatever the form the goal is the same. The first few days and months away from home will be tough, so having a collection of memories of all the people who are there for the student can make a real difference in helping them make a successful transition.
That’s the beauty of a trunk party. It’s more than the gifts. It’s the memories and the promise of a new phase in life—one that carries with it the love and support of friends and family.

**Days After That**

Once the contents of the trunk and the student are well on their way to college, a parent’s job enters a whole new phase. I’ll talk more about that in another tip, but as far as the trunk goes, remember these words: “care packages.”

“My stepdaughter reminded me of care packages I used to send her,” says Marcia. “More clever than I remembered being, I froze homemade loaves of banana bread and mailed them while frozen so they arrived fresh and thawed.”

You might remember, too, that depending on where their college is located, your child may not be able to get some of the foods they are accustomed to. Homemade favorites are always a hit. The idea, of course, is to occasionally and strategically infuse little reminders of home and love throughout the college experience. It doesn’t have to be elaborate but include items that you know your student likes and/or needs. Care packages are like comfort food for the soul. They become especially meaningful during high stress times, like midterms and finals when opening a package from home can be just the thing to put a smile on their face and to become that little spark to make the study process more tolerable.

Remember, a trunk can store all the material necessities your student will need to make it through their college years. The other necessities—knowing there is unconditional love and never feeling alone—those are the things that are stored in the heart and that will last a lifetime.
The folks at College Parent Central call it the “meltdown” phone call—the one that parents get around midnight from a child very early in their first semester of college. The one where they say life is miserable and friendless, and they are totally overwhelmed. Then the words, “I want to come home, now!

Although the meltdown call is both common and normal, parents should take it seriously, and—more importantly—learn how to respond in ways that don’t undermine development of the self-confidence, resilience, and positive attitudes their children need to tackle the challenges of college life.

Decades of research underscore that the first few weeks of freshman year are a critical time. More than 30 percent of first-time and full-time college freshman withdraw before they finish their first year. Studies also show that the most of these withdrawals take place in the first four to six weeks of freshman year.¹

Too many students don’t come back if they leave. American College Testing, which administers the ACT college entrance exam, estimates that 33 percent of freshman students don’t go on to sophomore year at the school where they started, and 25 percent leave college altogether before finishing their second year.²

The inability of many students to make the transition from “home room to dorm room” during the first year of college contributes to the low rate of college completion in the United States. According to a 2012 study by the Harvard Graduate School of Education, only little over half — 56 percent — of U.S. college students complete four-year degrees within six years.

“The numbers are dreadful, and the freshman year is key,” James Boyle, president of College Parents of America told USA Today in a 2010 article about how parents can help their kids manage the tough first weeks of college.

The good news is that there is plenty of good advice around for parents on how to handle the meltdown call and moments of homesickness the first few days and weeks in college.
Be Prepared

Anticipating the meltdown call helps parents respond rather than react to their college freshman’s struggles. College Parent Central offers a wealth of tips to parents for handling the call, including the following:

**Don’t panic.** Remember that this is a normal phase in the adjustment to college. While it may not happen for every student, or will happen to differing degrees for different students, once the initial “honeymoon” phase is over, many students go through a period of adjustment to the reality of college life.

**Listen.** It is possible that all your student really needs is a sympathetic ear. She knows that you are her home base and her foundation and that she can count on you. She may just need to vent. Let her talk it out. As difficult as it may be, just listen.

**Don’t trivialize what your student is telling you.** As you think about how to respond to your student, don’t try to make her feel better by trivializing what she is telling you. “I’m sure it can’t be that bad,” may sound helpful on the surface, but you are telling her that her feelings or reactions are wrong and out of proportion to the situation. Right now things may be that bad for her. Validate what she is feeling.

**Try to determine the exact problem.** Is the dissatisfaction generally with everything having to do with college, or is there a specific issue that is upsetting her? Ask what exactly the problem is. In trying to describe it, she may realize that it is one specific issue—and then together you may be able to come up with a solution for that issue. Or as she describes a specific issue in detail she may discover for herself that it really isn’t as big an issue as it seemed.

**Ask your student what can be done to make the situation better.** If she has been able to describe the problem specifically, she may be able to begin to think about how it can be fixed. If she is worried about having no friends, ask her to brainstorm with you some ideas about how to meet some new people, or how to find others with similar interests. If she is worried about her schoolwork, ask whether it is a specific class or all classes. Ask about academic support services or whether there is a student in class who can help.

**Encourage her to make use of help that is available on campus.** Has she explored help from her residence assistant, the counseling center, the tutoring center, the student activities office, her advisor or a sympathetic professor?
If he says he’s ready to drop out, ask whether he can just finish this semester. Don’t give in too quickly, but don’t make him feel he’s stuck for four years. Try to compromise. Tell him you understand, and that coming home or transferring may be the answer. But suggest that he try to make it through the few weeks until the end of the semester. This will give him time to evaluate and find balance. He may still need to leave at that time, but he may also find that things have improved, he has made friends, and he doesn’t want to leave after all.

Some parents find it helpful to establish a weekly check-in call with their college student, say, every Sunday night that first semester. In that way you can keep “an ear” open for progress, or even another meltdown call, should it come.

2 According to the National Student Clearing House Research Center, of all the student in the U.S. students who started at a four-year public college or university in 2013, less than 70 percent returned to the same institution for sophomore year.
When your child goes to college for the first time, doing well in school may be the least of their challenges. Getting along with a roommate, making friends, learning new routines, handling social situations, fitting in and making decisions unsupervised by parents may be much higher on the priority list than earning a 4.0.

Many young people will negotiate all these hurdles and still serve up stellar grades; not surprisingly, others will not. So what do you do if your child’s first-semester performance falls short of your expectations?

The first rule of thumb is: Don’t Panic. Many kids who wobble their way through first semester will ratchet their grades up once they gain more solid footing in their new environment. Believe it or not, they can do this without you there to guide their every move. But there is still a lot you can do to help them stage their own “course correction.”

Here are some constructive forms of support you can offer at various stages.

**Before your kids enter college:**

Give them opportunities to talk to you, guidance counselors, college friends or other trusted adults about how college is different from high school. For example, there are a lot fewer courses, but more work is required to master massive amounts of material. There is a lot more free time than they may be accustomed to, but they need to budget time wisely to keep up with coursework while partaking in social and extracurricular activities or juggling responsibilities like part-time work.

Help them think about time management and ways to plan and block out their time so they can keep track of assignments, papers and exams. One advantage of your child’s likely addiction to technology is that there are all kinds of organizational apps that can be both motivating and helpful.

Make sure that you and your children take advantage of college information nights and opportunities at school and in the community—the more you and your child know, the better prepared you both will be.

Encourage increasingly independent planning and decision-making as your children progress through high school and throughout the process of applying for college.
Make sure they understand basic life skills like using a credit card responsibly, doing laundry and balancing a checkbook. The less chaotic their day-to-day living is, the more students can concentrate on schoolwork.

If your child and your gut instincts tell you that he or she is not ready to succeed and perform optimally in college, consider the advantages of a productive “gap year.” If you live in or near Baltimore you might consider BridgeEdU, a program that Wes Moore started with the University of Baltimore that’s designed to ease the on-ramp to a successful first-year experience.

**Once they start college:**

Be prepared to receive much less information about a student’s grades and progress than you’ve ever before. College students are considered accountable for their own performance.

Keep in regular touch with your child and foster open communication about their academic progress.

*Talk less and listen more.*

If you discover that your student is not doing well, your first reaction may be to get angry and lash out--but don’t, even if it means giving yourself time to cool down. “Don’t talk to your child when you are angry and upset—nothing good can come of it,” cautions one parent. Maintain your equilibrium and encourage them to talk about how they reached that point and what the greatest challenges have been. Engage them in brainstorming about what went wrong and how to turn the situation around.

As we see throughout *All the Difference*, it’s critical that students know that they don’t have to make it alone. Make sure your child is aware of the myriad campus resources for students facing challenges: faculty advisors, favorite professors, counselors, health centers support centers, tutors, library staff and communities of faith. At the same time, help your children understand that it is up to them to make use of these resources.

**Consider Plan B:**

*Don’t rule out wholesale changes:* When students are struggling academically, socially or both despite every reasonable effort, it may be time to fundamentally shift gears. Help guide them in determining not only whether the course of study they have chosen is right for them, but also whether this institution is the right fit.

Help them seek advice and guidance on other fields of study and college settings that may be better suited for them. Many young people thrive after a college transfer. Maybe your child needs to be closer to home or further away; in a smaller school or a larger one; in a city, country or suburb; on a campus surrounded by friends or one where they can start anew.
For some young people, believe it or not, the best option may be to take time off from college before regrouping and trying again. For example if a child is going through a family crisis or personal trauma or just in an academic slump that a change of schools will not fix, a time out may be necessary—and make sense for your pocketbook. “My son was not succeeding and was not taking school seriously, but after taking time out he was able to return and be successful,” notes one friend. “Waiting tables will do that to you.”

**Support for YOU**

Whether it takes young people a semester or a decade to attain academic success or get on a sustainable career path, chances are they will find their way, on their own terms and in their own time. “I had to learn that kids are going to do what they are going to do, and that means making some bone-headed decisions,” notes Daphne*, whose son ended up switching majors, changing schools, marrying his high school sweetheart and then getting divorced before making his way through college, law school and a much happier set of circumstances. For too long, she said, she shouldered a lot of the guilt for his missteps, until he told her he had no regrets because all of these experiences helped him to grow and led him to where he was.

Finding the right balance between being a helpful guide, nagging parent and helpless observer as your child negotiates college can take a huge emotional toll. While you are wracking your brain trying to steer your child to the best sources of support, find ways to ease your own stress and maintain your sanity. You will be in no shape to provide constructive support if you are having a nervous breakdown!

For Daphne, sharing experiences with other parents of college-age children—and friends who knew each other's children well—was invaluable. “Other people who know your child well and have some history with him can give you a different perspective,” she says. “Sharing stories with parents about all kinds of challenges their kids were facing really helped,” she adds. “We almost had a syllabus for situations that come up in freshman, sophomore, junior and senior year!”

*Not her real name.*
Additional Resources:


CollegeView: “Help Your Student Survive the First Year of College.”


University of Pittsburgh, Student Affairs: “First Semester Challenges.”
http://www.studentaffairs.pitt.edu/sites/default/files/PDFSandForms/Parents/FirstSemesterChallenges.pdf
I have a distinct memory of the day my parents dropped me off at college. After all my newly acquired “college gear” had been deposited in my dorm room and emotional goodbyes uttered, my mother stood at the door ticking off one last cautionary list. “And don’t forget to leave your windows closed and locked when you leave the room,” she concluded. A relatively obedient and conscientious child my whole life, I was struck by a completely uncharacteristic but most delicious thought: “I don’t have to do that. Or any of the other things she just told me.”

I am quite sure that my mother’s sentiments in those last moments setting me on the path toward adulthood were quite different.

The Washington Post columnist Michael Gerson described his experience dropping his son off at college as “the worst thing that time has done to me so far.”

“That moment at the dorm is implied at the kindergarten door, at the gates of summer camp, at every ritual of parting and independence,” he wrote. “But it comes surprising as a thief, taking what you value most.”

Most parents find both relief and satisfaction in knowing they have gotten their offspring on a solid path toward independence. “I felt an enormous sense of accomplishment that I had successfully launched another human being,” notes Doris. “Of course I missed them, but it is my job to kick them out of the nest.”

Often, however, such emotions are usually mixed. “I felt a huge sense of loss and joy at the same time,” says Susan. “I was so thrilled for the opportunities ahead of them, but I also realized that our family life would never be the same.”

Grieving for the way things were is bound to be part of the process. But it is important not to make the send-off any more difficult for your children, who despite their bravado have their own complicated emotions and adjustments to face.
Here are some thoughts to consider:

- **Senior year** is a hectic time of college applications, testing and preparations, all crammed into your child’s already demanding schedule of school, sports, maybe a part-time job or other extra-curricular activities and juggling new responsibilities, all while navigating a whirlwind of social activities. Tempers will undoubtedly flare, but maintain a thick skin. Words may be uttered that are as much about pulling away from you as they are about the pressure cooker of tension your child is experiencing.

- **Involve and help** your child in planning, packing, shopping and preparing for the journey in increments to keep last minute stresses to a minimum. Items will still be forgotten, so allow extra time for errands when you drop them off, but also acknowledge that your child will survive and figure it all out.

- When the fateful day comes, let your child take the lead in saying goodbye, whether it is in the parking lot or after a couple of hours helping them get settled. It’s okay to be emotional, but don’t create embarrassing, drawn-out scenes in front of other students. Cap the goodbye with words of encouragement to let your children know you have confidence in them, but that you are also only a phone call (or text, email or FaceTime) away if they need your support.

- **Once your child has gone**, experience your emotions, grieve and share your feelings with supportive friends and family who are or have been in your shoes. But as time goes on, especially if you are now an empty nester, look for opportunities to blossom and expand your own horizons through new activities, accomplishments, and adventures. Deepen your bonds with loved ones and friends old and new.

- **Strike a balance** between staying in touch and being available as a sounding board with trying to fix everything and be a friend, counselor, advisor and superhero all at once. With the wealth of social media available, children and parents can be in constant touch. But young people need space and time to engage in their new surroundings and make their own way. “The hardest part for me was backing off from the urge to rescue her when she had to navigate bumps in the road, from academic issues to roommate issues to getting laundry done,” says Julie. “The best way for our children to learn is to fall down and get up again, and then repeat.”

- **When a child does not reach out**, you may be feeling abandoned and neglected. But remember that this is not about you. Try to keep the lines of communication open without panicking or “guilting” your child. Some video messaging apps make it easier for you and your child to communicate and respond to each other in your own time. You might try one like Glide.
Somewhat of a veteran in college drop-offs, I know that one of the biggest fears parents face is that sending children to college will diminish your closeness. But I know from my experience and from other parents that the more supportive and positive you are, the stronger your relationship with their child becomes. For me, each drop-off was an emotional rollercoaster that left a knot in my stomach and a lump in my throat. You know that with their growing independence will come a change in your relationship, and the fear is that you won’t be as close. But the reality is that you often develop an even deeper bond with an increasingly independent and confident young adult who will eventually walk back through your door.

Additional Resources:

http://womensissues.about.com/od/parentingcaregiving/a/10-Tips-For-Saying-Goodbye-To-Your-College-Bound-Child.htm

Family Circle: “Campus Living: Saying Goodbye to Your College-Bound Teen.”
http://www.familycircle.com/teen/college/saying-goodbye-to-your-college-bound-teen/

As scary as it may be for first-generation students to adjust to a college culture, it can be just as tough on their parents. Fortunately, more and more colleges and universities are starting to understand that. Many have begun to offer parent and family support programs because they recognize that parents can and do play a very important role in making sure students earn degrees from their institutions. These programs acknowledge that most families need support from and connections to their children’s schools that go beyond the Parents’ Weekend and standard orientations.

Marjorie Savage, Parents Program Director at the University of Minnesota and author of You’re On Your Own (But I’m Here If You Need Me): Mentoring Your Child During the College Years, conducted a national survey of college and university parent and family programs. She found that, since 2000, the number of these programs has increased dramatically since the 1970s and 1980s. About 200 major colleges and universities now have them. And while the primary goal is to make the parent more comfortable with the school, another big benefit is that it also helps parents connect with each other.

I was lucky because I had a head start on networking. My son went to a military school in high school, and if you think that the anxiety of parents, especially mothers, is high when your child goes to college at 18 or 19, imagine the level of intensity when you have to say goodbye to a 13- or 14-year old! Many of us mothers got through those first few weeks by informally talking to each other on the phone and it helped enormously to know that we were not alone in our anxiety. We also started exchanging ideas on how we could organize things like ride shares or staggering care packages to make all of our lives easier and perhaps more economical.
Of course, this was done very informally but colleges are learning that formal networking programs work much better. At the University of Minnesota, Savage says that the program holds itself accountable to clear outcome goals for the parents they serve. These include ensuring that parents understand the student experience and resources available on campus, know the institution’s goals for student development and learning and know when to step in to help their student, and when to empower their student to take responsibility. Written materials, websites, social media, parent-to-parent support groups and parent orientation sessions are among the ways the goals are met.

There’s even a national membership organization, College Parents of America, which provides online networking opportunities for parents around the country. While I am not necessarily promoting a formal membership relationship, there is a College Parents of America blog that parents contribute to that addresses many of the issues parents think most about.

One of those vexing issues is around the privacy that college students are guaranteed by FERPA, the Family Education, Rights and Privacy Act. Even if you, as a parent, are footing the entire bill for your child’s education, you are not entitled to grades or any information about your child’s (now young adult) life on campus. Marcia Cantarella, the author of our All the Difference College Bound Students Handbook says that privacy was one of the toughest things she had to enforce. “There were many times in my life as a dean when I had information about a student that, as a parent, I would have wanted to know but that I could not reveal to family members. My job was to encourage students to share necessary information with their families while trying to ensure that they got whatever support or aid they needed.”

In addition to privacy, an increasing number of colleges and universities are paying special attention to first generation parents, beginning with a personal letter that acknowledges the uniqueness of their situation. Dr. Brian Parks of the University of Oregon, for example, writes a personal letter from the vantage point of his own first-generation experiences of years past.

“You may be unsure of what the college experience is like or how you can best support your student. I remember very vividly that my parents wanted to support me as a student, but did not know how to do so. Often first generation parents feel like they do not belong on campus, which is quite untrue. I want to encourage you to visit the University of Oregon campus if you have not already done so. In fact, please feel free to visit multiple times, in order to familiarize yourself with the University and to become acquainted with the support and resources that are available to your student. What you will find is that the University of Oregon is much more than just a place for students to attend classes. It’s full of individuals who care greatly about helping students succeed in every way. For example, there is the Office of Academic Advising, Academic Learning Services, the Office of Multicultural Academic Support, the Career Center, and the Counseling and Testing Center. These and other great services often go unused, especially by first-generation students. As you familiarize yourself more with the University of Oregon and its services, you will be better able to give your student the specific support that they might need.”
Robert Henderson, one of the young men featured in the documentary *All the Difference* says that his grandmother, who raised him since he was a toddler, had a tough transition when he went off to college. Due to her age and restricted mobility, she rarely visited him while he was in college. That limited her access to other parents or grandparents who she could talk to about her loneliness now that he was away. So she went it alone those four years, relying on his phone calls and vacation breaks to keep her connected to his new life. Of course, she got through it, but Robert admits that now that he knows the value of supports and networking, he’s sure it would have been so much easier on her if she had had her own network and college-generated supports to rely on. Krishaun had similar feelings about the networking opportunities his mother received while he was at Fisk. I know networking and other supports helped me and in time I was able to help other parents, not just in high school but when my kids went to college as well.

Cantarella concludes that while it is important that we build our own peer networks to help us through this tough transitional phase, it is equally important to strengthen the bonds that exists between you and your offspring. Says Cantarella, “Children need affirmation from parents forever including while they are in college. Being both curious and supportive in positive ways will elicit more information from them than seeming to snoop. Given that their privacy is protected it is good to work at the kind of relationship that encourages openness. The parents’ weekend visit or moments when students strut their stuff in either academic presentations, sports or cultural events, geography permitting, creates opportunities to be exposed to their lives and be supportive too. We have to remember that this is a time when they transition from us in moving toward adulthood and so get to practice this different kind of relationship with them while they are in college.”
In her book, *I Can Finish College: The Overcome any Obstacle and Get Your Degree Guide*, Dr. Marcia Cantarella lays out an easy to understand summary of what both students and their parents can expect during their four years in college. In this tip, I’m going to give you an abbreviated version—from a parent’s perspective—to hopefully entice you to read the whole book.

**Freshman Year**

As you can imagine from the previous tips, the first semester of the first year is the most critical and the most stressful. Studies show that this is the time when students will most likely drop out of college—if not permanently, then at least temporarily. Probably for the first time, your student is on their own—making decisions about when to study, when to eat, when to go to bed or when to go to the never ending list of parties or other campus activities. You’re no longer their babysitter and one of three things may happen:

- This newly independent young person takes charge of this independence in a mature way that includes getting enough rest, studying, hanging out with like-minded students and limiting how much they party, or
- They go crazy with the freedom, partying every night, putting off assignments and blowing off classes, or
- They become totally overwhelmed, crawl under the covers and become depressed

As a dean, Dr. Cantarella saw all three scenarios, in the extreme and in moderation. But once students look at their new situation with clear eyes and a commitment to improving, they can successfully get past this first year milestone.

First there are **personal challenges** caused by being separated from what they are used to. There is a lot of “newness” rolled into a very short span of time. If your student has not brought a favorite item along with them (a favorite picture, poster, bedspread, etc.) maybe that item can be included in the first care package you send. Students love to receive letters and packages so don’t forget to stay in touch the old fashioned way.

There will be challenges from meeting new people, some of whom may be from backgrounds they’ve never encountered before; not being close enough to the faith community that has been a big part of their life; or maybe having a roommate for the first time. Encourage your young person
to seek out the many services and clubs that exist on campus to provide bridges to a familiar and comforting past.

Settling in means more than setting up a great looking room. There will be orientations of all kinds that you should encourage your student to attend. They’ll get information about available services and clubs, helpful websites, do’s and don’ts (like what happens if a student is caught cheating) and the differences between classes that are required and those that are not. At some schools orientation may also provide information about a First-Year Experience course, which is designed to ensure that students understand how college works academically and how it fits into the larger community surrounding the campus or the city or community-at-large. This course may also provide an introduction to crucial learning skills, from writing to gathering evidence—all crucial skills to college success.

Many colleges check on first-year students at midterm, and if professors report heavy absences or poor grades on early tests or papers, then your student will most likely get a note from the advisor or dean. As I pointed out in an earlier tip, as a parent you will not be notified because of the Family Education, Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA). But if you’ve fostered an open line of communication with your child, you may hear about the difficulties and be able to offer some helpful—not intrusive—advice. Specifically, one piece of advice that is most helpful is getting a tutor or seeking help from the professor or graduate assistant.

But sometimes the problem is more than not studying enough or focusing on the right things. It could be a range of difficulties that makes the fit in that environment seem unbearable. It is not at all uncommon in the first semester, and many students claim by Thanksgiving that they want to transfer or leave school. Most will stick it out and find that by the second semester they find their footing and continue right where they are. But for some, that initial gut feeling doesn’t go away, and they decide to either drop out or transfer. This may be hard for you as a parent to hear but don’t make your student feel guilty or that they’ve failed you. Dropping out is never a good idea. But if your student is asked to take a leave, encourage them to take courses at a community college close to home and develop a plan to return as soon as possible. If a scholarship was lost, you and your student may need to regroup and come up with some alternative financing, but don’t give up the idea of college.

Sometimes your student does well this first year and still wants to transfer—maybe closer to home, to a smaller or larger campus, to a college where the major your student has fallen in love with has a higher profile—whatever it is, listen to the reason and work with your student to land in a place where there is a better fit. Some credits may be lost but changing schools may help win the ultimate battle to finish college.
The last bit of advice that both Krishaun Branch and Robert Henderson provide in the documentary is to visit the financial aid office early in the freshman year and often after that. Keeping track of college expenses (and finding and applying for grants that don’t have to get paid back) on a regular basis will prevent a huge price sticker shock in their senior year.

**Sophomore Year**

While surviving the freshman year is a huge win, it doesn’t mean additional challenges don’t exist. Some people call it the “sophomore slump,” a feeling of coming down after a period of exhilaration. The first year, your student was the new kid on the block. This year, they know their way around campus, have made friends, have an idea of their strengths and weaknesses and have started leaning towards a major that makes sense for them. They have taken most of the introductory/required courses and now have more room for electives that might move them even closer to declaring a major. When you talk, listen to what courses make them excited and encourage your student in that direction. As parents, we often try to steer our kids to what we want them to major in. If they get excited about something in another direction, follow their lead because they’ll work harder and get more out of something they truly enjoy.

By the end of sophomore year is usually the time when colleges want your student to declare a major. The particular process that formalizes the major declaration varies from institution to institution, but in order for the major to be listed on their transcript, the declaration must get to the registrar. Encourage them to talk to their advisors and make a plan for which courses they need each semester in order to fit in all the required courses for their chosen major. If they have a secondary passion, suggest they consider a minor—as long as they can handle the course load and not get overwhelmed by it.

I’ve covered the community college experience in a separate tip but, as a reminder, if your student is attending a two-year college, the sophomore year is the one that will determine how easily they can transfer to a four-year college or university. The better their grades are, the easier it will be to transfer. Their grades also determine how much financial aid will be available to continue studying. Attending a two-year college is a short-term experience. In our household we used to say: *This is a sprint to the marathon that takes you to the rest of your life. Make the most of it.*

Course work is not the only thing you should want your student to consider this year. For them to start really embracing the fact that they are part of a larger community, encourage them to do some service learning or community service. Helping other people will not only help them round out their college experience, it will also help make them better citizens of the world. Time permitting, they might also take advantage of chances to lead campus tours or be a big brother or big sister to a freshman. These kinds of giving back experiences will help your student stay engaged and keep growing.
Junior Year

Junior year is the halfway point of your student’s college career. Every day now brings them closer to its end. Most students have spread their wings and landed in a very comfortable place. Most have selected a major, know which professors they like (or did not like), may be fully involved in clubs or joined a fraternity or sorority, and have discovered their own studying style. They may be taking classes off-campus or doing an internship with an organization related to their major. Some have even opted to study abroad for a semester. If that’s the case, look into the costs. Policies vary from college to college but some will allow study abroad credits if you continue to pay the full tuition, while others will automatically transfer credits from the host school. In many cases the tuition is a wash but some schools pay for travel and others don’t. Some schools offer financial support to those who need it but others can’t afford that. Bottom line is try to do it because the experience can be transformative but see how it works for your student’s school.

Junior year is also the year that they have to start thinking about graduate school. Remember the SAT in high school? Well, if you start hearing funny acronyms from your college student, here are the translations:

**GRE**—the exam for graduate school entry in the more general majors like communications, or philosophy, or history, etc.

**MCAT**—the exam for medical schools

**LSAT**—the exam for law schools

**GMAT**—the exam for business schools

Once they decide to go this route, your job continues to help financially, if you can. Costs vary but the tests themselves cost anywhere from $100 up. Some fees can be forgiven, especially for first-generation or scholarship students, so your student should be in close communication with their advisor to take advantage of any breaks there might be. There will also be costs associated with prep classes, retesting and study guides. Beyond the money, what you really need to provide is the encouragement to build on the relationships they have hopefully built with their advisors and professors beginning in their freshman year. By now they should know your student so well that asking for letters of recommendation when the time comes will be an easy ask. Great recommendations make the difference between a yes and a no when all other things between two candidates are equal.

Junior year is the optimum time for your student to solidify and enrich their experiences and plan for the future beyond the college cocoon. The summer between junior and senior year is also a good time for your student to explore a job or internship in a field of interest, as this will also help them gain relevant experience for after college.
Senior Year

Ah, senior year. It’s the reward for three years of lectures, papers and exams. But it is also the gateway to your student’s long-term future. They may be busy preparing grad school applications while taking a full course load and spending hours with friends they fear they’ll never see again. They’ll also start thinking about what they have to do to walk across the stage and collect their degree in the next seven months or so.

Your student (soon-to-be graduate) may also get something commonly called “senioritis,” which makes focusing on what’s next is very difficult. They just want to be done and graduation can’t come soon enough. Helping your student to keep excited about the next phase in their lives is one way to help them get over their own form of senioritis.

Additionally, to help keep them focused and motivated, it’s not a bad idea for you to see the checklist of to do’s that they should be ticking off their senior year:

• At the beginning of the year they should have visited the dean or checked online to make sure they have met all the degree requirements for graduation. If not, they’ll only have two semesters to get back on track if they want to graduate on time.

• Do they owe anything at the library?

• Are there any incompletes on their record?

• Have they visited the career center to get help in preparing a resume?

• Have they spoken to their professors or school administrators about recommendations for grad school or other applications for postgraduate fellowships like the Rhodes, Marshall, or Fulbright fellowships? If you hear them talking about applying for one of these fellowships, remember that the deadlines are often in the early fall of their senior year. (Your student should have already warned their professors the spring or summer before that they’ll need letters from them as early as September.)

• Are they aware of the application deadlines for job interviews or job fairs? Have they started to apply for post-graduation jobs?

• Have they met the deadline and requirements for applying for graduation?

• Have they visited the financial aid office to find out what their final bill is and what has to be paid before graduation day?

• Have they considered service programs - like Teach for America, the Peace Corps, AmeriCorps, or like Robert Henderson did in the documentary, City Year. These programs offer loan forbearance or sometimes loan forgiveness for participants. Depending on the program, those involved may also earn an education award that can be used to help pay off old student loans or put towards grad school while they provide a year of community service. There are some cautions to consider, but all in all, these programs provide a great way to chip away at those bills while doing good and gaining relevant experience.
Whether their first choice is to go to graduate school or to go to work, it’s a good idea for you to remind them to be flexible. If their Plan A doesn’t work out right away, ask them about a Plan B. Often-times, business, communications or law schools prefer students who have had a couple years of real-life experience before admitting them. If there’s no financial aid or fellowships available, your student may have to work for a few years to afford additional education. If they have to work for a while, encourage them to keep checking for available fellowships for graduate study (you can also surf the web yourself.) If your student has a good college record, there’s a good chance of finding money to continue their education post graduation.

The one thing that parents today have to think about that I didn’t when my three went to college is the Internet and the havoc it can create if there have been indiscreet postings on social media by your student. Remind them often that an online post lives forever. Point out stories of people losing jobs or scholarships because of one mindless post. Help them understand that cyber bullying is not only cruel, it can be deadly and traced back to the source. Caution them that getting drunk or being photographed in a compromising situation that lands online can follow them for the rest of their lives. Learning to be accountable for what they post or have posted about them will help your student learn responsibility and how to be accountable for all other aspects of their life.

Dr. Cantarella has some sound advice that you should share with your student as they cross this major milestone. She says:

“As you sprint toward the finish line of graduation, there is no question that you have had crises along the way and that someone has pulled you out of the soup. This is the time to have long talks with your favorite professors and to thank them and anyone else who has been particularly helpful along the way.”

This is a journey that both you and your student have taken together. There’s little doubt in my mind that you’ll be at the top of that thank you list. Congratulations on a job well done!
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