

Getting From Freshman Year to Freshman Year

**Tools for Helping Students Navigate High School
and Make a Smooth Transition to College**

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Introduction

Students wanting to go to college today will encounter more complexity and competition than ever before. Admissions requirements and policies are ever-changing, as are philosophies about what makes a quality applicant. And with many students applying to five or 10 different schools, gaining acceptance to one's first choice school is extremely difficult. Since only 28% of U.S. citizens over the age of 25 hold bachelor's degrees, many students look to their high school teachers (as opposed to family members) for information and advice about college.

As a Chicago Public Schools teacher in a low-income neighborhood from 2001-2003, I quickly recognized this challenge. In an attempt to get my students the best information possible I used my college experience, my friends' experiences, and a lot of research to put together a program to help my freshman and sophomore students learn about college. This included my teaching a three-day unit on college and building a Web site full of resources for students. After leaving my teaching position for graduate school, I stayed in touch with over two dozen of my students and helped them—through my Web site, visits to Chicago, phone calls, and e-mail—navigate their remaining years of high school. Nearly all of these students are currently in college or will begin in the fall of 2006. Although my students' success is clearly due to their hard work and perseverance, I like to think that the resources I provided played at least some part in their successfully making it from their freshman year of high school to their freshman year of college.

In the first section of this guide, a rationale is provided for why students should consider postsecondary education. The second section is a basic roadmap for getting through high school and into college. The third section deals with the preparation necessary for a successful first year of college. The appendix includes a day-by-day overview of the college unit I presented to my freshmen classes each year. The resources in each section can be used by teachers as building blocks for presentations and programs that educate students about postsecondary education. It is my hope that this guide will help students set ambitious goals during high school and gain admittance to excellent four-year colleges and universities.

Why Should I Go To College?

It's Better Than High School

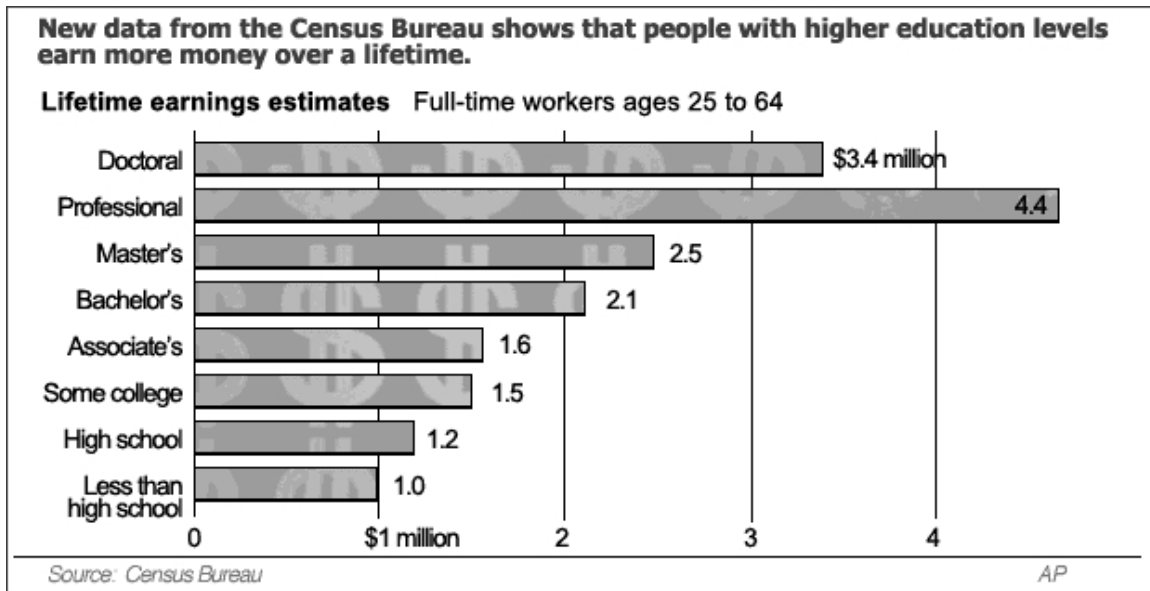
Why go to college? Many students see college as a chance to explore new things—to learn more about themselves and their world. They have long heard parents or family friends recall their favorite professors, the fun of dorm life, playing frisbee on the quad, and football Saturdays. Other students, however, may not have a clear idea of what college is like or what it can offer them.

To kick off the college unit I taught my ninth graders, I thought it was important to let them see the differences between high school and college. After they helped me fill in the boxes that described high school life, I filled in the boxes that described college life as I had experienced it. They quickly realized that going to college would mean more responsibility and harder work than in high school, but it would also mean more fun, more freedom, and more opportunities.

	High School	College
Hours of class per week	30	12-16
First class starts at	8:00am	You make your own schedule
Number of classes per week	7	3-5
Rules in class	No eating, drinking, gum, or hats	Generally allowed to eat, drink, chew gum, and wear a hat
Hours of homework per week	7-14	20-30
Number of organizations/clubs students can join	10-15	Hundreds
Number of parties per weekend	6-8	Dozens
Responsibilities/ Staying on track	Most classes are picked for you; security guards and teachers make sure you are in class; teachers meet with and call your parents	You choose your classes; you make appointments with your advisor; you choose to come to class on time; grades are not sent to your parents

At The Very Least...

No matter how much teachers would like students to see college as a way to quench their intrinsic thirst for learning, that is not always the case. At the very least, some students will respond to the economic benefits of college, which this graph from the Census Bureau clearly illustrates:



Quite simply, the changing world requires a college education for people who hope to be economically competitive. *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman's article "It's a Flat World, After All" (April 3, 2005) serves as a warning to those who do not see the value of postsecondary education:

[W]e are developing an education gap. Here is the dirty little secret that no C.E.O. wants to tell you: they are not just outsourcing to save on salary. They are doing it because they can often get better-skilled and more productive people than their American workers.

We need to get going immediately. It takes 15 years to train a good engineer, because, ladies and gentlemen, this really is rocket science. So parents, throw away the Game Boy, turn off the television and get your kids to work. There is no sugar-coating this: in a flat world, every individual is going to have to run a little faster if he or she wants to advance his or her standard of living. When I was growing up, my parents used to say to me, "Tom, finish your dinner -- people in China are starving." But after sailing to the edges of the flat world for a year, I am now telling my own daughters, "Girls, finish your homework -- people in China and India are starving for your jobs."

How Do I Get To College?

Preparing for College: An Overview

This letter greeted my students when they visited my Web site:

I have explained to all of you that there are a variety of ways to be successful, and that attending a four-year college is not the “correct” choice or the only thing to do after high school. In my opinion, though, going to a four-year college or university will give you the most options in your lives. Nearly all of you expressed a strong desire to go to college. However, **wanting to go** is very different than **being prepared to go**. Most of the seniors I taught last year really **wanted** to go to a certain college, but they did not **prepare** themselves for it during high school. Therefore, many of them a) did not go to college, or b) were disappointed because they did not go where they wanted to go.

The high school to do list that follows is of the utmost importance. Why? Because many students do not realize that they get accepted to college primarily based on what they have done during their first three years of high school. The grade point average (GPA) that you write on college applications is the GPA that you have at the end of junior year. The ACT tests what skills students have learned by the end of junior year. Bottom line: there is no time to waste. Waiting until junior or senior year to get serious about school is a mistake!

Getting into college is more competitive than ever. In order to go to a quality college, there are four main areas in which a student should excel:

1. Grade Point Average
2. ACT/SAT score (these tests are taken during spring of junior year)
3. Extracurricular activities (after-school jobs, community service, leadership, involvement with school clubs)
4. Coursework (four years of math, science, English and history; taking AP and Honors classes whenever possible)

Some students worry that even if they get accepted to a good college, they won't be able to afford it. With the financial aid opportunities available today, though, anyone can afford to go to college. Many schools—Harvard, the University of Illinois, and the University of Virginia are three examples—have financial aid packages that ensure that ANYONE who gets accepted is able to attend. And remember, having high grades and test scores can lead to scholarships and grants.

If you are interested in researching colleges further, I recommend you pick up the U.S. News and World Report special edition magazine: America's Best Colleges. This is available wherever magazines are sold. It should not be your only resource, but it is a good place to start.

Finally, I would like to stress that it is difficult to do this alone. Getting into college is a challenge, and talking to an intelligent teacher, an intelligent counselor, or a parent can be helpful throughout the process. Good luck!

College Terms

Following are terms that freshman students should learn as soon as possible. Knowing these will help students better understand college Web sites, as well as articles and books about college:

undergraduate	your time in college directly after high school; this is the time when you earn a bachelor's degree; usually takes four years
graduate	your time in college after you receive an undergraduate/bachelor's degree; this is the time when you earn a master's or doctoral degree
residence hall	buildings on campus that house only students; you usually live here for your first one or two years; also called 'dorms'
RA	resident advisor (upper-class student living in a dorm as a peer counselor & hall supervisor)
lecture	class session where professor talks and students takes notes; little or no interaction between students and professor during this time; these classes usually have between 50-300 people in them
discussion	class session where GSI or TA discusses lecture notes with students; these classes usually have between 20-30 students in them
TA	teaching assistant (student who works with professor and leads a discussion class)
GSI	graduate student instructor (student who works with professor and leads a discussion class)
transcript	record of all your classes taken, grades in those classes, and test scores; you currently have a high school transcript, and you will have one at each university you attend
ACT	college entrance examination taken in April of your junior year; scored out of 36; accepted at most universities
SAT	college entrance examination taken in April of your junior year; scored out of 2400; certain universities may require this test instead of the ACT
scholarship/grant	money given to a student that is not repaid; usually given with stipulations attached (e.g., you must maintain a certain GPA and take a certain number of classes per semester)
loan	money borrowed for tuition & living expenses and paid back after college
alumna/nus/ni	female graduate of a university/male graduate of a university/graduates of a university

Reading To Get Ahead (Or Keep Up!)

I was shocked at the small number of novels students were required to read each year! When I compared the English syllabi where I taught to my high school experience—where I read an average of six novels per year, including some during the summer—I became worried that my students would fall behind their peers who attended more rigorous schools. I delivered the following message to my students with regard to this concern:

Because my classmates and I read many challenging books during the school year and over the summer, we did better in our coursework and on standardized tests than students at other high schools. This helped us get accepted to excellent universities. Whenever you are not reading a novel in your English class, you should be reading one of the novels from this list.

TITLE	AUTHOR
Hard Times	Charles Dickens
Flowers For Algernon	Daniel Keyes
The Bluest Eye	Toni Morrison
The Awakening	Kate Chopin
Alas, Babylon	Pat Frank
Moby Dick	Herman Melville
1984	George Orwell
Brave New World	Aldous Huxley
A Tale of Two Cities	Charles Dickens
Fahrenheit 451	Ray Bradbury
The Scarlet Letter	Nathaniel Hawthorne
Hamlet	Shakespeare
Macbeth	Shakespeare
King Lear	Shakespeare
The Taming of the Shrew	Shakespeare
The Illustrated Man	Ray Bradbury
The Catcher in the Rye	J.D. Salinger
The Crucible	Arthur Miller
The Great Gatsby	F. Scott Fitzgerald
To Kill A Mockingbird	Harper Lee
Of Mice and Men	John Steinbeck
Crime and Punishment	Fyodor Dostoevsky

ACT Prep

The top juniors at the school where I taught usually scored in the 18-21 range on the ACT (the national average is 21), which prevented them from getting accepted to top colleges. Students with “average” grades generally struggled as well, scoring 18 and lower. Since the test was a roadblock for so many students, I implored my students to prepare for it in the following manner:

1. Go to Borders or Barnes & Noble in November and buy the Barron's ACT Prep book (it costs about \$15). Buy the version that does not have a CD-ROM; the ACT is a paper and pencil test, and in my opinion, one should prepare for the test in the same way one will be taking it. Using a test prep book like Barron's is important because the ACT will likely include material (especially on the math section) that you have not yet been taught!
2. Set a study schedule. This means determining how many pages of the book will be completed each day, and when practice tests will be taken. This study plan should be written on a calendar before any actual studying begins.

You should be finished with the diagnostic test, the four content sections of the book, and two of the practice tests approximately two weeks before the real test. That way, those final two weeks can be spent taking the final practice test and reviewing material you've had difficulty with.

3. When you take a practice test, use a clock or stopwatch to time it, do it all at once (with 5 minute breaks in between sections), and do it in a quiet place, to make it just like the real thing. If your house or local library doesn't have a quiet place, I suggest going to a local college or university library. As you take your practice test, circle the number of any answers you are not sure of. That way, if you guess and get it right, you will still know to go over **how** to get the right answer when you check your work.

When you finish taking a practice test, check your answers and determine your score (a scoring guide can be found on page 13). To score yourself, find your score for all four sections, then average them for your overall score. If you get a final score that has a .5 at the end, it rounds up (e.g., 22.5 is a 23). The next day, go over every answer you got wrong or were not sure of. This is the most important part of the practice tests. Here you can see what types of problems you have trouble with and work on improving your skills in that area.

4. As you study and complete practice problems in the four content sections of the book, make note cards with important math formulas and other things you need to know for the test. Make these as you go along so that you can use them to review in the days leading up to the test.
5. Set a goal for what score you want. For example, you may decide to keep a 25 or higher, but if you score 24 or lower you will retake the test. After taking four practice tests, you should know what you are going to score on the real thing. A first step to determining your goal can be to look at universities you are thinking of applying to, and finding out (on their Web sites) what the range of ACT scores is for students who are accepted.
6. It may help you to work with a partner from school. If you do this, make sure you both have the same version of the same book!

Following are a few reminders I sent students as the big day approached:

- The week before the test should be spent reviewing past tests and making note cards or review sheets of important formulas/rules for the math section. The math section should be the focal point of any last-minute studying, since those formulas/rules can be memorized and are sure to show up on the test.
- Don't stay up late studying the night before the test. If you need to review, go to bed early and then get up early in the morning and review before the test.
- When you get to the writing section, remember to 1) have perfect spelling, grammar, capitalization, and punctuation, 2) write neatly, and 3) write as much as possible. Also, make sure it to spend some time and organize your ideas before you actually start writing, and be sure to answer the question! Use the clues in the question to determine what should be in your answer.

A Few Other Thoughts

With all the standardized testing that occurs in schools today, it is crucial that students understand how the ACT is different. This test is not about local, state, or federal standards. It is all about their skills and getting into college. I used to tell my students:

Don't do ACT prep for the school, your parents, or your teachers. Do it for yourself. It's YOUR future.

Also, the ACT sometimes can fall the week after spring break, but spring break is a time when some schools schedule “college tours” for students in the junior class. Students therefore do not spend the week before the ACT preparing, but traveling around the state/country visiting colleges. I explained my students that ACT preparation should be their focus over spring break:

It does no good to visit colleges if you end up getting a low ACT score and can't get accepted there! Having a GPA of 3.5 or 4.0 won't matter if you get an 18 on the ACT.

ACT prep can be a grueling process for students already trying to balance homework, sports, after-school clubs, and part-time jobs. To keep my students focused and energized, I asked them to keep in mind why they were doing this:

Take a minute to close your eyes and visualize what it would feel like for you to get the mail one day in May, open your letter from ACT, and see a composite score of 25 (or better!). Think of how happy you'll be, who you'll call, how relieved you'll feel that all your hard work paid off.

Retaking the Test

In some cases, students may want/need to retake the ACT. The problem is, students do not always receive their scores from the April test before the deadline to sign up for the June test. I encouraged students to sign up for the June test even if they did not have their April scores back yet. If students are happy with their April scores, they can simply skip the retake. But if they are not happy with their April scores, they have ensured that they will have a chance to take the test before October. The fall of senior year should be spent researching and applying to colleges, not preparing to take the ACT.

There are usually about six weeks between the April and June ACT tests, which means there is plenty of time to prepare for a retake. Since the idea is to boost the April score, it is imperative that students study and take additional practice tests in this six weeks! If students are not willing to continue preparing they shouldn't retake the test, because their scores are not going to go up.

Also, it may be necessary for students to retake the ACT if they are not given the chance to take the writing portion in April (this was the case in spring 2005). Most selective colleges and universities now require the writing portion; students should know if the schools to which they will apply require it or not.

ACT Scoring Guide

ACT prep books, like the one I recommend from Barron's, do not always include the following scoring guide. I have included it because I think it is very important for students to know exactly where they stand after taking a practice test.

# Correct Math	# Correct Reading	# Correct English	# Correct Science	Score
60	39-40	75	40	36
60	38	75	40	35
59	38	74	39	34
58	37	73	39	33
57	37	72	38	32
55-56	36	71	37	31
53-54	35	69-70	36	30
50-52	34	68	35	29
48-49	34	66-67	34	28
45-47	32-33	64-65	32-33	27
43-44	31	61-63	31	26
40-42	30	59-60	29-30	25
38-39	29	56-58	27-28	24
35-37	28	54-55	26	23
33-34	27	52-53	24-25	22
31-32	25-26	49-51	22-23	21
28-30	24	46-48	20-21	20
26-27	23	44-45	18-19	19
23-25	21-22	41-43	16-17	18
20-22	20	39-40	15	17
17-19	19	36-38	13-14	16
15-16	17-18	33-35	12	15
13-14	16	30-32	10-11	14
11-12	14-15	28-29	9	13
9, 10	13	25-27	8	12
7-8	11-12	23-24	6-7	11
6	9-10	20-22	5	10
5	8	17-19	4	9
4	7	14-16	3	8

Choosing A School

Deciding where to go to college is a process that includes quite a bit of reading and research on the part of students. But there are approximately 4,000 colleges and universities in the United States! How can students even begin to pick just 5-10 schools to investigate thoroughly? I developed the following inventory to help students identify what they are looking for in a school:

1) Rank the following in order of importance to you when picking a college:

- Size
- Location
- Ranking
- Cost

2) Design your ideal school situation by choosing one of the options for each item below:

- Would you rather go to a school that has:
 - a) more than 20,000 students
 - b) between 10,000 and 20,000 students
 - c) between 5,000 and 10,000 students
 - d) between 2,000 and 5,000 students
 - e) fewer than 2,000 students
- Would you rather go to a school that is:
 - a) out-of-state
 - b) in-state but a few hours from your home
 - c) in-state and within an hour of your home
- Would you rather go to a school that is:
 - a) ranked in the top 25 nationally
 - b) ranked in the top 50 nationally
 - c) doesn't matter
- Would you rather go to a school where you:
 - a) could get scholarship assistance
 - b) doesn't matter--I'll go to the best school I can and take out government loans

3) Are there any specific majors you want your school to have? If so, list them.

4) Are there any specific extracurricular activities you want your school to have? If so, list them.

After filling out the inventory, students can start an initial search. For students who want to stay in state or who know they would like to attend college in a particular state, the following Web site is helpful: http://www.usnews.com/usnews/edu/college/rankings/rankindex_brief.php. After scrolling to the middle of the page, students select a state and click "Find Now." They will be provided with links to the names and Web sites of all the schools in that state.

The above Web site also offers students the opportunity to enter various criteria (e.g., size, diversity, academic majors) and then see which schools fit what they are looking for.

Visiting schools is the next step. I encouraged my students to visit as many schools as they could, even if they had little/no interest in some of them. That way, they would have a means of putting their top choice schools in context with regard to the questions below. I also encouraged my students to visit a school's Web site before visiting, telling them:

When you visit a school, don't waste your time asking "fact" questions about the school, like how much tuition is or if it offers a certain major. You don't need to go on a visit to get that information! Ask thoughtful questions like the ones below. These are things you can learn about only by visiting a school.

Ask Your Student Guide(s):

- What is it like for students socially?
- Do people have an easy time transitioning from high school to this school?
- What do the professors expect of students?
- What tutoring resources are available to me as a freshman? Do a lot of freshmen need tutoring support when they start here?
- What types of clubs/groups/activities do freshmen usually join?

Ask Yourself:

- What do I really like about campus?
- What do I really dislike about campus?
- Do I feel comfortable here?
- If I had the chance, would I come here to study for four years after high school?

Financial Aid

Financial aid is possibly the most complex thing about college these days. In my opinion, once January of senior year rolls around and students can fill out the FAFSA, they should bring specific questions to the specialists working with FAFSA or financial aid counselors at universities where they have applied (or are thinking of applying). Prior to January of senior year, the following explanation can help students understand the basics of financial aid:

1) Private Scholarships

These are the scholarships you apply for by writing essays and filling out application forms. This money follows you no matter where you go to college. You can search for private scholarships on the Internet, but you should never pay to do so! Once you compile a list of private scholarships, you should read about the scholarship and see if you qualify. For example, some are only for students who are Hispanic, or going into the U.S. Army, or have 3.5 GPAs, etc. If you qualify for a scholarship, print out the application information. Once you have about 10 of them, go through and figure out which ones are due first. Then start filling them out.

2) University Scholarships

Once you are accepted to a university, it might offer you scholarship or grant money. You probably won't know about this until February, March, or April of your senior year.

3) Government Loans

These are important, because they help pay for anything that private or university scholarships don't cover. Some people are afraid to take out loans and go into debt. Instead, they take a semester or two or three off of school to work or they go to a cheaper college. In my opinion loans are worth it. Taking a small amount of money from the government now will allow you to get a good education and make much more money later on in life!

High School Résumé

Filling out applications and writing essays for scholarships and college admission often require students to refer to things they have accomplished or been involved in during high school. It is therefore important for students to keep a high school "résumé" so this information is easily referenced during the hectic winter months of senior year. Below is the résumé of a fictional student who just finished the first quarter of his senior year:

Freshman Year

- freshman baseball
- perfect attendance
- SADD member
- stage hand for spring musical

Sophomore Year

- JV baseball
- perfect attendance
- SADD member
- Honors history student of the year
- won first place at school robotics competition

Junior Year

- Varsity baseball
- perfect attendance
- National Honor Society member
- AP English student of the month
- SADD treasurer
- peer resistance counselor
- volunteered as a Salvation Army bell ringer

Senior Year

- National Honor Society vice president
- selected for "Who's Who Among American High School Students"
- stage hand for fall play
- SADD president
- currently work 10 hours per week (after school each day) at a local water park

High School To Do List

Freshman Year

September-June

- Focus seriously on academics and get your grade point average as high as possible.
- Join clubs, sports, and activities outside of school, especially those that will help you develop leadership skills. Start now, since colleges will be impressed if you have a high level of involvement with a group for 3 or 4 years.
- Visit your guidance counselor and make sure you are in the most challenging classes possible. It is better to get a 'B' in an honors class than to get an 'A' in a regular class.
- Begin compiling a high school "résumé." This should include extracurricular activities, honors and awards, leadership positions, and work experience. You will need this information for both college and scholarship applications & essays.

Summer

- If you anticipate having a hard time paying for college, get a summer job and start saving now.
- Read on your own as much as possible. Try books that are challenging to you. A good place to start is my reading list.

Sophomore Year

September-June

- Sophomores take the PLAN test. Take it seriously, since the four sections on the PLAN (English, reading, math, and science reasoning) are the same four sections that will be on the ACT.
- Visit your counselor to verify that you are on track to graduate on time. Make sure you have all your necessary credits, and see if you need summer school or night school to make up any missing credits.
- Set a goal for what you want your GPA to be at the end of junior year, and start working toward it.
- If you have not done so yet, find an extracurricular activity (sports team, club, volunteer organization) to get seriously involved with.

Summer

- Continue working so you can save money for college.
- Continue reading challenging books on your own.

- If you want to play a sport in college, start contacting college coaches so they can scout you during the coming year. Contact them by writing letters, sending e-mails, and calling their offices.

Junior Year

Fall

- Focus on academics! Colleges take junior year grades very seriously, and they expect you to show improvement over your first two years. And remember, you only have two more semesters to make your overall GPA look good for your college application.
- Visit your counselor to verify that you are on track to graduate on time. Make sure you have all your necessary credits, and see if you need summer school or night school to make up any missing credits.
- Do some basic research on colleges. You should have some idea so you can determine where your ACT scores will be sent in the spring.

Winter

- Check the Web sites of your top choices for college and see if they require you to take the ACT or SAT. If your school does not offer the test you need to take, sign up to take it at a different testing location.
- In November, buy a Barron's ACT Prep book from Borders or Barnes & Noble. Make a study schedule and do a little bit each night. After you have reviewed all the material in the book, take three practice tests before you take the actual exam in April. (There will be questions on the ACT regarding material you have never been taught!!! An ACT Prep book will expose you to that material and help raise your score on the test.) Even if your school provides you with test preparation materials, you still need to buy your own prep book and practice on your own, outside of school!

Spring

- Take the ACT and/or SAT.
- If you do not think you did very well on the ACT, register to take it again in June. You may need to register for the June test BEFORE you get your original scores back. Do not wait until the fall to retake this test!
- Sign up to take the Advanced Placement (AP) test for any AP class you are taking at school. Colleges expect you to take the AP test if you take an AP class! Doing well on an AP test can earn you college credit. The tests are in May, and cost approximately \$80 per subject area.

Summer

- Keep working and saving money for college. If possible, get a job in a professional environment (i.e., a business or office). This will look impressive on your application, and your boss will probably be able to write you a good letter of recommendation.
- Continue reading challenging books on your own.
- Think about who you would like to write letters of recommendation for you when you apply in the coming months. Teachers, coaches, and employers are usually good choices. Try to pick people who: 1) will give you a letter that is well-written and has no typos or incorrect information; and 2) can write about specific things you have done academically, as a leader or at your job, as opposed to something general like "Jeremy is a great person."
- Start saving money for college application fees. These fees are generally \$35-\$50, so in order to apply to four or five colleges you should plan to save \$150-\$200.

Senior Year

September

- Visit with your counselor and make sure you are on track to graduate on time. Do you have enough credits? Have you taken (and passed) all the classes necessary to get into the colleges to which you will be applying?
- Visit college Web sites and begin filling out applications online. I recommend applying to at least four schools, including: one that is your first choice; one that you will have a hard time getting into (a "long shot"); one that you can probably get into; and one that you will definitely get into (your "backup school").

October

- Begin submitting applications (usually done online). About two weeks after you submit an application, call the admissions office at that school and confirm that they have received it.
- Don't slack off on your schoolwork just because your application has been sent in. A school may defer you or put you on a waitlist, in which case you will have to send them your senior year grades.

November

- Continue submitting applications. About two weeks after you send in an application, call the admissions office at that school and confirm that they have received it.
- Start applying for private scholarships.

December

- Finish filling out and submitting applications. About two weeks after you send in an application, call the admissions office at that school and confirm that they have received it.

January

- Fill out the FAFSA either online or by getting the forms from your counselor. You will need to sit down with a parent/guardian to fill this out, as it asks for information about your family's finances. Send in your completed FAFSA as soon as possible.
- Ask your parents/guardians to complete their income tax forms ASAP! Schools may request them to prove eligibility for financial aid.
- Call the admissions offices at the schools you have applied to. Ask them what the status of your application is, and when you can expect to hear from them about your acceptance.
- Talk to your AP teachers about taking the tests for AP classes you are taking. Colleges expect you to take the AP test if you take an AP class! Doing well on the test can earn you college credit. The tests are in May, and cost approximately \$80 per subject area.

March

- You should begin to receive letters from schools either accepting or rejecting you.

April

- Weigh your offers from the schools to which you have been accepted. Take into account how much money each school can give you in financial aid. Once you make your final decision, send in your decision paperwork to that school ASAP, and let other schools know that you will not be coming.
- Begin a folder in which you keep all the information that your school sends, and make sure to turn in all paperwork on time. You should know important dates, such as: when your housing paperwork is due; when your first tuition/room & board payment is due; and move-in dates for the fall semester.
- Keep your grades up and make sure you graduate!

I Made It! Now What?

15 Thoughts on the Undergraduate Experience

I sent this to my students during the spring of their senior year so they would have plenty of time to consider their options before summer orientation:

1. **Find a good counselor ASAP** and talk to him/her at least once per semester (usually right before you choose your classes for the next semester). If you don't like the counselor you are assigned, ask friends about their counselors and switch quickly! I had a great relationship with my counselor, and because she got to know me really well, she was able to help me make good decisions when I chose classes and tried to figure out what to do with my life.
2. **Double major if possible**—it will make you twice as marketable and allow you to learn about two fields in depth (even if they are totally unrelated!). For example, I know people who double majored in English & Philosophy, Film & Psychology, and History & Spanish.
3. **Don't feel pressured to figure out your major(s) right away!** Exploring and changing your mind is what being an undergrad is all about! That said, it is a good idea to declare your major by the beginning of your junior year.
4. **Don't take more than four courses during your first semester;** even if each is only three credits, it will still be plenty of work. You need to make time for extracurricular activities, socializing with friends, and (possibly) a part-time job.
5. **In your first year, take a philosophy course and a psychology course,** no matter what you are thinking of majoring in. Philosophy will teach you how to think critically, while psychology will help you understand how other people think. Not taking classes in these areas as a freshman was the biggest mistake I made as an undergraduate.
6. **In your first year, also take one history course per semester that deals with recent events.** Look for course titles such as: The 1960s; The Vietnam War; U.S. History from 1930 to the present; or 20th Century American History. It's important to take classes like these so you understand references to events and people such as: Churchill, D-Day, FDR, Stalin, Korea, the McCarthy hearings, the Beatles, LBJ, the fall of Saigon, hostages in Iran, and Tiananmen Square. All of these events and people have shaped the way our world is today, and it is assumed that educated people can bring them up in conversation.
7. **Take Spanish for as many semesters as possible.** Because of the increasing number of Spanish speakers in the United States, knowing the language will make you more marketable no matter what field you enter. It will also be helpful to know the language well if you ever travel to places where it's spoken (Mexico, Latin America, Spain, and places in the United States like southern California, Texas, and New York City).

8. **Talk to your professors!** Introduce yourself on the first day. Sit near the front of the class. Participate in class if it is allowed. Go to office hours. If you don't have a relationship with a professor, it's your fault. You need to take the initiative. And trust me, it can help your grade if you are ever borderline in a course. I once got an A in a class where I had gotten an A- on both papers and a B+ on the midterm. My class participation and relationship with the professor gave me a boost.
9. **Study abroad if possible!** As we move deeper into the 21st century, it will become more common for people to travel and work in countries outside their own. Taking part in a study abroad program will give you a taste of this. You will learn about a different culture, eat different food (not all the time, of course—McDonald's is everywhere!), and possibly speak another language. You will also make friends with people your age from other countries and understand their perspectives on the world. I very much regret not studying abroad when I was an undergraduate.
10. **Get involved in extracurricular activities!** During your first semester, join two organizations. By the end of your freshman year, run for a leadership position in at least one of those groups. Figure out what you need to do so that by your senior year you are the president or director of at least one group. Why? Think of how many people you know—parents, friends, teachers—who complain about their bosses. Well, you won't have to complain if you ARE the boss! Plus, you'll make a lot more money! College is where you get practice being a leader. Learning to be a leader is just as important as your grades, and when you're applying for a job, graduate school, Teach For America, the Peace Corps, or AmeriCorps after graduation, people will want to know what leadership position(s) you held.
11. That said, **learn how to balance your time between academics, extracurricular activities, friends, and a part-time job.** For example, it's important to be involved (and eventually be a leader) in one or two student organizations, but you also have to keep your GPA at a high level. And though you may need to work part-time as a part of your financial aid package (or just to make a few dollars), you must make time for extracurriculars and friends. Time management is an important skill, and the faster you learn it the better.

One thing I found frustrating as an undergraduate was the reality that I couldn't always give my best effort to all my undertakings. There were many situations where I had to do a cost-benefit analysis to determine where my time and effort would go. For example, in an end-of-semester crunch you might decide to spend 80% of your time studying for one exam, and only 20% studying for another exam. The reason? One class you need for your major, while the other class is just an elective. Or, in December of your junior year you may slack off on your studying and put all your effort into a project for your student organization. The reason? Elections for next year's leadership positions are coming up in February, and you feel that doing a good job on this project will convince others in the organization to elect you president. College is all about deciding what your priorities are and making decisions accordingly.

12. On most any day of the week for the next four years, you will have the opportunity to attend concerts, plays, and sporting events, and to visit museums, art galleries, and food or cultural festivals. As a student, these things will cost little or no money, so **take advantage and try new things!** Attend a student-produced opera, even if you don't understand what they're singing. Go to a women's field hockey game, or a lacrosse game, or a swim meet, and see if you can figure out what the rules of the sport are. Meander through an art gallery, and enjoy the quiet atmosphere and the beauty of the paintings and sculptures. You should be able to find a calendar of upcoming events in the student newspaper (which you should read every day) and on your school's web site.
13. Most students in the United States attend high schools that are racially segregated, and college is the first time they will attend classes with or live among people who don't look like them. College is also the first time many students will meet someone their age from another country, or someone who practices a different religion. It can be tempting to hang out exclusively with people who look like you or come from the same background as you, but I encourage you to **broaden your social circle**. Becoming friends with people who are different than you erases stereotypes and is a great way to learn about other countries, other parts of the United States, and other ways of life.
14. Your undergraduate years are a great time to have fun and experience new things. Just make sure you **keep in mind the possible consequences of your actions**. Here are a few things to keep in mind:
 - Sex
 - when a woman says no, it means no
 - you can get STDs—including HIV—from oral sex
 - the "pullout method" is not a reliable form of contraception
 - Drinking
 - never let anyone get you a drink at a party (even if it's not alcohol); get your own
 - every year, at least a handful of students around the country die on their 21st birthdays because of excessive drinking
 - never drink so much that you are not in control of your words and actions
 - Smoking/Drugs
 - if you don't start, you'll never have to worry about quitting
15. **Finally, regardless of the situation, never ever ever ever ever cheat or plagiarize!** One of my English professors used to tell us, "If it's 2 a.m. and you are so desperate that you are thinking about plagiarizing, call me." The worst possible thing you can do as a college student is to cheat on a test or assignment, or plagiarize when writing a paper. One grade in one class is not worth getting kicked out of school. Don't do it, no matter what!

Budgeting For Freshman Year

Much attention is given to the high cost of tuition, fees, room and board, and books. However, there are many other costs associated with going away to college. Using a format similar to the one provided, students should calculate their first-year expenses as soon as they know where they will attend college. The fictional student below, for example, has a possible \$2,900 in expenses **beyond** tuition, fees, room and board, and books.

NECESSITIES	estimated cost of item
laundry basket	10
laundry detergent	30
laundry money	150
lamp	20
alarm clock	15
school supplies	25
backpack	40
hygiene products	35
extra food money (\$20/week)	600

VERY HELPFUL	estimated cost of item
laptop computer	1000
printer	100
flash drive	50
paper and ink for printer	150

EXTRAS	estimated cost of item
season football tickets	150
season basketball tickets	150
new sheets and towels	100
microwave	100
mini-fridge	200

Goal-Setting

I sent my students the following letter and goal-setting template in April of their senior year:

The exciting (and challenging) thing about college, of course, is that you are starting from scratch. You have no commitments or predetermined destination. You can choose to study whatever you want, get involved in whatever you want, and be whoever you want. But how will you decide? And how will you stay on track?

One thing I have found helpful over the years is goal-setting. I think about how I want different aspects of my life to look in the future and then write down my ideas. I think goal-setting is useful because it helps you—while making decisions today—keep an eye on what you want to do in the future. Having goals can help you plan, keep you focused, and give you something to dream about. Keep in mind, however, that **many of the goals you set now, at age 18, are likely to change!** As I meet new people, learn more, and experience different things, some of my ideas change. When that happens, I go back to my life goals and add to, subtract to, or change what I previously wrote.

The following pages should help you begin to set some life goals. On the first two pages is a list of guiding questions, that is, the things that you should probably think about when setting short-term, intermediate, and long-term goals. After that you'll find a sample of what a completed version would look like. The last page is a blank template for you to fill out. I hope you enjoy imagining all the possibilities that your future holds!

Life Goals Guiding Questions

Short-Term (first semester of college)

- How many hours per week will you study?
- How many hours per week will you work?
- How many hours per week will you spend on clubs/organizations?
- What would you like your first semester GPA to be? How will you achieve that GPA?
- What will you do to stay focused on your schoolwork?
- How will you deal with stress?
- How will you stay healthy?
- Other goals?

Intermediate (August 2006 – May 2010)

- What clubs/organizations might you like to join?
- In what academic areas might you choose to major?
- Outside of your major, what topics/subjects would you like to learn about?
- Outside of campus, are there places near your school that you would like to visit?
- Assuming you leave the dorms after your sophomore year, where would you like to live during your junior and senior years? A house? An apartment? With a bunch of people you know? With one or two close friends?
- In what areas – both academically and personally – would you like to improve yourself over the next four years?
- What would you like your GPA to be at the end of your junior year (if you apply to graduate school this GPA is the one that will end up on your application)?
- What would you like your GPA to be at the end of your senior year?
- What would you like your GPA to be in your major (graduate schools and programs like Teach for America will want your overall GPA, which includes prerequisites and electives, as well as your GPA in your major, which would be only your English classes, for example)?
- Other goals?

Long-Term (May 2010 – 2020)

- Educational
 - o What degree(s) would you like to hold? In what fields?
- Economic
 - o What would you like your annual salary to be?
 - o How much money will you have invested for your retirement?
- Career
 - o What kind of job(s) would you like to have? (Another way to think about this is, what job(s) do you think you would be excited about going to everyday?)
- Home/Family
 - o Where would you like to live?
 - o Would you like to be married? Have kids?
 - o Would you like to have a pet?
- Personal
 - o What are your fitness goals?
 - o What are some things you might like to learn?
 - o Where are some places you would like to go on vacation?
 - o What are some fun things you would like to do?

Life Goals Sample Finished Version

Short-Term (first semester of college)

- I've been told that you are supposed to study three hours for every one hour you're in class. But that would mean if I took 12 credits I would need to study for 36 hours per week! Instead of doing that, I plan to study for four hours each day.
- I plan to work no more than 10 hours per week. If possible, however, I would rather wait until my second semester to start working. I don't know yet if my financial aid package will require me to do work-study during my first semester.
- I'm not sure how many hours per week I will spend with student organizations. It depends on how many I decide to join and how much I like them.
- I want my first semester GPA to be at least a 3.2. I will reach this goal by staying organized, studying every day, and not procrastinating. I want my GPA in future semesters to be higher, but I realize my first semester might be challenging as I adjust to college-level work.
- To stay focused on my schoolwork I will ask people in my classes if they want to form a study group. I also plan to stay focused on my schoolwork by becoming friends with people who are focused and staying away from people who don't take school seriously.
- If I am feeling really stressed out because of schoolwork or my hectic schedule, I will probably either go for a walk, take a short nap, or call up a friend to talk for a few minutes.
- I will stay healthy by eating three meals a day, getting at least eight hours of sleep per night, and going to the gym to exercise regularly. I might join a yoga class at the recreation center, and I also want to play on a few intramural sports teams.

Intermediate (August 2006 – May 2010)

- I think I want to write for the student newspaper, tutor students at a local elementary school, and be a part of student government.
- Possibilities for my major include history, economics, Spanish, and psychology. I might try to double major in history and economics.
- With all of the stories in the news about cloning animals, I think taking a few biology courses would be really interesting.
- I want to visit the state capital, and go hiking in the mountains that are two hours away from campus.
- During my junior and senior years it would be neat to live with the same group of 4-5 friends in a house.
- Academically, my writing could use some work. Also, I need to work on my debating skills because I can never think of the right thing to say when I disagree with someone. In terms of personal improvements, I want to become a better listener and start going to the gym three days a week.
- I want my GPA to be no lower than 3.3 by the end of my junior year. By the time I graduate I would like to have at least a 3.4 GPA. I would like my GPA in my major to be at least 3.5.

Long-Term (May 2010 – 2020)

- Educational
 - In May 2010 I want to have my bachelor's degree; I don't know what my major will be, though. After I graduate I would like to work for two years and then spend the next three years in law school.
- Economic
 - I would like to make at least \$45,000 per year during the two years I work after graduation. That way, I can pay off any student loans I have before I start law school. During each of the two years I work, I want to put at least \$3,000 into an IRA (Individual Retirement Account). I would like to earn at least \$90,000 per year during my first five years out of law school. By 2020 I would like my salary to be at least \$150,000 per year. I want to invest 15% of my salary each year into an IRA; with compounding interest, I hope to have \$1 million saved for my retirement by age 40.
- Career
 - If I major in economics, I would like to work for the state or federal government as a policy analyst. If I major in history, I would like to join Teach for America and teach eighth-grade social studies. I would really enjoy either of these jobs after I graduate. After law school I would like to work for a large law firm and work on cases related to corporate or contract law. I also want to spend as much time as possible doing pro bono work. If I was a lawyer, I think I would wake up every morning and be excited about going to work.
- Home/Family
 - After I graduate in 2010, I would like to move to Washington, DC, Atlanta, or Los Angeles. I will probably live in an apartment until I finished law school and get more settled. At some point after I graduate from law school I want to get married and have two or three kids. I would like to buy a house and live in the suburbs outside of Atlanta, or some other big city in the South. As long as my house has a big, fenced in yard, I want to have one or two medium-sized dogs.
- Personal
 - I would like to run a marathon, go on a camping trip, go to Times Square in New York City for New Year's Eve, and take a trip to Europe and visit England and France. I also want to go scuba diving, learn how to play chess, take a ride in a hot air balloon, read every book that Toni Morrison ever wrote, and see a play on Broadway.

Life Goals Template

Short-Term (first semester of college)

-

Intermediate (August 2006 – May 2010)

-

Long-Term (May 2010 – 2020)

- Educational
 -
- Economic
 -
- Career
 -
- Home/Family
 -
- Personal
 -

Appendix

The College Unit ¹

Following is a rough outline of the three-day unit I presented to my freshmen classes each year. It was scheduled at the beginning of the second quarter, after the students had received report cards, because I wanted them to have a chance to digest high school life before thinking about college life.

Day One

The first day began with students filling out a survey about future goals and how they might reach them (see page 36). While this prompted students to think about life after high school, their responses also enabled me to tailor my approach to the unit to the pre-knowledge and needs of each class. We then discussed practical things I knew most of my students could connect with—money and jobs. Students helped me design a budget on the chalkboard that separated essentials from extras, the idea being for them to understand (1) how budgeting works, and (2) that having money to pay the rent, buy groceries, have some fun, and save for the future would require a good job. Having a good job would, in turn, require a college degree. During this conversation I discovered that because my students had so little money, they also had little concept of how budgeting was handled outside of their community. For example, whereas many middle-class families budget 20-35 percent of their income for rent or mortgage payments, most of my students expected that 50 percent or more of the money they earned as adults would be used for this purpose. It was not my intention to teach them that the middle-class budgeting system I knew was the correct or only method; however, I thought it beneficial to show them how some people in other communities might manage their finances.

Students next received a copy of my résumé. I pointed out that a person's educational background is the first thing listed on a résumé and recounted my interview for an internship during college, when my future boss greeted me with a compliment about the university I attended and my grade point average. I immediately proceeded to a talking point I would reiterate throughout the year: having options. Though I had become a teacher, I explained, my college degree and college work experiences had prepared me to work in two other fields unrelated to education or attend graduate school. I was a teacher by choice. When I asked how many students knew someone with a job they didn't like but couldn't quit, most hands in each class shot into the air. I stressed that going to college would allow them to take a job because they wanted it, not because they had no other choice. I ended this portion of class by revealing the financial impact of college—that a person with a bachelor's degree will earn in his or her lifetime twice as much as a high school graduate.

¹ The following pages are adapted from my article, "Fostering Student Desire for Postsecondary Education," which can be found in the spring 2006 issue of the journal *Schools*.

Halfway through our first day of the unit, we finally addressed the big question: What is college? To my surprise, none of my ninth graders could tell me anything about a typical week in college. I needed to connect college to high school (their best reference point), so I asked them to help me fill out a chart on the board that compared the two (see page 4). After they provided the answer for a category in the high school column, I provided an answer and explanation for the corresponding category in the college column. Minutes later our chart showed that although the amount and difficulty of their coursework, as well as their responsibilities, would increase, they would also be provided more freedom. (I explained to students that these numbers were based on my experience at a large, public university, and may be somewhat different at small or private universities.) I wanted my students to understand that college was not simply an extension of high school, but an experience that would present new and different challenges and be a lot of fun! Their facial expressions and excited whispers to nearby classmates told me I had succeeded. A copy of my college transcript further revealed to my students what awaited them in four years. In addition to proving the accuracy of the college column with regard to number of classes taken and hours of class per week, it evoked numerous questions. "How did you decide what to take?" "Are you required to take certain classes?" "What if you don't like the classes you pick?" As I provided answers, my freshmen seemed increasingly eager to have this experience themselves. During the first half of class college was portrayed as a necessity; as we moved into day two students also saw it as a desired destination.

The Future

1. What do you plan to do after high school? (circle one option)

- a) attend a 4-year college or university
- b) attend a 2-year junior college
- c) attend a technical school for careers such as plumbing, electric, construction, or computer science
- d) find a job right away in retail (clothing stores, Target, etc.), manual labor (construction, etc.) or some other area

2. How confident do you feel that you can achieve what you answered for question #1? Choose a number on the scale below.

- | | | | |
|----------------------|--------------------|------------------|---------------------|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| not confident at all | a little confident | pretty confident | extremely confident |

3. Write two things you can do over the next 3.5 years to help you achieve your goal from question #1.

1)

2)

4. Why did you choose your answer for #1? (choose all that apply)

- a) for money or the chance to make money
- b) because someone you look up to or admire is doing that
- c) it is something you enjoy doing

Day Two

Day two was designed to be a basic map of how to get to college. I told my 14- and 15-year-old freshmen that in three years they would apply to college, and their acceptance would be based primarily on three things: grade point average, standardized test scores, and extracurricular involvement. I quickly found out that no one had explained to the students what grade point average meant or how it was calculated. Not understanding its importance, they had simply focused on whether or not they passed or earned their credits. They were quite interested in having that mysterious number broken down, so we worked through a mock report card on the board. Suddenly, letter grades were also numbers with important values. Students also had lots of questions about standardized tests—what tests they would take, when they would take them, and what scores they needed to achieve. I answered that they would take the ACT as juniors, but tried to temper their already evident test anxiety by telling them that coursework should be their current focus.

Our conversation then turned to extracurricular involvement. I explained that colleges want students to show high commitment and leadership in a few activities, rather than having low involvement in many. (Many colleges no longer covet “well-rounded” students, but instead want focused students who en masse will form a “well-rounded” student body.) I wanted students to understand that involvement should start during freshman or sophomore year so they could “pay their dues” before securing leadership positions as upperclassmen. To someone coming from a family where parents have “climbed the corporate ladder,” this may seem obvious. However, many students do not know the importance of positioning themselves in this way. To model this, I distributed copies of the high school résumé I created prior to applying to colleges. It included my involvement in sports, clubs, and service activities, and was broken down by year, illustrating where I allocated my time and how my involvement increased over the years. I felt this was especially necessary given that neither the school nor community culture emphasized student involvement in extracurricular activities. Few opportunities were offered by the school (e.g., there was no student newspaper or drama club, and the National Honor Society did not hold meetings, sponsor programs, or provide community service), and in the community, many students began working at age 15 (sometimes due to family finances, sometimes because having a job was simply what was valued). Though I advocated strongly for students to make extracurricular activities a priority, I questioned whether or not I was infringing upon community norms and values by doing so. Whereas my father did not allow me to work during high school, many of my students' families *needed* them to work. In the end, I sensed that my students appreciated what I had presented. Whether they or their families acted on the information was beyond my control.

Day Three

Each year, day three commenced with a guest speaker, a senior from our school who was an honor student and had received a scholarship to play college basketball. They told my wide-eyed freshmen why they were excited to go to college, and what they did to get there. The second year I taught this unit, our speaker revealed that her summer mornings began at 6 a.m. with running on the beach, that after games and practices during the season she spent hours doing homework, and that she was currently taking Advance Placement calculus. Some students appeared intimidated at the effort she was putting forth; at the same time, though, they were seeing someone from their school who worked hard and was successful.

We next discussed financial aid and scholarship opportunities. Financial aid is another part of the "pipeline" to postsecondary education. It requires filling out a FAFSA, college-specific financial aid forms, and scholarship applications; having parents' tax information available; and knowing who to call and what questions to ask when confusion arises. In families where parents are financially illiterate or have little education, the burden falls on the student to know and understand what must be done to access the financial aid available to them. This ended up being a crucial portion of the unit, because many students believed college was too expensive for them. Once they understood that scholarships and loans were available, they seemed more assured that college was a viable post-high school option. Our unit ended with a review of the goals students established on day one and a chance for them to reevaluate those goals in light of the past three days.