

COLLEGE MATTERS

A short guide for youth advocates



What you can do to help youth
put and keep college in their sights

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In a recent survey of 5,000 high school students in Tennessee and Washington— conducted by the nonprofit WKCD with student researchers in both states—youth spoke passionately about the challenges they faced gathering the support they need for college.

School counselors and teachers, they told us, are generally too hard-pressed to give students the individual attention they need (and crave). A third of the students in the survey said they'd never talked with a teacher or counselor about college.

Over three-quarters of the students surveyed said their biggest motivation for college came from their families: the drive to be the first in the family to attend college, to live up to family expectations if there's a college tradition, to avoid the heartbreak of parents and siblings who cut short their education and fell into a lifetime of struggle. However, when it came to providing informed guidance to match the motivation, family members most often came up short. "My mom she tries so hard to help me with all the things, like the SATs and picking colleges, but she's even more in the dark than I am," a Latina 17-year-old said. "We both cry in frustration."

As these youth looked around for places where they could get help, they talked about youth-serving organizations in the community as a potential source for the support they cannot get at school or at home. They understand that guiding youth towards college may not be the primary mission of many of these organizations. "I think of them as being about keeping kids occupied and out of trouble, not necessarily inspired," said one youth. But they challenged us—and you—to do more.

In response, we've put together this informal guide, *College Matters*, for organizations that work directly with teenage youth afterschool or in the summer and want to help them put and keep college in sight. There is so much you can do, including starting a full-fledged college access program. Here, we offer some of the smaller ideas the young people in our "Hear Us Out: Students Talk About College" study shared with WKCD.

Get our attention

One of the easiest and most straightforward ways to convey the message that college matters is to find a wall in a well-trafficked space where you can put up:

- college banners (many colleges, when asked, will send you free banners)
- college publicity posters (again, you can often get them for free by asking)
- inspirational quotes (see www.firstinthefamily.org for examples)
- a list of colleges attended by alumni of your program
- whatever strikes you as college-related

What else can you do?

Encourage young people to bring in their own visuals (even appropriately irreverent) for the wall. Extend the same invitation to staff. Don't make it look like a school guidance office. Give it attitude.

Start us thinking about college early, and help us stay motivated

In the twelve focus groups our student researchers led in Seattle, WA and Chattanooga, TN—with over 225 students—upperclassman had a lot to say about what they *wished* they had known and done when they were “coming up.”

In particular, they wished their schools had started them thinking about college early.

- I think the freshmen need to be told how important their GPA is their freshman year, because if you mess up freshman year, it can really mess up your GPA for all of high school.
- They start us on college too late. We should start a lot of things in 9th grade. Scholarships. Honor classes, we should have been taking those in 9th grade. You can't just throw a child in the 12th grade in an AP class and expect for them to pass that exam.
- Be strict on us in the eighth grade, because eighth grade, it's like a run-through for what's to come, you getting good grades. Last year, some of the grades I have, I didn't do nothing in those classes.
- Freshman year you hear about it. Sophomore year you hear about it. Junior year, you start hearing about it more towards the end. But senior year, it hits, because, I mean everything at once, you have your deadlines. You have your applications. Not to mention you have your senior stuff like you know, prom and yearbook and graduation. I think the best thing is as a freshman, talk to the teacher that inspires you and just ask her what are some small things that you can do now.

And they had a lot of advice for freshmen.

- Stay in class. Go to every class. My freshman year, I kicked it like I was a senior. This is the only year I haven't been in any trouble. Yeah, I maintained pretty good grades, but I could have did better. When I got a B, I could've got an A. When I got a C, I could've got a B. As a freshman, think about who it is you want to be so that you won't get sidetracked by things that are nonsense.
- Throughout high school I really challenged myself with taking the hardest classes and doing sports. When I wanted to go to a college, I wanted to have what it takes to go there. So just build up, make you the best that you can. And be like, “If that's what college I want to go to, I'm going to make sure I go there.” You pretty much need to work hard all through high school. It doubly pays off.
- Network with a lot of people. And when counselors come in, make sure you talk to them. Introduce yourself to them so they know who you are, so that when it is time for you to apply for colleges, they'll be like, “Oh, I remember her. She came and introduced herself to me freshman year.”
- When you come to school everyday, you come to learn new stuff. You might think your teachers give you too much work, but they're just preparing you for the real world. It only

gets harder when you get into college. When you're here in high school, this is the easiest. It gets no easier than this.

- If I was to give a 9th grader advice, I'd say, "Go get a mentor." Even though you think that you can keep yourself up on your own, it's too hard. You get tired, you need to go talk to someone, best someone who cares about you. Or buck yourself up and go talk straight up with a teacher.
- You have to learn how to deal with different situations. I have this to do. I have that to do. Which one should I do first? Which one's more important? Or how much time should I spend on this, so that I can finish that? And don't let other people's expectations get in your way.
- You have to motivate yourself because you're not going to go through life having people motivate you all the time. You have to look in the mirror and tell yourself, "I have to do it, and that's what I'm going to do!" If you make good grades, then people will pay attention to you, they'll be like, "He actually tries or she actually tries and puts effort into studying for a test." Your parents, yea they love you, they're going to be like, "Yea, you can do this, you can do that." But at the end of the day, it's you doing the work. If you tell yourself you can't do it, mostly likely you won't.
- Take every opportunity that is given to you. There's so many things that can help you grow as a person and people that are there to teach you something. You'll learn a lot more about yourself and what you actually want to do and where you want to go if you push yourself. It's easy to fall into what you're used to or with the crowd surrounding you rather than pushing yourself to see how far you can go.

What can you do?

You can encourage your young people to start thinking early about college. You can organize one or more events where a panel of seniors talks to younger youth about the lessons they have learned about putting and keeping college in their sights. And you can cheer the accomplishments—big and small—of your young people when they show motivation and perseverance.

Gather us as a group and get us talking about college

One of the findings in our "Hear Us Out" survey is how infrequently students have conversations about college with teachers and counselors, or other adults outside their family. As we reported earlier, one-third of the students said they had *never* talked with someone at school about their college plans—or with an adult outside their family.

What can you do?

Invite youth to come to a college dialogue session (better yet, host them regularly). Ask thoughtful questions (probing but respectful) —and take notes so that they know you are listening hard.

- Are they thinking about college? If not, why not? If so, what have they done so far with regard to checking out colleges and what's needed to apply?
- Will they be the first in their family to attend college?
- What are their motivators for college?

- What are the biggest hurdles they feel they face?
- What supports do they need—and to what extent are they getting those supports?
- For youth who aren't all that sure about college (or don't see themselves heading right off to college after graduation) what are good alternatives?
- How can you help?

Connect us to opportunities that help us grow

At WKCD, we've found no shortage of college ambition among the young people we meet, regardless of their family income or skin color. What's in short supply for youth who don't have college going in their genes are opportunities to believe in themselves, to spread their wings and build new skills and habits, and to attract the attention of adults who can provide guidance and support.

What can you do?

You can make a vigorous effort to find out what's available in your community (beyond your own program) that gives youth a leg up for college. Then you can be just as vigorous in putting these opportunities in the reach of your young people.

Places to look include:

- federal programs like Upward Bound, TRIO, and GEAR UP, for which college preparation is central
- nonprofit groups and young scholar-type programs that specialize in helping students with college admission
- afterschool and summer learning opportunities that challenge students academically, give them the chance to try out special skills (e.g., video), or develop leadership talent.

We wish there were city or county online directories—updated regularly—that listed these programs and opportunities in one place, so that you didn't have to do your own research. By and large, there aren't. (But if you want to see what's possible, go to www.bostonnavigator.org.)

A word more about summer learning programs: *Researchers at Johns Hopkins University concluded that two-thirds of the achievement gap between lower- and higher-income youth results from unequal access to summer learning opportunities.*

Help us gather the knowledge about college that is available online

As you probably know, there is TONS of information available online about the college application process and individual colleges. When it comes to learning about college

admission tests like the SATs and ACTS, financial aid, and the profile and requirements for individual colleges, the Internet is the place to go!

However for the online search to be fruitful, youth need a list of the most useful websites, along with advice about what they are looking for. In the Appendix, we provide a list of our favorite URLs. Here's what we advise youth to look for.

Colleges that match your interests and circumstances: Two-year and four-year colleges, public and private, large and small, in and out-of-state, specialized colleges (perhaps for engineering, tech, or sciences) and those for liberal arts, "safety schools" (where you can pretty much count on admission) and "reaches" (where your chances of getting in are slim but you would dance if they accept you).

Goal: Create a manageable list of colleges that fit *you*.

The nuts and bolts of the college application process: What the PSATs, SATs, and ACTs consist of, and the dates they are given at your school; what's required for admission to the colleges that interest you and when their applications are due; what's involved in the "Common Application," the college essay, letters of recommendation, your college resume.

Goal: Make sure you have everything required to make strong applications (on time!) to colleges on your list.

Everything you need to know about financial aid: What's available from the federal government, including Pell Grants; which scholarships you may be eligible for; how to fill out the required FAFSA form for all students seeking financial aid; work-study options at the colleges where you apply.

Goal: Secure the money you need for college, while thinking through your plan for handling long-term debt.

What can you do?

Print out **the list of websites in the Appendix and the tips** for how to get the most from researching colleges online. Make this information readily available to students—something they can pick up without having to ask for it or know of its existence—and post it prominently in your computer lab, if you have one.

A caveat: Researching colleges and the application process online does not replace the personal guidance that happens when a caring, knowledgeable adult sits down with a young person to explore his or her individual college quest. When, for example, a youth is trying to make a list of colleges that seem a "good fit," suggestions from a person who knows the youth well, along with the college landscape, adds immeasurably to the knowledge offered online. Indeed, it can make all the difference in the world.

A comment: When it comes to hunting down scholarship possibilities and understanding the financial aid process—including the federal government’s FAFSA form required of all youth seeking financial assistance—nothing beats the Web. Our list of links includes those related exclusively to financial aid.

Take us on college visits

Research shows that the power of a college visit extends beyond giving high school youth the chance to catch a glimpse of a college library, dorm, or class. It gives youth *a chance to imagine themselves as college students*, roaming the campus and attending classes on their own. It makes college seem possible and real.

And don’t limit the visits to only colleges nearby. Even if attending a college several hours away seems out-of-reach for your youth, take them there. Young people have told us repeatedly how they yearn to broaden their horizons, including the possibilities for college.

You can find lots of tips online for how to make a college visit worthwhile. Most are geared toward students headed to four-year colleges and universities some distance from home. **In the Appendix, you’ll find our WKCD collection of tips**, drawn from these online resources and the good advice of low-income and first generation college students we know.

Connect us with “near peers”: young people like us who’ve made it to college

There are many wonderful examples of college students providing “near peer” college advising to high school students following in their footsteps. The best are organized programs where the college mentors meet regularly with one or a small group of students; they receive training in the college application process and forging trusting relationships with teenagers; and the meetings between the high school and college students are frequent and ongoing.

Five years ago, for instance, students at the U. of Washington in Seattle launched a student-run course on campus that also took the undergraduates once a week to nearby high schools to provide hands-on college counseling. These college mentors connected with the local Boys & Girls Clubs, too. The impact, on both the undergraduates—most of whom are low-income or first-generation—and their high school mentees, has been stunning. You can read about it at: http://www.whatkidscando.org/featurestories/2011/03_dream_project/index.html.

However, there’s much to gain simply by connecting your youth with college students who share their background and are eager to pass on what they know, even if the exchange is not part of a formal, ongoing program. Contact one or several nearby colleges and universities to find out what might be possible. Most colleges are eager to have their students engage in community service and often have an office, with staff, especially equipped to organize this community outreach.

APPENDIX

Online research guide for youth (to handout and post)

College visit tips

Online college research

The path to college is like a jigsaw puzzle. It has lots of pieces, and it matters how they fit together. They include:

- Deciding you are college-bound
- Starting to prepare early
- Staying motivated
- Working hard and smart
- Building relationships with adults who **can** help
- Seeking opportunities to spread your wings.

Another piece of the puzzle is doing your college research. You need to find out about different colleges, admission requirements and tests, and financial aid. Much of this research is easiest to do online, so start by finding a computer you can use.

Helpful links

NUTS AND BOLTS

www.actstudent.org

www.collegeboard.org

www.knowhow2go.org

COLLEGE SEARCH

www.campuscompare.com

www.csocollegecenter.org

www.blackexcel.org

FINANCIAL AID

www.studentaid.ed.gov

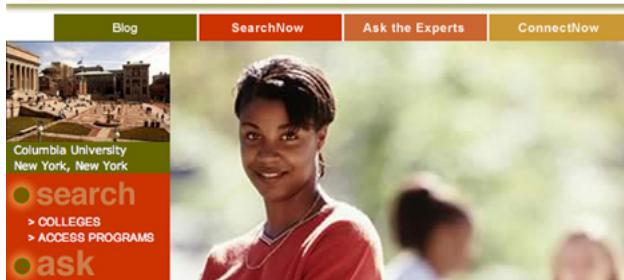
www.fafsa.ed.gov

www.fastweb.com

www.collegegoalsundayusa.org

ALSO

www.collegeaccess.org/accessprogramdirectory



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Goal: Secure the money you need for college, while thinking through your plan for handling long-term debt.



SOME TIPS ON MAKING THE MOST OF A COLLEGE VISIT

Plan ahead: Plan your visit for a time when classes are in session and the school is bustling. Summer is generally not a good time to visit, even if there's a summer session. College campuses are always quieter, often dead, in the summer. Good bets are Veterans Day or Martin Luther King Day, February vacation (in New England) and high school spring break—dates when high schools are typically closed, but colleges are open.

Reserve a tour—and more: Some schools have drop-in tours, but most require reservations ahead of time. *And don't stop with just a tour.* Arrange a meeting with someone from admissions, financial aid, or student support services. (Why someone from student support services? For low-income and first-generation college students, the support services can be critical to their adjustment and success.) Ask, too, if you can sit in on a class (one that will give your youth a decent sense of what college courses can be like). Make these special arrangements from a week to six weeks ahead of time.

Arrive early: Download a campus map and any additional paperwork the school has sent. Allow enough time to get lost, to look for parking, and to find the admissions office on an unfamiliar, possibly very large campus. Most campus tours leave from the admissions office.

Ask questions: Campus tours are a great way to get oriented but bear in mind that your tour guide is paid to be perky. He or she has a script to follow. Sit down with your youth beforehand and make a list of questions that aren't answered in the printed materials or on the university web site. Look for chances to ask the tour guide—and other students you meet—questions from your list. Some examples:

- Is this a commuter college or do students hang around on the weekend? What did your tour guide do last weekend? And the weekend before that? How often do he and his friends go home?
- What's the best class or most inspiring professor your tour guide ever had? Why? How well does she/he know his professors, and how did that happen?
- Who helps students choose classes?
- Is it hard into classes you want to take or need for your major?
- Why did your tour guide pick this school? What other schools did s/he consider? What does s/he wish s/he'd known then that s/he knows now?
- What was the most difficult thing to get used to here?

When talking to a representative from admissions or support services, be sure to ask:

- What percentage of entering freshmen go on to graduate? How many years, on average, does it take them to graduate?
- What percentage of freshman are in remedial classes?
- What special support services are available to low-income and first-generation students?

Escape the tour: Your tour guide will show you the highlights, but it's important to do some exploring on our own. If the dorms are not included on the tour, ask if you can peek anyway. Ditto for the computer lab. And leave time to explore the area surrounding the college, if it's not strictly a commuter college.

Debrief the college visit on your way back: Ask the youth about their impressions. E.g.: What did they think of the school, the area, the people? Did the students look like them or were they more or less diverse? Can they see themselves there, attending classes and hanging out with these people? Can you? If they found themselves struggling as undergraduates, do they feel they'd get the supports they need to prevail?

Adapted from <http://youngadults.about.com/od/collegeprep/a/collegevisit.htm> and <http://youngadults.about.com/od/collegeprep/qt/Tourqs.htm>

ABOUT WKCD (What Kids Can Do)

For nine years, the nonprofit WKCD (What Kids Can Do) has listened and talked with students nationwide about their learning, their schools, their hopes and dreams. Going to college has been a big part of these conversations. What does it take to get to college, especially if you are the first in your family to go? Where does the motivation come from? What stands in the way? What supports do students need, and where can they—do they—turn for help? How well do they feel their schools are preparing them for college?

From this work, we have produced a rich set of resources for first-generation and low-income students on how to make it to college and succeed once there. All of these resources are student-to-student: "near peers" advising those following in their footsteps.

We also have a website filled with advice, resources, checklists, and videos: www.firstinthefamily.org. We started this initiative, in collaboration with Lumina Foundation for Education, with first-generation students in mind. It has since grown to encompass low-income youth in general.

For more information, please contact: info@whatkidscando.org

