

ADVICE ABOUT COLLEGE

from low-income and first-generation students



Believe in your right to college . . . get the knowledge you need

So my mom kind of nonchalantly handed me the envelope . . . I was tearing it slowly and looking at it. I didn't even read the whole thing, I just read "Congratulations" and I screamed. I called everybody in my cell phone book.

By morning everybody in school knew about it. They made a huge announcement over the intercom, "Congratulations to Eric Polk, the first Stratford student to get accepted at Wake Forest University." What?! So I hold that title. And I basically didn't go to any class that day, they're like, "Honey, just sit down!"

Make college part of
your plan. **Beat the
odds.** Start early. **WORK
SMART.** Work hard.
Do your research. **Tell
everyone you are
going to college.**
Build relationships.
Spread your wings.
Challenge yourself.
Believe in yourself.

Who we are

The "we" behind this booklet includes 5,000 high school students and hundreds of first and second-year college students. It also includes WKCD, a nonprofit that gathers youth voices across the U.S., on issues that matter most to youth.

Some of the students contributing to this guide are the first in their family to attend college. Others have college in their family background—but it's still a stretch, filled with hopes and hurdles. In either case, you'll find lots here to think and talk about.

There's nothing, we believe, like the wisdom of "near peers"—older students like you—to set the record straight.



Beat the odds

I won't be defined by a statistic, like "how people who grow up in this area are more likely to turn out." Not me!

Students in poor neighborhoods share the same college hopes as wealthier students. But they start out without the advantages, and so do their schools. Some people call this the "achievement gap." We call it the "opportunity gap." Either way, students from poor families and under-resourced schools must dig deeper than their more "advantaged" peers when it comes to college. Is it fair? No. Is it worth the sacrifice? Yes.

How big is your opportunity gap?

(1) High school students living in low-income families drop out of school at _____ times the rate of their peers from high-income families:

- a. twice the rate b. four times the rate c. six times the rate

(2) While 81 percent of white students graduated from high school in 2008, the graduation rates for Hispanic and African-American students were:

- a. 75% and 73% b. 64% and 62% c. 51% and 49%

(3) In 2008, the gap in college enrollment rates between high school graduates from the highest and lowest income backgrounds was the smallest ever recorded. Still the enrollment gap between high- and low-income students was:

- a. 15% b. 25% c. 35%

(4) The number of Hispanic and African-American students enrolled in college has increased steadily. Still, in 2007, 64 percent of college-age Hispanic students and 56 percent of African-American students were enrolled in college, compared to _____ percent of whites:

- a. 70% b. 78% c. 85%

(5) While 40 percent of high-income students earn a bachelor's degree in six years, only _____ percent of low-income students earn a bachelors degree in six years.

- a. 6% b. 14% c. 21%

[Answers: c, b, b, a, a]

Why college matters

OVER A LIFETIME, A COLLEGE GRADUATE CAN EXPECT TO EARN \$1 MILLION MORE THAN A HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATE.

On average, college graduates have lower unemployment rates than high school graduates—even in tough economic times.

College graduates have more jobs to choose from.

College gets you out of your neighborhood and into a bigger world. It can open doors you never imagined.

People see you as a leader when you are the first in your family to go to college.

When you have a college education, you make better decisions as a consumer.

People who go to college live longer.





Stay motivated

Seventy-five percent of the 5,000 high school students in our survey said they hoped to go to college right after graduation. There's no shortage of college ambitions, we found. What can be hard is staying motivated.

It's good when you get encouragement. Some teachers, whenever you bring up "If I go to college..." they just say, "it's not an issue of whether or not you should go. You should go no matter what. Do your best, do go. It's not a choice. It's the next step."

My family inspired me for college because they told me their stories of how they struggled with not going. My aunt got married at 18 and then she got pregnant. I've watched her struggle with two jobs and her family. My uncles, my family, seeing them has convinced me going to college is the way to go.

You have to motivate yourself, to say, "I have to do it, and that's what I'm going to do!" If you make good grades, people will pay attention to you, "He actually tries and puts effort into studying for a test." Your parents, they love you, they'll be like, "Yeah, you can do this, you can do that." But in the end, it's you doing the work. If you tell yourself you can't do it, you won't.

Sometimes the motivation comes from not wanting to let other people down. The thing I don't want to do is disappoint people.

"Champions aren't made in gyms. Champions are made from something they have deep inside them—a desire, a dream, a vision."

— Muhammad Ali, athlete

Motivators that work for us

- * **Read books about others who have aimed high, especially in the face of steep obstacles**
- * **Hang with friends who share your dreams and your drive**
- * **Think about mistakes you've made and the good things you learned from them.**
- * **Set small goals and, when you meet them, set more goals.**
- * **Write down quotes you find inspiring and put them up on your bedroom wall.**
- * **Visit as many college campuses as you can, so that you can imagine yourself as a college student.**
- * **Find music that really inspires you and play it when you need a push or a lift.**
- * **Keep alive the hunger to prove your doubters and naysayers wrong.**

WORK HARD & SMART

Work hard, work smart

Getting good grades in “tough” classes is the surest way to make it to college. A strong GPA opens college doors, wins scholarships, maybe lets you attend school out-of-state (if that’s your wish). It also increases your chances of succeeding in college.

More than three-quarters of students who earn an A or A-plus grade average in high school complete college, compared to one-fifth of students with a C average in high school.

Over 60 percent of students who have taken two or more Advanced Placement (AP) courses in high school graduate from college in four years or less, compared with 29 percent of students who have taken no AP classes.

Some advice from seniors to ninth graders

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.

Throughout high school I really challenged myself with taking the hardest classes. When I wanted to go to a [certain] college, I wanted to have what it takes to go there. So just build up, make you the best that you can. You pretty much need to work hard all through high school.

AP classes will probably help you with college—they didn’t tell me that until last year. The AP teachers, it they have a different view on things. They cause you to think outside the box. And they’re more like, “This is your work and it’s on you to do it.”

When you come to school every day, you come to learn new stuff. You might think your teachers give you too much work, but it only gets harder when you get into college. When you’re here in high school, this is the easiest.



Figuring your GPA

GPA stands for Grade Point Average. Beginning in ninth grade, every grade you earn goes into computing your GPA.

It keeps adding up: your GPA your senior year combines all the grades you received since the start of freshmen year. A bad semester brings down your overall score. A good semester lifts it.

Here’s how to compute your GPA:

Convert your grades into numbers: A = 4.0; B = 3.0; C = 2.0; D = 1.0; F = 0. Add up all of your class grades, then divide that number by the number of classes you have. That’s your GPA.

Some high schools “weight” the GPA, assigning extra points to grades received in honors and AP classes. In a weighted GPA, grades in advanced classes earn an extra point: A = 5.0; B = 4.0; C = 3.0; D = 2.0; F = 0.

Most colleges and universities use the unweighted GPA, where A= 4.0, etc.

State colleges and universities often set a **minimum GPA for admission.** Inform yourself early on this score.



Start early

In our survey of close to 5,000 high school students, the majority said they wished their schools had done more to get them thinking about college their freshmen year.

They start us on college too late. We should start a lot of things in ninth grade. Honor classes, we should have been taking those in ninth grade. You can't just throw a child in an AP class in twelfth grade and expect them to pass that exam.

All high schools should start getting students thinking about college in freshman or sophomore year. If not, they're going to think what most of us thought, like, "We have two or three more years. We'll be fine." Then, last minute we're, "Oh, I need to do five or ten of these scholarships" Or, "Oh, I should have done better in that class. I needed that credit."



Begin forming your own path freshman year

Freshman and sophomore you hear about it. Junior year, you start hearing about it more towards the end. But senior year, it hits, everything at once. You have your deadlines, your applications—not to mention your senior stuff like prom and yearbook. As a freshman, talk to the teacher that inspires you and just ask her what are some small things that you can do now.

You should start freshman year. Things are easier when you think ahead of time: "Okay, what does it take for me to graduate from high school, what does it take for me to get into college?" Then ask, "What are some possible colleges that I can get into?" The earlier you start, the easier it is to be picky, to choose something that you really like. You can rule out schools, as much as pick schools you like.



Create your own college portfolio

We have created planning checklists for each high school grade, which you can use to build your own college portfolio.

Here's how our Grade 9 checklist begins (go to www.firstinthefamily.org to download full checklists for grades 9-12)

- * **Let your teachers know that you plan to go to college.**
- * **Are your courses considered "college prep"? If you don't know, ask your guidance counselor to make sure they are.**
- * **Let your teachers get to know you better. For a start, write down the names of the ones you trust or admire most.**
- * **Do you know other students like you who are planning to go to college? It helps to share your ideas and plans with them. Write down the names of the ones you trust or admire most.**
- * **Read as much as you can this year. It will give you new ideas, make you a better thinker, and build your vocabulary. Start a list of things you enjoy reading.**

BUILD RELATIONSHIPS

Build relationships

You get a huge boost if there's an adult you can count on for help in making it to college. Way too many of the students we surveyed—28 percent—said they completed their college application on their own. It's hard to get the attention of overloaded counselors, they said. Even supportive families may not be able to offer concrete help, especially if no one has been to college.

The value of these relationships can't be overstated:

My health science teacher, she's down to earth. She connects with you—outside of school, inside of school, she's there. She's a great influence on what you'd like to be when you grow up—cool, relaxed but professional.

I'm a participant in [our local university's] "Dream Project" that comes here on Thursdays. They assign you a student who's in college, so they know what it's all about. They come here and guide students through every step. I'm lucky to participate in something like that.

My coaches have made the difference. My parents want me to go to college bad, but they can't really help. But if you're a high school athlete like me, you're used to being pushed. Your coaches push you hard on the field, and they push you to college, especially when they have ties at a lot of places. They push you, and that's good.

Sadly, there aren't enough adults who think of reaching out to help young people make it to college. So it's up to you to make the connections and build the relationships. When you ask, most adults will probably say "yes."



Finding a mentor

Tell everyone you know you plan to go to college. Ask people you trust and admire for help—a religious leader, a coach, an employer, a family friend, a godparent.

Make a short list of the teachers you respect (from middle school, too). Send them a note—or email—explaining where things stand with your college plans and asking them if can they advise you when needed.

Look for "college access" programs in your community that give students the one-on-one support that's hard to find in school. Ask your counselors if they have a list of such programs, or look online at www.collegeaccess.org/accessprogramdirectory

Students on who makes a good mentor

"Someone who shows us different paths and different opportunities, based on our interests."

"Someone who puts themselves in our shoes and sees what we go through. It's great if they listen, but better yet if they understand us."

"Someone who really knows you and where you want to go in life. Someone you can trust and talk to and who really wants to help you out, who knows your heart."

SPREAD YOUR WINGS



Spread your wings

My afterschool program has given me the opportunity to see a new world, not just going home, doing chores, taking care of kids, helping my mom. It allows me to be creative, to explore, to imagine something different for myself.

Over 70 studies suggest that students who participate in afterschool and summer programs have a leg up, when it comes to college. They get to excel outside the classroom, develop interests and talents, practice leadership, and contribute to their community. Students often find their passion in these out-of-school programs. It's also a good way to build relationships with caring adults. And it can be just plain fun.

Most communities offer a range of afterschool and summer programs. The Y and Boys & Girls Clubs are growing new programs for teens that are worth a look. There are small nonprofits where you can make art, learn video, practice spoken word, and more.

For low-income students, the federal government offers several academic enrichment programs. Upward Bound may be the best known.

And there are always volunteer opportunities.

School counselors and teachers can have a hard time keeping up with afterschool and summer opportunities. Still, try to enlist their help: tell them what you have in mind and see what they uncover. Or recruit a group of friends and create your own list of opportunities, then circulate it around your school.

Some leads

Go online to look up local YMCA, Boys & Girls Club, 4-H (if you're not in a big city) to see what they have to offer.

Find out if there's an Upward Bound summer program near you. Google "Upward Bound + [where you live]"

Google:

"youth programs + [where you live]"
"summer camps + [where you live]"
"volunteer opportunities for teens + [where you live]"

Call your local United Way, and ask to speak with someone who knows about afterschool and summer programs for teens.

Find out if your city or town has a community foundation. If so, follow the same directions as for the United Way.

Ditto for calling a member of your town or city council.

Note: In all three of these cases, the very fact that you called may alert community leaders to the need for more out-of-school opportunities for youth.

DO THE RESEARCH

Do the research

The path to college is like a jigsaw puzzle. It has lots of pieces, and it matters how they fit together. We've gone through many of these pieces already:

- 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.

The last piece of the puzzle is the research you'll be doing all along the way. 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

What are you looking 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.

For great videos of students talking about making it to college see:

www.firstinthefamily.org

— plus inspiring books and quotes; downloadable, grade-by-grade checklists, and more resources.