

College Prep: It only begins with the SATs and ACTs

If you have a son or daughter in high school, don't think that college prep ends when they get a good score on the SAT or ACT. In fact, it's just beginning.

According to American College Testing (ACT), one in every four students leaves college before completing sophomore year. What's more, nearly half of all freshmen will either drop out before getting their degree or complete their college education elsewhere.

A primary reason for this somewhat shocking statistic is that a large number of students are ill-equipped for the challenges of college. Students and parents devote so much time to the admissions process that they forget to focus on what lies ahead: challenging academics, living away from home, maintaining their finances, learning time management skills, and taking responsibility for their own lives.

This lack of college preparedness has led many colleges to create freshman survival courses. While a good idea, a freshman course can come too late for many students. There are many stories of students who get off on the wrong foot with academics or a roommate, get homesick and don't even make it past their first semester before dropping out. That's why we launched Quantum U, a seven-day summer college prep program targeted primarily to incoming freshmen.

We encourage parents to be proactive about helping prepare their kids for the challenges they will face when they're on their own at college. Let's look at three key areas you can address with your student while they're still in high school.

Time Management

It's never too early for a student to learn how to manage their time. Kids as early as middle school have extremely busy schedules, which often involve one or more extra-curricular activities in addition to school, study time, friends, down time and, yes, even family time. Whether it's on paper, a PDA or an online calendar, get your teen accustomed to planning their time.

Have your student start by looking at the full semester and term, so they can mark in known dates for mid-terms, finals, project due dates, scheduled absences, etc. Next, they should schedule time leading up to the deadlines, allocating time for writing a paper, studying for an exam, etc. to avoid the last-minute crunches.

They can incorporate a weekly review to see if they are on target each week. If your student finds him/herself falling behind, some non-academic activities will have to be cut. This weekly review should include a priority (or "To Do") list for the upcoming week. A quiet time on a Sunday evening is an ideal time for this weekly review.

By getting into the habit of budgeting their time, your student will be better equipped to manage the autonomy of college life, at least as it relates to finding a balance between academic and personal life.

Decision Making

Most kids get through their pre-college years without having to make many big decisions. All of a sudden, they're in college and they're faced with decisions every day, some practical, others ethical. As a parent, you can help your son or daughter in a couple of ways. First, put them in situations where they need to think through issues rather than doing it for them. If they come to you with a "what should I do?" question, encourage them to think through the options and the pros and cons of each option, as well as the implications to them and others of a particular action. The more experience they have in going through a thought process, the more comfortable they will be when they arrive at college. They won't feel lost.

The second thing you can do is help your kids develop a strong character core. At SuperCamp, our learning and life skills summer program, we teach kids the 8 Keys of Excellence. When a young person learns and habituates core character principles, they have a solid foundation on which they can make good decisions. They're also more confident in themselves and they know themselves better, so they're less at risk to go along with the crowd in situations that may put them in jeopardy or that are inconsistent with their true values.

Money Management

Another area of life management that many new college students are ill-equipped to deal with is managing their finances. We've found that most students who attend Quantum U simply don't have a good idea what things cost and don't have any idea how much they spend.

When kids get to college, both of these problems are magnified. College students spend a lot of money on eating out, much more money than they, or their parents, anticipate them spending. A good exercise you can do with your teenagers is sit them down with a list of items and ask them what they think each item costs. Include a range of grocery products, household products and other things they may consume, but don't pay for. Once they're done, show them the real costs and compare. Maybe they'll nail it, but chances are there will be some major differences on a few items.

Also, get your teen to analyze how they spend their money now. It might just be their allowance money, but it helps them begin to understand the outflow of funds, which is half of the budgeting process: tracking spending. The next step is to help your son or daughter set up a budget based on the money they have available and their expected expenditures on a monthly basis. By the time your student heads off to college, they'll have a much better appreciation for what things cost, what they spend their money on, and how to set up and manage a budget.

One more thing . college freshmen are inundated with opportunities to sign up for a credit card when they arrive on campus. While having access to a credit or debit card at college is practical,

even if it's just for emergencies, it's wise to start the process jointly before your son or daughter goes to college, so you can be a part of the process and establish clear ground rules on its use.

In summary, if you take a proactive approach to help your high school student prepare for college, you increase their chances for success enormously.