



Thinking about College? A Student Preparation Toolkit

Think Differently About College

Seeking Success

If you are like the millions of other people who are thinking about entering college you are probably searching for clues about how to make good decisions. In order to understand what matters to student success, the Business Innovation Factory conducted over 65 interviews with many different types of students at 40 schools across the country. Students told us loud and clear: college success is about more than SAT scores and financial aid. To succeed in college, you need to build a deeper awareness of all the challenges you will face along your college journey.

This list of questions, observations and activities in this toolkit will help you prepare for this journey and reveal some of the unspoken “secrets” that every student should know.

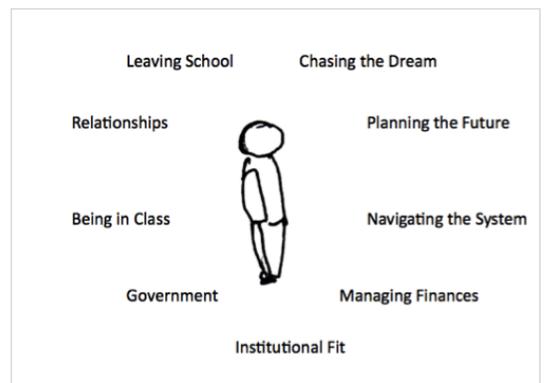
There are a lot of brochures that tell you that you must go to college to be successful and offer tips to help you prepare academically. But there are few tools to help you develop a college-ready mindset. This toolkit will help you cut through the fog and the emotions that may cloud your judgement about how to prepare for and begin your college career.

This document has partner website that you should review. On the site will see students talk about the issues, challenges and opportunities they faced in college. For more information please visit:
www.businessinnovationfactory.com/sxl

How to use this Toolkit

Each section starts with a brief description of a theme that significantly impacts student success. Each description is followed by questions or comments to help you understand what to expect and how to plan for college. These themes are important no matter how old or young you are, where you come from or what school you want to attend.

Review each section and answer the questions by writing them down. Writing your answers down is important because it challenges you to really think deeply about your ideas and attitudes. Plus, once you have written this information down, you can reference it again when talking with others, so they can help guide you on your journey to success.



BIF's Top 10 Insights about the College Experience

This top ten list of surprising insights about the college experience will motivate you to more thoroughly consider your decisions about your higher education career.

1. Schools are businesses and often make decisions based on what drives profit. These decision may not always be in the students best interest.
2. It is up to you to find the right school. Counselors and parents can help you, but even they might not have all the information you need. It is up to you to seek information, ask questions and honestly evaluate if and how a school can meet your needs.
3. Taking your general education courses at a community college can significantly reduce the cost of your education.
4. Consider the cost of your education: not all careers require you to attend a high-priced school. Know what you want to achieve and look for the most affordable options (expensive does not always equal better).
5. You are more than just a student. You have many responsibilities that will impact your ability to perform in school...but many schools don't take this into account when designing services.
6. Thanks to test scores, transcripts, and entrance applications, schools know much more about you than you know about them. As a result, most students are poorly prepared consumers. Don't trust college marketing materials to tell the truth about the real, everyday student experience on campus. Do your own research.
7. Top 100 lists are often filled with schools that have with the biggest marketing budgets. A high ranking does not necessarily mean a school has the best or right offering for you.
8. Freshman are cheaper to educate than seniors, so many colleges care most about getting people in the door...not necessarily about graduating them.
9. Students reported that having strong personal relationships in school made it easier for them to stay in school when things got tough.
10. A high school diploma doesn't guarantee that you are prepared to tackle all of the challenges of college. Don't wait to ask for help.

Fundamentals

The college experience is founded on a student's previous academic experiences, their cultural and community framework, their expectations about what is possible, their internal motivations, and the kind of role modeling and support they have received.

Things to consider...

Support

Are there people in your life who have been through college and can help you deal with the challenges? Having experienced people who have the time and energy to support you is crucial to your success. If you don't have someone like that, ask a school counselor, family friend or someone at work if they can help you find a mentor. You will be surprised how many people will help if you ask. It is important to have someone that can help you understand finances, academics and social issues.

Who Can you Rely on and for What?

For social support I can rely on

For financial knowledge and support I can rely on...

For academic support and advice I can rely on...

Academic Readiness

Your high school diploma does not mean you are ready for college. Some schools may require you to take remedial classes based on your SAT and or ACT scores. Look into what remedial courses you might need. Some schools will require you to take a placement test. Do this as soon as possible. If you have not graduated high school, try to find out if other graduates from your school needed help to be college ready.

Do you know any seniors that have graduated that you can ask about their experience?

Can your counselor help you understand how prepared you are?

Do you need help with writing? If so, are there any after school programs in your community that might give you a head start?

Do you need help with your studying skills?

Is there someone you can talk to about improving your time management skills?

Moving from Passive to Active Learning

High school is often about learning lots of facts. College is about understanding and examining subjects and issues. This is the transition from what is called "passive learning" (sitting back and learning facts) and "active learning" (having to understand what "facts" really mean). The transition between the two types of learning is startling to many students and you may not be as prepared as you think. It is important to recognize if you need help making the transition. Get help if you need it.

Chasing the Dream

Seeking a college education is often tied to your personal dreams about what you want your life to be. Your “dream” may be very specific or very broad and may change over time and with experience.

Things to consider...

Finding a dream

As the old saying goes, if you aim at nothing, you will hit it. What are your dreams right now? You don't have to stick to them and they don't have to be perfectly formed, but write what you are thinking right now.

Opportunities

Sometimes it is hard to see that there are more opportunities than you realized in front of you. Take some time to think about what the opportunity to go to college will offer you. What could success look like? What would failure look like? It is often helpful to find a hero to inspire your journey to success.

Are you taking advantage of your opportunities in life? What are they and how are you doing it?

Motivation

We grow up hearing that college is a necessity and we should all go right after high school, but some of us are not ready. Many are starting college later in life when they have had the chance to get some other experiences. Traveling, volunteering or just plain working after high school can be valuable too. Just make sure you are always thinking about how your choices affect your future in the long run.

Are you going to college because you want to or because you are supposed to?

What is your motivation?

Planning the Future

When students plan the future they make critical decisions that have a lasting effect on their academic trajectory. Students often base their plans on very little (and sometimes wrong) information about options and opportunities. Choosing a school is extremely challenging. Knowing what it will be like on a daily basis, how much it really costs and if it will support your needs (when you aren't quite sure what they are) is hard.

Things to consider...

Schools are Businesses

Remember that schools are businesses and want your money just like any other business. They will be most helpful when signing you up and taking your money. We like to believe that they are there for the good of society and they are, but they are also there to make money. Don't just trust them blindly. Stick up for your rights as someone paying a lot of money for a service. College will be one of the most expensive things you ever purchase.

How much do you expect to pay for college?

Now check with a few schools you are considering attending. How does the actual cost compare to what you thought?

Beware of the Hype!

Most of the information you and your counselor will have is from college marketing departments. These marketing materials, such as brochures, websites and television commercials, are designed to be attractive to you. Schools are not always what they promise. Most students will choose a school based on these materials and on the emotions they create. Do not let your emotions get the best of you.

- 1) Create a list of your goals and check off how well the school serves them.
- 2) Find out what the graduation rates are for students like you.

Think Long Term

It is easy to get caught up in the excitement of going to college but make sure your decision is in line with your long-term goals. English or engineering may be very interesting but how do these subjects help you in the future when you are looking for a job. Perhaps not even your first job, but your ideal job. Remember that the world is changing fast. Consider how you can get an education that will offer you the skills and the flexibility you need to attain your goals...even if those goals change over time.

What are your long-term goals?

How will the school of your choice help you attain those goals?

Check accreditation

Schools are "accredited" or given the right to grant certain types of degrees. Credits are not all the same. Some transfer to other schools and some don't. It is always better to go to an accredited school in case you want to transfer or go on for more education. This is particularly true when it comes to schools that offer 18 to 24 month nursing, mechanics, and computer networking or "trade" programs. Make sure to ask if your credits will transfer.

Are the schools you are interested accredited?

Navigating the System

Going to college requires students to find their way through a complicated system to complete a degree. Colleges and the government have their own words to describe things and that can make it very complicated.

Things to consider...

A Broken System

While it seems like a school is one complete system with departments that talk to each other and counselors that talk to teachers, etc., this is often not true. You must learn to “connect the dots” to get the right results. Take responsibility for tracking down information and following up with people when you are expecting them to do something for you. Don’t assume that the right things will happen at the right time. Be your own best advocate. You can help reduce the problems that result from a poorly run system by taking responsibility for your needs rather than expecting the school to take care of things for you.

Transferring Schools

60% of students will transfer colleges. Even if you love your school something may come up that requires you to make a change. Remember that transferring credits between schools can add extra cost and time to your education. Be prepared to do this right by working with your advisors to make sure you transfer in the right way and at the best time so you can get the most bang for your buck. This can be hard if it is an emotion driven change. Dissatisfaction and disappointment are very hard to deal with when college was supposed to be the greatest experience of your life. Take a deep breath and think about a better future before acting hastily.

What do you think you would do if you wanted to transfer schools?

Who do you think you need to talk to?

What kind of preparation should be made?

Counselors

Counselors can be great allies but remember that most advisers are overwhelmed with students. At many high schools and colleges there can be 500 or more students for every 1 advisor. This means advisors don’t always have time to think about each student’s needs, so don’t wait for them or expect them to do everything. Follow up and offer to help them help you by contacting people and finding the right information for them.

Who, besides your school counselor, can help you with your decisions about which school to attend?

Managing Finances

In the last decade the cost of a college degree has doubled. Students rely heavily on financial aid and often enter into debt with only a marginal understanding of the long-term consequences.

Things to consider...

Unexpected Costs

Paying for classes is just part of the cost of your education, even if you live at home. Books, fees, computers, travel expenses and may other “incidentals” will challenge your budget. Think about what your needs will be. A great way to make this easy is to think about what a day in your life will be as a college student. If you can get someone who is in college to help you think about it is even better. Schools offer an expected cost of living but these are never very accurate. Think through:

- 1) What you need to get started and the expected cost. This may include a place to live and related supplies, a computer to work on, money for food, etc.
- 2) Interview a friend who is in college about their activities and how much they spend. Compare your estimates with your friend’s comments. How did you do? Anything surprising?

Understanding Debt

Debt is pretty easy to come by but paying it back is torture. Debt will limit your ability to change jobs, apply for a mortgage and get a new car. What happens if you don’t get your dream job right out of school? What are you risking and what are you getting in return?

Do the Math

Does the average salary for the career you are choosing make investing in the schools you are looking at make sense? This is called return on investment.

How much does the job you expect to have pay?

How much does your education cost?

How long do you think it will take you to pay for it?

Start Local

Starting with classes from your local community college can be a great way to cut down the cost of education. Community college may not always seem as exciting as a big state or private school but it can be a big money saver.

A good way to understand the value of this is to add up what you think it will cost to go to school all four years at a more expensive school and then add up what it would be with two years at a community college and two years at the school of your choice. Another factor is that if you perform well at community college you might qualify for more scholarships and get into even better schools.

How much would 2 years of community college cost?

How much can you save by going to a community college? (Subtract cost of community college from your estimated cost of a degree.)

Institutional Fit

As a student begins to interact with a school, they begin to assess how the institution “fits” their needs. Can you estimate how the schools you are considering attending might fit your needs?

Things to consider...

What to Expect?

When we go into a new experience we have an idea about what it might be like. These are called expectations. Setting your expectations properly is important. College is exciting and there is good reason for you to be optimistic about your future but remember that things are not always as they may seem.

Do you like to learn visually, listening, working with others or by reading and researching on your own?

Does your learning style match the college you are going to? Have you done enough research to know the answer this question?

What kind of extracurricular activities, such as socializing or sports, do you plan to be involved in? How will those activities help or hurt your academic career?

Students face many pressures outside of school. They can be social, family or financial. What kind of help do you expect the school to give you for these issues?

How and where will you get that help?

List all the things that are or will be happening in your life outside of school that could impact your time and ability to perform in school.

Now go interview people at the school of your choice and see how their answers match up to your own.

Visiting the Campus

Even when you have few choices in schools it is important to make the most informed decision possible. It might be worth it to drive an extra 20 or 30 minutes to a different community college if you are happier there.

Make a list of the things that are important to you; classes, dorms, cafeteria, parking, video games, etc.

Take that list with you on your visit to the school and literally check off each question you have when you have successfully answered it.

Being in Class

The experience of “being in class” is distinctly different from time spent in between courses or planning for education. It is the time of active learning, when you expect to have tangible evidence that your efforts are worthwhile.

Understand Scheduling

Students told us that learning to manage their schedule was one of the most important parts of their transition to college. They described life as already being complicated and that adding college to the mix added a whole new layer of challenges, responsibility and pressures. Students also told us that schools often have classes and counselors that can help you learn to manage your time. If you are feeling behind don't hesitate to look for help. Many people have the same challenges.

Do you use a calendar yet? Has it been successful for you? If not, try asking a friend or parent that seems well organized how they handle their schedule. It will make a big difference in your life.

Choose the Right Courses

Choosing the right courses to attain your goals can be complicated. You will not always make the right choice, but ask yourself how/if every class you take moves you toward your goal.

Do you want to go to school to do one specific job or learn general skills?

Are there skills you would like to improve?

Do the schools you are interested in offer courses that meet your needs?

Asking for Help

Asking for help is hard but it can mean the difference between success and failure. Don't give up. Don't feel like there are things you are “supposed to know.”

Are you ready to ask for help?

Do you know how to describe the problems you are having?

What kinds of student support services or programs does your college, or the one you would like to attend, offer?

Do you know how to access these services?

Relationships

Strong and positive relationships with advisors, mentors and peers play an important role in enabling academic success.

Things to consider...

Connecting with Others

Having a person you connect with on campus is more important than just making friends. It is important that you feel connected to your school and community because it will help you to succeed when you struggle. Even if you have very little time be sure to find a teacher, administrator, or student that you can chat with, exchange numbers and ask questions of on an ongoing basis

Who will you know when you get to college? Are they people you can trust to support you?

What are ways of connecting that most appeal to you (Facebook, social events, MySpace, etc.)?

Have you ever been away from home?

Make a list of people you know you can turn to in a time of crisis.

Dealing with Conflict

Having the ability to deal with conflict in a healthy way is crucial to your success as a student. This means conflict with teachers, classmates and even at home. It is important to find people to help you.

How do you handle crisis? Will this approach work as well when you are in college?

How have you dealt with a tough situation in the past? What did you learn from it?

Finding Friends

Many students reported struggling with making connections and creating friendships and felt generally disconnected with the campus community. Don't wait to ask for help or to find new ways to connect. Your school might even have a peer mentoring program that can connect you with some of the brightest, most interesting and talented people at your school.

Do the schools you are interested have programs to help you make new connections? What are they?

Having a Bad Experience

Students may enter a school with the highest of hopes to find that a particular institution does not meet their needs as they expected. This can be very painful but it is important to find people to help you consider the situation clearly and make a smart choice about how to deal with it.

Who do you think you should talk to about problems at college? Make a point to ask when you visit the school.

Leaving School

Leaving school is a pivotal moment for students. For those who graduate, it is the time when one expects to see a tangible return on their investment.

Things to consider...

Different Paths

Leaving school can happen in many different ways. Everyone hopes that leaving school occurs when you graduate but sometimes it doesn't. Many students will transfer schools and unfortunately many more will leave because they can't continue due to outside factors such as a lack of money, family or personal issues, etc. No matter what, it is important to leave in the right way. This means meeting with your counselor and proper administrators. Don't just stop going to class and not tell anyone what you have decided. Who knows, they may just be able to help.

Dropping Out Versus Stopping Out

Stopping out (leaving with the intention of coming back) unlike dropping out (not planning to return) often has more to do with the reality of your experience and the intrusion of "life needs" (e.g., financial issues, domestic responsibilities, and other circumstances that push you out of the system) than it does with a lack of desire or drive to complete the degree.

If you are graduating, then have a plan for the next step. Career counselors can help you find a job and make a plan. If you are leaving for other reasons don't assume you won't come back or that no one cares. Make sure to leave officially so you don't just fail your class. Get all your records so you have a place to start when or if you decide to go back.

Find out what the graduation rates are like for students like you. Every school knows how students of different race, income and educational background fare in their school.

Graduating

It is important to think about your next steps, what you have learned, and how to improve or take advantage of your situation.

Try to imagine what your graduation day will look like, what your first week out of college will be like, first month and first year.

Where do you want to be a year after graduating?

How does this vision impact what you need to do to succeed in school?

Next Steps

As you can see there is plenty to consider when thinking about attending college but don't let that scare you off. Just make sure you are prepared. After completing this document share it with others to get their feedback.

Another great way to ensure that you have answered the questions and exercises to your best ability is to do it with a friend or help them complete theirs.

Good luck!