

**Where Will Your Child Be Their Sophomore Year in College?**  
***Home, Sweet Home: Why Didn't You Go to School Close to  
Home in the First Place?***

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College is for everyone, right? Perhaps. A four-year university degree is certainly not the right choice for some students, but there seems to be a lack of connection between action and reality on this issue. Some students go to college at the age of 18 for all the wrong reasons—adult pressure/misplaced ego, peer pressure, “zip code envy,” counselor/teacher advice, unrealistic understanding of financial implications—the list goes on.

Sending your child to college at the age of 18 for the wrong reasons can be costly on several fronts. The transition from high school to college can be traumatic, and as Brian Harke, associate dean at the University of Southern California, has pointed out, the academic, personal and social implications of attending the wrong college can be serious when the decision is based on “romanticized notions rather than accurate reflections of college life—ideas created by admissions brochures, a campus visit, stereotypes in the media, and stories from family or friends” (Harke). The prospect of a student then returning home with a deflated self-esteem, who must face their peers and explain their “failure,” is something no parent wants their child to experience. From a parental perspective, spending \$20,000 to \$50,000 for a year of college expenses, only to discover that your son or daughter passed only a small percentage of their courses, can be a major blow to your financial security as well as a painful family dilemma.

The question students need to ask is: Am I attending college for the right reasons, or am I attending college because of adult or peer pressure or other irrational influences? Harke refers to the nearly 34 percent dropout rate among college freshman as “The Freshman Myth” and contends that many of these students leave during or after their freshman year because they were “overconfident, under-prepared and lacked realistic expectations about college.” Harke (2010) further states that “over 70 percent of these students left because they were not prepared for their new social environment.”

So why is it that so many students who begin the college experience with high hopes of success return home after just one academic year? The reasons are numerous. Based on a study conducted by Roger I. Yoshino, seven of the 16 most common reasons are:

- ≡ Lack of preparation in high school (51%)
- ≡ Inadequate finances (39%)
- ≡ No clear-cut field of interest (33%)
- ≡ Poor study habits (29%)
- ≡ Unhappy personal adjustment (16%)

- ≡ Lack of academic ability (13%)
- ≡ Misconception of what to expect in college (11%).

What is perhaps most interesting is that the study was completed in 1958 (yes, 1958!), illustrating very clearly that things have not changed much in nearly 55 years! Perhaps the time has come to confront this issue head-on.

This paper will address these issues and will examine the economic, emotional, social, academic and behavioral realities associated with college attendance while offering some practical approaches to help parents and students make the right decision about college the first time around. We also address the issue of what guidance counselors, teachers, and college administrators can do to reverse this disturbing trend.

### Adult Pressure and Alternatives Ignored

Too often, there is excessive and unnecessary adult pressure and student ego boosting inherent in the college application process. Parents, students, college counselors and others have told us repeatedly that too many students are expected to attend a four-year college immediately out of high school, even though there are multiple, alternative options that may and should be considered before focusing solely on traditional four-year colleges.

Trade and professional schools and community colleges, for example, may be the best choice for many students, but these options unfortunately continue to carry a stigma as “the place where kids who cannot gain admission to four-year colleges end up.” The reality is that trade and professional schools and community college are often an excellent option for many reasons, including financial capacity, family issues, intellectual maturity and academic preparedness.

According to Robert Templin, Jr., president of Northern Virginia Community College (NVCC), “For every job requiring a bachelor’s degree or advanced degree, twice as many require more than a high school diploma but less than a four-year degree.” (2008)

George Gabriel, vice president of Institutional Research at NVCC, estimates that NVCC students’ annual salary upon completion of an associate’s degree at NVCC is between \$40,000 and \$50,000 per year, and that a large percentage of NVCC graduates pursue careers in science technology, engineering, nursing, health, information and technology, accounting, and other lucrative fields. In fact, nationwide, community colleges provide 59 percent of the nursing workforce and 80 percent of firefighters, law enforcement officers, and emergency medical technicians (EMTs) (*Fairfax City Patch*, 2012).

Given these facts, why do parents, teachers, counselors and others press students into four-year college studies when it would be more advisable to consider alternatives, or even a delay in the application process?

One undeniable reality is ego: If you and/or your spouse graduated from a prestigious university, it may be difficult to accept anything less than that for your child. It may be time to

rethink that approach. History is replete with examples of people who attended lesser known colleges and universities and went on to do great things. Does anyone remember that former U.S. President Lyndon Baines Johnson attended Southwest Texas State Teacher's College, or that nationally renowned financial planner Ric Edelman attended Glassboro State Teacher's College? Many notable people attended community college, including George Lucas, Hollywood producer; Arthur Goldberg, U.S. Supreme Court Justice; Fred Haise, Apollo 13 astronaut; Eileen Collins, NASA Space Shuttle Commander; and Dustin Hoffman, Tom Hanks, Jim Lehrer, Nolan Ryan, Billy Crystal, Morgan Freeman, H. Ross Perot and Calvin Klein. What did they know that many students and parents do not take into consideration when planning for college?

### Peer Pressure

The subject of peer pressure probably needs little explanation, as most parents know how this scenario plays out: Joshua is a junior in high school. He has been taking honors and advanced placement courses since middle school and has been tracked to attend college. Joshua's friends are already talking about the schools to which they plan to apply in the spring. Joshua's list may become excessively long (and expensive due to application fees) so that he will have bragging rights with his friends. When spring arrives, Joshua will apply to his top three schools and a few "safety schools" as back-ups. These "safety schools" are often excellent schools that get little notice from the Joshuas of the world—they are, in the eyes of the Joshuas—for those who cannot compete at the highest level.

Joshua waits months to hear from the 10 to 15 schools to which he has applied. Others in Joshua's circle of friends have applied for "early decision" which, of course, places them in the stratosphere of college acceptance. These students have real bragging rights! They can lean against their lockers and proudly pronounce that they have been accepted by one of "The Ivies." Joshua now feels increasing pressure to not only go to college, but to make a potentially hasty decision and accept the offer of a college that may not fit his interests, lifestyle, personality or, worst of all, his family's financial ability.

Although a bright student, Joshua is a candidate for returning home his sophomore year unfulfilled, deflated and uncertain about his future—part of "The Freshman Myth."

### Zip Code Envy

When the U.S. Postal Service initiated the zip code system in 1963, it did more than categorize the country by geographic areas. It also stratified the nation on the basis of a somewhat arbitrary number assigned to individual neighborhoods. Those numbers fairly quickly became synonymous with wealth, power and privilege as well as poverty, need and lack of opportunity. Of course, social stratification has always existed in America, but the zip code institutionalized it.

It was not long before parents and students in the wealthier zip codes could boast of primary and secondary schools that were often far superior to many others. The families in these school systems developed an expectation that high percentages of their students must and will go to college. This was fully realized by the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when the number of Americans who sought a college degree was one in seven. That number increased to three in eight by the

1970s (Cohen, 1989). The increasing availability of student loans, grants and scholarships propelled this trend during the 1980s and beyond.

Today, it is not uncommon to have a public high school in a wealthy zip code with a nearly 100 percent college attendance rate (for example, McLean or Langley High Schools in Fairfax, Virginia). Ninety percent of all graduating high school seniors in Arlington County, Virginia go on to attend college (Arlington County, Virginia, Office of Planning and Evaluation, 2009). Conversely, it is common to see a high school in a poor zip code with a college attendance rate of less than 50 percent. Ballou High School in the District of Columbia, for example, sent just 30 percent of its graduates to college in 2010 and 32 percent in 2011 (District of Columbia Public School profiles, 2012).

How did this happen, and do wealthy zip code families really need to send nearly 100 percent of their children to college, particularly if the student has not reached the level of intellectual or emotional maturity required for college success? If they insist on the importance of a college degree, would it not make sense to consider other options like community college, technical school, or even the armed forces, where higher education is often paid for by the government? If family finances are a major concern, would a state school not be a more realistic alternative, particularly if the student plans to major in a rewarding but low-paying field? A final question to ask before sending a student off to an expensive, private university is: Will these students all become gainfully employed and financially secure when they leave college with tens of thousands of dollars of debt?

Statistically, the likelihood of students graduating in four years is also not high; Stephanie Banchemo reports in *The Wall Street Journal* (2012) that “nationwide, 44 percent of high school freshman go on to attend college, and 21 percent earn a bachelor’s degree in six years.” This begs the question: Why send everyone to college in the first place? Alternatively, the question may be: Were more viable options available at the outset that were ignored by parents and students due to adult pressure, misplaced ego, peer pressure or other irrational factors?

#### Counselor/Teacher Advice

No doubt, the advice provided by high school guidance counselors, career placement counselors and teachers is well intentioned and honest at its core. However, forces beyond the control of these individuals often lead them to suggest that all students should attend college straight out of high school, regardless of their level of intellectual or emotional maturity.

We spoke with several representatives from AGM-College Advisors located in Arlington, Virginia, and asked if they see clients whose children return home feeling disillusioned or suffering from low self-esteem after their freshman year. In their response, it was clear that planning before even setting foot on campus the first day is key: When the issues of college selection emerges, they said, they engage in what they term “realistic counseling,” which focuses on intervention early in the process to avoid missteps in the college selection process, effectively eliminating the problem of disillusionment or low self-esteem (Randy McKnight, AGM-College Advisors, 2012). Of course, their clients’ investment in good planning minimizes the chances of a student leaving college after the freshman year.

The question arises: Why do high school guidance and career counselors not employ the same strategy? The answer may be that high school guidance and career counselors are simply burdened with too many students. Our research indicates that the average high school guidance and career counselor is responsible for 200 or more students. That may be a modest number. Harke has written that in 2008, the California Department of Education reported a counselor-student ratio in excess of 1:900 (2010). That, coupled with the fact that peer and parental pressure are often intense, is a recipe for ineffective decision-making.

When we asked the AGM team what schools can do better to address this issue—that is to say, what they are doing wrong—they responded with several recommendations:

- ≡ Look into a variety of options for students and, for parents in the Washington, D.C., metropolitan area (particularly Northern Virginia), avoid the same worn set of default schools (University of Virginia, Virginia Tech, William and Mary, etc.).
- ≡ Develop a willingness to learn about the individual student.
- ≡ Talk frankly and openly with parents about realistic options.
- ≡ Encourage guidance counselors to attend college fairs. This does not occur with the frequency needed to make it an effective tool.
- ≡ Openly discuss basic issues such as school size, urban vs. rural setting, and racial/ethnic mix.

These recommendations were made with the full realization that the burden of “counseling” upwards of 200 to 900 students may preclude some of them. However, in the view of the AGM team, more of an effort can and should be made in this area to minimize freshman dropout and transfer rates. This effort can manifest itself in fairly practical ways by investigating fundamental issues before making a final college selection. The overall cost of the college experience, for example, is not limited solely to tuition, fees, and room and board; other considerations that should be factored into the equation include distance from home, travel costs, frequency of home visits, transportation while away from home (car, public transit, etc.) and even the cost of storing personal items during summer breaks.

#### Ensuring “Psychological Comfort”

Another significant issue to consider is “psychological comfort.” Parents and students often visit college campuses during the junior year of high school. Both are looking at the overall layout of the campus, living accommodations, the quality and availability of food, access to public transit and other “creature comforts.” Equally important, though, is how comfortable the student will feel socially. Will he or she “fit in”? Will he or she feel like the proverbial “fish out of water,” or will the college experience be socially, culturally and psychologically comfortable? In addition, some fairly simple, yet often overlooked, issues that may affect whether a student remains in college are geographic location, weather, urban/rural/suburban setting, and school size. These are significant considerations because research has shown that a poor match at the outset often results in freshman dropout or transfer.

Students should do several things prior to arriving on campus in order to increase their “psychological comfort.” These may include:

- ≡ Use the Internet to investigate student clubs and organizations on campus.
- ≡ Take some time to read about and investigate the faculty. Are they accessible, approachable and helpful?
- ≡ Study the history of the college.
- ≡ Use social media to explore the college from a perspective other than its promotional materials.
- ≡ Talk to current students. They have the real inside information needed by an aspiring freshman.
- ≡ Find out about local shopping, where to get a haircut or where the movie theatres are located.
- ≡ Determine the availability of library resources and locations on campus conducive to study. (Harke, 2010)

Becoming familiar with the cultural, racial, ethnic and gender mix on campus is also important. If a student attended a public school in an urban environment where diversity was the norm, attending a small college in a small town that is racially homogeneous may not be a sound decision.

### The Underlying Issues

The Washington, D.C., area is home to a highly educated, highly motivated, affluent population. Nearly 50 percent of adults who reside in the Washington metropolitan area have earned a bachelor’s degree. Arlington County alone has a completed bachelor degree rate of 69 percent, followed by Loudoun County (59 percent) and Fairfax County (58 percent) (Fairfax County, Virginia Economic Development Authority). These levels of educational attainment are staggering by national standards.

Unemployment in the area has always been historically low, even during the late 2000s severe recession. The value of educational achievement is paramount in this environment. When life’s basic needs are satisfied, and discretionary income, time and attention can be directed toward the value of education, the demand and the desire to earn a college degree rises. In addition, the tax effort and taxing capacity of local jurisdictions is exceptionally high. It is rare to hear of a school bond rejected by the public. Even in a jurisdiction like Arlington County, where approximately 15 percent of residents have school-age children, school bonds are routinely approved by large majorities.

In this intense, highly driven educational environment, parents, teachers, administrators, counselors and independent providers of peripheral educational resources (tutoring services, testing centers, college counselors, career planning specialists, college finance consultants,

etc.) are in constant inertia toward the attainment of college degrees. On the other side of the coin are colleges and universities that are, of course, the beneficiaries of this unbridled push for the four-year bachelor's degree.

Nevertheless, according to a 2011 Harvard University study<sup>2</sup> titled "Pathways to Prosperity," 56 percent of students who begin a bachelor's degree finish within six years (Weissmann). Only 29 percent of those who seek an associate's degree from the more than 1,132 community and technical colleges nationwide complete that degree within three years, and the first year-retention rate for public two-year institutions is about 50 percent (Barefoot). The Harvard study further points out that only 46 percent of American adults who begin a college degree program complete it. This is the worst rate of return of any of the 18 countries tracked by the Harvard study (Weissmann).

Richard Vedder, professor of economics at Ohio University, has argued that the actual value of a college degree may be diminishing and that "if the gains of a college degree fall relative to its costs, people will start seeking substitutes, be it in the form of cheaper degrees or in the form of non-degree credentialing." Vedder further states that colleges seem to be blind to this economic reality and suffer from what he terms "political myopia." In this environment, if the current economic trends continue, Vedder states that an increasing number of Americans "will simply say 'no' to higher education." (2012)

#### What Does the Research Show?

As discussed earlier, the problem of freshman dropout rates is not a new one. As far back as 1958, researchers lamented this matter, stating:

"The problem of dropouts from our schools continues to be a major concern to educators, and it represents a considerable loss of human resources to society. Few questions can be more important to a college than the area of inquiry concerning student separations ... The proneness to attend or not to attend college is a product of a complex of social, economic, psychological and educational forces." (Yoshino, 1958)

Betsy O. Barefoot, co-director of the Policy Center on the First Year of College, Brevard College, has stated:

"In the United States, as in many other countries, academic preparation, socioeconomic status, family participation in higher education and being female are good predictors (in aggregate) of whether students will persist in higher education." (2004)

Vincent Tinto, a professor at Syracuse University, has posited that the "commitment" of students to a college or university and to one's personal goals play a key role in the success or failure of a student to complete a college degree." (1993)

J. Richard Hackman, Yale University, and Wendell S. Dysinger, MacMurray College, in a study titled "Commitment to College as a Factor in Student Attrition" (1970), also examined the "commitment" factor in determining whether a student withdraws from college after their freshman year. They categorized students as "persisters, transfers, voluntary withdrawals and

academic dismissals.” They found that student (and parental) commitment was correlated to whether a student “persists beyond his freshman year.”

The national first-year student retention rate is not encouraging. Research by Barefoot (2004) indicates “only 47 percent of students entering a baccalaureate institution have graduated from that same institution in five years” and that 29 percent are still enrolled or have graduated from another institution of higher education. The percentages are even higher at the nation’s two-year colleges. Overall, the picture is not good. In today’s market, students are not known for “product loyalty.” In fact, Tinto has pointed out that the reasons students leave an institution after just one year are varied—boredom, lack of academic challenge, poor institutional fit, failure to connect to the campus social systems, financial problems, general dissatisfaction or the desire to transfer elsewhere (1990).

As Barefoot points out, “No American college or university wants to be known for its high rate of dropout” (2004). In fact, *U.S. News and World Report*, in its annual college comparisons, now includes first-to-second year retention and graduation statistics in its methodology when ranking institutions of higher learning. This is in sharp contrast to the 1950s and 1960s, when student dropout (or “flunk-out”) rates were considered a somewhat perverse badge of honor.

#### What Can Be Done to Reverse the Trend?

The dilemma is clear. Students and families are arriving at college and are planning decisions on the basis of sometimes irrational, subjective factors such as peer, adult, and guidance/career counselor pressure, as well as “zip code envy,” whereby “keeping up with the Joneses” supplants clear thinking. It is then incumbent upon institutions of higher education to take a more active, reasoned approach to attracting students and marketing. Surely this will increase student retention and reduce student dropouts.

So what is at stake and what can be done to reduce the freshman dropout rate? First, the very financial solvency of many small, private colleges may be endangered. These institutions often rely on tuition as a major operating source. Public colleges and universities that receive much of their funding from state legislatures are under pressure to increase student retention or face reductions in state aid. These same schools are experiencing dramatic reductions in state funding due to the current recession. Last, as Barefoot has noted, no college wants a reputation today as a place where students are unsatisfied, uncomfortable, disenchanting, bored, unchallenged or left to fend for themselves.

Unlike in the past where higher education paid little attention to creating psychological comfort for their students, today’s institutions of higher education are actively engaged in what is now termed “retention management”; some have even created positions with titles like “campus retention director” in an attempt to institutionalize the effort. The University of Miami in Florida offers a degree in “enrollment management”—a growing field in higher education administration (Barefoot, 2004).

As higher education has become more open to students of all socioeconomic levels, races, cultures and life-circumstances, the need to recognize the unique needs of these populations

has also increased. Many of these students arrive on campus ill-prepared academically, disadvantaged socioeconomically, or simply lacking the study and organization skills and maturity required for a successful college experience. It is not that these students cannot be successful—there just needs to be a more reasoned approach to higher education choices that would assist in increasing retention and reducing dropout rates at colleges and universities nationwide.

In his book, *Why Don't Students Like School?*, Daniel T. Willingham (2009) proposes several critical risk factors for minority students. These risk factors are:

- ≡ Lack of cultural capital
- ≡ Lack of family support
- ≡ Academic under-preparation.

Willingham further states that mentors are critical players in the process. His research indicates that in one instance, 23 of 24 at-risk students were able to overcome risk factors with strong mentoring. Even more interesting is the fact that the mentoring does not have to occur in a formalized setting. Professors with a caring attitude, a sense of authenticity and a clear focus on student success are all that is needed. In fact, Willingham's research indicates that many such professors and staff are not even aware of the fact that they had served in a mentoring role or that they made a difference in the lives of their students. These unaware mentors can impact a student's life and can, in fact, dramatically increase student retention. In a speech given at NVCC's fall 2012 Convocation, Willingham stated, "Human connection is enormously important in encouraging student retention and success."

Colleges recognize this, and many have taken measures to address the problem of student retention.

Many approaches to increase student retention have been attempted, some with success, some not so successfully. Among these are:

1. Working with faculty to modify their pedagogical style of simply interacting with students on a more personal level to encourage better classroom performance. This is couched in the idea that increased student interaction may result in increased retention because students may feel a closer connection to their classes, professors and, ultimately, the college.
2. Creating opportunities for students to develop a sense of commitment to the school through clubs, residential programs, expanded campus orientations, convocations, community service and events that build "school spirit" (Barefoot, 2004).
3. Offering economically and financially disadvantaged students financial, personal and academic assistance through loans or grants, counseling and tutoring/mentoring.
4. Offering first-year seminars that bring cohorts of students together to improve social and academic integration (Tinto, 1993). These courses often focus on study and organization

skills, time management, use of the campus library and other resources, and available technology.

5. Developing “learning communities” where cross-curricular courses are taught with a small cohort of students who find intellectual and social unity through small group interaction. This approach not only enhances student learning; it also helps to develop a sense of belonging and, in the end, enhances student retention.

Personal interviews with Carol Muleta, managing partner of Gardener Parenting Consultants, Inc., in Arlington, Virginia, and Drs. Donald and Anne Weinheimer, educational professionals located in Great Falls, Virginia, revealed some interesting ideas (2012). Each of these individuals took a unique approach to the issue of student dropout and retention. When asked the root cause(s) of the problem, their response was to begin the process of instilling the values of responsibility for personal decisions at an early age. Parents should begin speaking with their children in elementary school about personal decision-making and responsibility. This will, in their view, result in a stronger commitment to school, to family life and to work. In the opinion of the education professionals—long before signing up for SAT or ACT classes—students should learn and practice study and organization skills and read a variety of books to set the stage for lifelong learning. These skills are self-evident; however, one aspect of learning is to set goals and to think through actions to obtain these goals. The ability to honor commitments and take responsibility for one’s actions is critical. Muleta stated it is not enough to simply say, “I want to go to college and get a good job.” Rather, students must consider how going to college fits into a life plan.

### The Challenge Facing Colleges

If this problem has persisted as far back as the 1950s, why have the strategies noted above been ineffective? Barefoot has explored this issue in depth and has termed this “a final frontier.” She has stated that rather than focusing on special purpose courses like first-year seminars, colleges should place the emphasis on helping students with core courses like history, composition, calculus and other content areas. More importantly, the format of these courses and the styles of instruction need to be revamped to meet the needs of today’s student population.

Evidence is mounting that students today are tiring of pedantic lectures, amphitheater-sized classes and boring PowerPoint presentations. In addition, Barefoot has found evidence that many female and minority students much prefer an educational experience that is “relational, rather than abstract and impersonal” (2004). Given the fact that, nationwide, nearly 60 percent of students enrolled in college are female, this is an important consideration.

These factors, coupled with the desire of an entire generation of students raised in the digital age who are demanding more tech-savvy approaches to learning, will surely need to be

addressed if the problem of freshman dropout is to be effectively addressed. It is clear that since the post-WWII era, most, if not all, approaches have been minimally successful.

The challenge facing higher education today is how to increase retention at a time when student choice has exploded, “product loyalty” has been minimized (Barefoot) and the pull of technology permeates all aspects of life. In addition, the issues noted earlier—adult pressure, counselor/teacher advice, unrealistic understanding of financial implications, peer pressure, “zip code envy”—all must be addressed if the issue of retention is to be reduced. Only through creative measures, on both the part of the students and the colleges, can the trend finally be reversed.

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