

Going to College: No Guarantees

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Going to college is no guarantee of completing college with a degree in hand. In a recent article, “Why We Quit” in *Scientific American Mind*, Yvonne Raley presents the latest findings on graduation rates. Public colleges and universities graduate about 40% of those who enter as freshman. Private school rates increase to 57%. Junior college and community college rates of graduation drop to about 30%. These numbers do not account for transfers and the possibilities of degree completion elsewhere, but do present the dangers of assuming that entrance equals completion.

Most dropouts from college leave by the end of their freshman year. Researchers speculate that the difficulties arise out of the transition between high school and college. It is vital that issues of *student readiness* and *goodness of fit* with the institution be carefully addressed prior to that first semester as a college student.

Student readiness is multifaceted. It is much more than SAT and ACT scores. These scores predict grades in college, not graduation. Raley (2007) cites the 2004 ACT review of retention studies that found the best predictors of college graduation are: “commitment to getting a degree, academic self-confidence, and good study and time management skills” (p. 78). Many at-risk college students want to be *in* college which is different than a clear commitment to graduate *from* college.

To graduate from college requires that the young adult be able to project into the future and try various career paths. A career path is more than selecting a major. The student needs exposure and experience in a variety of adult work environments. Research assistantships, mentoring opportunities, and internships are some of the ways that students can explore careers beyond going to class. Young people benefit from learning how someone selected the career they are currently in. It is rarely a straight trajectory from college to career 15 to 20 years later. Teenagers should be encouraged to ask parents, teachers, family friends, etc., how they got to where they are. Most adults are happy to talk about their jobs, the pros and cons of the work they do, and the opportunities that unexpectedly came along the way that shaped their career paths.

The second best predictor of college graduation is academic self-confidence. Academic self-confidence is not related to general self-confidence but specifically to academic goals and knowledge. The individual knows that she can do what it takes to complete a specific degree. An example might be the student who wants to be a physicist and is not daunted by the upper level math courses. The student with academic self-confidence feels both confident and competent that they can learn what they need to be able to do to complete a major area of study. That does not mean that the confidence is across the board. The business major can struggle with accounting, but will find a way to get at least a C even if it means taking it in summer school. Research methods may be tedious or difficult for the social science major. The study of old English can overwhelm the English major. The student will plan to get those courses out of the way early in a career, just in case reserve measures need to be taken, and not put off until the last semester senior year. The student with academic self-confidence knows that they will do what it takes to complete the necessary components of the chosen area of study.

It is no surprise to those of us at the Tarnow Center that the third best predictor of degree completion is that the student has “good study and time management skills.” College is often the first time that the student has to create and sustain his own schedule. Mom and Dad are not there to oversee that the young adult gets up on time, goes to class, and keeps current on the work to be completed. Some students are surprised when, for example, math problems are assigned but never checked or graded. The assignments were given for the students to learn the material and to validate their understanding prior to exams rather than for the sake of a grade. Students who quit college often have a history of procrastination as the only way to get papers written or materials read. Procrastination is a risky approach as so many things can go wrong when left to the last minute, e.g., the computer crashes, the roommate throws up, the student is overwhelmed with anxiety and can’t think!

Students who later are on academic probation or suspension in college often fail to realize that they do not know *how* to study. Many pride themselves on *getting by* in high school with very little effort. They sometimes think that if you’re smart it means you shouldn’t have to work hard. Thomas Friedman’s report on the Indiana High School Survey of Student Engagement (90,000 students surveyed) found that 55% of the students reported they studied no more than 3 hours per week, and 65% of those reported getting mostly A’s and B’s (Houston Chronicle, 5.13.05). This kind of erroneous thinking is more pervasive than people realize: If you are smart, it should come easy. It is very hard to be successful with this as a mindset. A high school student that knows her learning style, i.e., the best way to learn information, write papers, and study efficiently, has the advantage that first year of college over the student who just knows how to *get by*.

Social and emotional factors are thought to be very important to integrating into a college environment. A new student has to tolerate being an *unknown*, possibly for the first time in years. He needs the social skills and self-confidence to venture out and make new friends without resorting to alcohol and drugs for courage. More and more students are beginning college with a history of anxiety, depression, ADHD and learning difficulties. More students than ever are on medications for these conditions. Colleges are responding by providing an increase in campus mental health services to try and meet the demands.

Colleges, however, are not adept at managing psychological and emotional collapse. It is too easy for the student to get lost in the woodwork, or even to get lost in the legal issues involved with informing parents of problems and concerns without the student’s consent. The best approach is that the at-risk student knows her vulnerabilities prior to going away, and has learned to manage on a daily basis, takes medicine regularly, and has learned early warning signals of her psychological state *beginning* to get out of control when measures can more likely be taken to alter the course effectively. Parents should also have the student’s permission to get a call or email from the Resident Advisor or even the roommate if the student’s well-being is in question. Everyone feels the failure when the student has already collapsed under the stress.

Getting skills in place before the young person leaves for college is the best approach to optimize the likelihood of success in college. In my practice with young adults and adolescents, I have developed Competencies Checklists to provide information to begin the Pre-Launch Assessment. These checklists identify skills that young people need to have in place to manage their lives effectively, such as, getting up on your own in the morning to be on time for school or work. If they can perform the skill 90% of the time without Mom, Dad, or anyone else reminding them, then they can consider it a skill that they have down. It is important that parents and teenagers address these issues together and collect real data. Do not settle for “good intentions.” Do not wait for the

summer prior to college enrollment. The stakes are too high to allow much room for failure.

The Pre-Launch Assessment needs to look at all aspects of functioning: daily self-care, managing time and money, emotional and interpersonal stability and skills, educational self-management, awareness of academic strengths and weaknesses, executive functioning, moral grounding. These are the larger categories. What each category entails is the work that we encourage families to do together throughout the high school years..

Let the student know what is expected in order for the parent to feel comfortable investing in college. A recent Houston Chronicle article by Matthew Tresaugue (October 26, 2007) reported that 48% of Texas college students are now enrolled in community colleges, while only 41% are in public universities. Cost is thought to be the primary factor contributing to this trend. Can you and your family afford to lose a year or more of college funding? High school students and young college students do not always understand how much is at stake. Each year of high school, the parents and teenager should assess what skills need to be put into place this next year. Parents often say, "I need you to demonstrate responsibility before. . .you drive, you date, you can go to the mall on your own." Have written contracts that define the expectations and responsibilities, as well as, the real-life consequences of not meeting the goals.

Table:

Collect real data.

Share with student.

Plan for improvement.

Assess over time.

Develop a fall-back plan.

Help the teenager to generate plans to develop needed skills, and reassess over time whether the plans are effective. Decide what skills are required and what are optional or in the *to be developed* category. The job of reassessing over time falls to the parents. The 10th grader is busy being a 10th grader. Your responsibility as a parent is to make sure, as best you can, that your young person is developing the skills needed for when you are not there. That your young person can problem-solve and get support when needed will increase everyone's confidence in sending him or her off for a successful college adventure.