

## Introduction

**I**t's the week before finals and you've been asking your sixteen-year-old every day if he has started studying. His response: "They haven't told us anything yet." What "they" have told him is that he has two major tests on Thursday and a chemistry lab due on Friday. In addition, he has dress rehearsal for the opening of a community production that will run every night through his finals. He comes home at 11 p.m. from rehearsal, completely exhausted and with at least two hours of homework before him. He cries to you that it is all too much and that he'll probably lose his B in math after he flunks the test the next day. You try to talk to him about time management and priorities, but he notoriously waits until the last minute on all his schoolwork. He is a sophomore—two and a half years before college. Will he be ready with effective time management skills?

It's parent-teacher conferences and you listen to your ninth-grade daughter's English teacher's report of four missed assignments and Cs and Ds on all her tests. The teacher also informs you that your daughter is behind on a major writing assignment that is due on Monday. When you confront your daughter she swears she turned in some of those assignments, the others she missed because she was absent, and the reason she does so poorly on tests is that her teacher doesn't like her. She is four years away from college. Will she be willing to take responsibility in time?

Your daughter is registering for her senior year and she is having a hard time fitting her beloved choir classes, for which she has yet to audition, into a schedule that must include government, English, math, science, and history—all required for graduation. After two meetings with her counselor, her advisor verbally agrees to hold open the choir slots while your daughter auditions. Your daughter, excited with selection into her preferred choir, never returns to the counselor's office after the auditions.

Weeks later, you get a call from the school asking if your daughter has dropped out because she never registered. She did not follow through after choir selection and her counselor was busy with other schedules. Consequently she couldn't get into a government class and has to take it in the summer to fulfill graduation requirements. She's off to college after the next summer. Will she be able to ask questions, follow through, and be her own advocate?

It is difficult enough maneuvering through your child's teenage years without wondering if he or she will be ready, willing, and able to succeed in college, but wonder you should. If college is the goal of your student, that student needs to be mature enough, resilient enough, and confident enough to face life in a dorm room, conflicts with roommates, bureaucracy deadlines, and a more demanding academic setting. That student probably will be giddy with more freedoms and overwhelmed with more responsibilities than ever before at the very time he or she is supposed to cull a college education, a degree, and the beginnings of a successful career. Much as parents hate to admit it, the truth is that in spite of their best efforts and intentions, failure is possible, even for the best and brightest of high school graduates. For anyone raising children, the implications of this fact can be staggering. Most parents fervently believe that their children's entire future may be at stake, and at no small financial or emotional cost to everyone involved. So how do parents make the decisions necessary to assure a successful outcome?

Parents obviously cannot control many of the things they would like to control when it comes to their children. Parents do not even control some of the things in their children's lives—such as where they go and don't go, and with whom—that they sometimes think they do. However, looking at the experiences of today's families it is clear that some students arrive at college better prepared than others—and they're prepared for more than just academics. The real question parents need to be asking, long before the end of high school, is whether their children are, or will be, ready, willing, and able to attend college within a few months after they receive their diploma, and, if not, what does that mean? This book is an attempt to help answer those questions.

Many parents of adolescents know that a cooperative, enthusiastic, sharing sixth grader can turn into a confrontational, apathetic, secretive teenager overnight; then come to Mom or Dad overwhelmed with some issue the next day wanting love, understanding, and reassurance. Those turbulent emotions can directly affect a student's experiences at school. We all hope that things will work out, but life holds no guarantees and no one wants to put forward literally thousands of dollars for their child's college education only to discover that the student was not prepared—something we parents might have figured out earlier and in time to remedy.

The problem, however, is that being a parent does not in itself give us the ability to know in advance all that our young adults will encounter. This is not to say there is a lack of relevant reading materials for college-bound high schoolers and their parents. Far from it. A visit to the local bookstore or library will present you with a number of books addressing such topics as college admissions requirements, financing your student's education, how to survive the college years, and the necessary emotional adjustments you and your child should anticipate. However, many of the challenges involved in successfully adjusting to college life need to be addressed much earlier than the college orientation program for incoming freshmen in the summer before they begin classes. Taking responsibility, managing time, self-advocating, and setting realistic goals are skills that eighteen-year-olds cannot learn overnight. This book, therefore, is to add to these existing resources an overview of the issues concerned in actually preparing students for college while they are in high school or earlier. If parents can actively prepare their kids for this transition during these earlier years, there is a much greater likelihood that once the financial and academic issues have been dealt with, they will actually succeed.

This idea of preparing the student for the college environment, rather than the other way around, irritates or even angers some parents. They argue that it is the responsibility of the colleges and universities to create an environment that is "user friendly." When parents pay school tuition and fees, they point out that they have become consumers who should have the right to demand the services for which they have paid. Fair enough,

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and it is important to note that because education at this level operates in a competitive market, many, if not all, schools make a real effort to use updated studies on student life in reforming existing school policies and practices or in creating new ones with the goal of boosting student success rates. However, changes in school policies and programs can take years to formulate and even more years to actually take effect. Colleges and universities are, after all, complex institutions, and meaningful changes take years to materialize. But parents need to understand that even the most user-friendly colleges cannot be expected to spoon-feed or coddle students to ensure the school's popularity as an institution or to ensure their students' success. Some would argue that this is actually doing a disservice to students since such coddling does not realistically prepare students for the world of work. Colleges and universities that maintain high standards and academic rigor serve students well. Relaxed rules and understanding professors may feel better, but in the long run, students' learning and preparation for life may suffer.

In the meantime, our kids continue year by year to approach college age, and it seems only realistic that parents need to know how to prepare their teenaged students now, regardless of what those future policy changes may bring. Instead of parents' hoping for the perfect college environment for their kids, this book takes the position that parents should take responsibility to prepare their students for the less-than-perfect college, and world, that those students will inhabit in the not-so-distant future.

Since most of us tend to look to our own experiences and those of the people around us rather than reading academic journal articles, it seemed most logical to listen to people's experiences directly through a series of interviews and to report those experiences. Over the next nine chapters, this book will show you the ways in which families and their students have struggled with a range of issues and challenges, some of which represent success stories and others not. Those issues and challenges will include some familiar ones such as grades, sex, and alcohol, but also some less obvious or less well-known ones such as new privacy laws or the fact that

the vast majority of today's students are working at various jobs while going to school. You also will hear from some of the people who work directly with those students and families: from dorm supervisors and their assisting staff, to law enforcement personnel, to mental health counselors, and others. Whenever possible, detailed personal stories are included (names or revealing specifics changed or omitted) in the hope that by doing so readers will be able to find the situations and personalities to which they can best relate. Since denial seems to be a problem for many of us—"What, my child?"—such stories may help in overcoming that problem as well. Each chapter ends with a section titled "Preparing Your Teenager," where you will find example scenarios detailing how to approach common challenges.