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## [First Generation College Students: 4 Tips for Success](#)

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by Teresa Heinz Housel | Hope College

Applying to colleges and adjusting to college life can be daunting for many students. The tasks of identifying prospective colleges, navigating the college and financial aid application process, and choosing courses can seem overwhelming because students have so many choices.

For students whose parents did not attend college, also known as first generation college students, t

he transition to college can be even harder. In my own case, college presented unforeseen transitions because neither my parents, nor I, knew how to apply to colleges or prepare for classes. Today, as a college professor, I often advise first generation college students who are considering application to my college or are currently enrolled in my classes. I frequently offer the following tips for selecting prospective colleges, applying for financial aid, and choosing a course of study.

### Seek Free Advice

First, while students are still in high school, they should use available college advising resources. Never be afraid to ask questions of teachers, guidance counselor, or other academic personnel. For first generation college students, guidance counselors can help obtain need-based waivers for college entrance exams, with financial aid forms and setting up college visits. Because so many students now attend college, many high schools now host financial aid information nights for parents and students. If your high school does not offer this service, contact a nearby high school that does.

### Don't Get Overwhelmed by the Application Process

The college application process can seem overwhelming because there are so many choices. The process can appear even more onerous when first generation college students have no parental experience as a guide. Students should remember that colleges want students who will successfully graduate and be a good fit for the institution. To this end, I advise students to do a self-inventory of qualities they seek in a college. Do they want to attend college in an urban area or other type of setting? Would they feel more comfortable at a small liberal arts college or a large university? Would they prefer a racially and ethnically diverse student body? Would they like to be with classmates from diverse geographic areas or at a more regional institution?

Once students identify qualities they desire in an institution, they should locate schools with those qualities. Students can do this with the help of his or her guidance counselor. I advise students to contact at least 20 institutions for admissions materials and then, if possible, visit top choices and back-up choices. I am well aware that even nearby trips cost money; in this case, most schools offer free overnight hosting with a current student and even travel assistances for qualified students if the school is far away. Check with the college admissions office. As a high school junior, I visited my top two college choices during admissions weekends and attended a few classes on each campus. My college visits were instrumental in helping me identify an institution with a campus culture that was a strong fit for my interests and personality

#### Learn About Financial Aid

Prospective college students should begin researching financial aid by the sophomore year of high school. Perhaps others might disagree, but I believe that having information is empowering and it is not too soon to investigate what your options are. Parents and students should attend financial aid information nights and, if necessary, schedule an appointment with the guidance counselor. I also encourage students to contact the financial aid office at a local college campus if they have remaining questions about the process. Find out financial aid deadlines for federal and state programs; colleges also typically have application deadlines for applicants seeking financial aid. In addition, I advise s

tudents to check out private funding sources and so scholarship searches online. Scholarships may also be available from local community groups or through the parent company where a family member works.

#### Don't Be in a Hurry to Select a Major

Once students enroll in college, they typically have one to two years before they select a major,

depending on the program. Selecting a major can seem overwhelming. Students should inventory of their talents and skills. Many guidance counselor offices and college career offices offer career aptitude tests to help students identify career paths. Consult your college advisor and don't be afraid to consult academic services if you need tutoring or other assistances. Once students narrow down possible careers, contact nearby professionals in those fields and schedule informational interviews with them. Arrange to shadow professionals for a few hours to a day in fields that interest you.

Many first-generation students do not realize that they have invaluable strengths. It is not uncommon for first-generation students to navigate the college and financial aid application process completely on their own. I repeatedly encourage my own first-generation students that the skills that helped them reach their goal of attending college are priceless in everyday life. Self-reliance, determination, hard work, and an adventurous spirit are qualities that are essential for both college and post-graduate success. Go forward with courage: You can reach your goals.

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