



By: Vernell Gregg, LISD Board of Trustees, retired LISD educator

College Readiness – It’s Never too Early to Start Planning

As a retired educator, it is my passion to share with parents how they can help their children prepare for college. It’s never too early to start whether your child is in pre-school or high school. The sooner you have a plan in place, the easier it will be academically and financially for your child.

The latest statistics show that college tuition is out-pacing inflation. In Texas, tuition has increased between 5 - 8 percent annually. While this isn’t in our control, below is an outline of current college costs.

- Public two-year community college tuition, books and fees - \$2,607 per year
- Public four-year college/university tuition, books, fees, room and board - \$13,589 per year
- Private four-year college/university tuition, books, fees, room and board - \$32,307 per year

Also, some other costs should be considered when preparing your financial plan, including \$2,000 for transportation, and living costs if your child plans to live away from home while attending community college. An excellent website that includes an online calculator is www.savingforcollege.com.

While your child is a toddler, pre-schooler or an elementary student, cuddle up with your child at bedtime and read a story. Not only are you raising a child who loves to read, you are also making lasting memories. Statistics show when parents read to their children regularly, they have a better acquisition of vocabulary and comprehension.

Parents with middle school students, I cannot stress enough the importance of enrolling in more rigorous and challenging courses such as a foreign language and pre-advanced placement (AP) classes. Do not enroll in more than your child can manage, but at least opt to take one of these courses. These courses prepare and allow your child to take advantage of future opportunities. For example, pre-AP math, taken in sixth-grade, is an excellent precursor for success in algebra in eighth-grade as well as help to increase pre-SAT, SAT and ACT scores.

Once your student is enrolled in high school, every year counts – there isn’t a “do-over.” The one comment I often hear is, “I wish I had worked harder from the beginning of my high school career. I didn’t realize how every year impacts my overall GPA.”

With this in mind, begin to list the colleges/universities that your child would like to attend. Then have your child visit with a school counselor to let her know your goals. Research the entrance requirements and make a plan that will help your child get there including the courses needed. I encourage AP courses be part of the plan. Not only do AP courses increase the value of a transcript, research from the College Board states that students who enroll in at least one AP class, are 80 percent more likely to graduate in four years. Some students are able to enter college with at least a semester of coursework because they have enrolled, taken and done well on the AP tests.

As part of the plan, identify the year and month to take the college entrance exams. During tenth-grade, take the PSAT test. This will help give a guideline on strengths and weaknesses on the test. Then students can take the PSAT/National Merit Scholarship Qualifying test in eleventh-grade. Students who perform well on the qualifying test could be designated as a Commended, Semi-Finalist or National Merit Scholar, which could open the door to many scholarship opportunities.

During the spring of the junior year, take the SAT test and during the summer between junior and senior year, take the ACT test. This can assist in receiving early admission. The benefit of early admission for students having a B+ average could mean attending the college of choice. If your child waits until the spring semester of the senior year to apply to colleges, more applicants are vying for those last few spots. Another added benefit is students can enjoy their senior year without any more college entrance tests.

Don't forget high school is fun. Students do need to get involved in school and in their community. Colleges and universities want students who are well-rounded and will be involved at the collegiate level. Students who can strike a balance between academics and school involvement will see much success.

Now we know expected college costs and have an academic plan, you will want to find scholarships to help defray college costs. Your school counselor has a listing of all the scholarships available. These lists are updated, so stop by the counselors' office monthly to see what new scholarship offerings have been posted. One of my favorite publications to help search for scholarships is the *Compendium of Texas Colleges and Financial Aid Calendar for High School Seniors*. Students can find this book in the counselors' office or can go online to www.window.state.tx.us/scholars/mspmmain.html. There are several scholarship opportunities that award \$10,000 or more, however, be aware several deadlines are in October.

Many states have full scholarships, including the University of Texas and Texas A&M University systems for parents making between \$25,000 - \$40,000. Harvard, Princeton and other private colleges will provide full scholarships for parents making less than \$60,000 and sometimes the income can increase depend upon family circumstances. Stanford provides tuition for students whose parents make less than \$100,000 and everything for students whose parents make less than \$60,000.

If your student applies for scholarships, letters of recommendation, a quality essay and a list of co-curricular and community activities are required. Know that searching and applying for scholarships is not easy, but it is worthwhile when you see the amount saved on college expenses. I have attended award ceremonies at our high schools and am proud of the numerous scholarships our students are receiving. Below is a list of websites that can help you find scholarships and provide student loan information. College is always in reach – it only takes sound planning.

- www.brokescholar.com
- www.collegenet.com
- www.fastweb.com
- www.finaid.org
- www.scholarships.com
- www.scholarshipsforhispanics.com
- www.collegetoolkit.com
- www.studentaid.ed.gov
- www.collegeanswer.com
- www.studentaid.org
- www.collegefortexas.org
- www.collegeboard.com