



“The Top 10 Tips for Choosing a College That’s Right for Your Kids”

by Jim Burns, Ph.D

How soon should you start preparing for your child’s college education? Talk to 1,000 parents and you’re bound to get 1,000 different answers.

Of course, the decision whether or not to even attend a college or university is a big one. Many teens have gone on to lead fairly happy and productive lives without a post-high school education – but the statistics are clear: college graduates generally earn more money and have more opportunity for advancement than non-graduates.

So, encouraging your child to attend college is a good idea. But where’s the best place to attend – and, perhaps more importantly, exactly who is going to pay for it?

Well, I decided to make myself a “case study.” After all, with one daughter already in college and another headed there soon, I’ve run the gamut of emotions regarding “college anxiety” – and so has my wife, Cathy.

We know what it’s like to feel as though we “didn’t start saving soon enough” and that “maybe we’ve visited too many colleges.” But, is it possible to over plan or under prepare for what could be one of the most important decisions of a child’s life?

Using the Burns family as a case study, I called upon my good friend, Dr. Jon Wallace. Jon is currently the President of Azusa Pacific University (my alma mater!), and he knows what kinds of questions parents need answered regarding finding the right college for their child.

Together, we created what we consider to be the “Top Ten Tips for Choosing a College That’s Right for Your Teenager.”

What follows are ten practical tips you can follow regardless of where you are in the “college search” process. So, whether you have a high school senior who hasn’t really given college much thought . . . or the parent of a toddler who believes you can “never start planning too early” . . . here are ten things you can do to start now:

1. Pray about it. The college years are typically when a person makes some of the most important decisions in life – whether or not to marry, what kind of career path to pursue chief among them. These are decisions not made lightly . . . so it’s important to bathe the “college issue” in prayer before deciding where and when to attend.

2. Ask others about their experiences. Scripture reminds us “There is wisdom in the counsel of

many.” Do you know anyone who is already attending a school your child is interested in? Get to know them. Ask them what it’s like to attend the school they’re attending. Practical experience will tell you more about a college or university than any handbook or brochure ever will.

3. Visit the campus. This one might sound obvious, but you’d be amazed at the number of children – and their parents – who make decisions about where to attend college based on a brochure or a website. We’re talking about the place your son or daughter will be spending some of the most foundational time of his or her life. Take a weekend – preferably when school is in session – and walk the campus. Sit in on a class or two. Talk to some of the professors and support staff. Really “try the place on.”

4. Read everything you can about the colleges. This is another “obvious” point too many of us parents miss. Just because you have good memories from your days at “good old State U” doesn’t mean it’s right for your son or daughter. Get the brochures . . . surf the Internet . . . do your homework!

5. Start saving now. You know what they say – “There’s no time like the present.” And that’s especially true when it comes to saving for college. When I told Jon Wallace that Cathy and I didn’t feel as though we started saving early enough for our daughters’ college educations, he corrected me by reminding me that . . . at least we had started. Whether your child is 17 years old or 17 months old, it’s never too late (or too early) to start saving for college. Don’t try to save the whole amount all at once. Save what you can . . . and start doing it now.

6. Look to the military. Even during a time of war. The different branches of the military offer tremendous financial incentives to college students . . . because they want to educate young people! It’s a great way to serve our country and pay for college. So look into it – you just might be surprised at what kind of financial assistance you’ll find.

7. Remember that grades do count. High school can be a confusing time for young people. One moment, their main priority is getting straight A’s; the next, it’s simply “hanging out with friends” and having a good time. Many scholarships are based on a student’s GPA. So stress with your child the importance of earning good grades and maintaining a solid grade point average.

8. Don’t pay for any scholarship search companies. There are plenty of free scholarship search engines available online. It takes some time to search, but there is private scholarship money out there.

9. Apply early to schools. There are many times when what is considered as “institutional financial aid” – that is, the college or university’s “own” money – is given to those students who apply and are admitted early. For this reason, it is in everyone’s best interest – both the student and his or her parents – to apply early!

10. Meet deadlines! Many times, state and federal government aid is contingent upon a student getting their FAFSA (Free Application for Federal Student Aid) in by a priority deadline.

Families can start filling out the FAFSA for the upcoming school year as early as January 1 of that year . . . but the deadline for filing is often not long after that. (For example – in California, the Cal Grant and GPA verification form must be filled out by a student’s school and turned in by March 2nd – NO EXCEPTIONS!)

Now, I know that a college education might seem like a major expense – and it is. But it’s been my experience that some of the same folks who don’t think they have enough to pay for college also have no trouble coming up with the money for a new car or a nice vacation every year. Sacrificing instant gratification isn’t always popular . . . but the benefits of doing so are worth it – especially when it comes to your child’s education and future!

(For more information on how to find financial aid and scholarship money online, log on to <http://www.fastweb.com/>)