

Freshman Year: The Big Picture

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As a former English teacher and Dean of Students (9th and 10th grade), I know that there are few things as daunting, mysterious and exciting to a teenager than freshman year of high school. It's a whole new world: the hallways are foreign and at larger schools, students sometimes feel as though they need a GPS to get from class to class; the upperclassmen seem so much older and are brimming with a glowing confidence; teacher expectations and homework may require substantial adjustment. And college seems like a distant point on the horizon.

Part of the trepidation may be what adults would understand as not being able to see the forest for the trees. However, when a student is able to see how the various academic courses, opportunities in arts and athletics and programs that develop other interests (the school paper, community service or a part-time job) that form the Big Picture, he or she is able to navigate this terrain successfully, with greater purpose and enjoyment.

An excellent first step towards realizing this Big Picture is to encourage a student to make an appointment with a school counselor early on. Where access to a counselor is difficult, students can approach a trusted teacher of a favorite subject. If a student is willing to share information with this new advisor, he or she can help that student make sure he taking the right classes to graduate on time and taking the types of classes colleges are looking for. Students should discuss favorite subjects to learn about additional opportunities as well as to get the necessary help with the more intimidating courses before it's too late. Students can even share hobbies as well as aspirations; a counselor or advisor can help find extracurricular activities to help develop these interests.

[Big Future](#), sponsored by the College Board, is an incredibly useful tool in helping students of all ages contemplate and understand what it takes to get to the college – or major – of their dreams. Starting early can help high school freshmen plan an academic path and start to understand the financial aid process, including scholarships and merit aid. It also provides information on how to make high school count, things to discuss with a counselor, planning college visits and other avenues to success.

Becoming aware of all the available resources and understanding how the decisions made now will offer benefits later on is one way to start the planning process. Actively utilizing those resources and building a unique and representative academic and extracurricular profile puts students on track for the Big Picture: showing colleges who they really are.