# LIFE AFTER HIGH SCHOOL





### LIFE AFTER HIGH SCHOOL

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### Introduction

#### Welcome to a new chapter in your life.

Yes, it's been quite the adventure so far, hasn't it? The many classes you've struggled through and conquered. The many friends you've made, hopefully with a few that will stick with you into the next exciting stages of life.

Don't rush this next part, though. Like many big changes, the more you take time to understand what's happening, to clarify your hopes and dreams into cocrete goals, and plan and prepare for the best ways to tackle new challenges in your path, the better your results can be.

Both parents and students alike should be reflective at this point. High school has taught you both a lot, and we hardly want to dump all those valuable experiences like a worn-out backpack. They should stick with us and help make the next chapter of your educational story all the better!





### Preparing for the End

**Before you leap forward into the fray** of higher education, it's important to look back on everything that's brought you to this point.

Whether you realize it or not, your high school experiences have shaped you. You've hopefully discovered a lot about yourself, your learning styles, your unique passions and interests. Perhaps you already have a clear idea of where you want your academic pursuits to take you, or what careers you are eager to invest in.

There's been a lot of hard studying and effort to get you to this point. A lot of late nights and early morning classes. Essays have been written and science projects have

been brainstormed. Maybe you've been involved in athletics alongside your academics, and juggle other extracurriculars on top of your homework load.

You'll take all of that with you, in one way or another. The study habits you've formed will be the ones you draw on in college. The



way you communicate with teachers will inform your relationship with professors. Your familiarity with educational technology will hopefully empower your ongoing studies.

But before all that, you still have to graduate.

Parents struggle with the graduation experience for entirely different reasons than students do. Parents, after all, have been alongside the student for just as many years,



and are just as invested in this transition. It may be difficult for parents to accept that their child is gaining another dimension of independence and may soon be living outside the home for the first time, lacking the immediate support system they've relied

on for eighteen years now.



It is natural to want to hold on to these last precious moments of high school, and some parents may try to squeeze every ounce of emotion out of the memories being made through graduation ceremonies, senior parties, and other milestone events. It's a

period of excitement, but also bittersweet as parents recognize their relationship with a student is going to change forever (hopefully for the best).

Students, on the other hand, may be incredibly eager to get graduation over with, and won't be quite so reminiscent about the whole affair. Their focus is more forward, rather than backward like a parent's, and it's easy for this to cause a disconnect between students and parents who are trying to get different things out of the final days of school. There's the push to hang out with longtime friends before they potentially go off to different parts of the country for the next four years. If students are in dating relationships, there can be high stress in navigating how the couple will stay in touch despite the distance.

Parents are quick to give plenty of advice, especially if they had the chance to go to college themselves—but be careful not to over-burden students with lectures or streams of "do this, not that" which will likely be quickly forgotten in the rush of events and upcoming changes.



At the same time, students may inadvertently put distance between themselves and their family as they take first steps toward what might be seen as "real independence." This can cause stress between parents and students unless communication is kept strong and expectations are clear for both sides. This requires intentional and proactive relationship management during this time, which can be difficult since mental and emotional margin may be in short supply while dealing with the pressures of graduation itself.

But it's absolutely worth it! When parents and students remain aligned in this stage of life, they're able to better deal with and adapt to upcoming challenges such as:

- Discovering financial responsibility
- Dealing with geographic distance from family
- Homesickness
- Schedule self-management
- Dorm chores and domestic upkeep
- Roommate conflict
- Making healthy lifestyle choices

And much more.

Let's start with the graduation itself and how to make the most of this once-in-a-lifetime event!



### **Graduating Greatness**

**In all the stress and rush of getting ready** to leave high school and enter college, it can be way too easy to gloss over graduation itself. Yes, it's a big, long ceremony that has some weird traditions, but once it's over, you'll never go through quite the same thing again.



It may seem odd to celebrate graduation. After all, isn't that what the whole shindig going up on stage, getting that certificate, throwing the pointy hat into the air and all is about? Certainly, it's good to enjoy that process. Take lots of photos and have a great time at the after-party. But how can you make it even better?

Alongside traditional graduation parties and senior spotlight galas, consider alternate celebratory options:

- Roadtrips with family and/or friends
- Attending sporting events, concerts, or theater
- Upcoming summer vacations before college kicks off

What would be most meaningful to you and your student? Invest in that memory-making, and you won't regret it.



On top of all that, here are several big tips to surviving the graduation process with mind and body intact:

#### For Students:

• Don't neglect your health.

It's easy to get caught up in all the prep and final exams and let things like exercise and healthy eating go by the wayside. But keeping these healthy habits (or establishing them) means you're more likely to keep them in college where it's even easier to get distracted by classes and homework pressure.



- **Keep perspective.** Just like high school, college is not the end-all-be-all of life. It's a stepping stone to bigger, better things. So...
- Don't forget to enjoy life! Obviously you want to have fun in college, but don't be
  so focused on getting there that you neglect life outside of your final year of high
  school along the way.

#### For Parents:

• **Keep being a role model.** Don't let the stress or anxiety of graduation cause you to have a meltdown that freaks your student out even further. It's healthy to acknowl-



edge your emotional struggles during this time, but to keep healthy coping means your student understands so they can handle their stress well.

- **Don't overdo the advice.** Most parents will want to hand their student pieces of college advice by the ton, but it can actually be better to encourage your student to start evaluating situations, ask questions, and make decisions on how they'll handle things on their own. Your advice can be valuable, but it can also be overwhelming (and sometimes not exactly what your student needs in the first place).
- Stay their biggest cheerleaders. Don't forget that even if your student seems more distant and will soon be living further from home, they still want to know their parents care about them and are encouraging them to achieve their dreams.

Graduation is a topsy-turvy period that can be unsettling for everyone in the family. In the end, though, it can also help draw family closer together, cement a healthier parent-student relationship, and reduce overall anxiety about life after high school. But this requires parents and students working together throughout the process and recognizing that they all have each other's best interests at heart.





### The Trouble With Letting Go

You would think that after the last four years of high school, you'd be absolutely eager to leave everything to do with high school behind and enjoy all the opportunities college is going to provide. Just because you're looking forward to this next phase of life doesn't mean it's going to always happen as smoothly as you hope.

Even the best planning on the parts of students and parents won't have you 100% prepared or ensure a flawless transition time.

Graduation is a time of inevitable change, but it can be mostly good change if handled correctly. One big way not to deal with it well?



Refuse to let go of the past. It's something both parents and students alike can be guilty of. There are comforts of the known routine, and college disrupts this entirely, especially if students are going away from home for their undergraduate education. Here are several ways both parents and students may struggle during this transition time.

#### Parent Stumbles During College Transition

Providing Full Financial Support. If your child is going to learn proper financial
management during college, how to budget and pay for all their new needs and
tuition, you should let them shoulder at least some of that responsibility. If your
student has found plenty of scholarships and grants to cover their costs, great!



But don't step in and completely cover the tuition gaps just so they can make ends meet. Help them learn how to manage their money, even if it requires a few hard lessons along the way.

• Visiting Too Often (And Unannounced.) We get it. You miss them! But there are plenty of ways to send your love and support without showing up on campus every other day, knocking on their dorm room and inviting yourself to sit in on their



classes. Give them the distance they need to establish the independence necessary to succeed in college and beyond.

Just because you've been guiding them along all this time doesn't mean your student won't make some gues-

tionable choices, mistakes, or outright drop the ball when they reach college. This is a learning time for them, helping them realize how relevant many of the lessons you tried to teach them are to their circumstances. But don't constantly be on their case, questioning their approaches, or condemning their actions just because they're not exactly what you would've done in those circumstances.

#### Student Stumbles During College Transition

• **Abusing Your Freedom.** Yes, this is a wonderful time to start experiencing more of what an independent life has to offer. However, this is also the time that you could fall



into some terrible habits, health crisis, or totally tank your grades if you don't step up into some responsibility and maturity. Enjoy your time as you move into college, but don't throw everything away that you've worked so hard to accomplish so far.

- Forgetting Your Family. Make sure to keep in touch with your parents, who are no doubt missing you terribly as you head to college. This doesn't mean you have to head home every weekend, but regular phone calls or just text messages every so often can ease the sting of you being gone after 18 years of being home.
- Making Big Choices Too Fast. In the first year of college, you are faced with tons of opportunities. What clubs or sororities/fraternities to join? What activities or athletics to sign up for? Who will be your new friends? How much time will you spend studying in the library or be out at student parties? Are you going to open a credit card account to pay for your bills or get a part-time job? These are all important, but take your time to get all the facts, get advice, and choose as wisely as you can in how you invest your valuable time.

Of course, heading off to college doesn't mean you forget about life beforehand. Instead, you have to recognize that the same healthy personal and study habits you've established (hopefully) throughout high school can continue to serve you well during your college years. You've laid the foundation—but a foundation isn't enough. Now it's time to keep building up strong walls of educational and personal growth for the next four years.





### Them Vs. You

Parents, as your child prepares to enter college, you will be faced with a number of obstacles in your relationship with them. These are natural and normal, but it's best to be aware of them so they don't catch you off-guard and cause harm to your interactions with them.

One thing to realize is that this is an incredibly formative time for your student in every area of their life. Yes, the past 18 years have been one big readying period for them to go



out into the real world and start living on their own. College will put them into a wide variety of circumstances that will further shape their personality, their health, their future career, their friendships, and much more. In the end, though, it

is their time, not yours—but some parents struggle with that concept.

Let's look at several ways parents can make the college years more combative than necessary, and how to avoid them.

1. Vicarious living through your student. Maybe you didn't have as much fun as you wanted during your own college years (or maybe you didn't attend college at all and felt like you missed out on this huge experience). It's fun to watch your student's progress and hear about their stories as they navigate this new area of life, but trying to insert yourself into their experiences, sometimes literally, can be a huge source of conflict. Now is the time to learn to keep some mental and emotional distance and not feel like your success or failure as a parent is hitched to their current performance (or lack thereof) in school.



- 2. Prioritizing your goals and dreams (not theirs.) Whatever ideals you had or have about college, from getting full-ride scholarships to working during school to maintaining a certain GPA level, remember that these are yours, not theirs. Students may realize they have different passions and goals than the ones they discussed or planned with their parents once they are dealing with the reality of college. Their academic plan is likely going to shift, and they may choose several different degree programs before finding the right fit. That's normal! Trying too hard to get them to stick to the educational mileposts that you prefer is not only counterproductive, but can also derail their potential.
- 3. Stressing them out, rather than supporting them. While you are still their parent, your parenting role or duties will change during this college time. Your role becomes more of providing advice, being an active listener, and encouraging them during difficult times in school. You aren't there to dictate their actions or punish them when they fall short of your standards, whatever those may be. But if you try to stay in that direct parent role, whether they're living at home or at an out-of-state college, it's likely to create a more adversarial relationship dynamic that can be destructive in the long term. You must learn how to offer guidance without being a dictator, to offer encouragement without trying to be an enforcer, and be a resource without making them reliant on you. Tricky? Yes. Essential? Absolutely.

These are just a few areas that parents can go a bit overboard in response to their students suddenly no longer being at home, and trying to compensate for the relational shifts. If you are proactive about this, though, and remember to prioritize your student's experience rather than your ideals, it can make a wonderful difference. Fortunately, a survey of 14,500 college students across the U.S. showed that 3-out-of-5 students said that their relationship with their parents improved once they began college (and ¼ said that the relationship was actually "much better").



### Pros and Cons of Ivy League

**Don't we want our students to get into the most** prestigious colleges around, even if it means going into debt or any lengths necessary to do so? After all, going to those big-name colleges, lvy League institutions...isn't that what will help guarantee future success for a student?

Not necessarily. Ivy League institutes have long been associated with higher excellence in academics and athletics, but even so, there are pros and cons to attending them that must be weighed



before making a final decision. Of course, there is also the issue of acceptance rates at Ivy League universities, as competition to get admitted is high. Is the effort to get in worth the return? Well, it depends.

#### Pros of Ivy League Schools

- Networking. A major advantage of an Ivy League institute is that it does put students in social and academic circles that can help them be well-connected in their studies and career pursuits. They can work directly with established professionals in their academic fields, get more internship opportunities, and often more quickly find a job post-graduation.
- **Resources.** Ivy League schools have kept up their reputation of providing bestof-the-best for their students, whether in the classroom, in amenities, in social opportunities, in extracurricular activities, and more. This is a big benefit, for sure,



but it also adds to the overall cost of attendance (see below). Students can also get more personalized attention from professors, and student centers are better-equipped to handle students needs and demands.

#### Cons of Ivy League Schools

- **Cost.** Ivy League schools can easily be 2x 3x more expensive than in-state or community colleges. While it is often claimed that graduates from Ivy League schools are higher earners in their respective fields, the problem is that they can find themselves paying off student loans for 5-10 years longer than graduates from their colleges.
- Academics. Many people believe that all students get an inherently better education at an Ivy League school. While this may be true for some programs and degrees, it's not necessarily true for all of them. Many universities can rank higher for different programs than those found at an Ivy League institute. Therefore it's important to do your research and figure out where your career goals are going to best be met.



While a college degree can certainly help improve employment opportunities and salary rates, it doesn't actually matter much where that degree was received from in the long run. One 10-year study showed that for most majors and careers, the specific school a graduate came from had



no impact on their future earnings. Top college attendees average the same salaries as those from lesser-known alma maters.

In fact, it has been suggested that it is more aptitude that makes a difference in the long-run. In other words, the rigorous performance and personal effort it takes to gain admittance to an Ivy League school is what is required for a student to experience success in their career—and it wouldn't matter which school that student graduated from so long as they exhibited those same qualities in their work.

In the end, whether you strive to have your student attend an Ivy League school or not is down to your preferences. Smaller, less-expensive, less-prestigious schools can offer many similar benefits and long-term educational returns. But if your student is dreaming of the larger university experience and the benefits it offers, take the time to weigh all the facts, consider all the options, and help your student make the decision that is best for their personality, their passions, and their future profession.





### Being Career-Focused Vs. School-Focused

What's the difference between being career-focused during high school or being school-focused during high school? It's an important distinction to make, because it can make a big difference in how your student invests their time and how those investments will pay off in the long run. We believe that having a long-term perspective is helpful in life because it helps students prepare for upcoming challenges and transitions while also lessens the likelihood of them being caught off-guard by obstacles such as financial need, college admission requirements, and other factors that might impact their higher education and eventual jobs.

To be school focused means that the student is really only considering goals and objectives that are primarily relevant while they're in high school, and have far less impact beyond their graduation. This might include their grades in a specific class



they're struggling with, or joining up in a club or sport because it's where all their friends are already involved. It may be that the student is having fun learning a foreign language in high school, even if they don't plan to travel much or work in a field where that language is helpful. It's excellent

experience and learning, but where will it impact their lives down the road? Other examples might include taking first in science fair projects, or placing in an art competition. Again, there is nothing wrong with these pursuits, but if they are done without deeper thought given to how they may align with the student's future, it may be effort wasted.



A career focus in high school, on the flipside, is where the student has established a vision for their future and are actively following a career plan that guides their activity and class choices in high school and college. For too many students, this sort of planning only starts to happen in their senior year as graduation looms. But students who are career-focused all during high school are much more empowered to achieve their dreams.

#### Steps to Become a Career-Focused Student

To shift perspectives from merely school-focused to career-focused requires the student, parents, and educational advisor's involvement. Students should take the

time to have frank conversations about their aspirations, passions, and dreams in life. This can help them plot out the main educational and experiential requirements that would open the doors for them to achieve those goals. This is found in their education and career plan.



#### **Education and Career Plan**

- This plan would involve their required and elective courses throughout high school (and potentially into college) that would lead to the degree best suited for their desired career. Helpful volunteer opportunities can be listed here, along with part-time jobs and internships. This would also include a breakdown of potential schools and initial financial planning.

Once a plan is in place and in play, the students can then begin compiling a career planning portfolio.



**Career Planning Portfolio** - Once the plan is created, it is the first document that can become a career planning portfolio, where the student stores everything relevant to their progress. This includes awards and honors, extracurricular activity records, letters of recommendation, notable essays and project documentation, resumes, job applications, hobby timelines, field experience, club involvement, and even journals. It's best to make this not only a physical compilation but also a digital one as well, which can be more easily shared with future instructors, coaches, and admissions counselors.

Two other big elements that should be incorporated in this planning are:

- 1. Job Search Skills. Students should have the chance to learn how to write and format a proper resume, learn job interviewing skills, write cover letters, attend networking events, follow-up interviews with thank you letters, and other professional behavior that can help them stand out from the crowd.
- 2. Ongoing Evaluation. No plan is perfect, and any career plan must be consistently evaluated for the student's progress to determine if it's being effective. Also, students may very well—and most likely will—change their minds about certain parts of the plan and what they want to do with their lives along the way. The plan must be able to flex or be redone entirely to accommodate this growth and new needs.





### What Matters Most?

**During high school, there are many things vying** for a student's attention and it can be difficult to determine which areas of school and classroom performance should be the biggest priorities. Do you focus on grades and report cards? Do you focus on athletic performance or the number of academic competitions they participate in? Is a perfect



GPA more important than being kind to others and following a particular passion? Should one's personality development be less important than perfect academic performance?

Standardized tests abound, and many parents look to these as the primary benchmarks of their students' success. Of course grades

are the easiest, most accessible way to gauge a student's progress, their strengths and weaknesses, and guide them through the learning process. But if grades become the end-all-be-all of high school, then what happens to the student who isn't always at the top of their class? Should they somehow be considered of less value or holding less potential? Hardly.

We have to look beyond grades to other indicators of growth and talent. This includes:

• **Initiative.** How much is the student taking the lead in their own education and activity investment? How much are they pushing themselves to do better, learn more, experience more, and become the best version of themselves without constantly being shoved ahead by other people's expectations?



- **Community Involvement.** Is the student able to consider others' needs and offer their time and energy to help people who can't give anything in return? Does the student look for unmet needs in their community and then find ways to fill them, even without being asked?
- **Perseverance.** When failure happens, as it inevitably will, how well does the student handle it? Is it seen as something to be avoided at all costs, or do they learn from it and try again with more experience bolstering their efforts?
- **Healthy Lifestyle.** Has the student learned to take care of their body as much as their mind? Do they know how to live in a clean environment and be respectful of other people's hygienic standards?
- **Technology Adeptness.** It may seem odd to bring this up in an age dominated by technology, but it remains an important element that can be easily overlooked. Not only does the student have a good grasp of how to use tech devices to better their learning and make more resources available to them—but do they also know how to handle technology in a healthy way, with good usage boundaries and privacy protection in place?

Each student will decide for themselves what they will prioritize in life both in and beyond high school. But the important thing is to help them understand that their personal and professional growth will rely on many more things than just their grades and standardized testing results.





### 4-Year College Alternates

Sometimes it seems like students are primarily offered a single track for their educational and professional advancement. Go to high school, get the best grades possible and maybe score well in a sport, apply to college, get scholarships, and then spend four years to get a degree. Move on to your first big job (or maybe pursue a master's degree depending on the career field).

However, beyond the traditional college pipeline, there are numerous other educational routes that are just as viable for students trying to determine how to achieve their goals in life.

- Online schooling. Moving to a community college dorms or an out-of-state campus
  used to be expected, but tele-education platforms are on the rise and becoming
  increasingly time and cost-effective while delivering equally valuable educational
  access. It also can give students more flexible study options and help them get
  their degree while also juggling part-time jobs.
- Vocational schools. Vocational schools are also known as trade schools or technical schools, and are job-focused institutes that give students skills training for more specific jobs. These usually are only two-year programs, rather than four, and focus more on hands-on learning and practical skills as well as industry standards to help students get into a career path more directly and faster.
- Military. Any branch of the military is another avenue many students look to beyond high school, especially if cost is a big factor that might limit their attendance to traditional education institutes. Of course, military careers come with many pros and cons, and is not the best choice for every temperament. Carefully weigh the options on this one if a student expresses interest in going into the military and ensure they have the best understanding of what they would be committing themselves to.



### Parenting Beyond High School

**Not only is your student going through a big** transition as they move from high school into college—or whatever path they choose to follow—as a parent you are going to experience immense change on your end as well. We've already talked about some of the potential pitfalls, stumbles, and challenges that parents will deal with as their relationship with their student and

child shifts to the next level.

#### Being Present When They're Not Home

Let's say your child is off experiencing life away from home for the first time. You no longer have that daily routine keeping you in



regular contact with one another. You don't see them for breakfast or dinner, and family game nights have one less person around the table. That doesn't mean your role as a parent is on hold until you see them during spring break or other holidays.

For instance, if your student is staying at home, you should negotiate reasonable expectations and boundaries for their behavior and routine while there. Treat them like the adult they wish to be seen as, but also continue to require the respect you deserve as their parent and provider in this instance.

If they're off at college, establish a routine of staying in touch so weeks and months don't go by without keeping up with what's happening in their lives. This doesn't mean daily or hourly phone calls and constant text messages to demand updates—but week-



ly connections are a good way to consistently share your love for them, encouragement, and hear how things are going.

#### Ways to Keep Communicating

Thankfully, there are countless ways to stay in touch with students who are no longer living at home, or who are on such a different schedule now that it seems like they're never around. Staying in touch is critical so your child knows they always have some-



one to turn to when they need advice, a sympathetic ear, or a little dose of reality (and lots of love, of course).

Daily text messages or emails can be an excellent way to remind

your student that they're in your mind and heart. Keep it short and simple to avoid overwhelming them (remember, they're now likely dealing with new friends, new classes, and even maybe a new part-time job).

Send care packages with notes, pictures, favorite snacks, clothes, and maybe a little cash or gift card for some weekend fun. Sure, it may seem old school, but who doesn't love receiving a gift in the mail, especially when it's put together with love?

Social media also offers parents a way to keep in touch by following and liking your student's online activity. Of course, try to avoid becoming that "stalker parent" many students dread, and try not to embarrass them with public comments that really should wait until they're home for the holidays.

Oh, and if you want to be super sneaky, recruit their new friends and roommates to hold



onto some notes and little gifts that can then be hidden around their dorm for them to find throughout the semester. They'll definitely wonder how you're managing that trick!

#### What They Need Most

When students launch off into college, there are a couple things they will still need from you—and hopefully it's not just some financial aid.

• **Independence.** Students need to start flexing that muscle of independence in their lives. Sure, they're going to make mistakes and missteps along the way, but

that's part of the learning and growing process. Many parents don't trust their students enough to believe they can go out and make it on their own, but this is when parenting needs to start being hands-off rather than hovering. The



more a parent tries to keep acting like the authority in every area of their graduate's life, the more stifling it can be, or the more it spur rebellious behavior just to "stick it to the man." Let them go with much hope and prayer and love, and then be there for them when there's a real, drastic need they come home with.

• **Encouragement.** Let your child know you are always in their corner and they will always have a home. Be their primary cheerleader, not taking the credit for their accomplishments, but validating their strengths and passions. Encourage them to make new (good) friends and try new experiences. Encourage them to maintain their healthy habits and make wise choices, and to truly enjoy how college will open them up to new vistas of opportunities.



#### What You Need Most

Parents, you are not alone and forgotten in this time, even as difficult and heart-wrenching as it may be. There are a couple things you should ensure you receive during this time after high school as well.

- Personal Time. Remember this thing? All that time you invested in hobbies and activities outside of work? Side jobs that you loved, perhaps, or ways you used to relax that you haven't been able to indulge in because so much of your time and energy got funneled into your kids. Now is the time to reclaim that. This can be anything from a trip with you and your spouse (where applicable) to jumping on some home remodeling you've been waiting for to some crafty projects to that novel you've always wanted to sit down and write. Many things get sidelined while your main focus is parenting, and this can become an amazing time to not only reconnect with yourself, but also your significant other.
- Forgiveness. You weren't the perfect parent. No one is. We all end up with ways we wish we could've brought up one child or another better, with different resources, strategies, or outcomes. But time waits for no graduate, and this transition happens whether you want it to or not. You're going to be tempted to spend countless hours thinking over what went wrong or less-than-perfect, beating yourself up over what-ifs and would've-beens. Or you might try to make up for it by doubling down on your attempts to be the perfect parent for any remaining kids in the house—which is another big pitfall. You must learn to forgive yourself for the errors made, but appreciate the effort you put into it as well. Be grateful that you and your student have made it this far together and look forward to the ways your relationship will evolve from here on out. It's an exciting time, and you don't want the past to distract you from everything the future has to offer.



## LIFE AFTER HIGH SCHOOL

#### Learn more about Lutheran High School:

To learn more about the mission, vision, and core values of Lutheran High School in Parker, CO please visit **www.lhsparker.org**. To set up a personal tour of the school, please contact the Director of Admissions Hannah Buchholz at **hannah.buchholz@lhsparker.org** or 720-822-7981.

