

Why Go to College?

This question is often asked of me by homeschooled students and their parents, usually when the student is between 16 and 17. *“I mean, after all, I have been doing great so far. I have found so many amazing learning opportunities through the Internet. I’ve been taking on-line courses from Harvard, even! There are some really interesting people in our community that I’ve been talking about literature with, including a former professor from Occidental. I’ve even had research opportunities through the local community college, and I’m very involved and committed to some community service projects here in town that I’ve been working on for several years. I can’t imagine abandoning them. So why college? I just don’t see the point!”* Parents say, *“Why send him to a place where he is likely to feel a bit like a fish out of water, because he probably doesn’t share the social values of most of the students there? And besides, we love having him around! We are having a great time, learning together!”*

Well, that’s all true, and as a parent of five homeschoolers (now all college graduates), I understand those sentiments very, very well. Homeschoolers learn so effectively and so much without the confines of the regular elementary/high schooling experience. They have freedom of time without classes; they aren’t subjected to comparisons (their own or their teachers’) with other children/teens; they have freedom in their choice of curriculum; they can read more, think more, daydream more (SO important!), participate in their communities more; travel more; and be able to focus learning towards or from a particular philosophic or religious point of view that ‘fits’ their family or personal commitment. They develop a sense of self-motivation and responsibility. So what’s the point of going to college?

As a former college dean, I am used to addressing myself first and foremost to students, not their parents, so I hope you will bear with me as I write primarily to the young people. When someone is 18 or thereabouts, choices about their future may or may not be guided by parents and by circumstances (\$), but they *must* involve the young person. I want to tell them about what college has to offer, and then assure them that if they want it, *they* can do something about it. Homeschoolers are not on the same time continuum as schooled kids – if it takes them an extra year to prepare to go where they want, or to earn financial support/scholarships, they can do it! But if they aren’t interested, parents really can’t make them go, not successfully. I aim to entice.

I encourage many homeschoolers to consider going to college for three main reasons: first, to find opportunities to further their own development; secondly, to discover what they can and will

contribute to the campus learning environment; and thirdly, to prepare for stepping out and contributing their unique and valuable experiences and perceptions to the larger community and world.

We all know the public education system in this country is broken, and falls further and further behind almost every other developed nation on the globe. It is increasingly failing to produce candidates for that bank of brainpower for which American higher education has been globally renowned for decades. And who can help our country out of the educational quagmire better than homeschoolers who have experienced the results of another vision yet know enough about the educational system from attending college that they can enter the dialogue from a platform of unique experience?

College is a heck of a lot of fun (and I think fun is often undervalued.) You can't begin to imagine the range of opportunities out there for you. Going to live and learn in college at 18 is like going to live at Disneyworld at age 8...or at the Smithsonian. The libraries (open until midnight, or 24 hours a day), the art galleries, the creative activities (orchestras, bands, jazz and a capella groups, theatre clubs, dance from ballroom to ballet), service opportunities, political organizations, athletic teams at all levels. And I've barely mentioned the academic aspects - faculty, labs available, research opportunities, colloquia and seminars.

It's likely, and I can say this as a former Dean, that the most significant experiences of your learning will come not in the classrooms (which will only occupy some 12-15 hours a week), but in everything else you do. You get to make choices and decisions about everything – that alone is likely to be your greatest 'lesson'. Decision-making is a very valuable skill, and going to college provides an extraordinary day-by-day, even hour-by-hour opportunity to master/become comfortable with and proficient at it. Nobody tells you to get up, go to class, wash your laundry, change your bed, go to bed, read and study, write your papers, go and eat.

You will join a living and learning community that includes scholars and athletes and cellists and astronomers and evangelical Christians and people who make amazing music and poets and newspaper editors and mathematicians and artists and actors and students and faculty from every country in South America and film directors and economists and investors and radio station DJs and Jewish and Muslim students who host open-minded conferences on the Middle East and students creating and running community service projects and more. Never again in your lifetime will you have the opportunity to spend so much intense, exciting time growing and developing in the company of many of the best, brightest, most dynamic, curious, and motivated young people on the planet. Colleges seek to accept as broad a spectrum of young people as possible. The diversity of students is as, or more, important than the number of volumes in the library. Having 23 copies of the same book is not as valuable academically as having 23 books with different views on the same topic, and the same applies to students. From them you will learn to perceive, understand, accept, or refute information and opinions from many, many different perspectives and experience. It's all about playing chess with your roommate from Tibet who walked into Katmandu to take his first plane trip ever to come to your college to study computer science; and getting drawn into discussions between the girl from Minnesota on the floor above you who's so excited about her neuroscience classes and is arguing about biomedical ethics with the philosophy major from Madagascar and her roommate from Alaska.

Then there is the faculty – men and women who are passionately involved in their work and (particularly in the smaller colleges) are willing not only to tell you about it, but will let you sit and talk with them in their offices and labs, and participate in their research. They are eager to do

so because you come to them with fresh ideas (you haven't been told yet that they 'can't work') and insights and energy. They not only listen to you but give you feedback and support. Faculty see you as potential future colleagues!

Check this out – go to 2008.igem.org – How exciting! Students participate in an International Genetically Engineered Machine Competition – small groups of students at any college can get faculty sponsorship, access to labs, and raise funds to craft some sort of biological "machine," or living organism, using original combinations of DNA and other organic material, that will help tackle real environmental and health problems. These young people spend their summer on their home campuses doing 'synthetic biology', a new way to approach solving the world's problems using living organisms. The annual IGEN jamboree gives them the chance to show off all that work through a series of presentations. This program started just five years ago with a group of teams from a small handful of colleges. Last year 84 teams from 21 countries competed, and more than half of the American teams came from state universities. And faculty appreciate and support these ventures. Gary Wessell, the faculty sponsor for one of two award-winning teams from Brown University, said, regarding his work with the IGEN team, "this is I think one of the joys of the job. I am constantly learning in this profession, and the students are the best teachers oftentimes."

At college, you will have the opportunity to challenge every belief and assumption you have held, so that you become clearer and firmer in your values. It certainly won't always be comfortable. And that's the point. Leaving home for college means breaking out of your comfort zone. As author Alan Cohen says, one of the ways to know if your next step is the right one for you is to ask yourself if it is both exciting and scary. If so, do it! If it's just exciting and you're not a little anxious or afraid, then there is no challenge, no stretching. You are playing it safe and growth is less likely to be realized. If you're scared and not excited, there is little motivation or reason. But if this possibility turns you on, attracts you and gives you butterflies in your stomach, take the chance! Get away from home and comforts – it's like travel, encountering a new language, and a new culture.

You will find you bring special value to the college campus. Occasionally, it will be challenging living with a roommate and a dorm full of mostly 'schooled' young people, some of whom will be acting in a ridiculous manner in their first experience of freedom from the restrictive environments from which they've come. In my experience, homeschoolers are often more mature than their college classmates. And in expressing this maturity, you will help others find opportunities, and share insights, even as they share their own experiences with you. You will have reached the same point on the road, but from different paths, and in doing so, you will find friends and colleagues who will be with you throughout the rest of your life. And dare I say that working with these other young people may become your calling, or your mission? You have views, values, perceptions, and a lifestyle to share that they need to know about.

In college you will learn to demonstrate achievement in competitive learning situations, develop self-confidence in your capacity to learn new material rapidly, become a team-player who shows responsibility, self-initiation, respect, diligence, creativity, and innovation, and has the ability to get along with colleagues. What more could your future employers or employees ask of you? In global terms, the very small percentage of college graduates will put you in an extremely 'elite' and hence responsible position. You will be one of those who have demonstrated the capacity to learn to do many things, most importantly how to draw together and work with people with dedication. College is not (or at least not only) about marching along a path to a career goal. It is about developing flexibility, vision, and courage. It's a time to be by oneself—between the

worlds of family life and your own commitments and career. You can have a ‘room of one’s own’, where you get to take a very good look at yourself as you balance your abilities against your desires.

College is a relatively safe environment to learn things that go beyond any curriculum; to take risks and experience failures that will help you to test, measure, challenge, explore, enjoy, acclaim, and accept yourself and others. You’ll get to invest yourself in your community, nation, and world in a way that is appropriate to your skills, and your limitations. If you take the opportunity for self-reflection as well as for academic achievement and committed leadership, you’ll graduate both chastened and empowered – and both experiences will be equally valuable. Above all, you will understand why Howard Swearer, 15th president of Brown University, said: “*Liberal education is preparation for appointments not yet made.*”

Now, let’s be realistic. You may be thinking, as you read this, “Colleges cost a fortune! Attending college is a lifetime investment, but a family can afford only so much.” If the possibilities I’ve suggested look tempting, even mouth-watering to you but you feel there is no way you could afford these options, I want you to think again. Yes, consider applying to in-state public institutions, or starting at community colleges, so you can reduce the years at university and thus the cost. The other thing to do is simply excel in your own learning process. Stand out. Be willing to demonstrate to colleges on their own terms that you are an excellent student and potential scholar (and, yes, that means taking and knocking the socks off some standardized tests – ACT and/or SAT I and II subject tests). Accumulate some straight As in community college or local college courses, or from online courses available from prestigious institutions. Show the private colleges that you have what it takes to succeed academically and personally – demonstrate community involvement and leadership – write music for a ballet – be a golfing whiz. If you have outstanding abilities, private colleges will be interested in you, because you represent a different perspective. Private colleges can be *much* more generous than public institutions. There are over 2,000 4-year colleges and universities in this country, and there will be one (usually more than one) that will want YOU!

When I was a single mother putting four kids through colleges in the 1990s, one of my daughters applied to three state schools that had excellent programs in what interested her - interior architecture. She was admitted to all, but the financial aid packages were so low I couldn’t afford to send her, since I already had two of her older siblings in private colleges. She sat out another year, had an interesting internship, worked throwing pizza, did some travel and applied again, but only to private colleges that *could afford to have her*. The next year she entered one of the most prestigious art schools in the nation, the Rhode Island School of Design, with generous funding. She has been a happy and highly successful industrial designer for eight years.

Attending college will open doors to your future, and open windows in your mind. Enjoy!