

HEARN CONSULTING

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- Before You Go
- TRANSITION GUIDE
- What to learn, build, and think about before college starts — the things nobody puts on a syllabus.
- Bryan Hearn, Ed.D.

WHAT'S INSIDE

- The Mindset Shift — From high school to college, what actually changes
- Academic Preparation — Expectations, course registration, and study skills preview
- Financial Literacy — Budgeting, banking, credit, and financial aid basics
- Living on Your Own — Dorm life, roommates, laundry, meal planning, and cleaning
- Health & Wellness — Insurance, mental health, sleep, nutrition, and substance awareness
- Social Life & Community — Making friends, joining clubs, handling homesickness, finding your people
- Safety & Awareness — Campus safety, personal boundaries, and knowing where to turn
- Technology & Organization — Digital tools, email etiquette, calendar management, and digital citizenship
- Family Communication — Setting expectations with parents and finding the right independence balance
- Your 30-Day Action Plan — Practical checklist for the month before move-in

01

- The Mindset Shift

College is a different world. Not better or worse than high school — just fundamentally different. The students who thrive aren't always the ones with the highest test scores. They're the ones who understand what's changed and adjust accordingly.

High school structure is built for you. Teachers check if you did the reading. Your parents make sure you eat. Your schedule is predetermined. College assumes you're an adult who can figure all of this out on your own. This isn't punishment — it's freedom. But freedom requires a different kind of responsibility.

WHAT ACTUALLY CHANGES

Factor	What Happens
Autonomy	Nobody checks on you. This sounds great until you're 3 weeks behind on an assignment. You're now managing your own deadlines, sleep, and social life.
Scale	500-person lecture halls. TA-led recitations. Office hours you have to seek out. Professors see 200+ students, not 30. You have to be proactive.
Expectations	College assumes 2-3 hours of outside work per hour of class. That's 30-45 hours per week for a full course load, even before you leave the classroom. Manage your load accordingly.
Choices	You pick your classes, sometimes your professors, your schedule, your major. More freedom = more consequences for bad choices.
Community	You're building a new social network from zero. No shared elementary school history. Everyone is in the same boat at first.

THE GROWTH MINDSET YOU'LL NEED

You will not be the smartest person in the room anymore. This is actually healthy. Surround yourself with people who challenge you.

Failure is normal and informative. A bad midterm isn't who you are. It's data. What went wrong? How do you adjust?

Asking for help is strength, not weakness. Office hours, tutoring, counseling, peer study groups. Use them.

You're not in competition with your classmates. Collaboration, not comparison. Study groups work better than solo cramming.

College is about becoming someone, not just getting a degree. Give yourself permission to explore, change your mind, and grow.

YOUR FIRST SEMESTER MATTERS, BUT...
First semester grades do affect you, but they're not everything. Most students struggle with the adjustment. A rough start doesn't define your college experience. What matters is what you do next.

When was the last time you failed at something? How did you respond?

- 02**
- Academic Preparation

You've done well academically or you wouldn't be going to college. But college-level work is different in kind, not just degree. Understanding these differences before you arrive means you can adjust faster.

WHAT'S DIFFERENT

Dimension	College Reality
Reading volume	College professors expect you to read 50-100+ pages per week per class, sometimes more. Not everything will be discussed in lectures. You're responsible for getting it.
Independence	No one takes attendance. No one checks if you did the reading. You're expected to show up prepared and participate. Professors reward this.
Depth over breadth	College tests understanding and critical thinking, not memorization. You'll see fewer questions with one right answer and more with multiple valid perspectives.
Writing	Papers are longer, more analytical, and held to a higher standard. You'll write in multiple disciplines with different formats. Start early and revise.
Conversations with professors	Office hours are normal and expected. Professors notice who shows up and are more generous with students who engage. Using office hours is not admitting defeat.

BEFORE YOU ARRIVE

Learn your registration timeline and process. Know when you can register and how. Missing a registration window can mess up your whole semester.

Know where the library is and how to access online resources. Spend an hour there. Figure out how to check out books and find databases.

Review your first semester schedule. Look up your professors online (RateMyProfessors is one tool, not the only one). Email professors if you want to introduce yourself.

Think about your major or intended major, but know you'll likely change your mind. First-year requirements are designed to let you explore.

Understand degree requirements early. Get a 4-year roadmap, even if it changes. Planning forward prevents getting stuck.

STUDY SKILLS TO BUILD NOW

Active reading	Don't highlight and passive-read. Annotate. Ask questions. Summarize in your own words. Engage with the material.
Note-taking systems	Experiment now with Cornell notes, outlining, concept maps, or whatever works for your brain. Different classes benefit from different systems.
Time blocking	Schedule study time the same way you schedule classes. Treat it as non-negotiable. 2-3 hours outside class per hour inside is normal.
Spaced repetition	Review material over days, not hours. Your brain consolidates information through repetition over time, not through cramming.
Writing process	Brainstorm, draft, revise, edit, proofread. Good papers are never first drafts. Know what a thesis statement is and what it isn't.

What study habits worked in high school? Which ones won't translate to college?

03

- Financial Literacy

College is expensive. Not just tuition — books, food, housing if off-campus, travel, activities, unexpected costs. Understanding where money goes and how to manage what you have prevents a lot of stress and mistakes.

THE FAMILY CONVERSATION

Have this conversation with your family before you leave. It's awkward, and that's okay. It's much better to be awkward now than confused and resentful later. Know exactly what's covered and what isn't.

What's covered by financial aid and what's not? (Tuition, fees, books, room & board, personal expenses)

How much spending money will you have each month? Where does it come from? (Family, work, loans, savings)

What are you responsible for? What emergencies would you need to cover yourself?

Will you need a job during school? How many hours can you realistically work without hurting your grades?

BANKING & MONEY MANAGEMENT

You'll likely need a checking account without your parents' names on it. Start this before college.

Checking account	Look for no-fee, no-minimum checking. Many banks offer student accounts. Set up mobile banking and know how to check your balance.
Savings account	Separate from checking. Even small deposits add up. This is where unexpected costs come from.
Debit card	Linked to your checking. Easier than checks for most transactions. Understand how much you have before you spend it.
ATM	Know where campus ATMs are. Out-of-network withdrawals charge fees. Avoid them.

CREDIT CARDS & BUILDING CREDIT

Credit cards are not free money. They're loans with interest. But building credit now matters for loans and other things later. If you get a credit card, understand how they work:

Interest rates compound. A \$500 charge at 20% interest costs different amounts depending on how fast you pay it back.

Minimum payments keep you in debt. Paying only the minimum means you'll be paying for that purchase for years.

Credit scores matter. They affect your ability to borrow money later. Build good habits now.

Only charge what you can pay back in full each month. If you can't, you're not ready for a credit card.

MONTHLY BUDGET TEMPLATE

Track your actual spending for one month. Be honest about food, entertainment, subscriptions, and everything else.

Category	Estimated	Actual	Notes
Food / Groceries			
Transportation			
Books / Supplies			
Entertainment / Social			
Subscriptions & Apps			
Personal Care / Hygiene			
Savings / Emergency Fund			
Clothing & Misc.			
TOTAL			

What are your biggest spending categories? Where do you think you'll overspend in college?

04

- Living on Your Own

College is the first time many students manage their own physical space, food, laundry, and daily routines. These skills matter more than you think. They prevent you from living in chaos while trying to do well academically.

PRACTICAL LIFE SKILLS

Do laundry	Sorting (colors vs. whites), water temperature, detergent amounts, which fabrics can't go in the dryer. Practice before you go.
Cook basic meals	Not gourmet — just reliable, cheap, and edible. Pasta with sauce. Rice and vegetables. Eggs. Scrambled egg sandwiches. Ramen elevated with actual nutrition.
Keep a space clean	A dorm room is small. Dishes pile up. Clothes accumulate. Develop a 15-minute daily reset habit and a weekly deeper clean.
Shop for groceries	Understanding what you need, how long food lasts, and how to not waste money on things you won't eat is a skill.
Basic household maintenance	Unclog a drain. Know when to call for help. Change a light bulb. Fix a broken zipper.

DORM ESSENTIALS CHECKLIST

Bedding: Twin XL sheets (most dorms use this size), pillows, blanket. Check what your school provides.

Toiletries: You know these better than I do. Shower shoes, towels (they take up room), soap.

Medications: Anything you take regularly. Also: pain reliever, cold medicine, antacid, anti-diarrheal.

Clothes: Enough for 1-2 weeks. A couple of outfits for different weather and occasions. Comfortable shoes and a pair you can dress up in.

Tech: Chargers, laptop (if needed for your major), headphones.

Cleaning supplies: Small container of disinfectant wipes. Paper towels. A mini vacuum or dustpan.

Tools: Hammer, screwdriver set, sewing kit. You'll use these.

ROOMMATE COMMUNICATION

You'll likely have a roommate. Living with a stranger is a skill. These conversations prevent a lot of resentment:

Sleep schedules	When do you sleep? How sensitive to noise are you? What time does the other person need quiet?
Guests & overnight visitors	What's okay? How much notice do you need? When is it not okay?
Cleaning & sharing space	What are expectations around cleanliness? Whose stuff is where? Who's responsible for bathroom cleaning?
Borrowing & sharing belongings	Is everything off-limits or some things okay to share? Ask before borrowing anything.
Temperature & lighting	These actually matter. Discuss preferences early and compromise.

MEAL PLANNING IN THE DINING HALL

Most dining halls have multiple stations: salad bar, grill, main entree, sides. You can build a balanced meal.

Go through the line with intention. Grab a protein, vegetables, whole grain, and fruit. It's there.

Dining hall food is available most hours. You don't have to eat at scheduled times. Eat when you're hungry.

If you're not eating in the dining hall, keep non-perishable food in your room. Granola bars, nuts, crackers, peanut butter, instant oatmeal.

Food insecurity is real for some students. If money's tight, talk to your RA or dean. Most schools have emergency food resources.

05

- Health & Wellness

Your health is your responsibility now. You're managing insurance, medications, appointments, and daily habits without your parents' reminders. Start understanding your health before you leave home.

BEFORE YOU LEAVE HOME

Health insurance	Get a copy of your insurance card. Know your plan: coverage, deductible, how to find in-network providers. Know where campus health is and if it's covered.
Prescriptions	If you take any medications, set up a pharmacy near campus (call ahead). Get a 90-day supply before you leave. Know the medication names, dosages, and what they do.
Medical records	Know your medical history, allergies, family history. Have this accessible (digital is easiest). Doctor may ask.
Immunizations	Your school will require certain vaccinations. Get them done early — holds on registration are not fun.
Dental & vision	Get check-ups before you leave. Dental work is expensive and easy to neglect for four years. Same with vision.
Mental health	Know where your campus counseling center is before you need it. It's normal to see a therapist in college. It's not just for crises.

DAILY WELLNESS NON-NEGOTIABLES

Sleep: 7-8 hours	Not negotiable. Sleep deprivation tanks your grades, your mood, your immunity, and your decision-making. You will make worse choices when tired.
Movement	Find something you enjoy. Gym, intramurals, walking, yoga, dancing in your room. Consistency matters more than intensity.
Nutrition	The dining hall has vegetables. Use them. Eat actual meals, not just snacks. Your brain and body need fuel.
Hydration	You're dehydrated. Carry a water bottle. Refill it constantly. Thirst lags behind dehydration.
Screens-off time	Build in time without your phone or laptop. Your brain needs rest from content consumption.

MENTAL HEALTH & SUBSTANCE AWARENESS

The social pressure in college is real. So is mental health struggle. Know your boundaries and where to get help.

Most students drink alcohol and/or use substances in college. Some don't. Either is fine. Know your own comfort level and stick to it.

Peer pressure isn't as dramatic as movies make it seem. It's subtle. If you don't want to drink, you don't have to. If you do, know your limits.

Depression and anxiety are common in college. They're also very treatable. Campus counseling is usually free or low-cost.

If you're struggling mentally, that's not weakness. That's being human in a transition. Tell someone — RA, counselor, friend, parent.

Sleep, exercise, and eating well treat a lot of mental health issues. They're not a cure-all, but they matter.

What's your relationship with alcohol and substances? Have you talked to your parents about this?

What would mental health struggle look like for you? How would you know you need help?

06

- Social Life & Community

The social transition to college is often harder than the academic one. You're leaving your entire support network and starting from zero. That's exhilarating and terrifying in roughly equal measure. Understand what to expect.

WHAT TO EXPECT SOCIALLY

Loneliness is normal. Almost everyone feels it the first month, even the outgoing people. Peaks around week 4-6. Then you realize you know people and it shifts.

Friendships take time. Your first friends may not be your long-term friends. That's okay. Give it a semester before assuming you don't fit.

FOMO is real. Everyone's Instagram looks better than their actual life. Social media curates joy. Don't compare your reality to someone else's highlight reel.

Homesickness is not weakness. It means you had a good life before. Call home when you need to. Also give the new place a real chance.

You don't need a big group of friends. 2-3 people you trust and like is actually plenty. Quality over quantity.

	<p>FINDING YOUR PEOPLE</p> <p>You don't need to find your best friends during orientation week. You need to find 2-3 people you enjoy being around. Friendships form through repeated exposure: the same class, the same club, the same floor. The best college friendships usually develop around shared interests, not shared dorms.</p>
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GETTING INVOLVED (STRATEGICALLY)

Clubs and organizations are where college social life actually happens. But don't overcommit. Better to be deeply involved in 2-3 things than stretched thin across 10.

Timeline	Strategy
Semester 1	Explore. Try new clubs. See what you like. You can drop anything. This is the time to experiment.
Semester 2	Commit. Choose 2-3 things you actually care about. Get more involved. Build real friendships in those communities.
Year 2+	Leadership. If you like something, lean in. Become an officer, lead a project, mentor newer students.

HANDLING HOMESICKNESS

Schedule regular check-ins with family. Sunday evening calls are traditional. This gives you something to look forward to.

Also have things to look forward to on campus. Club meetings, game nights, study groups. Something that gives you a reason to engage.

It's okay to come home for a weekend or long break. It's also okay to stay on campus. Both are normal.

Don't hide in your room. Loneliness compounds. Go to the dining hall. Join a club. Go to a study group. Connect with people.

If homesickness turns into depression or inability to function, talk to your RA or counselor. This is what they're there for.

What are your concerns about the social transition? What aspects of college social life sound most intimidating?

What kind of people or communities do you want to find in college? What clubs or groups interest you?

07

- Safety & Awareness

College campuses are generally safe spaces. They're also spaces where young adults are learning boundaries and decision-making. Knowing how to keep yourself safe is part of being on your own.

CAMPUS SAFETY RESOURCES

Security office	Know where it is. Know their non-emergency number. They're there to help, not just enforce rules.
Campus police	Yes, colleges have police. Emergency is 911 like everywhere. Non-emergency number is usually posted in dorms.
Escort services	Most campuses offer free escort services at night. Walking across campus alone at 2am is a time to use this.
Blue light phones	Emergency phones positioned around campus. Also: most phones can call emergency services outdoors anywhere.
Safety apps	Many campuses have safety apps. Download them. They let you report issues and get alerts.

PERSONAL SAFETY PRACTICES

Know your surroundings. Where are the well-lit paths? Which areas feel sketchy at night? Use that knowledge to navigate.

Trust your gut. If something feels off, it probably is. Leave the situation. You don't need to be polite about your safety.

Travel with friends, especially at night. Most incidents happen to solo people. Two people are usually safer than one.

Watch your drink at parties. Know what you're drinking. Don't accept drinks from people you don't trust.

Keep your door locked. Even in a dorm. Someone's roommate's roommate might walk in at 2am thinking it's the bathroom.

BOUNDARIES & CONSENT

College involves a lot of new social and physical situations. Understanding boundaries and consent is non-negotiable.

Consent is clear, enthusiastic, and ongoing. It can be withdrawn. If you're unsure whether someone's into it, ask.

Alcohol doesn't count as consent. Someone too drunk to make decisions clearly can't consent.

Setting boundaries is normal and healthy. 'No' is a complete sentence. You don't owe anyone an explanation.

Everyone deserves respect. Everyone also deserves to be respected. If someone doesn't respect your boundaries, they don't get access to you.

If something inappropriate happens, report it. Campus Title IX offices handle these cases. They're confidential.

EMERGENCY CONTACTS

Campus security	
Campus police non-emergency	
Campus health center	
Campus counseling	
Your RA's number	
Dean on call	
Someone you trust at home	

08

- Technology & Organization

You'll use technology constantly in college. Email is your lifeline. Calendar management prevents disasters. Digital citizenship matters — your online actions have consequences.

EMAIL & COMMUNICATION

Email is how professors communicate. Missing emails means missing deadlines, policy changes, and opportunities.

Check email daily	Not optional. Professors assume you see their emails within 24 hours. Missing this will hurt.
Use your college email	Not your personal email for academic stuff. Your college email is your official channel.
Email etiquette	Subject lines should be specific. Format emails clearly. Spell-check. Address professors formally (Professor X, not Hey Prof).
Response time	Reply within 48 hours when someone's waiting on you. Professors appreciate this.
Don't email late night rants	Write it. Save it as draft. Read it in the morning. Then send if it's still a good idea.

CALENDAR MANAGEMENT

Use a digital calendar (Google Calendar, Apple Calendar, Outlook). Put everything on it: classes, work, appointments, deadlines.

Set alerts 24 hours and 1 hour before deadlines. Early alert gives you time to course-correct. The 1-hour alert is your reality check.

Block out study time on your calendar like it's a class. If it's not scheduled, it won't happen.

Use color coding: red for deadlines, blue for classes, green for social. Visual categories help you see your load at a glance.

Share your calendar with close friends or family if they need to coordinate with you (optional but helpful).

DIGITAL CITIZENSHIP

What you post online is permanent. Employers, professors, and future friends can see it. Treat your digital life like your real life.

Google yourself. See what comes up. If future employers would see something that embarrasses you, adjust your privacy settings or delete it.

Think before you post. If you wouldn't want your professor or grandparent seeing it, don't post it.

Respect others' privacy. Don't post photos of people without permission. Don't share others' stories without asking.

Social media breaks are healthy. You don't have to be online all the time. Regular breaks help your mental health.

Digital distractions kill productivity. You can study better in silence than with TikTok playing. Consider app blockers during study time.

ORGANIZATIONAL SYSTEMS

Folder system	Create folders by class. Subfolders for syllabus, notes, readings, assignments. Saves panic when you need something.
Note-taking app	OneNote, Notion, or Apple Notes. Searchable, accessible everywhere, no paper to lose.
To-do list	Todoist, Apple Reminders, or just Notes. Write it down somewhere. Don't keep it all in your head.
Bookmarks / saves	Organize them by class or project. You'll want these again.
Backup system	Save important documents to cloud storage (Google Drive, Dropbox). A hard drive failure is a disaster without backup.

09

- Family Communication

College is when you separate from your family — not completely, but significantly. Finding the right level of independence and connection is an ongoing negotiation. Talking about expectations before you leave prevents confusion and resentment.

CONVERSATIONS TO HAVE BEFORE YOU LEAVE

Expectations about contact	How often will you call or text? What does your family expect? What do you need? Schedule regular check-ins.
Visits and breaks	When will you come home? What happens on long breaks? Will you work or rest?
Independence & input	What decisions are yours now? What decisions still involve family input? Where's the line?
Values & difference	What matters most to your family? What might college challenge about those values? How will you handle disagreement?
Emergencies & money	What happens if something goes wrong? Who do you call? What are you responsible for financially?
Mental health & struggle	If you're struggling, would your family want to know? How would that conversation happen?
Romantic relationships	What's your family's view? What boundaries do you want? What will you communicate?

FINDING INDEPENDENCE WHILE STAYING CONNECTED

Regular check-ins are good for both of you. Sunday evening calls are traditional. You're not tethered if you plan for it.

You can be independent and close to your family. These aren't mutually exclusive. Most students figure out a rhythm.

Your family might struggle with the separation. That's normal. Give them grace while also maintaining your boundaries.

Going home for holidays is good. Staying on campus is also okay. You don't have to go home every break.

If your family is critical of your choices, that's worth addressing now. College is a good time to start setting boundaries.

COMMON TENSIONS & HOW TO HANDLE THEM

Tension Point	How to Handle It
Partying	Your family might worry. Be honest but reasonable. A 2am text saying you're safe means a lot.
Major choice	Your family might have opinions. Ultimately, this is your choice. Listen, then decide.
Relationships	New partners, new identity. Family might disapprove. You can hear them and still make your own choices.
Money	Disagreements about spending or support are real. Clear expectations prevent resentment. See Section 3.
Mental health	Some families dismiss this. If you're struggling, you have a right to get help even if they don't understand.

What conversations haven't you had with your family yet? Which ones feel hard or important?

What does independence look like to you? What does staying connected look like?

10
 • Your 30-Day Action Plan

This isn't everything, but it's a practical checklist for the month before you leave. Work through it. Check things off. You'll feel more prepared.

8-6 WEEKS BEFORE MOVE-IN

Read this entire playbook. Take notes. Answer the reflection questions.

Have the big conversations with your family: money, values, contact, independence.

Research your college's website: where's the library? What's the dining schedule? Where's health services?

Look up your professors. Read reviews. Email an introduction if you feel like it.

Start a running list of what you'll need to bring. Add to it as you think of things.

Set up a checking account if you don't have one. Practice using mobile banking.

Get any medical check-ups (dentist, eye doctor, physical). Do this now.

Get required vaccinations. Schedule appointments if you haven't already.

4-2 WEEKS BEFORE MOVE-IN

Practice cooking 3-4 basic meals. Master at least one you can make in a dorm room.

Do your own laundry if you haven't in a while. Wash everything in a load together to be safe, then learn the proper way.

Start following your campus on social media. Get excited. See what organizations are recruiting.

Buy things you need (bedding, toiletries, basic supplies). Check your college's prohibited items list first.

Get any prescriptions transferred to a pharmacy near campus. Order early.

Organize your documents digitally: insurance card, vaccination records, medical history, financial aid info.

Pack a suitcase to see what actually fits. You probably want to bring less than you think.

Download your campus app, email your address, and get your login info for student portal.

WEEK BEFORE MOVE-IN

Confirm your move-in date and time. Know where to go and how to get there.

Do final laundry. Pack light — your family is probably coming and you can get what you forgot.

Take a screenshot of your insurance info and save it to your phone.

Do a final walkthrough with your parents of your moving plans and their expectations for contact.

Get excited. This is big. You should feel some nerves and some excitement.

YOUR FIRST WEEK ON CAMPUS

Attend orientation. Yes, it's sometimes cheesy. It's also important. You'll meet your RA and learn campus logistics.

Find all the key places: library, dining hall, health center, gym, bookstore, your classroom buildings.

Get to know your roommate. Have the roommate conversation if you haven't yet.

Go to class even if you're overwhelmed. See where everything is. Meet professors.

Try at least 2-3 clubs or activities. You have time to commit to them later.

Set up your calendar. Put in classes, work, office hours. Build in study time.

Call home. Tell people you're there and you're okay.

Be nice to your RA. They genuinely want you to succeed.

RELATED RESOURCES

- [Hearn Consulting Student Resources](#) — More playbooks for every transition
- [College Success Toolkit](#) — Deeper dives into specific topics
- info@hearn.consulting — For personalized college transition support