

We asked 5 former college students what you (and your family) should think about as you start your own college journey. Meet the students here, and keep reading to find out what they wanted you to know!

MEET THE STUDENTS



MADISON

Madison is working towards a Para-Professional Educator Certificate. She loves working in the classroom with 2- to 3-year-old children. Every semester, she takes one art class for fun. Madison enjoys horseback riding and walking her dog. Her advice is to “Just be you!”



KAETHE

Kaethe is finishing up her Certificate of Completion. She writes her own inspirational messages published on her social media pages. She wants to be a motivational speaker and advocate for people with disabilities.



MARIA

Maria earned her Para-Professional Educator Certificate. She is continuing to take courses in college, and is passionate about working with children in an after-school program. She has been living in her own apartment and is engaged to be married.



GEORGE

George is funny and insightful. He grew up in a small town and will eventually live in a bigger community where he can get around on his own. He is working towards a degree in Communication Studies. In his free time, George enjoys riding his three-wheel bike.



SANTI

Santi is working towards a degree in Studies in Education. He writes articles for the college newspaper. Santi teaches children during the summer how to play soccer, and he assists the men's soccer team at the college.

LOCATION AND SIZE OF THE COLLEGE

When thinking about college, you may wonder about moving away from home. Kaethe described how she chose between two colleges, one that was closer to home and one that was farther away. She wanted a college where she would feel most comfortable while being away from home, saying: "I knew that being away from my family would be hard. It would mean that I would need to say 'goodbye' to my home and that would be hard."

Kaethe decided to go to the college that was nearer to her home, and chose to live in campus housing. She encourages you to think about how far away from home you want to be when you go to college.

Madison and Santi advise you to think about what size campus you'll like best.

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Madison stated, "The size of the college campus and number of people were important to me. I went to a big high school. I don't like big groups. I feel shy, nervous, and don't feel connected with classmates. I chose a smaller college where I can have 16 to 20 students in class. I don't feel as nervous."

Other students feel that larger campuses offer more things to do. They like blending in with a group of students. They feel comfortable sitting in large lecture halls.

This is how Santi described his choices: "I wanted

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to go to a big college because I knew they would have more options. I want to study linguistics and take creative writing workshops. I enjoy the feeling of writing in solitude, being a phantom. It is peaceful to be surrounded by others, but be on my own."

STUDY TIME AND MAKING WISE CHOICES

Some students are surprised about how much time they need to spend studying when they get to college. In college, you are expected to reach out for help on your own. Then you need to think about the advice you get, and act on it.

Maria offered this advice: “Don’t be afraid to ask for help. If you don’t get answers to your questions, find others to ask for assistance.”

New college students often forget to put their studies first, because it can be so much fun hanging out with friends, watching sports, or being on social media.

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George provided advice about making wise choices. He said, “The social life on campus can be a distraction from studying. I had to learn to be self-disciplined and at times to say ‘No’ to my friends because, I have to buckle down and get things accomplished. I have to tell my friends, ‘You guys don’t get it. I have a lot to do this semester.’”

SOCIAL OPPORTUNITIES & PEER MENTORS

All new college students face the experience of not knowing anyone on campus. At first, you may worry about fitting in and being accepted. George offered this advice: “Don’t give up. Don’t get stressed about things that are too hard for you to understand. Be the best that you can. Never be afraid to show who you really are. It is not what other people think of you. You have to be you.”

Madison had advice for students who feel shy in new situations: “There were some thoughts that I had about college that made me feel anxious about fitting in. I wondered if I would get bullied and if I would make true friends.”

She also wondered if she would be lonely, and homesick. “I felt nervous and scared because of my past experiences. In all of my schooling, I just felt like I could never fit in and I was very scared that no one would like me or would be patient with me because it takes me awhile to warm up to people. Some people just give up on me. I didn’t want to be misunderstood anymore. I get misunderstood by what I can do, and not let people put limits on me. Even though I am shy and quiet, I have a lot to say, I just don’t always know how to say it.”

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George, who has an outgoing personality, was asked if he worried about fitting in to college. He said, “No, I didn’t worry about fitting in really because I am a people person and I pretty much feel that I add a totally different element to whatever group I am in. I can think of one example. I met a friend named Abby. She is best friends with José. She introduced me to José. He would sit with me at breakfast. José has a sister named Sarah, who attends this college and she joins us for breakfast. Then, we get together for dinner. To this day, José and Sarah are two of my greatest friends. We talk quite a bit. We connected, it happened. I know that they will continue to be friends after college.”

Santi shared his experience as a freshman, living away from home in the residence hall. He said, “I am very reserved. I don’t go out of my way to fit in, I wait for others to approach me. During my freshman year, I got scared and spent a lot of time in my dorm room.”

Santi knew that he had to be brave and put himself out there: “When people get to know me, they know that I have charisma and a sarcastic wit. It took a while to fit in—I had to learn how to break out of my shell. I did this by going door-to-door in my resident hall seeing if I could join in. I hooked up with other students who were interested in gaming. I just had to throw myself out there, otherwise I wouldn’t have done it.”

Some colleges have peer mentors to help new students get connected. A peer mentor is an experienced college student who can provide social or academic support, and help you meet new people. For example, if you and a peer mentor go to the fitness center together,

the peer mentor may invite a friend to come along. This is how you get to know more people on campus.

Maria liked having peer mentors help her connect with other students. She stated, “It’s hard for me to meet and connect to new people. I feel more comfortable when I have peer mentors around me who will introduce me to their friends and then I get to know them better without having to be the first one to start the introduction.”

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BEING INCLUDED

These 5 students also spoke about how being included was important to them. They wanted to go to a college where they would be just like all of the other students. They found that their choice of a college was based on how students with disabilities were included in campus life. When visiting their top college choices, they liked the colleges best where they would be included.

Kaethe said, “Inclusion means that I get to be in the same classes with other students and not being separated because of disabilities. Inclusion is very important to me and being accepted for who I am.”

Madison described how students with intellectual disabilities at one college were kept away from regular campus life. She said, “I did a week-long stay at one college. We couldn’t take the same courses that other college students could take, and we were limited to certain subjects. For the meals, we had to cook one group meal and if you didn’t like it, that was too bad. I didn’t get to choose what I wanted to eat so I didn’t eat at all.”

Madison then visited another college that was quite different: “I went to the open house for this college. I knew that I wanted to go to this college because it was inclusive to everyone and I love the program! I like all different experiences like internships and peer mentors and different jobs students can do with disabilities. Which I thought was really cool. This was different than what I saw in other colleges and I wanted to be part of it. I heard the students speak about their

experiences in college. I could tell they meant it and they weren’t saying things just to say them. People were kind and friendly to me. This was a lot different experience from the other colleges that I looked at.”

Kaethe gave advice on what to look for when visiting college campuses: “I look at how students with disabilities are included on campus. It was a turn-off for me when there was a lack of inclusion by separating students apart from others. Some colleges had programs that put students with intellectual disabilities into the same classes. They moved together as a group. I didn’t want to be separated from my friends.”

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NEXT STEPS

When you are visiting a college, ask the staff...

1. Can I take the same courses as other students?
2. Can I take courses for credit or audit?
3. Can I participate in athletics?
4. Can I live on campus in the residence halls with other students?
5. Can I participate in clubs and activities on campus?
6. Can I work in paid jobs on campus?
7. Can I choose internships that fit my career goals?
8. What does the college do to make sure that I feel like I belong here?
9. Will I be able to participate in the university commencement events?

As you start looking at colleges online or in person, make a list of the things that matter most to you. A pros and cons list can help you decide what is most important to you when choosing the right college.

COLLEGE TEACHES YOU ABOUT WHO YOU ARE. IT TEACHES YOU HOW TO RELATE TO PEOPLE MORE. IT WILL PUT PEOPLE IN YOUR PATHWAY FOR A REASON. ... I'M SO LUCKY TO MEET SUCH GREAT PEOPLE. HOW DID I GET SO LUCKY TO HAVE THESE GREAT EXPERIENCES?"



"MAKE A LIST OF FEARS, THINGS YOU WANT IN COLLEGE, THINGS YOU NEED AS A PERSON TO BE SUCCESSFUL. I NEED SOME ALONE TIME, AND AT LEAST ONE PERSON TO TRUST TO SHARE MY FEELINGS."



Choosing a college is a big decision. Advice from these students can help you make strong choices to get the most out of your college experience!

ARE YOU READY TO DO A COLLEGE SEARCH TO LEARN MORE ABOUT YOUR OPTIONS?

Visit the College Search page on the Think College website to find colleges that meet your needs. You can search by state, length of program, whether housing is offered, and whether they offer financial aid.



HOW TO CONDUCT A COLLEGE SEARCH GUIDE

Once you have narrowed down some choices, use our new Guide to Conducting a College Search to learn more about each college you have selected.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Dedra Hafner is an Educational Consultant who has a passion for working with young adults who are transitioning from high school to college, and into the community. She has years of experience in creating and directing new programs in colleges. Her latest venture is called the Alumni Resource Center. She is addressing the needs of the alumni after they have had the college experience as they transition into the adult world.



HOW TO THINK COLLEGE

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