COUNTDOWN TO COLLEGE

Why Your Involvement Decides More Than You Think

A 10-minute read for parents — from a student whose parents wished they'd known

The problem, in one paragraph

By the time most families start 'thinking about college' — junior or senior year — the majority of the application has already been written. The math track was set in 8th grade. The GPA is three-quarters final. The activities that show depth needed to start years earlier. Nobody tells families this. Schools assume parents know; parents assume schools will flag it. Both are wrong, and students pay for it.

I know because it happened in my house. My parents cared deeply. They just didn't know that an 8th-grade course form mattered more than almost anything they'd sign later, or that 'take the PSAT seriously in October of 11th grade' was worth thousands in scholarship money. This packet is the short list of what parents specifically need to know and do — because there are things in this process only a parent can do.

What only you can do

- **Advanced math track in middle school, honors/AP in high school. Schools respond to parents who ask; students rarely win this alone. One meeting with a counselor in 7th or 8th grade changes the ceiling of the next six years.** Get the course placement.
- **Course registration (every spring), PSAT (October, 11th grade — it's the National Merit scholarship qualifier), SAT/ACT dates, FAFSA opening (fall of 12th), application deadlines (often Nov 1). Teenagers don't do long-horizon planning. That's not a character flaw; it's biology. Be the calendar.** Own the calendar.
- **Decide together what's affordable before emotional attachments form. Run each school's Net Price Calculator; sticker prices lie in both directions, and debt decisions made at 17 last until 40.** Have the money talk early — 9th or 10th grade, not 12th.
- **A test prep book, one competition fee, a summer program application. Small money, outsized returns.** Fund small, high-leverage things.

If your student doesn't seem to care

This is the most common situation, and pressure usually makes it worse. What works better:

- Connect it to THEIR goal, not yours. A kid who won't study 'for college' will grind for a specific dream — game design, medicine, music production. Start with what they love; work backwards to what it requires.

- Make it concrete and near-term. 'Your future' is invisible to a 14-year-old. 'If you want the option of Texas A&M engineering, this year's math grade is the door' is real.
- Keep doors open quietly. Even if they're unmotivated now, insist on the rigorous math track and core courses. Motivation usually shows up in 10th–11th grade — your job is making sure that when it does, the options still exist.
- Don't do it FOR them. Parents who write the essays and pick the schools produce students who flame out in college. Structure and accountability, yes; authorship, no.

If YOU'RE the one who's unsure this matters

- It's rational to be skeptical of the college industry — costs are real and degrees aren't magic. But the planning in this guide costs nothing, and its whole purpose is to keep choices open, including the choice of a cheap or alternative path done deliberately.
- The families hurt most aren't the ones who chose differently — they're the ones who found out too late that a choice had already been made for them by an 8th-grade form.

Your one-page checklist

- This week: ask your child's counselor which math track your child is on and what the advanced options are.
- This month: put next year's course registration date and (if 10th–11th grade) the October PSAT on the family calendar.
- This semester: one conversation about direction (what do you enjoy?) and one about money (what can we do?).
- Every year: 30 minutes with the grade-by-grade timeline in our full guide. That's genuinely most of the job.

> **The point:** *You don't need to become an admissions expert. You need to know which five moments matter and show up for them. This packet is those moments.*