

An open letter to the college freshman class of 2010: Begin with the end in mind

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For most high school college applicants, decision time is here. You've heard from the universities and now you're weighing the variables of academics, campus life, extracurricular opportunities, future careers and financial aid. Although academic excellence will likely figure prominently in your choice, in times like these, cost is also an important consideration.

My two cents for the Freshman Class of 2010: The most expensive college is the one you don't finish.

I feel you need to know that many people don't get done in four years. It's not uncommon to graduate in five or even six years, and one in four enrollees at America's flagship public universities don't graduate at all, according to "Crossing the Finish Line," a recent book on college completion.

The reasons varied: work and family pressures sidelined some, campus culture clashed with personal customs or classes were too hard for the underprepared. In some cases, though, classes weren't hard enough, and students who picked colleges that didn't challenge them were less likely to make it.

My advice? Visit your favorite campuses again, attend a class, talk to professors and peers. Be realistic about what you can pay for college, how much you can afford to work and how much can you afford to borrow. Check out support programs that complement classroom instruction. Pick a college where expectations are high and people are expected to graduate. Plan to live on campus your first years. Investigate support programs. Commit to complete.

Going the distance makes a difference. The benefits of a college degree are well-known.

If you don't graduate, you may have wasted your money as well as your time. Most people are aware that there are wage premiums for finishing high school and college. Each graduation marks a new level of earning potential. But recent research shows there is little wage benefit for "some college." Once you begin, attaining your college degree must become your highest priority. Your future depends on it.

If you start college and don't graduate, America loses, too. Good scholarship, thoughtful decision-making, groundbreaking research and innovation have been the

hallmarks of American economic achievements, and an educated work force is the reason.

Choose a university committed to turning applicants into graduates and successful alums; one that balances high expectations with great support programs and uses research and technology to improve classroom interaction and student retention and success. Look for innovation in teaching challenging subjects and academic support from orientation programs, learning communities, targeted tutorial programs and software programs that flag lagging student effort while there's still time to fix it.

Check out the university's roster of distinguished alums. (I am proud to note the Boilermaker family of alums includes New Orleans Saints quarterback Drew Brees, astronaut Neil Armstrong, pilot Captain "Sully" Sullenberger, the U.S. Coast Guard's first female commissioned officer and Purdue Dean of Women Dorothy Stratton, and C-Span's Brian Lamb!) Note there is likely more financial help available than you think, so find options to make college more affordable. And, most importantly, make sure your first step on campus ends with a step on the stage where the university president hands you a diploma.