



ADVICE FOR STUDENTS OF COLOR AND FIRST-GENERATION COLLEGE STUDENTS:

SUCCESSFUL TRANSITIONS FROM HIGH SCHOOL INTO AND WITHIN COLLEGE/UNIVERSITY

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Midwest and Plains Equity Assistance Center

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About the Centers

Great Lakes Equity Center (Center) is an educational research and service center located in Indiana University's School of Education at IUPUI. The Center engages in equity-focused technical assistance and related research with educational and community agencies focused on systemic improvements to serve all learners with particular focus on educational access, participation and outcomes for those who have been historically marginalized. Midwest and Plains Equity Assistance Center is a project of the Center and provides technical assistance related to educational equity based on student race, national origin, sex, and religion at no cost to public educational agencies throughout its 13-state region in the Midwest and Plains.



Introduction: Note from the Author

As you begin to read this pamphlet, you might ask, “Why should I listen to this person?” “What experiences has she had, or what expertise does she hold that makes her advice credible or worth my time and attention?” Well, given how busy we all are these days and knowing about all the advice out there about going to college, I see your point! However, I hope you find this piece a bit different from other resources. See, I approached the writing here in some ways as a *consejo* (a piece of advice) to my younger self. More specifically, I wanted to write something that would have been useful to me as a young Latina living in the rural Midwest and as a future ¹first-generation college student nearing the end of my four years of high school.

I wrote it in hopes that other youth of Color on the verge of new opportunities and exciting transitions could hear my words and see themselves reflected in the text. I wrote it hoping that parents and guardians might read it and have reason to pause, imagine, and better understand the future adventures, challenges, and opportunities that their loved one is about to embark on. I also wrote hoping that student mentors, school guidance counselors, and community college and university advisors might read it and see it as a potential window of insight into understanding their current and future Students of Color (SOCs).

Furthermore, I wrote it based not only in my own personal experiences navigating through post-secondary education as a minoritized and first-generation college student but also based in my experiences as a teacher for, and researcher of, first-generation college students and SOCs. Over the past 20+ years I have coordinated and

¹First generation means I was the first generation in my family to leave home for college—first community college, then a four-year university, and later two graduate schools to complete my master's degree and PhD.



About This Tool (Continued)

implemented public, community, and college-based programming designed to increase access and equity for SOCs as they traverse through and across educational institutions (high school, community college, and university). Among other things, that means this advice is “research-based,” although I intentionally do not use a ‘researcher voice’ in my advice to students. I have also learned a lot from various collaborators and mentors. So of course what I have learned and share here I have not learned alone. My own successes and failures as a student, an educator, a mentor, and a leader have taught me a great deal that you might not find written down in a typical “how-to” manual. I am sharing some candid insights here. And though certainly not an exhaustive list of the many things one might need to keep in mind or be responsive to in support of SOCs’ transition into college and beyond, I hope you find my advice compelling and useful.



Key Terms

Anti-Racism: The policy or practice of opposing racism and promoting racial justice. A commitment to dismantling racism at all levels (Kendi, 2019)

Culturally Sustaining Pedagogies: A commitment to foster and sustain “linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism as part of schooling for positive social transformation”. It challenges school systems and all actors within them to sustain the “lifeways of communities who have been and continue to be damaged and erased through schooling” (Paris & Alim, 2014, p. 1)

Deficit Thinking: When educators and or administrators assume that some children are inferior or less than based on their cultural, linguistic or experiential backgrounds (Nieto & Bode, 2012). This deficit thinking “blames the underachievement of ethnic minority groups in schools on perceived deficiencies relating to the minority students themselves, their families and their cultures” (Gonzalez et al, 2009, p. 666).

Equity Literacy: “Equity literacy is a comprehensive approach for creating and sustaining equitable schools. The foundations of equity literacy are (1) a commitment to deepening individual and institutional understandings of how equity and inequity operate in organizations and societies, and (2) the individual and institutional knowledge, skills, and will to vigilantly identify inequities, eliminate inequities, and actively cultivating equity” (Gorski, 2020, para. 1).

Funds of Knowledge: The “historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills essential for household or individual functioning and wellbeing” or “sources of knowledge available to students and households, apart from formal educational sources” (Moll et al., 1992, p. 669).

Gatekeeping Courses: Those courses that often create barriers for students due to lack of educational opportunities or access to quality curriculum and instruction in those areas (e.g. mathematics and the sciences).

Opportunity Gaps in Education: Gaps in access to foundational social, economic, and educational resources needed for well-being across the contexts of schools, communities, and society writ large. This extends beyond safe schools, quality teachers, relevant curricula. It includes but is not limited to: taken-for-granted resources such as quality health-care, food, shelter, and transportation (Carter & Welner, 2013; Ladson-Billings, 2006).



Key Terms

Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs): Predominantly White Institutions are those social, governmental, and educational institutions that were designed by, designed for, and predominantly populated by individuals from White non-Hispanic heritages.

Racial Micro-Aggressions: Racial microaggressions are “commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults toward people of Color” (Sue et al., 2007, p. 271).



Think About Your Future Self:

Questions to Ponder...

- What are some things about your daily life that make success in school hard? How might these things change, end, or continue as you transition into adult life and new opportunities such as going to college (post-secondary education)?
- What are some things about your family, community, and culture that give you strength? What assets will or can you take with you in these transitions?
- What expectations do family members or close friends have for your life?
- What expectations do you have for your life? Personally? Educationally? Professionally?
- In what ways are your expectations the same or different from those of your family and friends?
- *What kind of impacts do you want to make in the world? In your family? In your community?*

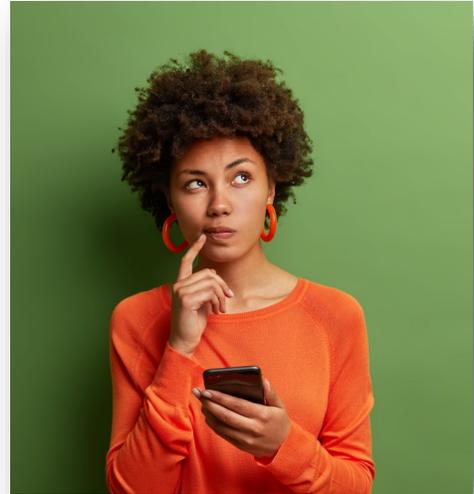


Image Description: [Black feminine-presenting young adult holding a cellphone, appearing deep in thought, looking off to the right.]

Learning Who You are and What You are Capable of

- As a talented young person who has lived a rich and complex life already, you “bring a lot to the table” that will serve you well in whatever direction you go as an adult. Your cultural, linguistic, academic, and experiential “funds of knowledge” (Gonzalez et al., 2005) should be leveraged as tools both in transitioning into and during your post-secondary education. Funds of knowledge means the ways you, your family, and your community know how to respond to challenges and opportunities. College may sometimes presume that you don’t know anything. But I assure you, you already know a lot about how to live, persevere, and succeed.



Think About Your Future Self (cont.):

- Despite these amazing assets, you may feel underprepared or uncertain about your abilities to be successful. You may have heard and absorbed messages that you are inadequate or that you “don’t really have what it takes” to navigate college or to accomplish meaningful things beyond high school.
- However, it is important to realize that you are not alone in these feelings. Most students experience feelings of doubt at various points in the process of accessing, attending, and then completing college. For SOCs these feelings are often compounded – both by negative societal assumptions about your potential and by institutional structures that are often rigid and not initially designed with SOCs in mind. It can be hard to feel like you’re one of the few, that that aren’t a lot of students like you at your community college, college, or university.
- In short, it is *not uncommon* to feel unsure and uncertain. But remember, most things worth doing in life are not easy!

Notes



Think About Messages & Messaging:

Who Should You Listen To?



Image Description: [Four arrow-shaped directional signs, pointing in various directions. They read: Advice, support, guidance, and help]

- Surround yourself with people who have *critical hope* for themselves and for you. Seek the company of people who believe in, want, and are working towards positive futures. Critical hope is more than just optimism; it means recognizing that there are obstacles and challenges (fair and unfair) but insisting you can and will make it anyway.

- Those who help you maintain critical hope don't have to think the same way or want the exact same things as you do, but remember that their words and actions have power and can support your outlook and your forward momentum. There

are also people who can impede you; they won't be your sources for critical hope.

- Seek out people you admire. Who in your community, school, church, or extended family do you look up to? Seek out people who have shown strength, resourcefulness, kindness, leadership, intelligence, and/or creativity.
- There is much you can learn from these people! Though they might live, study, or work in contexts that may be unfamiliar to you or different from your educational or professional plans, the life skills they have developed, the lessons they have learned, and the wisdom they have to share can all inform your decision-making and give you ideas about any future ventures you are pursuing.
- At school, you likely will have advisors, guidance counselors, teachers and recruiters who are giving you advice about what you can or should do with your future. If NOT, you should be seeking them out! They are messengers whose job it is to provide vital information and to assist you in exploring the



Think About Messages & Messaging (cont.):

world of options open to you. They can also serve as doorways or gatekeepers to opportunities, programs, internships, and scholarships. But remember, not everyone with these titles will be a source of critical hope. In my experience, many more people have helped me than not.

- Therefore, it is essential that you find and reach out to your possible allies and mentors early and OFTEN. This takes time and courage. Remember, they are very busy people who likely work with many students, so you want them to KNOW WHO YOU ARE and what you are capable of!
- In all cases whether they are peers, parents, informal mentors, or more formal messengers (e.g. advisors, counselors, teachers, recruiters), it is important to consider their roles and positions. Though one would hope that every person (peer, parent, adult, mentor, teacher, and counselor) has your best interests in mind, it is vital that you take stock of who they are and where they “sit” in relation to you and your future goals and aspirations. Those who tell you something that may be hard, but also offer strategies and encouragement, can be important supporters. Those who tell you that you “can’t/shouldn’t” may not be.
- I encourage you to keep *both* a positive and hopeful outlook *and* a critical lens to assess peers’, parents’, mentors’, teachers’, and counselors’ intentions in your interactions with them. Continue to ask them questions. Consider what informs their outlook...What do they know about college/university? But more importantly, what do they know about you? What experiences might they be filtering you through (your identity, your past achievements, and future potential)? Is their perspective of you accurate? How can you know?
- Ultimately, the adults in your life may have blind spots; we all do. However, you must remember that unless you are willing to share your unique perspectives and to be vulnerable enough with your hopes, dreams, and worries, others may not always be able to see our potential, the possible pathways to your future goals, or what might be best for you.
- Peers, parents, mentors, teachers, and counselors also may not understand fully your realities or how you experience the world on a daily basis—especially if their backgrounds are profoundly different from yours—that is



Think About Messages & Messaging (cont.):

why it is useful to seek advice from multiple people.

- Seek out mentors in both formal and informal contexts. Consider finding mentors who are from diverse backgrounds, representing different identities. Their experiences within, and pathways to, higher education will be different from yours (costs have changed, technology has changed, they may have studied different majors than you want to). But they won't be completely different and they can inform you and support you in different ways.
- There are colleges that have long served SOCs as their primary enrollment (e.g., Historically Black Colleges and Universities [HBCUs], Hispanic-Serving Institutions [HSIs], and Tribal Colleges and Universities [TCUs]), where the dynamics of welcome and familiarity can be different; however, the vast majority of American colleges and universities are what researchers like me call "predominantly white institutions" (PWIs). These institutions may be welcoming and may be excellent, but it can be very helpful to find people who understand the rules and processes of the dominant (White) culture and the PWIs that reflect that culture.
- The knowledge, encouragement, and ideas that these different people can share with you will vary based on the relationships and resources they have access to. All of it is important and can serve you well in surviving and thriving within any college, university or trade school you aim to attend.

Notes



Think About Support & Supporting Others:

What are You Doing to Invest in Others?

- You may be the first, only, or one of very few people in your family to pursue education beyond high school. As a result, you may have few academic role models in your immediate social or familial circles to look to for advice. This can be lonely at times, and can make the whole process feel even more stressful and uncertain.
- However, it is vital that you understand that you do not have to go this alone. Remember, you did not get to where you are by yourself! It is likely that many people (directly and indirectly) have invested in you and have played a role in supporting you to get this far; whether through encouragement, advice, financial or emotional support, mentorship, friendship, humor, or advocacy.
- Similarly, your future academic and professional journey will be much smoother, more meaningful, and more impactful if you continue to allow these individuals and others to be a part of it, when possible.
- Just as mentioned in the previous “Messages” section, it is important to be aware that YOU and your actions also *matter to others*. Consider what messages YOUR actions and words are sending to siblings, parents, and others who have offered you critical hope.
- What kind of impact are you having on those who look up to you, who aspire to be like you, or who want to pursue similar goals?
- The old saying of “together we rise” holds true so often. Think about this: What good does it do for a person to pursue individual success at all cost if once they arrive, they have no one to share it with who really understands what it took to get there? That said, remember that some of your successes at college may initially be unfamiliar to some of your supporters. Give them time and support to understand *why* your successes are successes.
- Just as you need support, it is vital that you understand that you – your life, successes, struggles, and lessons learned—serve as a strong example for

Image Description: [Two hands reaching for each other; one is positioned higher than the other. A sunset is picture in the background.]



Think About Support & Supporting Others (cont.):

those coming up behind you. And it is often in the helping, mentoring, and nurturing of others' hopes and dreams that you find peace, encouragement, and direction for your own life.

You Can't Be What Others Need if You Fail to Take Care of Your Own Needs

- Regardless of your current situation, making daily choices that set you up to *be your best self* is important.
- Rest, proper nutrition, exercise, meaningful relationships, and building in time to do things that bring you joy are all essential to success beyond high school. Establish weekly routines that attend to these issues. Include activities that support wellness.
- Remember that taking time to support your own well-being is just as essential as taking time to support the well-being of others. Pay attention to your emotions and how you are feeling.
- While you may experience feelings of guilt or homesickness because you are away from loved ones, it is important to focus on established *goals*. Remind yourself (and your loved ones back home) **WHY** you are attending post-secondary education. Your efforts – all your struggles and successes—are worth a great deal! Remember that with every successful semester and every new academic and professional experience you have, you are increasing your ability to provide for yourself and/or your family. You are investing in your future *and their future* by successfully gaining an education and/or professional trade.
- If you have a positive relationship with family and/or friends back home, maintain a healthy level of communication with them. It is important to let them know how you are doing. While it is scary and sometimes difficult to communicate what you are experiencing at college with them, try to keep them informed. Be willing to share both your successes and your failures, your highs and your lows. Sometimes, just talking about your experiences and struggles can improve your morale and help you get through tough times.



Think About Support & Supporting Others (cont.):

- For some of you, due to your family's or loved one's unfamiliarity with college, your family may not understand at all what you are going through. And if they see you sad, worried, ill, stressed, or homesick (which you will likely experience ALL these things at various points in a given year), they may try to convince you to *come home*. This is common, but remember: it is not that they don't want you to succeed. Rather, it is that it is hard for them to see their loved one (you) in pain, and to feel like they are too far away to help you. Often just talking openly about your feelings and theirs can resolve some of the worry, fear, and uncertainty they have. It can increase their understanding and appreciation for the sacrifices you are making and give you the strength to keep moving forward towards your goals.

Notes



Think About Logistics

Your Successes Tomorrow Begin with Your Planning and Wise Choices Today

- The tools, routines, and approaches you have used to navigate daily life as a high school student are important. We can even call them *resources*. They provide important frames of reference. The lessons you've already learned help you assess situations, work through challenges, and manage responsibilities to maintain momentum and accomplish goals. This can remain true beyond high school.



Image Description: [Latinx feminine-presenting young adult sitting at a table, reading a book.]

- However, it is important to keep in mind that while valuable, the systems of high school are NOT always navigated in the same ways as systems in other institutions (community colleges, trade schools, and 4-year colleges and universities). Each institution has its own set of rules, processes, and expectations—some are clearly articulated but others are subtly-implied.
- You may even feel that some of your new classmates seem to know these implied rules and you might feel frustrated that you're still "figuring them out."
- In order to navigate these new systems well, you must be aware that at each phase, the "game" changes and the best strategy for success is to be hyper-observant and responsive to these changes.
- Critical self-reflection, asking questions, and seeking advice is key to navigating post-secondary education.
- Keep your eye on your ultimate goals. Create and maintain a *long-range*



Think About Logistics (cont.)

plan for completing your degree, certificate, or training program. Semester by semester, make sure you keep track of deadlines, program requirements, and when key courses are offered. It is also important to regularly “take stock” of (keep track and reflect on) what you have accomplished and what you have overcome with each new season.

- Study like it’s your job, because in many ways it is. To establish strong study habits, you should set your study schedule and reassess it with each new semester. Make sure you block out enough time to study each day/ week and protect that time like your life and your future depends on it – because it does!



Image Description: [Black masculine-presenting young adult sitting at a table writing and reading a book. A laptop and mug are also pictured.]

- If you are a potential transfer student, make sure you know what course requirements are for the university and bachelor’s degree/ program that you hope to enroll in. Not all courses are created equal! Often a course might “transfer” as credit from the community college or another university, but may not count as a direct *equivalent* to the required

course needed at the receiving institution. Make sure that you have examined the course requirements at the receiving institution (the college you are transferring to), to ensure that each course you take at the community college will count as an *equivalent* to one of the required courses in your program. This is essential to progressing through to bachelor’s degree completion efficiently. Working with advisors at the receiving institution as early as possible can be helpful, having them assess your transcript to make sure all your credits will count.

- Pay attention to deadlines. It is easy to put off tasks that you dread, don’t fully understand, and/or feel uncertain about. However, these are the last things you should procrastinate on! By starting to work on them early, you will have more time to figure them out, to ask questions, and to seek support in reviewing the finished products before having to submitting them.



Think About Logistics (cont.)

- Managing finances effectively can be tough for any young adult; especially for students who have limited access to resources. Therefore, each semester evaluate your financial situation—tuition, fees and associated expenses, as well as monthly housing, food, phone, and insurance expenses, etc. Track how you are spending your money and *budget* for these essential needs. Then consider ways you can carve out some “fun money” for extracurricular activities, social events, or weekend outings with friends (these are important too). There are a lot of activities and opportunities at college that do not cost a lot of money, but that aren’t free either. So, it helps to save a little and be ready for these.
- Paperwork, bills, forms, and applications are some of the least fun aspects of adulthood. However, it is vital that you learn to manage any anxieties, frustration, and avoidance behaviors regarding these things and stay on top of them.
- Be open to and look for new opportunities. Don’t let fears keep you from something amazing. Explore your interests and get involved in things that matter. All these experiences can expand your comfort zone, increase your skills, and broaden your interests as well as build your resumé!
- But don’t over-commit yourself. It is common for SOCs and first-generation college students to get involved in various activities, programs, and organizations on campus (and at work) that build community and bring them joy. This is a GOOD thing! But too much of a good thing can be a bad thing... If you are over-committed at work or in extracurricular activities, your grades may suffer. Remember—if you are not passing classes you risk losing everything you have worked so hard for.

You are Not in this Alone; the System has a Stake in You Succeeding

- **Find an accountability ally:** Find someone (or two or three) who you can

Image Description: [Five stacks of quarters sitting in a row, each stack larger than the one before it. At the end of the row is a mason jar filled with quarters, with a miniature graduation cap sitting on top.]



Think About Logistics (cont.)

trust to hold you accountable to complete important tasks, to keep up with homework, to attend class, to go to work, and to be smart with your finances. We all can use help staying on track, especially if you are managing many of these things on your own for the first time!

- **Be known:** Particularly at a large institution, it is easy to feel anonymous, more like a number than a person. To reduce this risk (and feel better) your job is to make sure possible allies and mentors get to know you. Go to professors' office hours or set up appointments, find out who leads activities, look for resources designed for students like you, like multicultural centers and support groups for first-generation students.

- **Take calculated risks:** Don't be reckless, but stretch yourself beyond what you think you can do. Oftentimes we miss out on opportunities simply because we discount our abilities and capacity to be successful. Surround yourself with other growth-minded people who are willing to try things that stretch them in positive ways. You will be shocked what you can accomplish!



Image Description: [Black masculine-presenting young adult in a wheelchair, reaching for a book on a shelf in a library.]

- **Be strategic:** Ask for input from peers on classes, professors, internships, programs, and part-time job opportunities. By asking around for insights and suggestions, you can find out more about a situation or opportunity before having to invest too much time or expense. This can both save you from negative experiences as well as motivate you to opt into an experience you otherwise might have missed.
- **Be brave enough to ask for things that you need and want.** Seek out resources, services, and opportunities from your mentors, faculty, and staff on your campus and in your community. In many ways they are there FOR YOU. Don't assume that an answer is NO—because it might be YES!



Think About Logistics (cont.)

- **Scholarships, fellowships, internships and job opportunities don't fall from the sky; they require action on your part.** Completing applications, creating and updating your resumé, requesting letters of recommendation, and writing purpose statements are often part of the process of applying and securing these amazing, funded opportunities. Keep in mind that MANY scholarships and internships go unused every year due to lack of applicants.
- **While difficult and tedious, investing time in application processes is often well worth the trouble.** Even if you are not selected for a particular scholarship or internship, learning how to create and update important documents such as purpose statements and your resumé will serve you well throughout your whole life. Those who help you with an application are also more likely to help you again.



Think About Your Growth

Expect Big Things!

- **Expect to think A LOT—and in new ways.** Expect to demonstrate, contribute, and share your thinking with others. You have a wealth of knowledge already and it will grow exponentially as you gain experiences through post-secondary education.
- **Expect to be stretched.** As mentioned earlier, nothing worth doing is easy! There is a lot to be gained from your “productive struggle.” Trust the process, and in those moments of greatest difficulty or challenge, know that you’re capable of making it through to the other side successfully.
- **Expect to be surprised by your own abilities.** There are many people who believe in you, even in those times when you’re doubting yourself.
- **Expect to make a difference on multiple levels.** Your arrival to, and progression through, post-secondary education is a powerful example in itself. However, it is your intellectual, emotional, and cultural contributions to class discussions, programs, work environments, and campus organizations that will have a lasting impact on your peers, advisors, and professors, as well as on the leaders within the institutions you attend. Your voice and perspectives are so important!



Image Description: [A photo of six seedlings at various stages of growth.]



About the Author

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