A Parents Guide to the Senior Year
What you need to know so you don’t get bushwhacked along the way

By Amy Hammond Hagberg

Aah, the senior year of high school. If ever there was a time for parents and teens to heed the wisdom of Psalm 25:4, this is it: "Show me the path where I should walk, Lord; point out the right road for me to follow" (NLT). 1

The senior year is packed with events, expenses, and expectations (some realistic, some not). LWT has tapped the collective wisdom of parents and teens who have traveled the senior year road, and we've blended it with other need-to-know stuff. It's our belief that if you know what's coming, you're a lot less likely to get bushwhacked along the way.

Cha'ching! Expenses That Keep on Coming
For starters, the senior year can be expensive. Every time you turn around, somebody has their hand out for more of your hard-earned greenbacks. Sometime during the junior year it would be wise to have a financial pow-wow with your teen.

Together decide on the upcoming "nice to haves" and "must haves." Also determine the items for which your student should pay. (Inside tip: You may want to get that part in writing.)

Graduation time not only means spending money on your own senior, but also gifts for other graduates. Remember that your presence at their graduation ceremony or party will mean much more than any gift you could ever give, so don't feel obligated. Of course, money is always appreciated, but a heartfelt personalized gift can mean even more. Here are a few ideas that won't break the bank:

- Book of devotions
- Jewelry (cross necklace, etc.)
- Sweatshirt/T-shirt from new college
- Software (dictionary, thesaurus)
- Gift certificates for businesses near campus (movie theaters, pizza places, grocery stores, gas stations, etc.)

Senioritis: The Bug That Keeps Biting
As students enter their senior year, they have a lot on their minds - friends, sports, romance, work, the future, and most important (to them at least)... fun. Academics often are put on the back burner.

Senioritis is so serious that in 2000 the Department of Education launched the Commission on the High School Senior Year to study the problem and find ways to combat it. Some school districts are even contemplating a reorganization of the senior to the year to stomp out the bug and give students a more effective leg-up on their futures. Some of this contemplating includes ditching the senior year all together. Other ideas include adding basic college courses to senior year required curriculum or offering them as electives.

1 Scriptures marked (NLT) are taken from the Holy Bible, New Living Translation, copyright 1996. Used by permission of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., Wheaton, IL 60189 USA. All rights reserved.
Why is senioritis so pandemic? Because students are savvy. Most know what they accomplish through their junior year largely determines their future. Those already accepted into college often ignore their senior year studies. Hannah, now a freshman at Bethel College, said, "I got senioritis. I didn't want to do any school-related work, but I wanted to do the high school activities and [hang out with friends]."

Students bound for the working world often don't think the classroom will have any correlation to their jobs. And those who have struggled academically may believe that by the senior year it's simply too late to turn things around.

Part-time jobs also are a key ingredient in senioritis. In 2001, 55 percent of high school seniors worked three or more hours each day at jobs outside of school. That means less time to study. In fact, according to the National Research Council and the Institute of Medicine, students who work more than 20 hours a week don't do as well in school.

Is it really a big deal? Yes. Senioritis can cause problems long after the graduation cap hits the ground. College admissions officers will know who decided to coast through senior year. Just to prove they mean business, many acceptance letters include warnings to students that admission is contingent upon continued performance.

In Youth at the Crossroads: Facing High School and Beyond authors Kati Haycock and Sandra Huang state that "as many as half of all college students do not have adequate academic preparation, and are required to take remedial courses. More than one quarter of the freshman at four-year colleges and nearly half of those at two-year colleges do not make it to their sophomore year."  

Mark Anderson, dean of admissions at Gustavus Adolphus College in St. Peter, Minn., knows what a problem senioritis can be.

"Many students will do the senior slide, expecting they'll easily jump back into the academic groove. Like running a race, you need to develop your academic endurance if you want to be successful in the long run."

**College Search: Let the Hunt Begin**

According to the U.S. Department of Labor Statistics, 70 percent of the 30 fastest-growing jobs will require an education beyond high school. About 40 percent of all new jobs will require at least an associate's degree.

If your student isn't sure about his next step, check out a local community college or technical school first. The cost is often significantly less and it will enable him to get his collegiate feet wet before committing to an expensive four-year school. If your teenager is ready to take the plunge at a four-year college or university, do your homework.

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Narrow the field. Students can choose from nearly 4,000 postsecondary institutions in the United States. How do you find the right one? Anderson suggests starting with people you respect.

"Ask teachers, pastors, and friends what colleges they might recommend. Then assemble a laundry list, search online, and pare it down." (Ideally this process is begun during the junior year.)


Speaking of the latter, there are approximately 1,600 private schools in the country; about 900 of them define themselves as "religious affiliated." Far fewer of them, only 102, would be considered intentionally Christ-centered and have qualified for membership in the Council for Christian Colleges & Universities.6

Start shopping. Once you've figured out your list of musts, start shopping. Where do you begin? Googling "college search" produced 91,700,000 matches! Couple that with the dozens of books on the subject and searching can be perplexing. Upon closer analysis, the following sites proved most helpful:

- www.princetonreview.com
- www.collegeview.com
- www.petersons.com

If your choice is a Christ-centered school, there's no better resource than Christian Colleges & Universities: The Official Guide to Campuses of the Council for Christian Colleges & Universities, published by Thomson/Peterson's. It should be available at your local bookstore, public library, or the guidance office of your student's school.

Campus Visit. Once you've narrowed your list to what you can count on two hands, it's time to travel. Campus visits are critical to the decision-making process. To get the most out of visits, schedule them while classes are in session. (Most high schools allow some excused absences for college visits.) Anderson has some great advice to get a good feel for a campus.

"Arrive well before the appointed time and pretend you're lost. See if people are friendly and helpful in directing you."

After you've found your way, head over to the library. If it's quiet yet busy, that's a good sign. Next stop is the cafeteria. It should definitely not have a studious feel about it; it should be loud! You'll also want to tour a few dormitories, classrooms, the chapel, and athletic facilities. Touring several campuses over a period of time can be a blur, so remember to pack a notebook and camera to log your journey.

Paying for school. College is a huge investment. If you haven't been socking away college cash for years, it's time to get creative with financing options, whether it's student aid, a loan, or a scholarship.

According to the Department of Education, the federal government supplies $46 billion annually in student aid - about 75 percent of all student aid. This aid comes primarily in three forms:

- Pell Grants for the neediest students.
- The Work-Study Program, which allows students to work part-time during the school year to help pay for college.
- Federal loans, which are available to parents and students.7

Completing a FAFSA (Free Application for Federal Student Aid). Completing the FAFSA form is the first step to be considered for any federally funded financial aid. Here are some tips to help you get it done right:

1. Call admissions offices to determine which forms you need for particular schools. There will be differences.
2. You also may be required to complete a CSS/PROFILE form. It can be obtained at www.collegeboard.com.
3. Meet deadlines. They vary, so check carefully. The deadline for the FAFSA and Profile form might be different for a particular school. Each state also has its own deadline. (State deadlines are listed on the FAFSA Web site.) The FAFSA cannot be filed until after Jan. 1, but the Profile can be filed as soon as you receive it.
4. Many schools process applications in batches. If you miss the cut-off you will get only the leftovers (if there are any).
5. Forms and further information can be found at www.fafsa.ed.gov.

Scholarship savvy. Bottom line? Look everywhere for money. You'll find funding sources in some of the most unlikely places. Scholarships are given for academics, athletics, arts, extracurricular activities, and community service. Getting scholarship money is competitive, so you'll need know how. Numerous books have been written on the subject, so visit your school's career center. Besides the books, there are some excellent Web sites as well. Never pay for scholarship search tools; there are plenty of free resources out there. Check out www.collegeboard.com, www.scholarships.com and www.college-scholarships.com.

Among the best places to find scholarships are clubs, civic groups, churches, and businesses in your community.

Tips for the non-college crew. As parents, we all want what's best for our children. Some teens will be interested in college, some in a vocational program, and some prefer to stay out of the classroom entirely. Don't push your teenager into college; he has to want to tackle that challenge.

Success comes in many forms; it's all about how we define it. What truly matters is that your student is pursuing the purpose that God has laid out for him. You will keep in perfect peace the mind that is dependent on You for it is trusting in You (Isa. 26:3).

Ask your student early in his high school career if he wants to go on to college. Be prepared for an honest answer; the truth may be difficult to hear. Truth is, not all teens are college material. Students going straight to work need practical training and experience that will prepare them for the demands of the workplace. For many, the senior year will be

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a time of exploration. If your teen doesn't relish the college scene, encourage him to consider:

- Working part time while taking a course at a vocational school or community college to explore options.
- Pursuing something challenging with growth opportunity rather than just taking the first job that comes along.
- The military. Granted, this will increase your fear factor, but the military does have excellent hands-on training.
- Joining the Peace Corps, AmeriCorp, or a missionary organization. Serving others may help your student better understand himself.

**Graduation Day**

Graduation day brings a flood of emotions. You are going to cry, and your student will likely put on a confident, carefree front when his stomach is churning. This is one of the biggest days of his life thus far, so make it memorable. But choose the right celebration for your teenager, not for you.

**Letting go.** Graduating from high school is exciting for your student, but you can feel a tremendous sense of loss. Bev Mathiasen has watched three of her children receive their high school diplomas.

"When my children were seniors, the hardest adjustment for me was letting go. They stayed out later, pushed the curfew. They did more with friends and had more weekend sleepovers. It was hard to let go."

Add to that the fact that many seniors turn 18 and think they deserve more independence and respect. Don't be intimidated by that numerical landmark.

"Even though they were 18, they were still in my home. My children knew I was still the boss, and I was the one in control of the checkbook!" Mathiasen said.

Kelly Frankenfeld, whose son Matt is a college freshman, agrees that letting go can be tough.

"They will do things differently than you and that's OK; it's healthy. I knew that intellectually, but until you experience it... it's hard to step back and let go and yet know when to step back in."

Students often change after they move away from home. Their habits, their friends, their attitudes, and even their appearance. All of this is a natural part of growing up. The key is to be prepared for the changes, and to appreciate the man or woman your child is becoming. It all falls into that "train up a child in the way he should go" category. Scary, for sure, but you can do this, especially now that you know what lies ahead.

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