

A Developmental Approach to High School

One family's story of navigating high school that looks beyond college as the “end game”

College Information Night · 45 Minutes · Parents, 9th & 10th Grade Students

FOR PARENTS

Tonight is not a strategy session.
It is the conversation most college information nights never get to — the one that puts the focus on the development of a child first and the result will bring colleges into better focus.

FOR STUDENTS

You are 14 or 15. You are already feeling the pressure to have a plan.
You don't have to.
And tonight, we're going to explain why — with research.

*We are going to follow one student through four years of high school.
His name is Liam. He is 14. He is the oldest child in his family.
And by the end of tonight, most of you may see your own life somewhere in his story.*

OUR GUIDE TONIGHT

Meet Liam.

14 years old. Oldest child. No playbook.

His parents are figuring this out as they go.

Just like most of you.

IF YOU ARE A STUDENT

Liam is you, right now. At 14, with the pressure starting and no real answers yet. That is not a problem to be fixed. That is exactly where you should be.

*He loves soccer, video games.
A history class sparked something.
He has no idea what he wants to do
with his life.*

***That is exactly where
a 14-year-old should be.***

Liam's parents know their kid.

Not the transcript version

They know how Liam works best — some unstructured time, processing big feelings slowly, pretending to be fine when he isn't.

Not the activity list version

They know the history class that made him feel like the past was alive. The soccer game where he surprised himself.

The actual person

That genuine, particular knowledge of who their child is — that is the most important asset they bring to the next four years.

FOR STUDENTS

Do your parents know your genuine thing? The one interest that lights you up even when no one is watching? If they don't know it yet — that is a conversation worth having.

The question Liam's parents return to — again and again — over four years:

*Does this choice help our son become more fully himself
— or does it pull him away from that?*

This is the compass. Not the college list.

FOR STUDENTS

Your version: Did I choose this — or did it choose me?

Things that Students and Parents might be feeling

The Pressure Field

THE LUNCH TABLE (students)

- Peer comparison is neurological — not weakness
- Courses chosen because friends are taking them
- Opting out of an activity feels like social risk
- The pressure to have a plan before you know yourself

THE PARENT HALLWAY (parents)

- “Our son is looking at APs for 10th grade”
- “You need 10 activities to be competitive”
- Anxiety dressed up as helpful information
- Comparison culture among adults — just as real

Liam's Four-Year Journey

What it actually looks like to navigate high school the right way.

FOR PARENTS

Each year: the pressure that arrives, and how Liam's family holds firm.

FOR STUDENTS

Each year: what Liam is actually doing, and what you can take from it.

Liam arrives. Nobody has a script.

What Liam is doing

- Soccer — because he genuinely loves it and he loves being part of a team
- Standard course load — no formula
- History teacher sparks genuine curiosity
- Two close friends. Weekend downtime. Still himself.

FOR STUDENTS

You don't have to have a plan yet. The most important thing happening in 9th grade is not course selection — it is figuring out what you most and least like.

Pressure moment

Back to School Night: “Our son is already looking at AP options for 10th grade.” The lunch table talk has begun.

Family's response

They go home and ask Liam what he thought about his first week. Not what he plans to do about APs.

Something gets dropped. Something real gets found.

What Liam is doing

- Quits Model UN — 'it felt like a costume, not a calling'
- Discovers media production elective — loves it
- Stays with soccer + history interest
- Reads two books just because he wanted to

FOR STUDENTS

Quitting something that doesn't fit you is not failure. It is self-knowledge. What would you do — just because you can't stop — if no one was watching and nothing was graded?

Pressure moment

“He needs to build his college list now.” A neighbor's child is taking 2 Honors courses, varsity sport, and tutoring twice a week.

Family's response

Is Liam engaged? Does he seem like himself? Yes. They return to that question — not the neighbor's schedule — as their compass.

Tasks to Accomplish.

What Liam should be doing in 10th grade:

- Think about classes and areas of interest and exploration– which career paths may align?
- Use Naviance for career exploration and self-discovery; personality & strengths assessments can connect to career paths
- If taking Algebra II in 10 grade, consider preparing for SAT's or ACT's summer before 11th grade. Students in Geometry will take SAT's Junior year
- Continue to explore and join clubs and sports/activities that you enjoy and are passionate about
- Get to know your School Counselor

Going deeper. Two APs. One genuine thread.

What Liam is doing

- AP History + AP Language — both genuine interests
- Short documentary film about his town's history
- Soccer captain — authentic leadership emerges
- Counselor conversation: who he is, not just his list

FOR STUDENTS

Two APs you genuinely care about will produce a better application — and a better junior year — than five you are enduring. Depth tells a more compelling story than volume and it leads to you knowing what you most want in a college.

Pressure moment

“Only two APs junior year?” A family they know announces their child is taking five. The comparison reaches the dinner table.

Family's response

Liam's parents look at what he is actually building — and name it to him: 'You are doing the right things.' They hold firm.

Tasks to Accomplish.

What Liam should be doing in 11th grade:

- Take the PSAT - Fall
- Use Naviance to continue career exploration and college search tools
- What are the college values Liam is looking for: Start creating list of colleges to visit and research more
- Visiting colleges and meeting with Admission Counselors that visit the high schools (register through Naviance)
- Take SAT's or ACT's (some may be re-taking if accelerated in math)
- Think about two teachers that could write recommendation letters

Tasks to Accomplish.

What Liam should be doing:

- Summer prior to 12th Grade; work on Common Application & personal essay
- College Application Season - fall
- Final re-take of SAT or ACT if needed
- Senior grades do count! Most colleges request first quarter and/or mid-year reports
- Visit or re-visit colleges that you're considering to make final decisions

The essay sounds like Liam. Because it is.

What Liam is doing

- AP History + AP Lang grades and time spent reflect genuine investment
- Documentary film is a real, distinct application thread
- Soccer captaincy: leadership with a real story behind it
- Essay begins with a morning he actually remembers

FOR STUDENTS

The essay that gets remembered is the one that sounds like you wrote it. Your real voice, your actual curiosity — that is more powerful than anything polished into someone else's words.

Pressure moment

Acceptance season: “Where did Liam get in?” A neighbor's child got into a name school. An uncomfortable moment.

Family's response

Is Liam going somewhere he can genuinely thrive? Yes. That is the answer that matters. They hold to it.

What colleges actually want.

Grades in rigorous courses

Evaluated in the context of what your school offers — not against every student in America. AP count is not the metric.

Coherent narrative

Transcript, essay, activities, and recommendations pointing to the same recognizable human. Coherence cannot be manufactured.

'Well-lopsided' over well-rounded

Two deep, genuine commitments tell a more compelling story than ten thin activities. Admissions readers use this exact term.

Voice, not polish

Experienced readers cross-check essay voice against teacher recommendations. Authenticity is a detection mechanism.

The finding that changes everything.

The healthy striving predicts the outcome. Not the acceptance letter.

Princeton economists Krueger & Dale (2011): When students who attended less-selective colleges were compared to equally ambitious students who applied to elite schools — the earnings difference disappeared entirely.

'A good student can get a good education anywhere.' — Alan Krueger, Princeton

FOR STUDENTS

Your ambition — your genuine curiosity and follow-through — matters more than the name of the school that accepts you.

The five foundations.

01

Sleep

8+ hours. An academic performance strategy, not a lifestyle preference. (Challenge Success/Stanford)

02

Real friendships

Deep peer relationships are a developmental requirement — not a distraction from achievement.

03

Unscheduled time

Identity forms in the gaps. Genuine interests emerge when nothing is required.

04

Depth over breadth

2-4 genuine activities beat 10 thin ones. Admissions readers see the difference immediately.

05

Fun

Play and delight are not the opposite of achievement. They are the conditions under which it develops.

What you can actually do.

FOR PARENTS

1

Ask different questions

'What did you find interesting today?' signals what you value far more than 'How did you do on the test?'

2

Find their genuine thing

What would your child pursue even if it never appeared on an application? Find out. Ask about it — just because you're curious.

3

Hold firm

The parent hallway will be loud. Return to your compass: does this choice help my child become more fully themselves?

FOR STUDENTS

1

Notice what you chose

Look at your schedule. For each item: did I choose this, or did it choose me? Just notice. You don't have to act yet.

2

Name your genuine thing

What would you do even if it never appeared on a college application? That answer is a clue. Follow it, even a little.

3

Say something

Tell a parent, a counselor, or a trusted adult what actually interests you. Not the resume version — the real version.

Liam arrives at college knowing more about who he is.

Not because he had the perfect strategy.

Because he had four years of developmentally honest experiences — sleep, real friendships, genuine exploration, and adults who held the longer view.

There is a healthy and reasonable path through high school. It requires knowing your child. Holding firm to what is right for your family. And trusting that genuine development — not optimized performance — is what actually prepares them.

FOR STUDENTS

Liam's story is available to you. It starts with the choices you make this semester — not four years from now.