

## Goldilocks and the Three Bears of College Fit

All parents want their children to be successful and college is a natural step after high school for many students. In fact, students who attain a four-year degree have historically higher lifetime earnings than their counterparts who do not. According to College Board's "[Education Pays 2023](#)" report, students with a four-year degree earn \$1,200,000 more in median lifetime earnings, a 56% increase among men and 55% among women.

While this may sound like the bright future every parent dreams of for their child, there is a catch and it's a rather large one: student debt. In 2023, the average federal student loan debt was \$37,338 and the average private student loan debt came in at a whopping \$54,921 as reported by the [Education Data Initiative](#). Additionally, there is the alarming rate of student dropouts and the extended graduation timeline for more and more students.

So how do you as a parent ensure that your student goes to college and does not come out buried in student loan debt? Read on about Goldilocks and the Three Bears of College Fit to learn more.

### **Bear #1: Academic Fit**

While there are plenty of students each year who will get into an Ivy League school, the truth is that most students won't. The even harder truth is that most students shouldn't. Here's why.

College is tough for a lot of students. There are so many things happening at once. They may be living away from you for the first time, possibly in a different state, or even across the country. Your student may now be responsible for things that seem minor (like laundry or remembering where they put their dorm room keys), but it all adds up to a potentially overwhelming experience for many students.

Now, let's add academic pressures on top of that. Each semester, most colleges and universities require 12-18 credits to be considered full-time. That means your child is going to balance around 5-6 classes at once with each class on average meeting 2-3 times a week. Students should budget at least 3 hours of homework or studying for every hour they are in class. That adds up!

If your child is not the studying type, hasn't taken advanced coursework like AP courses or honors courses, the very act of attending a lecture, taking notes, and then preparing a college-level paper or taking an exam will seem difficult. Do you have a budding doctor or engineer on your hands? The courses for those fields are more difficult and often include mandatory labs on top of all that class time.

When considering a great college fit for your child, school counselors will talk to students about some really important questions – and you should too:

1. **Can the student (your child) do well at the school academically?** Do their grades, test scores, and other extracurriculars match the general student population?
2. **What sort of student support services do they offer to help struggling students?** Do they have free peer tutoring, a writing center, friendly faculty, and involved advisors to help my child succeed?

Remember, college GPA matters a lot for life after graduation, whether that be employment or graduate or professional school.

### **Bear #2: Social Fit**

This is often the cold porridge or overlooked bear of the family, but social fit is extremely important for your student. Believe it or not, social fit is often the most powerful enabler of academic fit and one of the biggest drivers of student retention and ultimately graduation. When a student feels that they are part of a community, they are often more academically successful according to [a study by MIT](#).

Mental health is also something that shouldn't be ignored by parents of students attending college. Unfortunately, even with COVID in the rearview mirror, college students are still grappling with mental health issues. Isolation and loneliness contribute to students feeling depressed, anxious, and stressed.

The bottom line with social fit is that your student needs to go somewhere they can find "their people". This is generally easier when a college or university provides some of the social activities that your student would enjoy.

When you are considering social fit, the following are important for students to consider:

1. **Does this school offer activities or social events that they would like to participate in?** As parents we may think we know what interests our children – and we often do, but not always. Be sure to let them know that you know how important social fit is. Do they want to join an athletic team or a club of some kind? Are they interested in Greek life or maybe something in the arts? Be sure they think about what they like to do now and be sure the college offers the same things.
2. **What's the overall vibe on campus and does it match my student's personality?** Campus visits are very important to get the feel for what life will be like in that community. There are plenty of anecdotes of students getting that vibe (and making a decision) before the college information session and tour concludes. If you have a social butterfly, do you see people hanging out in common areas? If you have a bookworm, do you see students studying together in the library?

### **Bear #3: Financial Fit**

So you've narrowed down the list of the top schools for your student based upon how they're going to do academically and whether or not they'll fit in and love their college experience. We're now onto the not-so-baby bear of financial fitness, which may determine your student's ability for lifetime success. Let us explain.

A [2023 podcast by the New York Times](#) discussed the college wealth premium. This term measures not only the difference in lifetime wages between a college graduate versus a high school graduate, but also their subsequent debt and assets compared to those lifetime wages. Unfortunately, due to the rising costs of college as well as those for important life purchases such as homes or cars, the college wealth premium is not the same as it once was for those people who graduated college decades ago. This means that if your student graduates with debt, it's going to be even harder for them to pay off that debt, buy a home or a new car, and do all the other things that someone who graduated college 20 or even 10 years ago managed more easily.

How do you, as parents, help your children recognize the importance of thinking about how the college bill will be repaid DURING (not after) the process of choosing a college. This is the time for frank talk about how much has been saved to pay for college. About how much “free money” (grants and scholarships) is being offered by the college. How much debt will the student (and/or you) have to take on in order to pay that college bill. And remember, there are at least four years’ worth of those bills to be paid. Your goal should be to help them choose a school that will enable them to be the most financially fit.

The good news is that today most students are more aware than ever that college is expensive. They also understand that the reason they go to school isn’t to get away from mom and dad and party, it’s to help them get a good-paying job after graduation. It’s your responsibility to help them understand that a good-paying job is worth even more when there isn’t a student loan payment eating away at their bank account each month. Student loans should be the last resort, not the first option, to pay for college.

When you are considering schools for financial fitness, ask these questions:

1. What is the total amount your student will have to pay after any need-based and merit-based grants and scholarships are awarded? The total costs are more than tuition, room, meals, fees, transportation to/from school, and any fine print charges.
2. What are the school’s four-year graduation rates? What is the likelihood of graduation and how long will it take?
3. Last, but not least, what will your student (after any grants or contributions from you) ultimately have to pay back?

One important rule of thumb: student loan debt should not exceed the student's expected first-year starting salary in their field of choice.

So, which fit is most important: academic, social or financial? All three are equally important but the last one is often overlooked. The moral of the story: Don’t let your student overlook the one bear that can chase them for decades after they graduate. Financial fit has the capacity to make things just right!