

# A Call to Parents

A Family's Guide to High School & College Success

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of GENERAL INTEREST



## College Survival Vocabulary

*or: What do all those strange words in college catalogs really mean?*

*So you're trying to help a student decide on the best next move after high school? And those college brochures and catalogs all seem to be written in a mysterious style of English? Don't give up! Here are some of the technical words you are likely to see and what they mean in everyday language.*

**academic year** — Usually refers to the September–June school year, sometimes includes summer term as well.

**accreditation** — Certification that a school meets certain standards set by an outside reviewing organization.

**admission** — The process of becoming a student at a college or university. The admission process usually involves completing an application form and providing copies of documents from previous schools.

**advisor** — A faculty or staff member who assists students with planning their class schedules as well as their overall programs of study. Advisors may also help with career planning. See also counselor.

**application** — The first step in requesting admission to a college or university. Usually there is a form to fill out; sometimes there is a fee to pay.

**articulation** — A formal agreement between high schools and colleges or between community/technical colleges and baccalaureate institutions, designed to make it easy for students to move from one level to the next without any gaps or repetition in their coursework.

**assessment** — A method of finding out a student's knowledge or skill level, often used to find his or her best placement or starting level in a series of courses in English, foreign languages, math, or science.

**associate's degree** — A diploma earned after successfully completing a required course of study in a community or technical college. It typically requires 90 or more credits and takes two years of full-time study.

**baccalaureate or bachelor's degree** — A college degree which can often be earned by following a four-year instructional program. A baccalaureate institution, sometimes called a "four-year college," is a school that is entitled to grant a baccalaureate degree.

**basic skills** — Usually refers to a level of competency in reading, writing, and mathematics which is required for successful college-level work in all fields of study.

**campus** — The land and buildings that a school uses for instruction or student services.

**catalog** — A publication listing college regulations, program and course descriptions, degree and graduation requirements, etc.

**certificate** — A document granted by a college or university indicating that a student has successfully completed specified courses and requirements (compare with degree, which usually requires more time and coursework).

**class** — (1) A specific group of students meeting for specific instructional purposes; it can mean the whole

series of scheduled meetings (“I’m in Dr. Owen’s English class this quarter”) or just one session (“we had a guest speaker in my Business class today”).

(2) Often means the same as course (“she’s taking classes in Electrical Engineering”).

(3) A group of students who expect to complete their studies at the same time (“he’s in the graduating class of 2006”).

**class schedule** — (1) A publication listing details on the courses the school will offer during a specific term.

(2) The courses that an individual student is taking or plans to take during a specific term.

**college-level study** — Curricula and instruction that assume the student has already mastered certain skills and abilities needed for postsecondary school work. Compare to developmental-level study.

**commencement** — The ceremony at the end of an academic year when students receive their degrees or diplomas (compare to graduation).

**competency** — In “competency-based” courses or programs, students must prove that they have certain skills and abilities before moving from one level to the next or earning the final certificate or degree (instead of just earning passing grades in certain classes).

**counselor** — A faculty member who has special training in guidance and who assists students in academic or personal matters. See also advisor.

**course** — (1) Often means the same as class.

(2) A planned sequence of instruction in a particular topic; may include class meetings, lectures, readings, assignments, examinations, etc.; offered repeatedly to different groups of students.

**credit** — A unit of measure for college study. Generally speaking, one credit hour represents one hour of classroom attendance each week, plus the study time, homework, etc. that go along with it.

**credit load** — The total credit value of all the courses a student is currently enrolled in.

**curriculum** (plural: curricula) — (1) An established sequence of information to be learned, skills to be gained, etc. in a specific course or program.

(2) In a general sense, all the courses offered by a department, division, or college.

**dean** — An academic administrator or official, especially one with responsibility for students or faculty.

**degree** — A rank earned by a student who has successfully completed specific courses and requirements (compare with certificate, which usually requires less time and coursework).

**department** — An organizational unit within a college or university, offering courses in a particular topic.

**developmental-level study** — Instruction that helps students improve their English and math abilities and prepare themselves for college-level study. Sometimes called “remedial education.”

**diploma** — An official document issued by the school to show that a student has earned a degree or certificate.

**discipline** — (1) A subject; field; branch of knowledge or learning (“he teaches in the related disciplines of physics and astronomy”)

(2) Orderly behavior (“instructors are responsible for maintaining discipline in their classrooms”)

(3) Correction or punishment for disorderly behavior (“she disrupted the class repeatedly, so the college will begin disciplinary action”).

**distance learning or distance education** — Instruction which is not time- or place-specific; it can include correspondence courses, televised or videotaped lectures, online courses (internet and e-mail), etc.

**distribution requirements** — Course requirements that make sure the student is well-rounded and gains some perspective outside his or her major focus.

**division** — an organizational unit made up of two or more related departments at a college or university.

**drop** — To cancel registration in a course after enrolling in it, usually before the term has started. See withdrawal.

**elective** — A course that is not required for a particular instructional program. Many programs require a certain number of elective credits, and many recommend certain electives for students to choose from.

**ESL (English as a Second Language)** — Usually refers to developmental-level instruction in English language skills for non-native speakers.

**enrollment** — (1) The process of signing up and paying for courses. See also registration.

(2) The total number of registered students attending classes in a particular instructional program, school, district, etc.

**evaluation** — (1) The process and standards by which an instructor judges a student’s work and assigns a grade. (2) The process of determining that a student has met all requirements to complete a degree or certificate and is ready to graduate.

**faculty** — The teachers at a college or university. Librarians and counselors are often considered faculty members along with classroom instructors.

**financial aid** — Money available from various sources to help students pay college expenses. These funds come as loans, grants, or scholarships from the state or federal government or other organizations. Work-study is also a form of financial aid.

**freshman** — A student in the first year of a typical four-year college degree program.

**GED (General Education Development)** — A certificate that is accepted as equal to a high-school diploma.

**grade** — A number or letter that shows how well the student did in a course. Traditional letter grades are “A” for outstanding achievement, “B” for high achievement, “C” for satisfactory achievement, etc.

**grade-point average (GPA)** — the GPA is computed by multiplying the number value of the grade earned in each course (generally, A=4, B=3, C=2, D=1, F=0) times the number credits for each course, then dividing the result by the total number of credits taken.

**graduation** — The formal completion of an instructional program. Students graduate after successfully meeting all requirements set by the college or university (compare to commencement).

**grant** — A type of financial aid that does not have to be paid back after the student leaves college.

**independent study** — An arrangement that allows a student to earn college credit through individual study and research, usually planned with and supervised by a faculty member.

**internship** — A supervised short-term apprenticeship or temporary job in a real-world setting; the student may or may not be paid but does earn college credit for the work experience. See also practicum.

**junior** — A student in the third year of a typical four-year college degree program.

**loan** — A type of financial aid that must be paid back when the student leaves school.

**lower division** — The courses students are generally expected to take during the first two years of a typical four-year college degree program.

**major** — Specialization in one academic discipline or field of study. Also called an “academic concentration.”

**non-credit** — Courses or instructional programs which do not require extensive homework or examinations and which do not offer college credit. Students frequently take non-credit courses for basic skills improvement, job or career development, or personal enrichment.

**open admissions** — The policy of some colleges to admit nearly all applicants, regardless of high school grades and admission test scores.

**pass** — Opposite of fail. At most schools, a student will pass and earn credit for a class with a grade of “A” through “D.” A student who earns an “F” fails the class and earns no credit.

**placement** — The appropriate level to enter a series of courses, based on the student’s skills (“since she learned so much Spanish in high school, she placed into Spanish 201 as a freshman”). See also assessment.

**postsecondary** — Refers to all educational programs for students past high-school age; it includes community and technical colleges and job training programs as well as baccalaureate colleges and universities.

**practicum** — A course that includes job-related activities and stresses the practical application of theory in a field of study. See also internship.

**prerequisite** — A course that must be completed (often with a certain minimum grade) or a skill that must be demonstrated before a student can enroll in another, more advanced course.

**professional/technical** — A course or instructional program that emphasizes job skills training for a particular field of work; sometimes also called “occupational” or “vocational” education.

**program** — (1) The courses that an individual student plans to take (“the academic advisors can help you plan

your program each year”).

(2) The courses required to complete a particular degree or certificate (“he’s almost finished with the Recreation Leadership program”).

(3) The courses that make up a department or the departments that make up a division within the college organization (“the Social Science Division offers instructional programs in nine fields”).

(4) Organized activities with a specific function (“The college offers support programs for students of color”).

**quarter** — Some schools divide the academic year into three main periods—Fall, Winter, and Spring Quarters—plus a shorter Summer Quarter (compare to semester).

**records** — Refers to all the information the college might keep about a student; it includes registration activity, grades, payments, awards received, and financial aid applications and awards, as well as address, phone number, and student identification number.

**refund** — Tuition and fees that are paid back to a student when he or she has withdrawn from a course.

**register/registration** — To sign up or enroll in a course or courses. “Registration activity” includes enrolling, dropping/withdrawing, making payments, etc.

**requirements** — Minimum standards defined by the school, for example for admission or graduation. See also prerequisite; distribution requirements.

**resident** — For purposes of calculating a student’s tuition and fees, someone who has lived in the state for a specified length of time.

**scholarship** — (1) A type of financial aid grant. An organization may give scholarships according to academic achievement, financial need, or some other basis. The application process is often competitive..  
(2) A person’s ability and expertise in a particular discipline of study.

**section** — A specific class with its own days, hours, location, and instructor. A number of sections of a course may be offered during a term, each with different days, times, locations, and instructors but presenting the same curriculum.

**semester** — Some schools divide the academic year into two main periods—Fall and Spring Semesters—plus a shorter Summer Semester (compare to quarter).

**senior** — A student in the fourth year of a typical four-year college degree program.

**sophomore** — A student in the second year of a typical four-year college degree program.

**syllabus** (plural: syllabi) — An outline plan for a particular class, including textbook requirements, class meeting dates, reading assignments, examination dates, the instructor’s grading standards, etc.

**term** — A unit within the academic year, either a quarter or a semester depending on the school.

**transcript** — The record of the courses a student has taken and the grades he or she has earned at a school.

**transfer** — To move from one college or university to another and have the second institution recognize some or all of the courses the student took at the first one.

**tuition & fees** — Tuition is a student’s basic payment towards the cost of instruction at a school. Most schools also charge fees for laboratory equipment and materials, computer use, parking, and other costs.

**undergraduate** — A student who has not yet earned a bachelor’s degree; also refers to the courses and instructional programs such a student enrolls in.

**upper division** — The classes students are generally expected to take during the last two years of a typical four-year college degree program.

**waive/waiver** — To waive a right or a claim means to overlook it or give it up.  
(1) If a student meets specific criteria, the college may waive some of his or her tuition & fees (that is, some of the money owed to the college will be forgiven).  
(2) If a student demonstrates certain knowledge and abilities, an instructor may waive a course prerequisite (that is, allow the student to take the class even though he or she hasn’t completed the requirements for it).

**withdrawal** — The process of formally dropping a class or classes after the quarter or semester has started. A student might withdraw from one class, or from the college as a whole.

**work-study** — A type of financial aid which pays students to work part time during the school year.

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