

Family-to-Family College Knowledge Guide

This guide provides useful activities for counselors and other educators on building family engagement around college-knowledge, including tips for creating a parent/guardian ambassador network for parents/guardians who have navigated the college process to connect with parents/guardians who are new to the process.

In addition to the PDF version, we have provided this guide as a Microsoft Word document to be editable so you can adapt your copy for district size, community needs, family demographics, etc.

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Session Planning Templates

Template 1: Event Planning Overview

Event Title: _____ School/ District: _____

Date & Time: _____ Location / Platform: _____

Target Audience:

- Middle School High School Transfer First-Gen All Families

Primary Goal of Event: _____

Key Topics to Address:

- Academic Transition Financial Aid & Costs Emotional / Social Transition
 Campus Life & Housing Supporting Independence
 Other: _____

Staff Lead(s): _____

Support Staff: _____

Experienced Parent/Guardian 1: _____

Experienced Parent/Guardian 2: _____

Experienced Parent/Guardian 3: _____

Experienced Parent/Guardian 4: _____

Experienced Parent/Guardian 5: _____

Template 2: Event Agenda

Event Length: 60 min 75 min 90 min

Time	Activity	Lead
	Welcome & Purpose	
	Panel Introductions	
	Guided Panel Discussion	
	Q&A	
	Small Group Networking	
	Resources & Closing	

Template 3: Panelist Recruitment Form

Name: _____ Phone: _____

Email: _____

Student College Type:

Community College Public University Private University Trade/Technical

Topics You're Comfortable Discussing

Financial Aid First-Generation Experience Mental Health
 Living on Campus Academic Challenges Other: _____

College their student(s) attended?

Major? _____

Languages Spoken (if applicable): _____

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Panelist Training Guidelines

Purpose of the Panel

Your role as a panelist is to:

- Share real experiences (successes and challenges)
- Normalize different college pathways
- Offer reassurance and perspective
- Support families with honesty and empathy

You are **not** expected to be an expert. Your lived experience matters.

Panelist Guidelines

Do:

- Speak from personal experience
- Be honest and respectful
- Acknowledge challenges and solutions
- Encourage questions
- Keep responses concise (2-3 minutes)

Avoid:

- Naming or criticizing specific staff or institutions
- Giving absolute advice (“You must...”)
- Comparing students or families
- Oversharing sensitive personal information

Sample Panel Questions

- What surprised you most during your student’s first year?
- What mistakes did you make that others can learn from?
- How did your role as a parent/guardian change?
- What helped your student stay on track?
- What support did *you* need as a parent/guardian?

Panelist Preparation Checklist

- Reviewed event goals
- Selected 2-3 key stories to share
- Practiced concise responses
- Reviewed boundaries and expectations
- Confirmed date, time and format

Tips for Parent /Guardian Participants

Encourage Honest Storytelling

Parents/Guardians value:

- What went wrong and how it was fixed
- Emotional transitions
- Communication challenges
- Financial surprises

Normalize Different Paths

Reinforce that...

- Community college is a valid option
- Gap years can be beneficial
- Transferring is common
- Not all students finish in four years
- Trade schools and CTE programs help students finish faster and have high-paying jobs upon completion

Set Boundaries on Advice

Encourage...

- “This worked for us.” vs. “You should do this.”
- Respect for different family values and cultures

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Multi - Session Parent /Guardian Engagement Plan

Program Overview

Title: College Transition Parent/Guardian Series

Format: In-Person / Virtual / Hybrid

Audience: Families of Grades 8-12

Frequency: Monthly or Quarterly

“Experienced” Parents/Guardians: Each session should have 3-4 parents/guardians who have gone through the transition experience, to give feedback, answer questions and be a resource to parents/guardians who are going or are about to go through the college transition. Parents/guardians can repeat, but it is best to try not to exhaust the same resources. Create a pool of parents/guardians who can be representatives of the college transition experience and pull from that pool as needed.

Session 1: Understanding the College Transition – Student Family Meet & Greet

Focus: Emotional and Academic Shifts

- What changes after high school
- Parent/guardian roles vs. student independence
- Common first-year challenges

Activity: Parent/guardian discussion

Tools:

- Reflection worksheet (Parents/Guardians: What questions did you have when you entered, and what new ones do you have after you left?)
- Timeline infographic: [Timeline for My Transition to College](#) (IDRA)

Session 2: Paying for College – Parent /Guardian Panel

Focus: Financial Literacy

- FAFSA and TAFSA basics
- Scholarships and timelines
- Real cost vs. sticker price

Activity: Parent/Guardian Q&A: Parents/guardians will come with specific questions about paying for college, and the panelists will answer from their personal experience. Not all questions may have a solidified answer. This is more about opening lines of communication and discussion.

Tools:

- Financial aid glossary
 - FAFSA and TAFSA fliers
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Session 3: College Pathways & Fit – Parent /Guardian Panel

Focus: Options and Flexibility

- Community college and transfer paths
- Gap years
- Choosing fit over prestige

Activity: Parent/Guardian Q&A: Parents/Guardians will come with specific questions about college pathways. The panelists will answer from their personal experience.

Tools: Pathway comparison chart

Session 4: Supporting Student Well - Being – Student Family Meet & Greet

Focus: Mental Health and Communication

- Stress and homesickness
- When to step in vs. step back
- Campus support services

Activity: Scenario discussions

Session 5: Preparing for Launch – Family Meet & Greet

Focus: Practical Readiness

- Time management
- Communication expectations
- What parents/guardians wish they had known

Tools: Parent/guardian readiness checklist

Evaluation & Sustainability

Measure Success by...

- Attendance growth
- Parent/guardian feedback surveys
- Increased engagement
- Parent/guardian ambassador participation

Next Steps

- Identify future panelists
- Rotate topics annually
- Build parent/guardian leadership opportunities

Additional Tools and Support

Tool 1: Parent/Guardian Resource Table

Have the following items available for parents/guardians to take:

- FAFSA, TAFSA and financial aid guides
- College readiness timelines
- Mental health resources
- Campus support services overview
- Contact info for counseling staff

Tool 2: Feedback or Follow-up survey

This can be done as a paper or as a Google Form with questions linked to a QR code. Consider attaching this code to materials for parents/guardians to take home in addition to presenting it during your event. This way, when other questions come up later, the parents/guardians can use the QR code. Just remember to turn on notifications so that when new responses are submitted, you are alerted and can respond in a timely manner.

Questions to ask:

- What was most helpful?
- What could be improved?
- How can we make connecting with other parents/guardians easier?
- What topics should be covered next?
- What questions remain unanswered?

Common Pitfalls to Avoid

- Overloading parents/guardians with too much information
- Letting one voice dominate
- Focusing only on “elite” colleges
- Ignoring emotional transitions
- Forgetting to follow up

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Tips: Creating a Parent /Guardian Ambassador Network

Program Overview

This networking strategy enables parents/guardians to become involved with each other, giving support to others who are new to the college transition experience. This group can also be asked to take some workload off the school and counselors. Members can create their own networking events and give feedback to the counselors to work together to make current college transition families as informed as possible.

Purpose

The network is designed to:

- Provide trusted peer-to-peer guidance for families
- Reduce anxiety around college transitions
- Increase access to information for underserved families
- Build leadership capacity among parents/guardians
- Strengthen school-family partnerships

Identifying Parent/Guardian Ambassadors

Ideal Ambassador Qualities

- Willingness to share experiences honestly
- Respectful of diverse paths and outcomes
- Strong listening skills
- Reliability and follow-through
- Reflects the diversity of the school community

Recruitment Sources

- Previous panelists
- PTA/PTO leaders
- First-generation family advocates
- Multilingual parents/guardians
- Counselor recommendations

Recruitment Tools

- Interest form (opt-in)
- Personal invitation from counselors or administrators
- Post-event surveys asking parents/guardians to volunteer

Ambassador Roles & Responsibilities

Core Roles

- Serve as peer contacts for new families
- Participate in panels or small group discussions
- Assist with family nights and outreach
- Share resources and reminders
- Offer encouragement, not directives

Optional Expanded Roles

- Grade-level parent/guardian mentors
 - Language-specific family liaisons
 - Workshop co-facilitators
 - Event planning advisors
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Training & Support for Ambassadors

Initial Training Topics

- Program goals and boundaries
- Cultural humility and confidentiality
- Effective communication and listening
- Knowing when to refer families to school staff
- Avoiding misinformation

Provide Ongoing Support

- Quarterly check-ins
 - Updated resource packets
 - Clear escalation process for complex questions
 - Staff point-of-contact
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Ambassador Boundaries & Ethics

Ambassadors should...

- Share personal experiences, not professional advice
- Avoid giving financial or legal directives
- Respect family privacy
- Refer academic, financial aid, or mental health concerns to professionals

Provide ambassadors with a written **code of practice** to sign annually.

Structuring the Network

Recommended Models

- Cohort-based (one group per graduating class)
- Topic-based (financial aid, first-gen, transfer)
- Language or community-based

Communication Methods

- Email groups (opt-in)
 - Monthly virtual meetups
 - WhatsApp or Remind groups (school-approved)
 - School-managed contact directory
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Recognition & Retention

Recognition builds sustainability and pride.

Ways to Recognize Ambassadors

- Certificates or appreciation letters
 - Public acknowledgment (with consent)
 - End-of-year appreciation event
 - Leadership development opportunities
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Measuring Impact

Things to Track

- Number of families supported
- Attendance increases among targeted groups
- Parent/guardian confidence surveys
- Parent/guardian ambassador retention rates

Use data to refine roles and expand the program.

Build Long-Term Sustainability

- Rotate ambassadors annually
- Build leadership ladders for experienced parents/guardians
- Integrate ambassadors into counseling and family engagement plans
- Secure small funding for materials and recognition