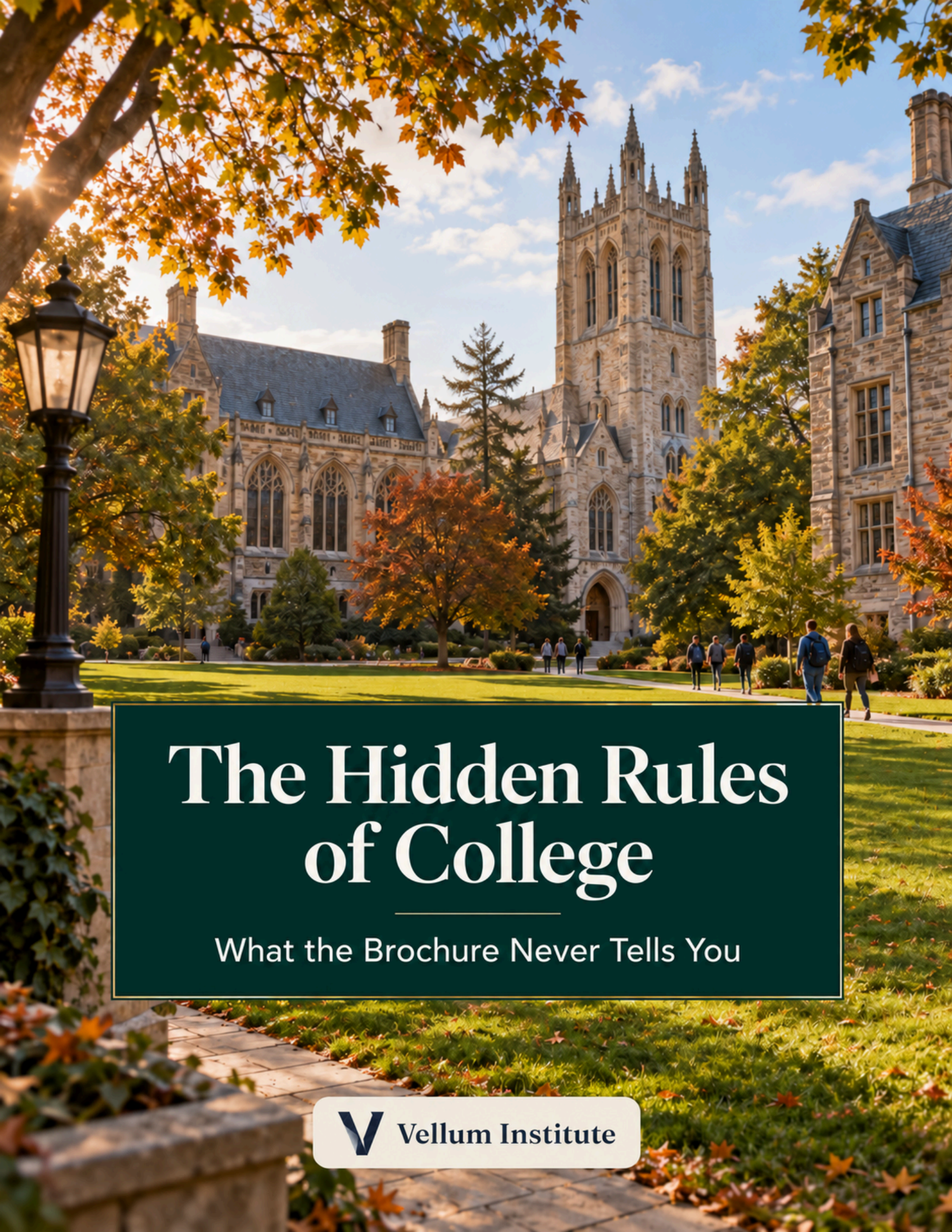




The Hidden Rules of College

What the Brochure Never Tells You

Cover note

Every fall, a counselor gets the same phone call. The student was fine in August. By week four, something has slipped, and nobody in the family can quite name what. It usually is not a crisis. It is a system nobody explained: delayed feedback, a syllabus that functions like a contract, office-hours etiquette nobody announces, and a belonging question that shows up only once the grades get real.

This guide names that system. It is a job tool, not a philosophy. Skim it in eight minutes, drop a single page into a senior meeting, or forward the family one-pager as a September check-in. Take what is useful. Leave the rest on the page.

Selective colleges are the default lens here, but the same friction shows up at large publics and for transfer students. Adjust the language to the student in front of you.

ORIENTATION

How to use this guide

The eight-minute pass. Read in this order: executive summary, operating-system checklist, early-warning checklist, red flags versus growing pains, one meeting script. That is enough for a hallway conversation with a worried parent.

The meeting insert. Screen-share or print one script plus the family one-pager. Keep the rest for yourself.

The parent forward. Send the family one-pager with a short note: "Ten hidden rules worth reviewing before move-in. Happy to talk through any of them."

First-gen and less-resourced families. Same substance, different framing. Do not imply the student is behind. Name the system, teach the moves, and assume capability.

Caseload triage. Rising juniors need the operating-system frame. Senior-spring students need scripts and logistics. Post-deposit families need the early-warning signs and red flags versus growing pains.

Printable handouts. Four single-page, ready-to-print handouts are gathered at the back of this guide, after the sources: one for students, one for families, and two quick-reference cards for counselors. Each stands on its own, so you can print and hand over just the page you need.

ORIENTATION

Executive summary

Most September struggles are not talent problems. College runs on a different operating system: delayed feedback, unwritten academic and social rules, and adults who expect initiative without ever explaining it out loud.

This guide leans on two lenses counselors already know well.

First, **the first eight weeks**: pace, reading load, office hours, blunt grades that arrive late, and the shock of unstructured time.

Second, **the hidden curriculum**: emailing faculty, reading a syllabus as a contract, using TAs, forming a study group, and asking for help without treating help as failure.

Plain language, early-warning signs, short scripts. Not a pitch for any program. Not a claim that every college works the same way.

COUNSELOR TAKEAWAY

Prepare students for friction, not for a perfect landing.

1 The operating-system shift

High school and college both have classes, grades, and adults with titles. The resemblance is the trap. Underneath it, the whole system has changed.

What changes

From a scheduled day to a self-authored one. In high school, the day is mostly built for the student. In college, the large blocks of unscheduled time look like freedom and behave like a test of planning. Students who thrive treat empty calendar space as work time they design, not leftover leisure.

From "complete the packet" to "produce judgment." High school often rewards finishing assigned steps in order. College more often rewards deciding what matters, synthesizing across readings, and showing your thinking under incomplete instructions. Ambiguity is not a glitch here. It is part of the assessment.

From frequent feedback to delayed, blunt feedback. Many college courses return almost nothing for weeks, then deliver a midterm or paper grade that reshapes the whole term. A student who waits for a professor to volunteer "how am I doing" can drift into real trouble before the first honest signal ever arrives.

Three surprises worth naming out loud

1. **Volume.** Reading is denser, problem sets take longer, and "keeping up" means starting earlier than the night before.
2. **Ambiguity.** Prompts get shorter, rubrics vary by professor, and "it depends" turns out to be a real, honest answer from faculty.
3. **Delayed grades.** Silence is not approval. It is often just the default state until a major assessment lands.

Counselor takeaway

Do not promise that orientation will teach the operating system, because it will not. Orientation covers logistics and school spirit well. What you can teach is the shift itself: ownership, initiative, and how to go looking for feedback before the first hard grade forces the issue.

Operating-system checklist (student-facing)

- ☐ I can name three weekly study blocks that are not "whenever I feel like it."
- ☐ I know a quiet gradebook for three weeks is normal, not proof that I am fine.
- ☐ For the first unclear assignment, I will reread the syllabus, ask a peer, then go to office hours, in that order.
- ☐ I treat asking for help early as a college skill, not a high-school rescue.

The same pattern often holds, only more so, at large publics, where lecture size and delayed feedback tend to be even more extreme.

What this looks like in a real week

A student who earned straight As on a tightly structured high-school schedule can still lose September by quietly treating Tuesday and Thursday afternoons as "free." Those afternoons are exactly where the problem sets and the reading were supposed to happen. Another student attends every single class and still underperforms, because nobody ever explained how much the midterm actually weighs against weekly homework.

Try three questions in any junior or senior meeting:

1. When your day is half empty, what gets scheduled first: sleep, study, or social life?
2. How will you know you are in trouble before a portal grade appears?
3. Who is your first human ask when an assignment is unclear: a peer, a TA, or the professor?

Students who can answer these out loud are already practicing the operating system. Students who cannot are not unmotivated. They are simply still running the high-school script in an environment that no longer rewards it.

2 The first eight weeks, week by week

PHOTO PLACEHOLDER

Move-in day: students and families unloading outside a residence hall

suggested crop 16:9, full width

Treat the opening of college as a sequence, not one long "adjustment period." Different weeks create genuinely different risks, and they deserve different advice.

Weeks 1 to 2: logistics overwhelm and social intensity

Move-in, IDs, adds and drops, dining, laundry, and a flood of new faces all at once. Sleep is short. Social calendars fill fast. Academics can feel light or strangely uneven.

What "normal hard" looks like: exhaustion, FOMO, roommate negotiation, and the sinking sense that everyone else already found a group.

Counselor watch points: goes quiet with family for days at a time (sometimes fine, sometimes withdrawal); skips class repeatedly to "catch up on sleep"; starts treating clubs as the whole job and coursework as optional.

Weeks 3 to 4: the first real assessments

Quizzes, problem sets, discussion posts, and early papers all start arriving. A lot of students say some version of: "I studied, but it did not look like what I expected."

What "normal hard" looks like: the first B or C shock; the discovery that highlighting is not studying; the sudden realization that office hours exist for a reason.

Counselor watch points: catastrophizing after one grade; avoiding the professor entirely; rewriting identity around "I am just not a STEM person" after a single assessment; hiding grades from family out of shame rather than ordinary privacy.

Weeks 5 to 8: the identity dip and belonging questions

Homesickness can spike once the novelty wears off. Friend groups reshuffle. Midterms arrive. Students start comparing their own insides to everyone else's outsides.

What "normal hard" looks like: questioning major fit, feeling behind socially, needing to rebuild a study system from scratch.

Counselor watch points: persistent isolation; talk of transferring as an escape rather than an exploration; sleep collapse; substance use as the main coping tool; "everyone belongs except me" hardening into a fixed belief rather than passing through as a mood.

Early-warning signs at a glance

Signal	Often growing pain	Worth a calm check-in
One rough quiz	Yes, if a study change follows	No change after two weeks
Quiet for a few days	Often normal immersion	Silence plus skipped class
FOMO / friend reshuffle	Common in month one	Isolation with no routine
Homesickness	Common if routines hold	Blocks sleep, food, or class
"I do not belong" after a hard week	Name it; coach the next step	Fixed belief plus withdrawal

Early-warning checklist (email-ready for families)

Feel free to adapt this and send it as-is:

SAMPLE EMAIL TO FAMILIES

In the first eight weeks, please watch for patterns more than single bad days:

- Classes skipped more than once, with no recovery plan
- No idea how grades are actually weighted in a course
- Refusing to contact a professor or TA after a confusing assignment
- Sleep routinely under six hours, or a flipped day-night schedule
- A friend group that revolves only around partying, with no study peer
- Sudden certainty that "I do not belong here" after one hard week

One hard week is common and usually passes on its own. A pattern that holds for two weeks with no reset plan is worth a calm check-in.

What to say, to normalize without minimizing

SAY THIS · ABOUT 20 SECONDS

"College gets hard on a delay. The brochure shows you move-in smiles. The real test is week four, when the first graded work comes back and the calendar is still full of optional events. Our job is to plan for that week now, while it is still easy to think clearly about it."

Counselor pacing tip

You do not need all eight weeks in one sitting. Rising juniors get the operating-system frame and unstructured time. Senior spring gets weeks three and four, the first assessments, plus the early-warning checklist. August check-ins get weeks five through eight: belonging dips, and red flags versus growing pains.

Week-by-week pocket card (for your notes)

Window	Student experience	Your prompt
Weeks 1 to 2	Logistics plus social flood	"Where will you study when the dorm is loud?"
Weeks 3 to 4	First graded surprise	"What does the syllabus say the midterm is worth?"
Weeks 5 to 8	Belonging plus midterms	"Is this a hard week, or a stuck pattern?"

3 The hidden curriculum: academic

PHOTO PLACEHOLDER

A student at office hours, talking with a professor over an open notebook

suggested crop 16:9, full width

The hidden curriculum is the set of expectations that quietly shape grades and faculty relationships, usually without a single lesson ever titled "How College Works." Your job is to teach it out loud.

The syllabus as contract

Teach students to read a syllabus like a contract on day one, not like optional packet fluff they can skim later.

Syllabus pull checklist (week one)

- ☐ Grading weights, meaning what actually moves the grade
- ☐ Late-work policy, and whether a "life happens" email actually helps
- ☐ Attendance and participation, as the professor defines them
- ☐ Required materials and platforms
- ☐ Exam and major deadline dates
- ☐ Office hours and how to book them
- ☐ Academic integrity expectations, in that department's own language

MYTH WORTH PUNCTURING

"College does not take attendance, so showing up does not matter." In practice, presence often matters anyway: participation grades, pop quizzes, and the plain fact that faculty notice patterns in smaller courses.

Office hours are normal, not remedial

High performers use office hours to stress-test their understanding and clarify a prompt before it becomes a problem. Waiting until failure turns office hours into emergency care instead of routine maintenance. Reframe it early.

Office-hours mini-checklist (weeks 1 to 4)

- ☐ I know the hours, or the booking link, for each hard course.
- ☐ I have made one low-stakes visit with a specific question in hand.
- ☐ I bring a short attempt at the work, plus a notebook.
- ☐ If the professor's time conflicts with mine, I use TA hours first and follow up.

Teaching assistants

At many colleges, TAs run sections, grade the work, and hold their own hours. Ignoring TAs means ignoring a real part of the instructional team. Encourage students to learn their names, learn the section's own expectations, and learn how a regrade request actually works.

Reading: density, not page count

Twenty pages of dense theory can outwork sixty pages of narrative. Teach a simple method instead of raw endurance:

1. Preview the headings and the conclusion first.
2. Read for claims and evidence, not for highlighting everything in sight.
3. Write a five-sentence summary in plain language.
4. Bring one honest confusion to class or office hours.

Study groups that actually work

High-yield groups compare approaches, quiz each other, and leave with a concrete next step. Low-yield groups reread notes together in the same room and call it studying.

Quick norms worth setting: same time every week, phones face down, full presence, and end by naming what each person will do before the next meeting.

Student email templates (*in the student's own voice*)

TEMPLATE A · CLARIFYING AN ASSIGNMENT

Subject: Question on [Course number] [Assignment name]

Dear Professor [Name],

I am in your [day/time] section of [Course]. I have read the syllabus and the assignment sheet, and I want to confirm one point: are we expected to [specific interpretation], or is the focus more on [alternate interpretation]?

I have drafted an outline and can bring it to office hours on [two options], if that would help.

Thank you,

[Name]

[Student ID if required]

TEMPLATE B · AFTER A DISAPPOINTING GRADE

Subject: Office hours request after [Quiz/Exam/Paper]

Dear Professor [Name],

I am in your [Course]. I have reviewed my graded [assessment] against the rubric, and I would like to understand where my approach missed the mark, and how to prepare differently for the next one.

Could I attend office hours on [option 1] or [option 2]? If neither works, I can meet during [TA] hours first and follow up with you afterward.

Thank you,
[Name]

Some students rehearse these office-hours conversations and finished written work in a short pre-college seminar or a supervised practice setting before move-in. It is one path among several, not a requirement.

Attendance, participation, and "optional" review sessions

Faculty language can genuinely mislead here. An "optional" review session is often the highest-yield hour of the week. Participation can mean seminar talk, online posts, or lab work, depending on the department. Teach students to ask, in week one: "How is participation actually recorded in this course?"

Academic integrity, without the scare tactics

Integrity conversations land better as clarity than as threat. Departments define collaboration differently from one another. A problem set that welcomes discussion of ideas may still forbid sharing written solutions outright.

HIDDEN RULE

When unsure, ask before you collaborate, not after. Faculty would much rather field one awkward question than manage a conduct case later.

4 The hidden curriculum: social and belonging

PHOTO PLACEHOLDER

Students gathered around a dining hall table, mid-conversation

suggested crop 16:9, full width

Belonging is not a trait a student either has or lacks going in. It is a set of skills and conditions that unfold gradually over the first weeks, for almost everyone.

Friend formation is fast for some, slow for others

Some students lock into a friend group within seventy-two hours. Others take a full month. Both can be perfectly healthy. Early intensity is not the only valid timeline, whatever the group chat implies.

Counselor language that helps: "Speed of friendship is not a grade. Consistency of contact is a far better signal than day-two chemistry."

FOMO, without diagnosing it

Students will miss events. They will see other people's curated photos from the ones they missed. Name FOMO for what it is, a common and temporary state, without turning it into a clinical story.

A useful phrase: "Your nervous system is collecting evidence that you are behind. The real question is whether that evidence is a pattern over two weeks, or just a weekend of highlights from people you barely know yet."

Roommate conflict as a skill to build, not a catastrophe

Most roommate tension comes down to sleep, cleaning, guests, and shared stuff. Treat it as practice in making a direct, specific ask.

A workable sequence: name the specific behavior, say its impact, make a clear ask, and agree on a date to check back in. Involving an RA is a tool here, not an admission of failure.

"Everyone else belongs" is a common thinking error

Students compare their own private doubt to everyone else's public ease. That error tends to peak in weeks five through eight.

PHRASES THAT HELP, WITHOUT OVERCLAIMING

"Feeling unsure in week six is genuinely common, even among very capable students."

"Belonging often lags behind competence. Keep putting in the academic and social reps anyway."

"If sadness or panic is persistent, getting worse, or blocking sleep and class, we bring in campus counseling together. That is a sign of strength, not drama."

Stay in your lane as a counselor. Do not try to play therapist. Do normalize help-seeking, and do name the actual campus resources by their real names.

Clubs, identity groups, and the middle path

Joining everything in week one is a common overcorrection. Joining nothing is the opposite one. Aim for two commitments with real, recurring meeting times, plus one low-stakes social routine on top. Identity-based and cultural organizations can be genuinely strong belonging anchors, including for first-gen students, without ever being framed as remediation.

Counselor caution: campuses vary widely in density, commute patterns, and housing. Match the advice to the actual setting in front of you. Social struggle is not automatically a networking failure.

5 Independence without a script

PHOTO PLACEHOLDER

A student at a dorm-room desk, planner and laundry basket in frame

suggested crop 16:9, full width

Independence is not only "no more curfew." It is decision load, spread across time, sleep, money, and priorities, with far fewer adults around to interrupt a bad pattern before it sets in.

Time, sleep, and decision load

Students inherit a blank calendar and optional everything. The most common failure mode is quiet optimism: "I will start once I feel ready." The fix is to block classes, meals, sleep, exercise, and study time first. Social life fills in whatever is left over. Sleep debt shows up as irritability, illness, and academic shortcuts, and families often miss all three on a cheerful Sunday phone call.

Independence also fails through a slow pile of small yeses. Teach a weekly no, and teach "good enough for this month" as a real decision for the choices that would otherwise freeze a student trying to optimize everything at once.

Money, agreed before move-in

Meal plans, delivery apps, rideshares, and club dues add up faster than anyone expects. A weekly money check beats a mid-November crisis every time.

Worth agreeing on in advance:

- What the meal plan actually covers versus what delivery apps are for
- Whether textbooks are bought, rented, or found at the library first
- A monthly spending ceiling for discretionary costs
- What actually counts as an emergency worth an extra transfer

HIDDEN RULE

Money conflict often shows up disguised as academic stress. A student working extra shifts to cover rideshares can look "uncommitted" to coursework, when the real issue is an unspoken budget nobody named out loud.

Failure modes families tend to miss

- The student reports "everything is fine" while quietly skipping breakfast and two discussion sections a week

- A parent solves every logistical snag remotely, so the student never actually practices navigating the registrar or financial aid
- The family treats one B- as a catastrophe, so the student starts hiding the next grade instead
- The student equates independence with isolation, and rejects tutoring or disability services that would genuinely help

Independence checklist

- ☐ Weekly calendar has sleep and study blocks before social plans, not after
- ☐ Student can navigate portal passwords, billing, and advising holds without a parent on speakerphone every single time
- ☐ Family and student share a real check-in cadence, for example two calls a week, not open-ended surveillance
- ☐ Student knows where tutoring, the writing center, and counseling actually sit on the campus map
- ☐ Student has a small emergency fund plan and a "text before you Venmo-panic" rule with family
- ☐ Family has agreed on the money rules above before move-in day, not during it

6 Meeting scripts

Each script runs about 60 to 90 seconds. Practice one out loud before you need it. Adjust names and campus type freely.

SCRIPT 1 · RISING JUNIOR · ABOUT 75 SEC

"College is not just harder high school. It runs on a different operating system. You will get more unstructured time, less frequent feedback, and assignments that ask for judgment, not just completion. Over the next year, I want you to practice three moves: plan a study week that is not only homework due tomorrow, ask one teacher a real clarifying question by email or after class, and finish one piece of work early enough to actually revise it. Those habits transfer directly. Grades matter, and so does learning how to operate when nobody is managing your hour-by-hour day for you."

SCRIPT 2 · SENIOR SPRING · ABOUT 75 SEC

"Between now and move-in, the hidden curriculum matters as much as the packing list. Find a sample syllabus from your intended major online if you can. Practice a short professor email that is clear and respectful. Decide how you will use the first two weeks: locate office hours, find a study place, meet one academic resource person, not only new friends. When the first confusing assignment hits, your default should be syllabus, then peer, then instructor, not panic and not silence. You do not need a perfect plan. You need a first-response plan."

SCRIPT 3 · PARENT MEETING · ABOUT 80 SEC

"Your student is capable. The rough patch we often see in September is not usually a talent problem. It is a systems problem. College delays grades, expects initiative, and hands over large open blocks of time. The most helpful role for a parent in September is calm coaching: ask what the syllabus says about grading weights, ask whether they have been to office hours, and watch for patterns like skipped classes or collapsed sleep. Try not to turn one early grade into an identity crisis. If you see two full weeks of stuckness with no reset plan, call me, and we will problem-solve with the student, not around them."

SCRIPT 4 · FIRST-GEN FAMILY · ABOUT 80 SEC

"College has rules that are real, even when nobody prints them in the welcome folder. That is true for a lot of families, including ones who have sent students before. We are going to treat those rules as learnable skills: how to read a syllabus, how to email a professor, how to use tutoring without shame, how to talk to a roommate directly instead of stewing. Your student belongs in that room. Our job together is to make the operating instructions visible. I will share a one-page checklist you can keep on the fridge. When something feels confusing, that confusion is information about the system, not a verdict on your student."

7 Red flags versus growing pains

GROWING PAINS · NORMALIZE, COACH, RECHECK IN ONE TO TWO WEEKS

- + Homesickness that still allows class attendance and basic routines
- + One poor quiz or paper, followed by a concrete study change
- + Friend-group reshuffling after the first month
- + Mild FOMO alongside continued involvement in at least one structured activity
- + Roommate annoyance that the student is already addressing directly
- + Uncertainty about major that leads to advising appointments, not a total shutdown

RED FLAGS · ESCALATE WITH STUDENT CONSENT WHERE POSSIBLE; INVOLVE CAMPUS RESOURCES PROMPTLY

- ! Repeated class absences with no recovery plan
- ! Inability to sleep for several nights, or a fully inverted sleep schedule with daytime collapse
- ! Talk of self-harm, hopelessness, or "everyone would be better off"
- ! Complete social isolation lasting more than two weeks, with withdrawal from previously liked activities
- ! Substance use that is driving missed obligations or unsafe situations
- ! Panic or despair that blocks eating, leaving the room, or contacting anyone for help
- ! A financial or conduct crisis the student is actively hiding while consequences mount

Counselor stance: name the difference out loud with families. "Hard is expected. Stuck and worsening is a reason to act." When in doubt about safety, follow your school's crisis protocol and campus emergency resources without hesitation. This guide is not a clinical manual.

8 What orientation usually skips

Orientation is genuinely valuable. It is also crowded, and these gaps show up year after year:

1. **How to read a syllabus for grading risk**, not only for the academic calendar.
2. **What office hours are for**, when a student is not already failing.
3. **How to email faculty**, without sounding like a text message or a legal brief.
4. **How delayed feedback actually feels**, to someone used to weekly grades.
5. **How to build a study week**, when half the day starts out blank.
6. **How to use TAs and tutoring**, without a shame story attached.
7. **How roommate conflict escalation works**, step by step.
8. **How belonging dips in weeks five to eight**, right after the welcome-week posters come down.
9. **How parents can coach without taking over** portals and emails entirely.
10. **Where to go when "I am fine" is no longer true**, including counseling and advising maps.

Teach even four of these before move-in, and you have already done work orientation rarely has time for.

9 Closing and next steps

College success is a set of operating skills. They can be taught early, practiced under low stakes, and coached when the hard feedback finally arrives. Your leverage is timing: juniors build habits, seniors build first-response plans, and families learn to coach systems instead of only moods and GPAs. If this guide makes even one meeting more concrete, it has done its job.

What to do with this guide tomorrow

1. Pick one script and practice it once out loud before your next senior meeting.
2. Forward the family one-pager to two families who tend to like concrete checklists.
3. Add the early-warning checklist language to your August email template.
4. Mark your calendar for a week-four pulse check with the students who tend to go quiet when grades get hard.

Small, repeated moves beat one perfect workshop every time.

OPTIONAL NEXT STEP FOR COUNSELORS

If you want occasional plain-language notes on the college transition and counselor practice, The Vellum Brief is available as a light professional resource, no obligation attached. This handbook stands on its own as a practical field guide either way.

Thank you for the work you do in the gap between the brochure and the first midterm.

Sources and further reading

Field guide, not a research monograph. These practice notes draw on themes in the following sources.

1. Armstrong, Elizabeth A., and Laura T. Hamilton. *Paying for the Party: How College Maintains Inequality*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013.
2. Chambliss, Daniel F., and Christopher G. Takacs. *How College Works*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014.
3. Gable, Rachel. *The Hidden Curriculum: First Generation Students at Legacy Universities*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2021.
4. Jack, Anthony Abraham. *The Privileged Poor: How Elite Colleges Are Failing Disadvantaged Students*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019.
5. Pascarella, Ernest T., and Patrick T. Terenzini. *How College Affects Students: A Third Decade of Research*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2005.
6. Tinto, Vincent. *Completing College: Rethinking Institutional Action*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012.

Also useful: campus advising, residence life, counseling, and learning centers. Local process beats generic advice whenever a specific student is stuck.

Before you go: the operating-system checklist

College runs on a different operating system than high school: more unstructured time, feedback that arrives late and blunt, and adults who expect you to ask for help rather than wait to be offered it. Use this page during your first weeks on campus.

- ☐ I can name three weekly study blocks that are not "whenever I feel like it."
- ☐ I know a quiet gradebook for three weeks is normal, not proof that I am fine.
- ☐ For the first unclear assignment, I will reread the syllabus, ask a peer, then go to office hours, in that order.
- ☐ I treat asking for help early as a college skill, not a high-school rescue.

Three questions worth asking yourself

1. When your day is half empty, what gets scheduled first: sleep, study, or social life?
2. How will you know you are in trouble before a portal grade appears?
3. Who is your first human ask when an assignment is unclear: a peer, a TA, or the professor?

From **The Hidden Rules of College**, a Vellum Institute field guide · velluminstitute.org

Ten hidden rules of college

PRINT THIS PAGE · CHECK THE BOXES TOGETHER BEFORE MOVE-IN

Counselor forward line: "Please review these ten hidden rules with your student before move-in. They head off a lot of September surprise. Happy to walk through any item with you."

- ☐ **Unstructured time is a test.** Put study blocks on the calendar before social plans fill the week.
- ☐ **The syllabus is a contract.** Find the grading weights, the late policy, and the major dates in week one.
- ☐ **Silence in the gradebook is not success.** Ask how you are doing before the first big assessment comes back.
- ☐ **Office hours are for everyone.** Go once early with a specific question, not only after a crisis.
- ☐ **TAs are part of the teaching team.** Learn their names, section rules, and hours.
- ☐ **Reading is about density, not page count.** Summarize claims in your own words.
- ☐ **Help-seeking is a college skill.** Tutoring and the writing center are normal tools, not last resorts.
- ☐ **Roommate tension is usually negotiable.** Use clear, specific asks, and involve an RA if you need to.
- ☐ **Belonging can lag.** Feeling unsure in weeks five to eight is common. Watch patterns, not one bad night.
- ☐ **Family check-ins work best as coaching.** Ask about systems and sleep, not only "are you happy?"

Family check box (optional): We reviewed this page together on _____

Red flags vs. growing pains: quick reference

Use this during a check-in when you are not sure whether a student's rough patch is ordinary adjustment or something that needs escalation.

GROWING PAINS · NORMALIZE, COACH, RECHECK IN ONE TO TWO WEEKS

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- + One poor quiz or paper, followed by a concrete study change
- + Friend-group reshuffling after the first month
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- ! Complete social isolation lasting more than two weeks, with withdrawal from previously liked activities
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- ! Panic or despair that blocks eating, leaving the room, or contacting anyone for help
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Counselor stance: name the difference out loud with families. "Hard is expected. Stuck and worsening is a reason to act." When in doubt about safety, follow your school's crisis protocol and campus emergency resources without hesitation. This guide is not a clinical manual.

Meeting scripts: quick-reference card

Keep this at your desk during meeting season. Full 60-90 second scripts are in the main guide; these are the cues to glance at right before you sit down.

Rising junior. Different operating system. Practice three moves: plan a real study week, ask one real clarifying question, revise one piece of work early.

Senior spring. Hidden curriculum matters as much as the packing list. First two weeks: locate office hours, find a study place, meet one resource person. Default when confused: syllabus, then peer, then instructor.

Parent meeting. Not a talent problem, a systems problem. Coach on grading weights and office-hours use. Watch for skipped classes or collapsed sleep. Two stuck weeks with no reset plan: call me.

First-gen family. The rules are real even when unwritten. Treat them as learnable skills, not a deficit. Confusion is information about the system, not a verdict on the student.

From **The Hidden Rules of College**, a Vellum Institute field guide · velluminstitute.org

About Vellum Institute

Vellum Institute is a small, application-based online institute built around live faculty seminars for highly motivated high school students. Selected students are known as Vellum Fellows. This page is a plain profile for counselors, not a pitch deck.

Who we are

We are experienced faculty with teaching backgrounds in research universities, graduate and undergraduate programs, and high school contexts, in the United States and overseas. We built Vellum to prepare highly motivated students for a fast-changing college experience, one where initiative and skill matter alongside credentials. Subject areas and student composition are designed to reflect prestigious US college campuses.

How a seminar works

- Eight weekly 90-minute live sessions, with the same professor and the same small group throughout
- A cap of 15 students, discussion-based by design, not lecture as the default
- Ends in a substantive original project the student actually authored
- An optional supervised one-on-one Apprenticeship with the same faculty member after the seminar
- Application-based cohorts running through the year, with interest currently open for the inaugural spring cohort

Offerings counselors can name

1. **Live seminars and courses** for Vellum Fellows, application-based, full catalog on the site
2. **Apprenticeship:** an optional supervised 1:1 continuation after a completed seminar, with the same professor
3. **The Vellum Brief:** a short counselor newsletter on what is changing in undergraduate education
4. **Counselor and partner relationship:** practical field tools and real dialogue with counselors and IECs, and this handbook is part of that partnership, including as a thank-you for survey partners

Why counselors might care

Students who rehearse seminar norms, clarifying questions, and finished work before move-in often land the first term with fewer surprise collisions. Vellum is one structured way to practice those moves under live faculty pushback. This handbook stands on its own either way.

Site: <https://velluminstitute.org/>

For questions about cohorts, The Vellum Brief, or a counselor partnership, start at the site. No obligation attached to using this field guide.