Back to School 2026

The Steve Fund

Four Lessons Before Your College Journey Begins: A Primer for Transitioning to College for Students

Author:

Michael Gerard Mason, PhD, LPC (Dean, Office of African-American Affairs, University of Virginia; Director, Project RISE)

Thousands of students will leave their hometowns, states, and families in just a few days to improve themselves by attaining a college education. This improvement has been the promise of higher education for nearly 400 years. Almost 30 years ago, I left for this promise as well.

This article attempts to share lessons learned since then and that I have shared with thousands of students. Consider them a starting point, a few worthy additions to the luggage you will carry to your college.

Lesson 1: Pay attention to what you pack for college, external and internal.

By now, the contents of your external luggage are mostly set. The material things you've accrued, the resources your family will send with you, the best you have is the best you have. This reality is not true for your internal luggage. Take time to store as much of your valuable assets as possible inside it. Tuck away good memories and experiences like:

- Your favorite memory of your family,
- The best plot line from a book you have read,
- A favorite movie line,
- An influential teacher or mentor,
- The feeling of happiness, and
- Any insights you have had about who you are becoming.

These assets will have great value to you and others. Those of us willing to share the contents of our internal luggage are more likely to build lasting community. Pack well and be ready to share.

About the Steve Fund

The Steve Fund is the nation's leading organization focused on supporting the mental health and emotional well-being of young people. We work with colleges and universities, nonprofits, researchers, mental health experts, families, and young people to promote programs and strategies that build understanding and assistance for the mental and emotional health of young people.

Lesson 2: Bridging AND Bonding; NOT Bridging OR Bonding.

Speaking of community, when you arrive at college, you will begin seeking your community. Community building is our effort to recreate the familial relationships we leave behind or wish we had. This effort is reasonable and necessary. Trust and psychological safety are nearby when we have a sense of connectedness or camaraderie with others. For many students, especially students of color, there will be great encouragement to try new things, to build a community that looks different from the community they left behind, a new community with other skills and attributes than they have, or a community that allows them to try on different qualities (i.e. personas, personality traits, or identities).

This emphasis on new fits within the category of "bridging." Trying new things, gaining new experiences, meeting new people, and exploring differences are all great tools for bridging. Use them.

Often, however, students commit to "bridging" at the expense of bonding. "Bonding" describes our experiences of connection we've felt with our families of origin and extended families . In the safety of communities where we've shared experiences, ethics and values, cultural practices, and traditions, we can make sense of our learnings during our bridging to new communities and experiences.

Authentic and deep learning requires bridging and bonding. Consider giving yourself permission to do both. Pay no mind to critiques of "self-segregation" or judgments for "sitting together at the cafeteria table." You will need your bonded community to get through the difficulties of bridging. Create both for yourselves.

About the Steve Fund

The Steve Fund is the nation's leading organization focused on supporting the mental health and emotional well-being of young people. We work with colleges and universities, nonprofits, researchers, mental health experts, families, and young people to promote programs and strategies that build understanding and assistance for the mental and emotional health of young people

Lesson 3: College will be wonderful, however, in different ways represented in television and the media.

These next four years will be some of the most important in your life. A common expectation is that they will also be the best, most fun, and most free years of your lives. This expectation will be partly true. College will be fun! And college will also be challenging.

On average, the most successful students spend 45 to 60 hours a week attending to their learning. This time commitment is more than most of your parents will work in a week. There will be opportunities for living it up, partying, and having fun. Working and playing hard, however, are not what makes college wonderful. For the first time, most of you will likely be venturing out on your own absent the support of K-12 education, the organization of your families, and for the first time, fully experiencing your peers as adults.

In addition to the good times that will come, you will soon encounter people with difficulties impacting their collegiate experience. There is a unique joy in helping them and receiving help from them. Realizing that we can go through problems and overcome them will be the beginning of appreciating how good it is to be indeed alive. Revel in this.

About the Steve Fund

The Steve Fund is the nation's leading organization focused on supporting the mental health and emotional well-being of young people. We work with colleges and universities, nonprofits, researchers, mental health experts, families, and young people to promote programs and strategies that build understanding and assistance for the mental and emotional health of young people

Lesson 4: Sometimes, even with your best efforts, you may need the help of trained peers and professionals. Accept it.

Over the last few years, students have borne the brunt of the disruptions due to the pandemic and the increasing impact on our society. Additionally, we have seen an increase in challenges to wellness and the number of students reporting significant distress during their college years. According to recent estimates, as many as 70% of students will experience moderate to significant distress during the college years. Even more, students report feeling alone and isolated at record numbers. Both of these increases are true for all students. Yet, underserved students have been reporting exponential increases in both.

I suspect you will initially struggle alone or with limited support when you encounter intense difficulties such as these. Students just like you have given a few reasons for this:

- Not wanting to be a burden to others,
- Feeling ashamed or anxious about being vulnerable,
- Not having time or money to receive help, or
- Not having enough information about resources.

Despite the "I" in "diploma," no one makes this journey alone. Before you need to, start considering your relationship to these beliefs. Begin challenging yourself to build relationships with professional help.

At each university or college, you will discover student counseling services, the Office of Dean of Students, and Cultural Centers. These are carefully managed bastions of support. These offices will also likely have peer support programs (i.e., peer counselors, mentors, and advisors). Make good use of all these resources. You and your success are important to them.

Feel free to pick and choose or prioritize these lessons. Some lessons will resonate immediately; others might resonate a year from now. Consider them a starting point, a few worthy additions to the items you will carry with you to college. Also, each lesson will lead to others. Pick one and take the path wherever it leads you. College can offer the best opportunity to learn, and there is great joy in learning.

Good luck!

About the Steve Fund

The Steve Fund is the nation's leading organization focused on supporting the mental health and emotional well-being of young people. We work with colleges and universities, nonprofits, researchers, mental health experts, families, and young people to promote programs and strategies that build understanding and assistance for the mental and emotional health of young people