

# 10 Rules For Going To College When Nobody Really Expected You To

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- 1 A vital revolution in American education has launched a slew of academic programs and charter schools that pluck bright minority, poor and blue-collar students from the educational abyss and turn them into college-bound scholars. Teachers are inspiring them to dream while showing them how to study, do research, write term papers, think critically and effectively cram for finals.
- 2 In many ways, the kids have learned the hard parts of surviving college.
- 3 But when the mere act of attending college is totally unexpected, there are unforeseen obstacles—including family and friends—that tend to blow nontraditional students off their paths like land mines.
- 4 Recently I spoke to a high school graduating class at Menlo-Atherton Computer Academy, a program in Silicon Valley that captures bright students who would have fallen through the cracks in the school system. Of the 41 students, 37 are slated for school next fall. And because they are excellent students, they imagine college being a piece of cake.
- 5 As someone who was lucky to attend college, I know there are difficult challenges unique to that particular group, one that is expanding here and all over the country.
- 6 I grew up in East Los Angeles and attended the famous Garfield High of the 1988 film “Stand and Deliver.” I was gone by the time Jaime Escalante, an unorthodox math teacher, had the nerve to successfully teach advanced placement calculus to underachieving Mexican-American kids.
- 7 As a book-loving barrio kid, I went off to college having no idea it would take me eight years to muddle through because I did not know then what I know now.
- 8 That’s why my graduation speech at Menlo was dubbed “Top 10 Rules for the Guess Who’s Going to College?” Like a certain late-night TV host, let’s start this adaptation of my talk at the end and work our way to the top.
- 9 Rule No. 10: Be a total student. Even if you live at home, work full-time and attend school part-time, you must feel and think like a full-time student. Studying is the highest priority. Hang out more on campus. Join student clubs. Get involved. Hang out less or not at all with old friends who aren’t doing anything. Just say no to those who would interfere with your studies, even if they don’t mean to get in the way.
- 10 No. 9: Resist the temptation to buy expensive stuff. Do you really need a late-model car or those shiny, spinning, chrome rims to make it look cooler? I’ve been there, done that. I bought a motorcycle when I should have selected an electric typewriter. A nice set of wheels may carry you many miles, but a good education will carry you for life.

- 11 No. 8: Handle the family crises that pressure students like you to leave school. Somebody dear to you will likely become deathly ill. It takes only one medical catastrophe or foreclosure or something as terrible to make you feel guilty about attending college. Some issues might set your siblings against you for not doing your share to help. Always remember: The best thing you can do for your family is to be the one who got a college education.
- 12 No. 7: Your parents will love this one: Don't worry too much about the high cost of college tuition. In most cases, only the wealthy pay the full bill. Go to the best school for you—no matter what. Some wise financial digging—at almost any school—will unearth a reasonable combination of grants, loans and work-study.
- 13 No. 6: Study harder in college. Put in more time, effort and energy than you did in high school. College professors rule on campus. And often, they're egomaniacal and nasty compared with the kindly, nurturing teachers you've had until now—so don't take it personally. And trust your fellow pupils, but be cautious. College breeds dangerous depths of competition.
- 14 No. 5: You will become lonely or homesick and it will upset you very much. Many minority and blue-collar students feel terrible isolation at big, public campuses and also at small, elite colleges. Don't question whether you belong there—you do. And don't "run" home. Call home, seek out students with similar interests and backgrounds and discuss your mutual anxieties. Soon the worst will pass.
- 15 No. 4: Get to know students of different racial, ethnic or social backgrounds. College is a prime gateway to our ever-shrinking, globalizing, melting-pot world. Learn another language. Success comes to those who branch out, not to those to shrink back to the only corner they ever knew.
- 16 No. 3: Ignore career confusion. Stay in school even if your dream job seems to become a delusion. Taking a break to rethink your future is only for rich kids. For you, that idea is Armageddon—the first step to dropping out. It's OK to change your major, just remain intent on graduating as soon as you can. You will pick up missing pieces on the job or in graduate school.
- 17 No. 2: You are much more than a future employee, so don't think like one. College isn't a four-year application for a specific job. Study what you love. Campuses are delightful villages of practical and heart's delight learning. Embrace and expand there, even if the job market says you're an idiot. I have two nieces who graduated with liberal studies degrees. Guess what? They both got plum jobs with a multinational insurance company before graduation day. Take that, business majors!
- 18 No. 1: Remember where you came from and who helped you get this far. Your family and community installed good things in your head, heart and soul. That foundation is what will support you as you figure out this world, improve upon it and attempt to correct the injustices you, your family and your community have endured. Jump off that foundation and you plop down in quicksand and so do all the people who helped you ascend. There is no worse sinking feeling than that.
- 19 Thank you and good luck.