THE #FKLM FAMILY BLUEPRINT

Questions to Ask a College Before You Commit

Educational & Scholarship Pathways · College Planning

Ten questions that reveal whether a campus will actually support a justice-impacted student.

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A free guide from My Fairy GodParents — for youth impacted by parental incarceration, justice-impacted youth, and the caregivers and families who support them.
myfairygodparents.org/resources/family-blueprint

Print, write on it, and share it with the people helping your family.

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> *Ten questions that reveal whether a campus will actually support a justice-impacted student.*

THE DIFFERENCE THIS MAKES

Every college markets itself as supportive. The difference between schools is not the brochure, it is whether specific offices and people exist and whether they are reachable in week three of a hard semester.

For a student who is justice-impacted, financially stretched, or the first in the family to attend, that difference decides whether they finish. National completion patterns are blunt about this: students leave far more often over money, logistics, and isolation than over academics.

These questions can be asked by phone or email before committing, by a student or a caregiver, without disclosing anything about the family's circumstances. The answers — and how readily they come — tell you a great deal.

ASK ABOUT MONEY AFTER THE FIRST YEAR

Aid offers are frequently strongest in the first year. Ask directly: is this aid package renewable for four years, what are the conditions for keeping it, and what happens if the student's grade point average dips one semester.

Ask what happens if a family's finances change mid-year — job loss, a household change — and whether the school has an emergency grant fund. Many schools do, and most students never learn of it until after they have already withdrawn.

Ask whether there are fees not included in tuition: lab fees, technology fees, health insurance that may be charged automatically, and what it costs to stay on campus during breaks when a student may have nowhere else to go.

ASK WHO THE HUMAN BEING IS

Ask whether each student is assigned an academic advisor, how often they meet, and whether it is the same person each year. Continuity matters more than credentials.

Ask what the school offers for first-generation students specifically — a program, a dedicated office, a summer bridge, a cohort. A school with a named program has thought about this; a school that answers

vaguely has not.

Ask about mental-health services: how many counselors, how long the wait for a first appointment, whether there is a cost, and what happens after the session limit. "We have a counseling center" is not an answer to any of those.

+ ASK ABOUT THE PRACTICAL THINGS THAT END ENROLLMENTS

Housing during breaks. Many campuses close residence halls for winter break, and a student with an unstable home situation needs to know before enrolling whether they can stay.

Food. Ask whether there is a campus food pantry and whether meal plans cover weekends and breaks. Food insecurity among college students is common and rarely discussed on tours.

Transportation, childcare for student parents, and whether a laptop is required or provided. Each of these has ended more enrollments than any course ever did.

+ ASK ABOUT SUPPORT FOR JUSTICE-IMPACTED STUDENTS

A growing number of institutions have programs, staff, or student organizations specifically for students impacted by the justice system, including students with a family member who is or has been incarcerated. Ask whether one exists — the answer itself is informative.

Ask whether the application asks about criminal history and how that information is used, if that is relevant to the student. Practices differ by institution and by state, and a direct question to an admissions office is the reliable way to learn a specific school's approach.

A student never has to disclose a family member's incarceration to ask any of this. "Do you have support programs for students from families affected by the justice system?" is a question anyone might ask.

+ HOW TO READ THE ANSWERS

Speed and specificity matter more than content. An office that answers within a day with a name and a phone number will probably do the same when a student is in trouble. An office that takes two weeks and sends a link will do that too.

Ask to be connected with a current student, ideally one in a similar situation. Admissions offices can usually arrange this, and students answer differently than staff do.

Write the answers down for every school under consideration and compare them side by side. The comparison is often clearer than any ranking.

+ WHAT ONE QUESTION REVEALED

A student comparing two universities with similar aid offers emailed both with the same short list of questions. Both were public, both were roughly the same distance from home.

One replied in a day with the name and direct line of a first-generation student program coordinator, a note that residence halls stay open during winter break with a form to request it, and an offer to connect him with a current student.

The other replied in eleven days with a link to a general student-services page. He chose the first. Two years later, when his caregiver's health changed and he nearly withdrew, it was that coordinator who found him an emergency grant.

+ WORDS YOU CAN USE

The short email that asks everything

Send to admissions or student services at each school being considered.

"Hello, I'm a prospective student comparing a few schools and I'd appreciate short answers to five questions: (1) Is first-year aid renewable, and under what conditions? (2) Is there an emergency grant fund for students whose finances change mid-year? (3) Do students have a consistent academic advisor? (4) Do residence halls stay open during breaks? (5) Is there a program or office for first-generation students? Thank you."

Asking about counseling capacity

Ask the counseling center directly rather than admissions.

"I'd like to understand your counseling services before enrolling. How long is the typical wait for a first appointment, is there a cost or session limit, and what options exist for students who need ongoing support beyond that limit?"

Asking about justice-impacted student support

Neutral wording that discloses nothing about the student's own family.

"Do you have any programs, staff, or student organizations that support students affected by the justice system — including students with an incarcerated family member? If so, could you send me a contact?"

Requesting to speak with a current student

Ask admissions; most schools have a program for this.

"Could you connect me with a current student who is first-generation or came from a low-income household? I'd like to hear from someone about what the first year is actually like here."

+ BEFORE YOU COMMIT TO A CAMPUS

- [ ] Confirm whether the aid package renews and under what conditions.

- [ ] Ask whether an emergency grant fund exists.
- [ ] Ask who the academic advisor is and whether it stays the same person.
- [ ] Ask the wait time for a first counseling appointment.
- [ ] Confirm housing availability during winter and summer breaks.
- [ ] Ask about a campus food pantry and weekend meal coverage.
- [ ] Ask whether a first-generation program or office exists.
- [ ] Ask whether support exists for justice-impacted students.
- [ ] Ask to speak with a current student before deciding.
- [ ] Write every answer down and compare schools side by side.

+ REFLECT AND WRITE

Which of these questions matters most for my situation specifically?

Which school answered fastest, and what did that tell me?

What would I need on a hard week in October to stay enrolled?

+ YOUR NEXT STEP

> Choose three questions and ask them on the next campus call.

+ WHERE THIS COMES FROM

Written by My Fairy GodParents — reviewed August 2026.
Official reference: Federal Student Aid — linked for the official rules and forms, which MFGP does not set.
https://studentaid.gov/help-center/answers/topic/incarcerated_individuals
This is general information and practice guidance — not legal advice, mental-health treatment, or a statement of any court, agency, or facility's rules. Policies differ by state, county, facility, school, and program, so always confirm details with the office involved.
For decisions with legal, medical, financial, or clinical consequences, work with a licensed professional or the organizations listed with each resource.

You do not have to do this alone.

More free guides, scripts, and checklists:
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