



GETTING YOUR DEGREE

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KNOW YOUR OPTIONS

TYPE OF INSTITUTION

- **Community College** – generally have two-year degrees that fulfill general requirements. Getting your AA degree at a community college is a good first step, as community college is usually a lot less expensive than attending a university.
- **University** – generally has higher degrees, such as Bachelors, Masters, and even PhD degrees. Look at their program list to make sure they have a program for the subject you are interested in studying.
- **Trade School** – though this guide is mainly focused on college, trade school is a great option for further education. If you are interested in a specific career, it's a good idea to figure out which of these routes will get you to that career path. For example, if you want to be an electrician, trade school or an apprenticeship would make more sense than going to a university.

TYPE OF DEGREES

- **Associates degree** – an Associates degree is generally a two-year degree that you can get from a community college. (Equivalent to the first 2 years of a Bachelors).
- **Bachelors degree** – a Bachelors degree is generally a four-year degree given out by universities. The first two years of a Bachelors degree are usually the general requirements. To get your Bachelors, you must choose a subject to major in, which will be your main topic of study for the last two years of the program. You may also choose to double-major, or get a minor degree.
- **Masters and PhD** – Masters and PhD programs usually come after you get a Bachelors degree. Usually universities only have a few Masters or PhD programs. You may need a Masters degree in certain fields, check positions you are interested in to see if they require higher degree.



ONLINE VS. IN-PERSON

The key is “know thyself”. Here are some things to think about when deciding whether to take online or in-person classes. You can also do both or hybrid classes, depending on what’s available at your college.

Online classes:

- need Wi-Fi & computer skills
- must be able to self-pace & self-motivate
- may have different or fewer classes available online
- do all school and class-work from home

In-person classes:

- consider how long the commute will be walk, bike, bus, or drive
- may need to purchase a parking pass
- must attend class consistently
- interact with professor and peers in person
- access to resources in-person

BEWARE! FOR-PROFIT COLLEGES

Unlike nonprofit colleges, for-profit schools primarily aim to make a profit. As a result, they generally cost more. For-profit colleges tend to offer trade-focused programs, however many community colleges also offer vocational degrees for less money. For-profit schools sometimes list unapproved accrediting agencies. If the school fits this description, take a deeper look. It may be best to avoid.

MAKE A PLAN

PLANNING

One of the most important steps of achieving any goal is to have some sort of plan.

The more you know going into a process, the more likely you will be to succeed! It is always recommended to have a notebook, folder, or binder that contains all your research and notes on college. Some things to think about as you plan your college journey are:

- What is your desired timeline for completing your degree? When do you want to start?
- Will you go to school part-time or full-time? Do you have the time & support to do school work?
- Will a degree help you achieve your goals? What type of degree will you need for your future? If you want a Bachelors, do you want to get an Associates first?

TIP

Have a goal in mind! Though it may change when you take classes, starting with a career goal can help you decide which classes you should take and what degree you will need.

DO YOUR RESEARCH!

Here are some questions you may want to ask yourself as you research different programs:

- What schools are available to you, either online or near enough to commute to?
- How much will your degree cost? Do they have the program you want?
- What are the application requirements?
- What degree do you want to pursue?
- Is the school accredited?

Where can you find the information?

- Usually institutions have websites with all their school information on it & a “request information” button. You can always call the school for information if you have trouble with the website!
- Talk to the admissions department (email or call) for any schools you are interested in, they will have a bunch of great information for students who are looking to apply, or they will know who you should call for specific questions.

TRANSFERRING CREDITS

If you have previous college credits, or decide to get your AA degree or take classes at community college and then transfer to a University, here are some tips about transferring your credits.

- **What are credits?** You earn credits through taking and passing classes. Different classes may be different amounts of credit. Essentially credits stand for the amount of time spent in working on that class. So usually for a 3 credit class, you are in class three hours a week, though this may vary based on the school you attend.
- If you switch from a college to a university, or between different schools in general, you must transfer the credits from one school to another. Different schools have different policies about transferring credits. This is why it is important to ask an admissions person whether your credits will transfer. It is possible that all, some, or none will transfer to the new school. Often, if schools are near each other or in the same state, they will have agreements about which credits transfer.

APPLY

Once you know which school or schools you want to apply to, it's time to dig in and apply!

Talk to the admissions department if you have any questions or concerns about the application process.

Usually there is an online application you can fill out easily. You will probably need basic information, and you may need to write an application essay to apply.

For tips on writing an application essay, [click here](#).

THINGS TO KEEP IN MIND WHEN YOU APPLY TO SCHOOLS...

- Talk to the admissions department for information about costs, applications, and transferring credits
- You may have to apply for certain specialized programs after you get accepted to the school, such as a nursing or engineering program—talk to the advising office about this
- Some colleges offer you scholarships when you apply as part of the acceptance process
- Some colleges offer automatic scholarships to those who graduated HS with a certain GPA, or meet a different criteria
- If you are applying to 4-year universities, it may be wise to apply for multiple if possible, just in case you don't get into one, and to see if any offer you funding
- If you don't get in to a university, you will probably be able to re-apply for the next semester or year—talk to admissions

GETTING YOUR AA DEGREE FIRST

It is generally a smart option to complete your AA degree at a community college before jumping in to a 4-year degree. Why?

- Community College usually costs less—but you can do a cost comparison just to be sure.
- An AA degree is essentially equivalent to your first two years of a Bachelors degree, as it covers the general requirements.
- This means that 4-year universities sometimes accept an entire AA degree as transfer credit. If you know what University you want to go to, you can check in advance to see if your AA degree or other credits from the college will transfer.
- Getting an AA degree first can help you adjust to college life before committing more money and time to a 4-year degree.

APPLICATION FEES

Some schools have an application fee, which varies based on school. However, you may be eligible to get that fee waived! If there is a fee, be sure to talk to the admissions department about getting the fee waived to see if you qualify.

FUNDING

1. Fill out the FAFSA
2. Talk to the financial aid office at your school and check out their website
3. Look for independent sources of scholarships or loans

THE FAFSA

The FAFSA is the federal application for student aid. This is the first thing you should apply for when seeking funding to attend a school. Once you fill out the FAFSA, you can see if you qualify for a pell-grant or any federal loans. A pell-grant is a grant to assist low-income individuals with school. Federal loans often have better terms than other student loans, but it's good to compare all your options if you decide to take out a loan, as you will have to repay it. You must fill out the FAFSA every year to remain eligible. You can start and get more info by going to studentaid.gov

FINANCIAL AID OFFICE

After filling out the FAFSA, talk to the financial aid office at your school. The first thing they will do is probably ask if you've filled out the FAFSA, and if you qualify for any federal grants or loans. If you do get a federal grant, but it doesn't cover the full cost of your tuition, the next step is to see what programs, grants or scholarships the financial aid office has available. They will be able to direct you to their database of scholarships. Fill out as many as you qualify for. Next, you can see if there is a work-study program available. Finally, schools might have specific funding opportunities. For example, Hinds Community College has a program that covers tuition for SNAP recipients.

INDEPENDENT SOURCES OF AID

There are lots of websites claiming to offer scholarships or help students find them. Though some are legit, they often charge a fee for a service that you can get for free through your financial aid office. However, certain trusted institutions offer scholarships, grants, or loans, such as banks, high schools, non-profits, or other government institutions such as the military.

TYPES OF AID

- **Scholarships** – there are various types of scholarships, you generally have to apply or qualify for them, and you don't have to repay them.
- **Grants** – grants are usually larger chunks of money that you also don't normally have to repay, such as the pell-grant. You do usually have to remain in good standing to keep the grant, and it can sometimes be renewed.
- **Work-Study** – when you work for the school for part of your tuition or living expenses.
- **Loans** – If you take out a loan you must pay it back within a certain amount of time with interest.



AVOID SCAMS!

You should never have to input credit card information or pay money to get student aid. Additionally, make sure that you are on trusted websites if you put in any financial or sensitive information. The end of the web address should be a .gov or .edu if it's a school website.

ADVISING

DEGREE PLAN

Every degree, from an AA degree all the way to a PhD has a degree plan. The degree plan covers the requirements you need to fulfill to graduate with the degree. This document is important to hold on to, as it will help you decide what classes to take to stay on track, and get you from point A to B. For a given requirement, multiple classes might fulfill it. Sometimes there are requirements that will take multiple classes to fulfill. That's why it's important to get advised.

YOUR ADVISOR

Your advisor can help you figure out which classes you should be taking to meet your goals and to graduate on time. At every school, there will be general advisors to help you decide which classes to take and keep you on track. However, you usually have to make an advising appointment yourself. It's important you know where the advising department is, or if you've been assigned a specific person as your advisor. You will usually get this information during orientation, but if you don't go to an orientation, just contact your advising office to figure it out!



TIP

The key to success is to get advised sooner rather than later and every semester. You don't want to realize you need an extra math class during your last semester and not graduate on time. Getting advised early & often will help keep you on track to graduate on time.

YOUR MAJOR

If you are getting your bachelor's degree, you will at some point have to pick a major. Once you pick a major, you must go to the department which that major is a part of to get your requirements and apply to be a part of that major program. This process is called declaring your major.

Depending on what major you chose, this can be really easy or more difficult. If it's a specialty or technical major such as engineering or nursing, you may have to meet certain GPA or class requirements. Once you have officially declared your major with the office, you will also most likely be able to talk to that department for advisement on your major classes, though you can still talk to a general advisor as well.

This may seem complicated, but that's why there are people in place to help you succeed! Your department and advisors are there to help you navigate the world of college, so use them as much as you can and listen to their advice!

CLASSES

Now that you've applied, been accepted, been advised, and registered for your first classes, it's time to actually take them!

This page covers tips for being successful in your classes and what to do if you are struggling.

BEFORE CLASSES

Get your student ID and a copy of your class schedule before classes begin! You can also set yourself up for success by checking out the classrooms before the first day, so you know where to go.

Either before classes or during the first week of classes, it's good to buy the books you will need for class. Your school will have a bookstore that will have the book lists for each class, additionally they will be listed on your syllabus. If you don't want to buy books directly through the bookstore, there are cheaper options such as buying used, renting, or online retailers such as thrift books.

SCHOOL EMAIL

Keep an eye on your school email! This is where all communications from the school, including professors, advisors, and resources will be sent—don't miss out!

GENERAL TIPS FOR SUCCESS

- Read the syllabus
- Attend class as much as possible
- Take notes in a way that works for you
- Talk to your professor including going to office hours or making an appointment
- Ask questions in class to get a clearer understanding
- Do any assigned reading, as much as you can even if you just skim
- If you are struggling to get an assignment done, talk to your professor
- Turn in the assignments, even if they are late or not perfect

IF YOU ARE STRUGGLING, OR FAILING A CLASS...

- It's okay. It happens to everyone.
- If possible, talk to your professor about why you are struggling with the class, whether it's the material or something going on outside of class. Professors are usually understanding and want to help you succeed.
- Turn in assignments even if they are late or not perfect.
- Communicate with your professor about late work.
- If you end up failing, you will probably have to retake the class. That's okay! It happens! If you know it's challenging, make sure to set aside extra time the next time you take it.

SYLLABUS

Read the syllabus! In addition to having all the class requirements, instructions, and course calendar, professors often include campus resources that students can access.

USE YOUR RESOURCES

When you are a student, your student fees pay for you to access most campus services and resources for free.

This page covers many of the resources that almost all colleges and universities will have available to you as a student, but check with your school to see what resources they offer. If you want to access any of these resources but don't know how, search your school's website and call or email the office, or talk to your professor about how to contact the resources. Often, professors will include some of the campus resources on their syllabus including contact information. These services are there just for you, so make sure to use them!



ACADEMIC RESOURCES

The Library

Your school has a library. You can go in person, or log in to the library portal using your student login information. You have access to books, databases, computers, and librarians to help you as you research and write essays. The library often houses other resources as well.

Tutoring or Writing Center

Schools will often have tutoring or writing centers, and possibly both. Tutoring centers may be focused on specific subjects such as math. Writing centers often employ peers to help you with essays.

Your Professor & Peers

Don't overlook your professor and classmates—they are great resources for help with classes and studying! You could start a study group, or ask someone for their notes if you missed class. Don't forget to go to office hours!

Your Department & Advisement

If you need help planning your class schedule, visit the advising office! Or, if you've declared a major, you can also visit your major department's office.

OTHER RESOURCES

Financial Aid Office

Your financial aid office is there to assist you with funding for school and figuring out a plan to pay your tuition.

Mental Health or Counseling

Usually, schools will have a counseling or mental health center where you can go to if you are mentally or emotionally struggling for help and counseling.

Health Center

Schools often have a health center to deal with minor health issues.

Disability & Veterans Services

Schools usually have specific offices for special populations such as disabled individuals and veterans to get specific services. This could include accessibility services.

Bus Pass

Often, schools will have a discounted or free bus pass for students.

FINISH YOUR DEGREE

AVOID BURNOUT

Sometimes, starting a goal is easier than finishing it. It's important to avoid the burnout that comes with school work and work in general. To avoid burnout, make sure not to take on too many responsibilities at once, and use your resources to help you succeed. Take time for self care and relaxation.

If you are feeling overwhelmed, or you are experiencing depression, anxiety, or other mental health issues, make sure to talk to someone. Your school may have a mental health or counseling office where you can seek help.

- Your financial aid might be impacted by taking time off
- Some credits expire in a certain amount of years, meaning you would have to retake that class if it expired
- Some schools you have to reapply to the school if you are gone for a certain amount of time
- The amount of time and policies on these issues varies by school

TAKING TIME OFF

If you need to take time off from school that's okay! Here are some things to keep in mind if you take time off in the middle of your degree. Talk to the admissions department for your school's policies on taking time off, as each school is different.

PART TIME VS. FULL TIME

You can be a part time student or a full time student. Being full time means you are taking a certain amount of credits/classes, which varies by school. There are a lot of benefits to being a full time student, such as graduating earlier. Additionally, some scholarships or financial aid opportunities are only for full time students. However, being a full time student isn't the best option for everyone, and may not be possible for everyone. If you are a part time student, make sure to talk to the financial aid office and see how that will impact you.

Additionally, keep your graduation timeline in mind and talk to an advisor about your class schedule.

***Full list of resource links in the appendix**

TIPS & RESOURCES FOR SUCCESS

- Make sure to fill out the FAFSA every year. Keep you login information to make this easier.
- If you don't know who to ask a question to, ask anyone and they should be able to help direct you to the right person.
- Make sure you remember to apply for graduation—usually a semester before you graduate you must fill out the paperwork
- For tips on how to study, click [here](#).

AFTER YOUR DEGREE

PAY OFF LOANS

If you took out a loan, you will probably have to start paying it back immediately or soon after you graduate. Make sure you keep track so you don't default on your loan.

CAREER SERVICES

Your school probably has a career services center with a bunch of resources for finding a career after you graduate. You can visit this office before or after you graduate, and get help finding a job, building a resume, and so much more!

CAREER OR HIGHER EDUCATION

You can continue your journey by going into a career, or by getting a higher degree after you graduate. Depending on what your goals are, you'll want to pick the path that will get you there. But wherever you go- you got this!



APPENDIX: RESOURCES

- FAFSA – studentaid.gov
- Mississippi Office of Financial Aid – www.msfinancialaid.org
- Hinds Community College – hindscc.edu
- Jackson State University – jsums.edu
- University of Southern Mississippi – usm.edu
- Writing a college application essay (and other college admission tips) – khanacademy.org/khanacademy.org/college-careers-more/college-admissions
- How to identify a for-profit college: thebestschools.org/resources/for-profit-colleges/
- Cheap books – thriftbooks.com or abebooks.com- compare book prices with google
- Study Tips – summer.harvard.edu/blog/top-10-study-tips-to-study-like-a-harvard-student/