COLLEGE for RURAL WISCONSIN

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Survival Guide to Life After High School

Whether you're going to college or not, the transition after high school can be a tough one. As rural students who went through this same situation ourselves, we've compiled some tips from our experiences to help you navigate this change successfully!

For those going to college, the college or campus-specific information is in italics.

Tip #1: Finding Your Place

After graduation, a few housing options are available: living at home, renting an apartment or house, or living in a co-op. *Many colleges offer on-campus housing, such as apartments and residence halls.*

The sooner the better when it comes to looking for housing! There can be a lot of competition for rental properties, especially in college towns. *Leases in college towns tend to require you sign earlier than in other areas. It is generally recommended that you sign a lease nine months in advance, but this can vary depending on the area you are in. Talk to other students and coworkers, or other experienced people for tips on where and when to start looking for housing!*

Don't forget to consider the cost of utilities – electricity, heat, internet, water, etc. - when factoring in your housing budget if you choose to live away from home. These are not always included in the rent. If they are not included, then you will need to setup an account with the local utility (ex. electric) or choose a service (ex. internet).

Tip #2: Finding Your People

Making friends can be hard, but it's impossible if you don't put yourself out there! *An easy way to get out there when you're in college is by studying outside of your room. Libraries, coffee shops, and campus common areas are great places to meet new people.* Check out flyers and posters for meetups or other activities you might be interested in where you can meet new people who share your same interests!

Don't be afraid to try new things! Stepping out of your comfort zone is a great way to meet people and learn about yourself!

If you don't find your best friends in your first semester or year of school, don't worry! College is a time of growth, so friend groups are going to shift and change as everyone learns more about themselves and their interests.

Don't force a friend group either. If you're not feeling it or are uncomfortable with what they are doing or saying, it's okay to step away. It's more important to find friends you trust than to be part of the "in-crowd"

Tip #3: Figuring Out Your Finances

Make a budget! Set aside what money you need for expenses first, such as rent, utilities, groceries, and other bills, then calculate what you have left over. We recommend using a spreadsheet or online tool to help you keep track of your finances.

If searching for a job, take advantage of local job boards and don't be afraid to reach out to businesses or organizations directly to see if they are hiring. Internships and apprenticeships are great ways to get your foot in the door for many careers too.

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Campus and student jobs are a great way to balance working a job while taking classes. Check out your campus website for a student jobs portal.

Understand different pay structures early—hourly vs. salary, overtime rules, benefits eligibility, and pay schedules all affect real take-home income.

Prioritize building an emergency fund for unexpected expenses. Even if it starts small, consistent saving matters more than the amount.

Learn the basics of taxes now (W-4s, withholding, refunds) so you are not caught off guard during tax season. Even if you can be considered a dependent, if you start earning income, you will need to submit your own taxes.

Tip #4: Taking Care of Your Mental Health

Build Community

- A strong sense of belonging increases motivation, persistence, and overall success in both school and the workplace.
- Take initiative by joining clubs, organizations, study groups, or engaging with coworkers to build connections around shared interests or goals.
- Spend time in shared or public spaces rather than isolating yourself, as casual interactions help relationships develop naturally.
- Stay connected with family and long-term friends through regular calls, texts, or visits to maintain a stable support system.

Practice Self-Care

- Self-care is simple: it is the act of taking care of oneself. This can look very different for each person, but examples include brushing your teeth, doing your laundry, baking something sweet, going for a walk, or getting a massage. Anything that makes you feel better physically, mentally, and emotionally can be self-care!

Authored by: Rural Peer Advisors

Establish Balance

- While school or work may be a central priority, personal growth also comes from relationships, hobbies, and new experiences.
- Avoid putting all your energy into one area; maintaining variety helps prevent burnout and supports long-term satisfaction.
- Taking care of your body through nutrition and hydration directly improves mood, concentration, and productivity.

Prioritize Yourself & Your Health

- Taking time off for mental health when needed can improve long-term performance and prevent exhaustion.
- If stress, fatigue, or lack of motivation persists, seeking support from advisors, supervisors, or health professionals is a proactive step.

Become Your Own Advocate

- After high school, you are responsible for communicating your needs, asking questions, and seeking out support.
- Learn how to navigate available resources—academic, workplace, or community-based—and use them early rather than waiting.
- Setting boundaries, requesting accommodations when appropriate, and making intentional choices strengthens independence and confidence.

Tip #6: Succeeding in Your Coursework & Career

Seek out mentors or experienced coworkers who can help you understand workplace expectations and advancement pathways.

Ask for feedback regularly and apply it; showing growth is one of the fastest ways to stand out in the workplace.

Keep a record of skills you build on the job (technical, interpersonal, leadership) to use for future applications or promotions.

Your professors and teaching assistants (TAs) want to help you! It is to your advantage to attend office hours, even if you don't have questions. This is a great way to build a relationship with professionals in your field of study.

Tutoring and study groups are a great way to make friends while also getting additional support in your studies.

Look into your campus' support early! Identity and disability resources are available for you, but you need to seek them out.