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## The Little Word that Means a Lot in College Admissions

By Elizabeth LaScala



Elizabeth LaScala Ph.D. guides college, transfer and graduate school applicants through the complex world of admissions. She develops best match college lists, offers personalized interview and essay coaching, and tools and strategies to help students tackle each step of the admissions process with confidence and success. Elizabeth helps students from all backgrounds to maximize merit and financial aid awards. Visit [www.doingcollege.com](http://www.doingcollege.com); Call (925) 891-4491 or email at [elizabeth@doingcollege.com](mailto:elizabeth@doingcollege.com).

It matters not a bit that the parents are the ones paying the tuition. Schools must have written permission from the eligible student in order to release any information from a student's record, except under certain conditions (such as sending records to another college as part of a transfer process).

Before your senior goes off to college, you should discuss your expectations regarding access to grades, choice of major, course selection, length of study, study abroad options (which cost quite a bit over and above the cost of tuition) and any other topics that are important to you. Changing majors, double majors, working part time, and other issues that may lengthen the time to graduation and/or make graduating more difficult should all be considered. If parents don't bring up these matters and reach agreement on them (preferably in writing), the students may understandably assume these decisions are entirely theirs to make. And, down the road, parents and students may regret it. The more families cover and agree upon beforehand, the better. Putting something in writing also gives you the opportunity to go back over your agreement and revise it over time.

The transition to college life is a major life change for students and their parents. The student above who was academically separated from his university attended community college for two years and then transferred successfully into a four year college as an upper classman. The intermediate step sideways was a painful lesson that most of us can easily avoid. Setting and managing expectations about grades and other indicators of student adjustment are important to address before problems arise.

Many parents are surprised to discover that unless their child is failing and placed on academic probation they will not hear from the student's college or university. They are also surprised to hear that they no longer have access to their college student's grades without his or her written consent. In one case that I know of the parents did not find out that their son was academically separated until the student 'told all' when he returned home for the summer. That student had flunked out by the end of his sophomore year without his parents knowing a thing about his struggles. Thousands of dollars were spent and there was little to show for it. This student's troubles included failure to use the college's learning disability resource center coupled with a debilitating case of seasonal affective disorder (SAD) when sunny California weather was replaced by cloudy overcast skies and chilly winters.

The Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) is a Federal law that protects the privacy of student education records. The law applies to all schools that receive funds under an applicable program of the U.S. Department of Education. Since the overwhelming majority of our nation's 4,000 undergraduate institutions are eligible to receive federal funding, the college your child attends in all likelihood complies with FERPA regulations. FERPA gives parents certain rights with respect to their children's education record. These rights transfer to the student when he or she reaches the age of 18 or attends a school beyond the high school level. Students to whom the rights have transferred are referred to as "eligible students."

Parents or eligible students have the right to inspect and review the student's education records maintained by the school. The instructive word in the preceding sentence is 'or.' When I was in grammar school, prepositions and conjunctions were referred to as "the little words that mean a lot." Words such as "and," "but" and "or" all have fewer than four letters but those letters pack quite a bit of punch. In this case the conjunction "or" means that once the student becomes eligible only the student has the right to request school records and student's parents no longer do.

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