

# The Fit Imperative

A Future Planning  
Action Guide for Schools



The importance of personal fit in college planning is well-established. A poor fit costs students in more ways than one—wasting time and money; jeopardizing their sense of belonging, satisfaction, and confidence. Counselors and college access organizations have long been working to support students through the lens of personal fit.

Helping all students find their fit starts with school counselors—but more students will get the message when teachers, coaches, and school leaders focus on the fit, too.

## Why Are We Talking About Fit Now?

With this guide, we hope to support the implementation of fit-centered college planning in four ways:

- 1 Uplift the great work counselors are already doing to help students find their fit
- 2 Support counselors to enlist the entire school community to build a broader college-planning conversation that centers on personal fit
- 3 Position teachers to talk to students and parents about future planning through a fit lens
- 4 Support school leaders to infuse a focus on fit throughout their school culture

## Who Is This Guide For?

**If you're helping students explore their paths forward, this guide is for you.**

Whether you're leading an advisory block, coaching on and off the field, or just leaving your classroom door open, you can help show that fit is imperative.

Counselors, this guide is for you, too—but in a different way. Many of you are already leading this work because you're often the first person students turn to when the future feels overwhelming. We hope this guide can support you in sharing the responsibility with others in your school community as you work together to find their post-high school fit.



## ACTIVITY 1

# 3 Conversations to Have with Your Students

These questions can be used in formal contexts such as advisory blocks, or informal settings like a hallway check-in or moment during extracurriculars.



# 1

## Help students connect their skills to their goals.

### What to ask:

What are you really good at, in and out of school? What types of careers build on those skills and interests?

### When to ask:

As early as possible! 9th or 10th grade is not too soon to start thinking about these questions. Students should be clarifying their answers by fall of 11th grade.

### Another resource:

Use the [Career Insights Snapshot in the BigFuture Toolkit](#) to help students map their academic strengths to career paths.

- Encourage students to draw connections between the skills they're developing in school (through their coursework and work experience), the unique strengths they've demonstrated (including on their PSAT-related assessment and SAT score reports), and their future plans.
- Prompt students to think about the durable skills they've built in and out of school, such as collaboration, critical thinking, leadership, and communication.
- Where do they really shine, and what skills do they have that could be applied to multiple career paths?

## Why does this matter for fit?

For students to derive the full value of their college investment, they need to find their fit, and fit is personal. Understanding their strengths and interests helps students set goals and identify potential good-fit programs. That matters when students land in a program that is a good match based on academics and their personal interests. That program will help them graduate in four years.



## 2

## Encourage frequent and early low-stakes “test runs.”

### What to ask:

What are you already doing to explore your interests?  
What else can you try now to learn more about what you might do in the future?

### When to ask:

Fall of 10th grade is a great time to reflect on how 9th grade went and what else they can try.

### Another resource:

Use the [AP Toolkit for Counselors](#) and [College Advising Essentials—AP Edition](#) to help students identify which courses they’ve enjoyed and what they could try next.

- Prompt your students to think about AP and other coursework they could take on, a new extracurricular, or an after-school or summer job opportunity they’d like to pursue.
- Highlight career-connected learning opportunities at your school; for example, AP Cybersecurity, AP Business with Personal Finance, internship opportunities, or other experiential learning.
- Remind students that it’s okay to make mistakes along the way and that figuring out what you don’t like is just as valuable as figuring out what you do like.
- Engage students in conversations about a diverse range of career paths: What kinds of jobs are out there? What might they not have observed in their own families or communities? [Career Search on BigFuture.org](#) can be a good place to start.



### How does this connect to fit?

High school is an ideal time to both explore interests and even rule out areas that aren’t of interest. But many students are concerned that small mistakes in high school will prevent them from getting into college. Students should be encouraged to instead consider high school a great time to take low-stakes risks, try different things, and lean into their interests to learn more about themselves.



### 3

## Support students to ask the right questions about costs and return on investment.

### What to ask:

How much will this cost? What is your financial plan?

### When to ask:

11th grade is a good time to start thinking about how to pay for college, with students solidifying their financial plans in the fall of 12th grade.

### Another resource:

Use [Explaining Financial Aid](#) to help students understand how college costs are calculated, different types of aid, and how to apply for them.

- A majority of students and their families are concerned about the cost of college. But that doesn't mean they know what questions to ask or where to find information that will help them make a sound financial decision. Talk to students about the value of a college degree relative to their unique long-term goals, and how to ensure they get the return-on-investment they deserve.
- Emphasize the importance of completing a FAFSA® on time to maximize federal financial aid, and the pros and cons of borrowing for college.
- Net price calculators can be complicated to use, so offer guidance with accessing these.
- Address the financial implications of different academic majors and career paths. Students can be encouraged to seek out employment data by academic program to get a sense of how different majors and fields lead to different earning potential.



### How does this connect to fit?

Financial concerns are a top reason students leave college without a degree. Students should be encouraged to think about financial feasibility early in their planning process and understand the financial implications of their choices.



## ACTIVITY 2

# Into This? Consider That

Many students fixate on a particular institution that's familiar to them—rather than the characteristics that make that institution a potential fit. Often, this means they don't consider the full range of options with similar characteristics that could also be a good fit for them.



Use the template below to expose your students to alternative programs that have similar characteristics and strengths. (Tailor these to your region and students' interests.)

You can also encourage your students to generate their own lists of alternative options based on their initial institutions of interest. Students may find this [College Search Worksheet](#) helpful, and [BigFuture.org College Search](#) can help them find programs they may not have heard of.

### INTO...

A popular big-city school near you

A selective college with a small student body

A selective program in \_\_\_\_

Your state's flagship public university

### CONSIDER...

Lesser known schools in the same city OR schools in other cities within driving distance

Lesser known colleges of similar sizes

Other schools with strong programs in \_\_\_\_

Other public campuses with high-quality programs

# More Ways to Focus on Fit



## School Leaders

- Share [\*The Fit Imperative\*](#) with your team at the start of the school year to spark a schoolwide conversation about the future planning conditions all students need to find their personal fit.
- Model fit-centered language at back-to-school nights, staff meetings, and in family communications.
- Use the [\*\*Principal-Counselor Relationship Toolkit\*\*](#) to strengthen collaboration with your counselor team.



## Teachers

- In the fall, share [\*Your Future, Your Fit\*](#) with your students.
- In the fall, share [\*Your Future, Your Fit\*](#) with families.
- Visit [\*\*BigFuture for Educators\*\*](#) to find classroom-ready resources to help your students find their fit.

## Counselors

- Start at the [\*\*Toolkits for Counselors hub\*\*](#)
- Visit the [\*\*AP Toolkit for Counselors\*\*](#) for more resources related to AP coursework
- Explore the [\*\*BigFuture Toolkit\*\*](#) and [\*\*College Advising Essentials series\*\*](#)

## What's Next?



Explore *The Fit Imperative* for perspective on helping teens find their fit at [bigfuture.org/fitimperative](https://bigfuture.org/fitimperative).

