

How to Help Your College-Bound Child Avoid the Pitfalls of Campus Life and Have a Happy, Healthy, Productive, and Successful College Experience

An interview with Susan Orenstein, PhD

Howie: My name is Howie Jacobson, of howieconnect, and I'm here talking with Sue Orenstein, PhD. Sue is a licensed psychologist with a doctorate in counseling psychology. She is the owner of College Bound for Success, which provides services and resources for college students and their families. She's also an old friend and I'm delighted to have her here with me. Hi Sue.

Sue: Hey, Howie. Thanks for having me.

Howie: It's a pleasure. So, when you talk about services and resources for college students and their families, what exactly are you talking about? What do you do for college students and their families?

Sue: Actually, what I do is to start helping students and their families before they even get to college. I work with college bound high school seniors and their families and stay with them through their college years to help ease the transition to college and promote student success. I offer seminars and workshops throughout the country and I offer some products. My newest product is called "The Ultimate Organizer for College Life," which you will probably be asking about in a few minutes.

Howie: Yeah. I'd like to hear about the specific services that you offer. But first, what do you mean when you say "the transition to college?" I mean, after my last semester of high school, I took the summer off. In August I bought a bunch of books and a set of fitted sheets and I went to college. What do you mean by transition? What is there to that?

Sue: Well, I think there's a huge difference between high school life and college life. As a matter of fact, there's a huge difference between a college student's life and just about everyone else's life. I think it helps when folks can have realistic expectations about what college life is like and prepare for that transition.

So, some of what I'm talking about is, look at most people's normal lives. They wake up at 7:00 or 8:00, have breakfast, go to work or to school, have lunch, unwind a little bit, have an evening activity and then go to bed anywhere from 10:00 to 12:00 and having lots of structure and lots of support.

In contrast, the typical college student could wake up at 11:00, put on some sweats, go to an 11:15 class, sit in that class for an hour and then have 23

hours left in their day where they really don't have any structure and they could do lots of work and lots of activities or they could procrastinate. So, it's a completely different lifestyle with very little routine and I work with students to help make sure that they develop some kind of routine and lifestyle that they really like.

Howie: Wow. When you said that, you talked about waking up late, you didn't mention anything about breakfast. All sorts of things just popped into my mind that I just take for granted now in terms of diet, in terms of exercise, in terms of just how I spend my time in constructive and productive ways. What are some problems that you see as typical for students who don't manage or transition well?

Sue: Well, I think the number one difficulty that I see is stress, that students are experiencing a lot of stress these days. *The New York Times* actually did an article about that last year, saying that it's just record breaking and I think that's primarily because students have difficulty managing their time without lack of structure.

In my practice, I see students who are still having anxiety attacks, feeling a loss of confidence. They may have felt really confident in high school and they wonder what in the world has happened. Sometimes they feel really lonely and don't know who to go to or safe places to talk about all that anxiety. The major problem is loneliness, depression, stress.

Howie: And how does that play out in terms of outcomes? What happens to these students?

Sue: Well, I think there are some fortunate students who know themselves well enough to say, "Boy, this doesn't feel right. I need to go talk to my parents or I need to go talk to a resident counselor. I need to get some help." It's really nice when folks come to me in my private practice and they know they need some way to get back on track.

Other students aren't as lucky. They don't know that there are some services and resources, so things spiral down for them. They might feel overwhelmed so they'll skip a class and then that becomes a pattern of skipping classes. They might develop bad eating habits and just live on junk food and then become disgusted with their weight and their figure. So they develop a cyclical pattern, alternating between dieting and bingeing on junk food. They might get in some other bad habits of spending money, having some debts and really being too ashamed to tell anybody about some of the difficulties they're having.

Howie: One thing that occurs to me is when you're talking about getting into bad habits, they aren't *changing* habits because they haven't had those habits before. There's a lot of things you'd never do until you get to college, like for many students, having to manage their money, have to buy things on their

own, have to make a whole range of decisions, financial decisions, time decisions, friend decisions, interest decisions that they've never had to really make before because they could kind of go along with the crowd. They could go along with a set path. So, now they're making decisions for the first time and they're getting into bad habits that could last a lifetime.

Sue: That's right. I think what students get so excited about when they know that high school graduation is coming is they really look forward to freedom, that they're not going to have their parents looking over their shoulders. They're not going to have to go to class if they don't want to. And with that freedom comes so much responsibility and so many choices that like you said, these students have never had to face before.

Also, the other big, big transition is, What are their goals now? It's been pretty clear for a college-bound student that they want to graduate high school and that they want to get into a certain kind of college. But once students go to college, a lot of times, they really don't know what the next step is for them so they feel a lack of purpose, a real sense of confusion. With all that freedom that they've been looking forward to, of course there's lots of joy and excitement, but along with that comes a lot of confusion and anxiety.

Howie: When you said the word responsibility, I laughed inside because that's the last word that I would use to describe most of the people I knew when I was in college. We would have parties and just leave things lying around. We knew that someone else was always going to clean up after us and that's how we ran our lives. But, it's true. If we have all that freedom, there are consequences that come with it.

Sue: That's right. And I think some students wait until they get caught and they think that the adults in their life will get things back on track for them and it doesn't really work that way anymore. So if they keep going to professors and making up excuses for why they're not going to class, nobody's really going to save them anymore and they're going to really get into some self-destructive habits that no one's going to get them out of. A lot of life lessons come all at once, even in that first semester. There are a lot of decisions that students have to make for the first time.

Howie: One thing I want to have you make clear is who you are talking to here. Is this for parents who have kids who have done well in high school, who are popular, who get good grades and manage their time, or are we just not talking to them? Is there nothing to worry about? Give us some examples of what types of parents and students should be paying attention to these issues.

Sue: I think all parents of college kids need to be paying attention to this. It is amazing. That's one thing that makes my work so interesting is that I see all kinds of students with all kinds of strengths and limitations. So it's really interesting to me that I had a student who was so talented and attractive and

social and bright and she was really struggling with how to manage her time and how could she do all of these terrific things at once. And no one would have ever worried about her before but she was very, very anxious about making decisions about her time. And then I'll see some other students who have had some struggles with their schoolwork in high school, with organization, so they're going to continue to need some support and some strategies to get through college. Really, I design my program and my organizer for every student.

Howie: It seems maybe that the student who's always been successful is actually more at risk because they're less likely to admit they need help, they're less likely to notice, they're less likely to see themselves as someone who is weak, who needs to turn to other people.

Sue: When I've seen students like that, I think it comes as such a blow to them. It's such a shock because they didn't expect that they would have any difficulty. Like you said, there's that component of feeling ashamed: "How could this happen to me?"

But with my services and my product, I really try to take the stigma out of it and to normalize all of these challenges so that all students can say, "Hey, these are challenges all students face. There's nothing wrong with me for having to learn how to manage my time. This is normal."

Or "There's nothing wrong with me to have to learn about how to communicate with a roommate. I shouldn't necessarily know this just because I was an honor student. It's OK for me to learn just like everybody else."

Howie: When you said the word "normal", that's such a powerful word, for everybody really, but especially this age group. They're desperate to know that they're normal and that their problems are normal and it's OK to talk about them.

Sue: That's right. They're hyper sensitive to comparing themselves to other folks. That's absolutely right.

Howie: Let's talk for a minute about your services. Paint us a picture. Maybe give an example or a composite of what you do.

Sue: Well, in my private practice, I see folks who have already had some setbacks and they're struggling and they need to get back on their feet. They may be taking a semester off from school. I've seen students who take a semester off because they were in a destructive relationship with a boyfriend and they couldn't concentrate on their work. I've seen people take time off because they're homesick or they were making poor grades. So, I see folks in my private practice who are struggling with all kinds of things. Sometimes I see young woman who have eating disorders, because it's pretty common.

Students in the first year of college are very vulnerable to eating disorders, unfortunately.

But, I also offer seminars that are more preventive. Before students have had setbacks, before they've even set foot on college. I offer them during the spring of their senior year of high school, or during their orientation of college, to make sure that they have some good patterns in their heads, some good templates for getting off to the right start. How to manage their time, how to communicate well with their roommate, how to know if you're in a positive relationship or not. So, they have these templates in their head so they can be real proactive and not have some of those setbacks.

Howie: That's so important because when you think about, probably people are prepared better for a week-long vacation than they do for college. If you were going to go mountain climbing, you'd know you need certain type of clothes. You need certain type of equipment. You need certain type of food. You might need certain navigation systems and maps. And you think about that ahead of time and you prepare as best you can. Whereas people go off to college and they really don't even think, "What are the issues that I'm going to face? How can I arm myself right now so that I can handle them in stride?"

Sue: That's right. And what's alarming and upsetting to me is some of things that happen to students their very semester, So, for instance, often the first month of school there are lots of parties where first-year females are invited to attend and it turns out that students are at the highest risk of date rape just in those first few months. So, there is a lot of information on campus. There are a lot of resources to help students if they do encounter a setback or something horrendous like that. But, what I would like to do is just minimize that happening by students, like you said, having that road map, having the equipment ahead of time. Having that compass.

Howie: Now, I'm sure a lot of people are thinking, boy, they'd love their kid to come see you and I'm sure many can, but for financial reasons or convenience or geographic reasons and probably for the stigma of seeing a psychologist, they wouldn't actually come see you or someone in their own neck of the woods who offers similar services or perspective. So, I'd like you to talk about the product you created as a next best thing.

Sue: This was really fun for me to create. It's called "The Ultimate Organizer for College Life." It's a system for college students that combines the best parts of a day planner, a monthly calendar with loads of college-specific reminders, an address book, combined with a survival guide, a workbook and bunches and bunches of resources. This is all in a three-ring binder that students can carry with them. There's even a pocket where they could put their palm pilot or their calculator or if they prefer, they can just use the organizer at home and then carry it around in special circumstances.

I've integrated the best parts of my workshops and counseling into this product that helps students manage their time, and addresses the various issues facing college students. I'm really excited because I have one section just on health issues. Where we work on developing exercise and eating routines and taking care of their health. A whole other section just on finances, including a sample budget, and things students need to know when they get their credit card for the first time.

I have a whole section on roommates: common issues faced by roommates and how to talk to your roommate. I actually give the ingredients to a conversation. I don't just tell folks, well make sure that you talk to your roommate. I actually give them the step by step. And then there are checklists and quotes and recommended websites and things for students to fill out that they can carry around with them for their whole college career.

Howie: I want to make sure I'm clear on this. This isn't just a book of philosophy or self help. This actually contains practical tools that students use on a daily basis.

Sue: Right. So, for example, Howie, I worked with some students in my private practice who have a great deal of difficulty with organization and I've suggested different things for them to organize their classwork. But, in this organizer, it's actually already there for them.

Under the study tips section, there's a worksheet that has places for them to fill out their professors' names, office hours and phone numbers and there's a line that says "Make sure you get at least one person you know in every class so that if you're sick, you can call them." So, it says "study buddy" and there's actually a line where they'd write that phone number. And it gives them plenty of spaces to write down their assignments.

And then, the nice thing about this product is that they keep all their papers in one place. They don't have to wonder... a lot of folks like to write things down on little pieces of paper and have little pieces of paper all over their desk. This is all in one place.

Howie: That's right. I remember someone telling me "the world is my " so it was, all over his house and his car and his office and his pockets.

Sue: I know. I'm married to somebody like that.

Howie: Now, when you talk about getting a study buddy or getting the name and office hours and phone numbers of your professors, that's obvious. That's total common sense but you know, I never did it in college. It never occurred to me so probably a lot of the tools are like that, that once you start doing them, it just becomes second nature. But, if no one had mentioned it to you, it's a million dollar tip to get you through college.

Sue: That's right. I think some of the suggestions I give to students seem so much like common sense and so simple yet they're so powerful. So students can get one or two simple ideas and it can really get them back on track just staying focused and organizing their schoolwork and enjoying college.

Howie: Now, I want to ask you more specifics about the product. My first negative reaction (I'm kind of a cynic about everything) is well, are they going to use it? What's your response to that?

Sue: Well, my response is there are certain students, and you know if you're a parent of one of these, that are just super organized and super responsible and they might fill out every single page of this book before they even get to college and just have so much fun reading it and love the idea of organizing every part of their life. And I think some students will really use the book in that way.

And then, I know that other students will use it as a resource and so I've designed it that way. The student doesn't need to read the survival guide from A to Z; it's for them to use when they're stuck. So, for instance, in my first section that talks about staying focused, I tell college students about the traps that get them off track, such as procrastination, and that they can go to page such and such if they're stuck. They have lots of worksheet and a whole section on procrastination. But, I wouldn't expect students to read that whole section unless they were struggling with that.

Howie: Well, for students who were procrastinating, they'll probably wait until the last possible minute to read it anyway.

Sue: That's true. That's right. And for other students, they might want to use the address book and the monthly calendar and some of those worksheets and then refer to the various chapters for recommended websites or recommended reading. So, I think students will find different ways to use this.

Also, as a parent, you can make sure that your student gets value out of this product. Before your student sets foot on campus, you can go through the section on adjusting to college, the very first chapter, and in that section, it even suggests issues for parents and students to talk about before the kids go to college. So, as a parent, you can use that to help yourself and to open up some conversations with your student.

Howie: I wanted to ask you about that because I'm sure a lot of parents try to tell their kids what to do all the time and really wish they could give them the benefit of their own experience. And we all know that teenagers are not the easiest group to talk to, especially if you're their parent. Is there some way that your product helps with that?

Sue: We used the word “normal” before. I think it makes it normal that you’re not some weird family starting to talk about these issues but there’s actually this fun colorful product and it gives you some ideas and you’re just looking over it together and it makes talking about these issues a little bit more casual and a little more comfortable. And if the parent and student aren’t comfortable talking about some of the issues together, they can be reading the same materials and they can be on the same page in that way.

Howie: Literally and figuratively.

Sue: Literally and figuratively.

Howie: So, it sounds like one way that a student might use this is very proactively, the hyper-organized student that you talked about, but another way is when they are beginning to get into crisis but you’ve really lowered the bar, both of convenience and stigma so that instead of waiting until they’re really in trouble to go see a professional, they get into a teeny bit of trouble, they feel a twinge of pressure and they know they’ve got this resource on their desk, on their shelf, under their pillow, that they can use to help them get out of that problem before it becomes a big monster.

Sue: That’s right. So, I’d like to think of it as a student’s personal coach. If they start to feel, “Well, I’m in this relationship and it feels kind of funny. I think Sue wrote a section on a checklist, ‘Are you in a healthy relationship.’ Maybe I’ll look at that now.”

Or “I’m really feeling like I’m losing my motivation. There was a section on that.” Then they don’t have to go around feeling anxious or stressed for several weeks and figuring out, do I want to go talk to somebody. They can start earlier. Exactly what you said about lowering the bar. And then I recommend on several of the pages, is even after they look at some of my materials, it still might be helpful for them to go use their resources on campus. The Ultimate Organizer integrates that. It helps remind folks about their advisor. About the study center. I let them know about all the available options that they may forget about when they’re feeling so stressed.

Howie: So, you’re not saying that your product is the only solution for everyone. It actually leads people to the help they need and guides people to when they should seek professional help.

Sue: That’s right. Because I believe that one of the keys to success is being a resourceful person and making good use of all the resources out there. With all the money that parents and kids are paying for college these days, I hope that they do use those resources and take advantage of them.

Howie: That’s such a powerful word: resourceful, because we think of being resourceful as being extremely independent. But when you really think about

it, it means being able to get help from other people, from other sources outside yourself.

Sue: Mm hm.

Howie: In our society, we think that you've got to go it alone. You've got to be the pioneer. But really being resourceful means exactly what you're talking about, knowing how and where and when to get the help you need in order to be successful.

Sue: That's right. You can feel confident about that and proud of yourself as a student. You don't have to feel ashamed of it if you do think of it in terms of being resourceful. I think you're right.

Howie: We're about out of time. I wanted to ask you before we get to how people can contact you and find out more about the Ultimate College Organizer, are there any questions that I didn't ask, that you wish I had?

Sue: I can't think of any right now, Howie.

Howie: OK. Well, you've boosted my self esteem.

Sue: This has been a lot of fun for me.

Howie: Great! Me too. I'm just glad I don't have to go through it again and I'm kind of glad I have ten years until I have to worry about it with my kids.

So, tell me how folks can contact you if they're interested in finding out more.

Sue: OK. I have a website. It's called www.collegeboundforsuccess.com. That has contact information. It has my address and my phone number. It has my email address on that website and it also gives you lots more information about my services and my product. So, you can even look at sample pages of the Ultimate Organizer for College Life and you can download them, print them, give them to some friends. Just get some ideas from looking at the website.

Howie: Great. Can people actually buy from the website?

Sue: That's right. The organizer is available for purchase online and I actually even give a discount if folks order online because it's such nice way for me to get my product out.

Howie: So, people can just pay with a credit card and it's a secure site.

Sue: It's a secure site and they can pay with their credit card and they'll get it in the mail.

Howie: Where else can they buy the Ultimate Organizer, in case they're nervous about buying online?

Sue: It's available in many bookstores and office supply stores. If they can't find it locally, they can contact me from the web site and I'll help them find a local supplier.

Howie: Let me ask you one more question. I also sell information products and I'm also a service provider, a consultant. I'm very clear when I'm consulting with someone whether I can help them or not. But, when I'm selling a book to a stranger I don't always know if the book is right for them, so I feel it's really important for me to give a really powerful guarantee just because I'm not sure that I'm selling them the right thing. Do you have a guarantee?

Sue: I do. Because I really want folks to be happy with this product and I believe that they will, but if they're not, then they certainly can return it and they'll get a complete refund.

Howie: Excellent. I'm glad to hear that. All right. I'll buy one now and I'll give it to my daughter in ten years.

Sue: OK.

Howie: Thank you so much for joining me, Sue.

Sue: Thank you, Howie. It was a pleasure.

Sue Orenstein, PhD, can be reached at her web site, www.collegeboundforsuccess.com, for services and resources for college students and their families.

Howie Jacobson, PhD, helps business professionals market themselves joyfully and profitably. He can be reached at www.howieconnect.com.