

A COMPASS OR A GPS



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SUMMARY

College is full of transitions. New freedoms. New responsibilities. New decisions. And many students quickly discover something unsettling: no one provides step-by-step directions for life after high school. In a world that depends on instant answers, students often want life to function like a GPS—clear direction, quick reroutes, and assurances given when mistakes are made. But the more time you spend in the real world, you quickly realize it rarely works this way.

This lesson challenges students to develop an internal compass—values, decision making, and direction—so they can navigate college and beyond with confidence, even when the path ahead is unclear.

“If you don’t know where you’re going, any road will take you there.”

— Lewis Carroll

GPS technology has reshaped how we travel. It provides turn-by-turn directions. It estimates arrival times. It even warns drivers about traffic ahead. But there is one key limitation to keep in mind. A GPS only works on known roads. Without a clear path to your destination, the GPS has nothing to calculate. It may offer rough direction, but it cannot get you where you want to go. In that case, a compass would be much more helpful.

A compass works differently. It does not always promise the fastest or even the best route. It doesn't eliminate obstacles. It simply points north. The traveler must still choose the path they need to take and adjust when necessary, navigating obstacles as they arise.

College is one of the first seasons of life in which the compass vs. GPS distinction becomes obvious.

WHEN GPS THINKING BREAKS DOWN

Many college students wrestle with similar questions: What major guarantees my success? Which career choice is safest or most profitable? What decision prevents future regret?

These are reasonable questions. But they often reveal something deeper. Many students want certainty before commitment. Instructions without reflection. Results without character development.

In her Research, psychologist Carol Dweck suggests that students who rely heavily on external validation often struggle during major transitions. When the roadmap disappears, confidence tends to follow.

A GPS life may move quickly—but not always wisely. A compass-driven life may move more slowly—but it stays aligned with who you want to be.

The compass represents values, identity, and purpose. It does not remove uncertainty; it provides direction within it.

FIVE PRINCIPLES FOR NAVIGATING WITH A COMPASS

Research reinforces this idea. Psychologists Edward Deci and Richard Ryan, through decades of research on Self-Determination Theory¹, found that people guided by internal values—not external pressure—demonstrate greater resilience, stronger decision-making, and higher well-being, especially during seasons of transition. When individuals know why they are moving forward, they are less dependent on instructions and better able to navigate uncertainty. These next principles translate that research into practical ways to live with a compass instead of a GPS.

1. Clarify True North

Your values determine your direction. When your values are clear, decisions become simpler—even when they are difficult.

2. Seek Input Without Surrendering Ownership

Advisors and mentors may offer wisdom. Direction, however, cannot be outsourced. You still must own the direction your life takes.

[1] Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L. (2017). *Self-determination theory: Basic psychological needs in motivation, development, and wellness*. Guilford Press.

3. Expect Detours

Detours are not failures. They are part of the journey. Re-center and re-calculate.

4. Prioritize Direction Over Speed

Moving fast in the wrong direction still leads to the wrong destination. Take the time to determine the best direction for your life.

5. Choose Alignment Over Convenience

The easiest option is rarely the most meaningful one. Values-driven decisions may take longer to achieve; however, they are often the way to your desired outcome.

THE BENEFITS OF DEVELOPING A VALUES-BASED COMPASS

- Greater Confidence in Decisions
- Reduced Anxiety During Uncertainty
- Stronger Resistance to Peer Pressure
- More Consistent Identity Across Settings
- Increased Resilience After Setbacks
- Long-Term Satisfaction Over Short-Term Approval

Pause here. Take a few minutes to allow each person to share one thing from the lesson above that stood out to you. What made you choose that part?

REFLECT AND RESPOND

“A GUIDING COMPASS”

Take some time individually to write your answers to these questions. Afterward, the group should spend 5-10 minutes sharing and discussing their answers.

- 1. Why do students often prefer to be ‘told’ rather than to ‘decide’?**

- 2. Who or what most influences decision-making right now?**

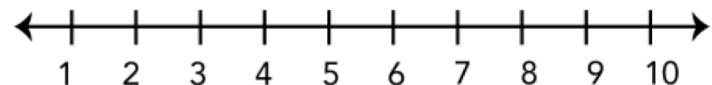
- 3. What values currently serve as your “true north”?**

- 4. Who do you know that remains grounded despite uncertainty?**

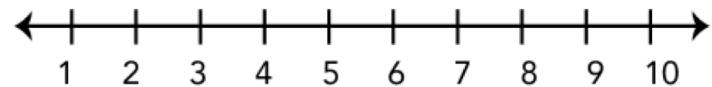
SELF ASSESSMENT

Rate Yourself (1, never true of me – 10, always true of me):

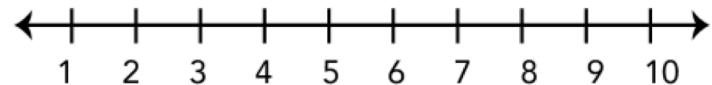
- 1. My decisions are guided by values, not just convenience.**



- 2. I welcome advice without surrendering responsibility.**



- 3. My life’s stability is maintained when plans change.**



Pause here. Take a few minutes to share why you rated yourself the way you did in each of the above.

CASE STUDY: ALEX'S RECALCULATION

Alex didn't arrive at college confused. His major had been chosen before move-in day. It was practical. It paid well. Several of his relatives worked in his chosen field. His friends said it was smart. On paper, it worked.

However, by midterms, Alex began to notice a pattern. He finished his work—but always at the last minute. Studying felt like a slog through the mud. Group projects were tolerable only if he could handle the organization, not the details. He wasn't failing, but something didn't feel right.

Still, he pushed through. Why question a plan that everyone said made sense?

But his doubts grew daily. He felt more energized in his non-major classes. He loved being pulled into conversations about student organizations, leadership roles, or creative projects—but then he'd feel guilty for enjoying them.

Alex didn't want to "blow up the plan." Tuition was due. Expectations were mounting. Switching majors felt like he'd disappoint everyone. One day, during a leadership discussion in a seminar class, students were asked to identify three values they wanted their lives to reflect ten years from now. Not job titles. Not salaries. Values.

Alex found real clarity in discovering his personal values: Growth. Impact. Relationships. Creativity. The problem was that they weren't being exercised in his current field of study.

Alex attended office hours and met with career services. His course load was adjusted, and a minor was added. He even explored an internship possibility.

Alex's destination didn't change overnight. But his direction did. Discovering his values and his compass finally set him on the course he was meant to take.

REFLECT AND RESPOND:

In what ways can you relate to Alex? Have you ever made decisions, taken classes, or pursued a career path just because others expected you to? Perhaps you know someone in that situation? What changes about a leader's direction when they begin to live by their values?

TAKE ACTION

This week:

Identify 2-3 core values that shape direction. Write them down.

Share those values with someone trustworthy and invite them to hold you accountable for using them to make decisions.

Post your values somewhere you'll see them often, your mirror or closet door perhaps.

“Direction—not intention—determines destination.”
— John C. Maxwell