



Continuing Education: Our First 20 Years of Helping Families Plan for College



“CAN YOU HELP US FILL OUT THIS FINANCIAL AID FORM?”

This simple request from a client, over two decades ago, was the beginning of a journey for John J. Lennon that would ultimately lead him to becoming a pioneer in the college planning industry. Now, 20 years later, John and his business partners Matt McCarter and Dave Kozak, have helped more than a thousand families plan for, afford, and send their kids to college, without putting themselves in financial jeopardy.

Today John, Dave and Matt are leaders in the college planning services industry through their ownership of Paradigm Financial Group, Elite Collegiate Planning, and the College Planning Network. The business has really come full circle.

The offerings of their companies span the entire need of a college-bound family. From financial planning, wealth advising and tax planning, to auto, home and life insurance as well as student services and financial aid counseling.

So, on the occasion of the business' 20th anniversary, we sat down with John, Matt, and Dave to learn about how it all started, to relive some of “the good ol’ days,” and to take a peek into the future. Read on for their memories and insights into 20 years of learning, 20 years of growth, but most importantly, 20 years of helping families successfully, affordably fulfill their higher education dreams.

HOW DID YOU GET STARTED IN COLLEGE PLANNING?

John: I had a close friend with four kids and their oldest—twin boys—were getting ready to go to college. Because I was their tax guy and handled all of that paperwork, they leaned on me to tackle the financial aid paperwork for them. Back then it really was paperwork—paper forms and a pen. I took it on, unaware of all the intricacies of it.



After I helped them, they started referring their friends to me, and I realized that if they were trusting me with such an important job, I had to know everything there was to know about it. That's when I started digging deep into the process. I ran across a couple of organizations and some knowledgeable people, but much of what was recommended seemed contrary to logic. It was very confusing and none of the resources for college financial planning that we have today were available then. It was the school of hard knocks, like being thrown into a pool and teaching yourself to swim. There was no one in front of me telling me how to do it.

Dave: Right. There were no trailblazers when John started out. He was blazing the trail.

For me, the original goal when I started, was to have a more meaningful impact in the financial services industry. There weren't many financial strategies available for the unique needs of a college-bound family.

When the concept of college financial planning was presented to me, I thought it was something I could really get behind because I believe in education, I believe in higher education, I believe in helping people make that a reality.

So, the idea that I could not only help a family plan financially, but I could do it with purpose and impact for generations is what struck me.

There were no trailblazers when John started out. He was blazing the trail.

SINCE COLLEGE PLANNING WAS A FLEDGLING INDUSTRY 20 YEARS AGO, HOW DID YOU BECOME AN EXPERT IN COLLEGE PLANNING SERVICES?

John: Having clients who sincerely needed guidance made this more about trying to help people, so I wanted to learn as much as I could. It was all just getting exposed to the ins and outs of a very confusing area. One of my first college planning clients was an engineer and he had a million questions. Every time he had a question I couldn't answer, I went back and did tons of research to make sure I had the best answer possible. My knowledge base just kept growing.

CAN YOU EXPLAIN HOW YOU ALL BECAME BUSINESS PARTNERS?

Dave: Yes, the real story is that John and I met as competitors. But we also had a very similar mental approach in what we did, how we did it, and how we structured our businesses.

Eventually, we were on a panel at a conference together and in answering questions, it became apparent that we had a very similar view on college planning and the importance of it. That prompted us to talk, and we quickly realized that together we could make a very formidable team.



Matt: I met Dave when he was giving my son baseball lessons. I was really impressed with him and asked him to join my financial services business. With my mentoring, Dave rapidly became sales manager. We added the college focus, and Dave began spearheading our college planning business. Our goal at the time was to assist families in the college arena without wreaking havoc on their overall financial positions.

When Dave and John began discussing a merger, all three of us realized that with our unique strengths, if we joined forces and strategically aligned, we could better serve our community.

John: The partnership among the three of us has definitely enhanced our ability to serve our customers and our community. It pushes our boundaries and perspectives. Because we each view things through a different lens, and truly respect each other's opinions, we make better decisions. And in the end, that's not only better for our client families, but our employees, too.

HOW HAS THE COLLEGE PLANNING INDUSTRY CHANGED IN THE PAST 20 YEARS?

John: How hasn't it?!

When I started in this business, there was no College Planning Network (CPN)*, there was no help. There was a pen, and a pad of paper, and a lot of forms. There were maybe a dozen people committed to learning more about the process. We had to figure out what mattered on the FAFSA and what made a difference in the Expected Family Contribution. We had to find solutions for families who had no plan. We had to figure out the math.

Today, together, we have a unique understanding of the financial aid system and how college planning decisions can affect a family's financial future. We have the tools and resources at our fingertips to help families afford college, choose the right schools, apply, get accepted, get financial aid, pay less for it—it's a really comprehensive set of college planning services that also allows people to meet their retirement goals.

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CPN is the nation's largest and most reputable provider of college admissions and financial aid services. Customizable programs allow you to choose the level of support your family needs for personalized application and admissions counseling and guidance through the financial aid process.



Matt: Over 20 years, the pace of change has been incredible. College costs have inflated an exorbitant amount, there are constant changes to tax laws, admissions requirements, COVID—constant changes and challenges. But we're committed to staying nimble and innovative, so we continue to provide our clients with successful comprehensive guidance from our combined perspectives.

Dave: In the beginning, we used CPN as a resource for student services and financial aid submission. Now, we own CPN. Today, we are leaders in this industry that John and his counterparts started building from the ground up 20 years ago.

In 2022 college planning is a big industry, not simply a business model. You have SAT Prep coaches, and learning centers, and tons of coaches and counselors. There are a multitude of businesses within this industry. The key that I want to communicate is that we started in different places, different times, and with different perspectives (taxes, insurance, financial planning, and college services) but we ended up as business partners and now we are leading the next iteration of what college planning means.

Our approach to college planning doesn't just deal with student needs. It starts with the parents—well before the kids apply to college. College is one of the biggest investments a family will make and too few people approach it as an investment. There are many factors to consider, including being cognizant of taxes, retirement, savings, and using your assets efficiently—all of which are just as important as a student's academic achievement.

AS YOU LOOK BACK, WHAT HAS BEEN THE MOST GRATIFYING PART OF THE LAST 20 YEARS IN THE COLLEGE PLANNING INDUSTRY?

Matt: Serving the community, seeing the results that our planning has provided, and creating less financial stress for families.

John: One of my early clients didn't come from extravagant means and had seven boys to get through college. They met with me, and I built a plan for them. Years later, they came back and said, "It worked exactly as you said it would." It was such a relief, for me and for them. Now, their youngest son has graduated and is working in the financial industry.

I had another client whose kids we helped get through college. Now we're helping their kids plan for their own children's college education. It makes me feel a little old but being able to help the next generation is so special.



Dave: I get excited watching a client go through the process. At the beginning they really don't think it's possible. Then at the end they literally have financial freedom. And they say, "What do we do now?" And I can say, "What do you want to do now?" That's extremely gratifying.

Also, I love that we can give parents the confidence to tell their kids, "We can get you to that school, and we can pay for it."

WHY DO YOU THINK YOU MAKE SUCH A PERSONAL CONNECTION WITH YOUR CLIENTS?

John: In the financial world, when you are working on a college plan, you'll see your clients more emotional than at any other time. It's not buying a house, not buying a car, not planning for retirement. College involves a hard deadline, massive amounts of money, and your child's future. Many people have cried in front of me; it becomes a tremendously rewarding experience if you can help someone who's struggling to gain control of their situation.

Dave: What we're experiencing now with our clients is unbelievable. The perspective and confidence we've given families through our planning model, and through the people we have working with us . . . everything that we've created over these 20 years is just remarkable to see.

**It's simple.
We plan to be
the most valued
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WHAT DO YOU SEE FOR YOURSELVES MOVING FORWARD INTO THE FUTURE?

John: One of our Paradigm Pillars, our core values, is constantly learning and breaking down barriers. So, I certainly see us continuing to do that.

Dave: We just keep growing. This whole business started with John trying to serve one customer's special request. Today, we are leaders in an industry that didn't exist 20 years ago. We took a major step when we acquired CPN, and now we have the experience and ability to enhance and upgrade the resources and services CPN offers. We welcome the responsibility and accountability that comes with it.

But we never want to lose sight of the fact that there is a deeply personal side to this business. At the end of the day, it's about helping families.

Matt: It's simple. We plan to be the most valued college planning company in the country.