

# Signature School

COLLEGE ADMISSION  
**Handbook**

2011-2012 Academic Year Edition

*produced in conjunction with*



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# College Admission Handbook

2011-2012 Academic Year  
Table of Contents

<b>Introduction .....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>A Note to Parents .....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Now About You .....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>What Colleges are Looking For .....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Curriculum Planning.....</b>	<b>6</b>
Courses to take in High School .....	7
AP and IB Classes.....	7
GPA Weighting .....	8
What Years Count Most .....	8
Class and School Ranking .....	8
<b>Research Pays.....</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>The Resume or Activities List.....</b>	<b>9</b>
Resume Outline .....	9
Strengthen Each Area .....	9
Use Your Summers .....	9
Leadership Counts.....	10
Academic Record and the Resume.....	10
When the Resume is Used.....	11
<b>Your “ACE” .....</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>Standardized Testing.....</b>	<b>11</b>
EXPLORE.....	12
PLAN .....	12
PSAT/NMSQT .....	12
The SAT Reasoning Test .....	12
The SAT Subject Tests.....	13
The ACT Test .....	13
AP Exams .....	14
The Best Testing Schedule .....	14
Prepping and Registering for the Tests.....	14
Sending Your Test Scores.....	15
<b>Information for Athletes .....</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>Students with Learning Differences.....</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>First-Generation College Students.....</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>Finding your Target Colleges .....</b>	<b>17</b>
Choosing Your Schools Strategically .....	17
The Common Data Set Initiative.....	18
Impacted Majors .....	18
How to Find Schools.....	19

College Visits .....	20
College Fairs.....	20
More Helpful Links for Finding Colleges and/or Careers.....	21
Get in Their Database .....	21
<b>Sample Inquiry Letter .....</b>	<b>21</b>
<b>The Internet, Social Networking Sites and Email.....</b>	<b>22</b>
<b>Getting Ready to Apply .....</b>	<b>22</b>
Transcripts .....	23
Additional Requirements for Some Majors .....	23
Make Copies.....	23
Certificate of Mailing .....	23
On-Line Receipt.....	23
Fees.....	24
The Common Application(s) .....	24
<b>Types of Admission .....</b>	<b>24</b>
<b>Transferring from a Community College .....</b>	<b>25</b>
<b>The Truth about Legacies .....</b>	<b>26</b>
<b>Applying Out of State .....</b>	<b>26</b>
<b>Letters of Recommendation.....</b>	<b>26</b>
Who to Ask .....	26
How to Ask.....	26
Secondary School Report.....	27
Thank You Notes and Follow-up .....	27
<b>Essays.....</b>	<b>27</b>
What Essays Are .....	27
What Essays Are Not .....	28
Essay Format.....	28
Help With Brainstorming .....	28
Word Count.....	29
Putting the Essay onto the Application .....	29
Final Tips for Essays .....	29
<b>Interviews.....</b>	<b>30</b>
Obtaining the Interview .....	30
Preparing for the Interview .....	30
Sample Interview Questions.....	30
Questions for You to Ask .....	31
How to Dress .....	32
Be on Time .....	32
Bring Your Resume .....	32
Get the Name or Card of the Interviewer .....	32
Send a Thank You Note .....	32
<b>Demonstration of Interest .....</b>	<b>32</b>
<b>Paying for College.....</b>	<b>32</b>

<b>Financial Aid.....</b>	<b>33</b>
Sources of Aid .....	33
Types of Aid Granted.....	33
Loans and Grants .....	33
Looking for Scholarships .....	34
The Forms .....	34
Financial Aid Estimator .....	34
Beware of Scams.....	35
Financial Aid Links.....	35
Merit-Based Scholarships.....	35
Negotiating Your Aid Package.....	35
<b>Once You're Accepted.....</b>	<b>35</b>
May 1 Deadline.....	36
Waiting List.....	36
Notify Schools You Are Turning Down .....	36
Appealing a Rejection.....	36
<b>Get Organized and Get Busy .....</b>	<b>36</b>

**APPENDIX**

<b>Admission Results (Nationwide Sample) .....</b>	<b>38</b>
<b>Sample Resume .....</b>	<b>40</b>
<b>Sample Essays .....</b>	<b>41</b>
<b>Questions to Ask Your Prospective Colleges .....</b>	<b>44</b>
<b>Junior Calendar.....</b>	<b>45</b>
<b>Senior Calendar.....</b>	<b>46</b>

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subscriber-only resource website at  
[www.getin2college.com/protected/websource.html](http://www.getin2college.com/protected/websource.html)  
**User name: 2011 Password: READ (all caps)**

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## Introduction

College admissions, not surprisingly, is experiencing a bit of a “perfect storm”. The struggling economy is impacting state budgets, even as high school graduating classes are larger than ever. While the lower tuition costs at public universities are attractive to families, budget cuts are forcing those same schools to cut back on admissions. At the same time, more students are applying to more schools, allowing colleges and universities to raise their requirements and turn away highly qualified students in record numbers. The 2011 admissions season has turned out to be one of the most competitive and uncertain in history. The percentage of students accepted at top schools hit new lows, while wait list numbers reached new heights. Yesterday’s “safety schools” remain “iffy” today. The high school class of 2011 was among the largest in our nation’s history with some 70% of the graduating class enrolling in college.

Colleges continue to look for a complete package – students who will add skills and talent, thereby enhancing the vitality of the campus, while also demonstrating a high level of academic achievement. As colleges attempt to find these students, the pattern of acceptances and rejections is often unclear. Indeed, it can appear somewhat random. But in reality, there is some method to the madness.

What can you do to beat the system? There is no way to guarantee your acceptance to a particular school. But with planning and strategy, you can greatly improve your odds. It’s time to start putting together your “case” - the absolute best possible presentation of your academic record and other strengths.

Most students possess more potential than they realize. Many have a unique “hook” or “ace” that they can use to their advantage. But it needs to be identified, developed, and presented properly. It also needs to be combined with an overall package of abilities, experiences and academic accomplishments that will catch the eye of the admissions staff. The recommendations contained in this handbook will help you to do that.

Our materials are geared toward students who plan to attend a four-year college or university. (In this handbook we will use the term “college” to represent any four-year institution.) However, community colleges have a lot to offer and have come to the forefront as economic pressures have increased and four year colleges have become more and more competitive. A community college may be a good choice for you if:

- You plan on four years of college but prefer to stay at home for the first two for whatever reason.
- You plan on a four year college but don’t meet the academic requirements to enter.
- You want to attend college but aren’t sure where or what your career focus may be. As such, you want to complete your general education credits for less cost.
- You wish to attend a college that will train you for a vocation in two years.

(See section on **Transferring from a Community College** later in the handbook.)

While we make no guarantee that you will obtain admission to your top choice(s), we believe that following our advice will give you the best possible chance. There is an excellent school out there for everyone (more than 3,800 in the U.S. alone) and a high percentage of students are accepted at their first or second choice college. As you make this journey, keep this quote in mind: “*College admission is a match to be made, not a game to be won.*” So keep a positive attitude and let the adventure begin!

## A Note to Parents

The period during which your child is considering college options and making future decisions is one of tremendous excitement. However, it is equally often characterized as stressful and overwhelming. It generates feelings of empowerment, yet also anxiety and helplessness. Like all the major milestones in your child's life, it is a time for parental involvement and support. Parents can ensure that the student allows time to plan and complete the many application tasks. Parents can, and should, encourage students to talk about their decisions and help them analyze the vast amount of information they will amass. Most of all, you can ease the stress for them by keeping them on track and helping them learn to manage their time efficiently. Never forget that you are probably the most influential factor in your child's life. As such, here are some specific things that you can do for them:

- *Be sure that your child takes all high school years, including senior year, very seriously. Keep an eye on study time, progress reports and other indicators that your student is still engaged. They can't afford to slip. Get in touch with school counselors if you have any doubts.*
- *Keep a file of all honors, awards, articles, leadership accolades, volunteer work certificates, etc. relating to your child. This saves a lot of time when preparing applications.*
- *Discuss college choices with your student. Help them articulate what is important to them and why. Encourage them to talk about majors and careers. Talk openly, but tactfully, about your student's strengths and weaknesses.*
- *Emphasize the value of a college education as opposed to the prestige associated with certain school names.*
- *Be sure to remember that this is your child's future and not yours. Students who take ownership of this process and make their own decisions will have a greater stake in their own success. It's easier to rationalize failure if someone else made their decisions.*
- *Parents should be sure to guide, not steer. Guiding implies support, whereas steering implies control. Constantly ask yourself if you are guiding or steering. Remember, this is not about you. Guard against over-involvement.*
- *Participate when and where appropriate. Attend college visits with your child and join in parent programs there. Read this entire handbook, help them with research, and keep them focused and organized.*
- *Talk openly and honestly with your child about finances, although be sure they don't eliminate schools on that basis initially. Financial aid is available at a surprising level for more families than you might think. Still, your child should have some idea of what the family can afford to contribute.*
- *Reassure them throughout the process that you are proud of them and encourage them when things seem overwhelming. Let them know that you will be pleased no matter where they ultimately decide to go. Then be true to that statement.*

## Now About You

Well, you're finally here. It's time to engage in the college admission process. For some of you, it's something you've been dreading. For others, it's the moment you've been waiting for. In either case, approach it with optimism and an open mind. It's not really about college at all... this process is about YOU.

Who are you? It seems like a silly question, doesn't it. But by stepping back having a candid dialog with yourself and those who know you best, you may better prepare yourself for a successful college application process. What do you love? What do you despise?

What are your strengths and weaknesses? Above all, why do you want to go to college? You are making decisions now that will have a significant impact on your future. And your own unique characteristics need to be accurately reflected in your choices. An honest assessment of your aptitude, interests, values, goals and personality will assist you as you navigate college admissions. Select colleges that are compatible with your traits. Be true to yourself and celebrate what makes you YOU.

Sometimes it helps to use some tools and resources that will help guide you to the right match in colleges and/or careers. There are personality profiles and interest inventory tools that assess your aptitude in various areas. The PLAN test, often taken sophomore year, is one such tool. Some are found on our subscriber website and one popular one is currently found at the link below entitled "*Self Survey for the College-Bound Student*". [www.usnews.com/articles/education/best-colleges/2008/08/21/college-personality-quiz-part-1-enthusiasm.html](http://www.usnews.com/articles/education/best-colleges/2008/08/21/college-personality-quiz-part-1-enthusiasm.html)

There is also a great paperback book (sold on Amazon for under \$15) called *Do What You Are: Discover the Perfect Career for You through the Secrets of Personality Type*

### **What Colleges are Looking For**

Sometimes it seems like a mystery. Every college has its own criteria and defines a set of parameters used to evaluate applicants. But what we can tell you is that it will almost certainly be some mix of the following, weighted a bit differently from college to college:

- *Academic Record – GPA, class rank, consistency, improvement, difficulty of classes, reputation of high school. In short, a strong level of performance in a challenging curriculum represents the ideal mix.*
- *Testing – Standardized tests will be a part of the application at almost every college.*
- *Extracurricular Activities – These seem to be weighted more heavily at private schools but are probably important almost everywhere. There is some bias toward academically-based activities versus social, such as yearbook versus spirit club.*
- *Letters of Recommendation – These serve to paint a broader, more subjective picture of the student and are important when colleges ask for them. Some public schools will not take them, so do your research. Don't send them if the colleges don't want them.*
- *Honors and Awards - Special recognition for some skill or talent is desirable and you will want to showcase any that you receive.*
- *Essays – Most applications will have an essay section, and it is becoming increasingly important as more and more students look alike in other ways. The essay seems to be getting more attention as a differentiator, especially as interviews become less common.*
- *Interviews – While not always offered, they are just another way to gain insight into the applicant, and you should obtain them whenever possible.*
- *Personality? Believe it or not, the newest things we've seen are assessments designed to measure non-cognitive traits such as leadership, creativity and resilience. While not yet mainstream, we may see this type of evaluation become more common.*

It is important to remember that admissions committees are not only admitting qualified individuals, but are also building dynamic and diverse classes. This explains why a seemingly less qualified student might occasionally be accepted over another.

### **Curriculum Planning**

Let's start with the basics. You will spend four years in high school, so you may as well make them count. Remember, colleges rate students an estimated 60-80% based on

academics. A good rule of thumb is to take the most difficult courses you can handle, with a goal of obtaining A's or B's. Most advisors would probably agree that a B in an honors or AP (or IB) class is better than an A in an easier one. It is unlikely that any college will even accept a class with a D grade or worse.

Generally colleges like to see a consistent progression in English, Math, Lab Sciences and Social Studies plus a non-English (LOTE) language. It is generally better to take several years of one language, rather than to try a year each of several.

Maximize your grade potential by taking easy steps such as minimizing absences, sitting near the front of the class, doing all homework, participating, taking good notes and getting to know your teachers. Be sure teachers know you care about your grades.

### **Courses to take in High School**

So what should you take? First and foremost, you need to meet the graduation requirements of your high school, both subject and credit requirements if applicable. Beyond that, you'll want to gear your courses to fit your college plans. If you are interested in playing Division I or II sports in college, there are specific requirements as well. (Separate section found later in this handbook.) When you look at college websites, you will usually be able to find their specific requirements. So if you have some colleges in mind, or at least some that would represent your type of college, it pays to do research up front.

As a general example, you will often see requirements by subject, such as:

- *History/Social Science – 2 years required/3 preferred*
- *English – 4 years required*
- *Math – 3 years required/4 preferred*
- *Laboratory Sciences – 2 years required/3 preferred*
- *Language (other than English) – 2 years required/3 recommended (of same language)*
- *Visual and Performing Arts – 1 year required*
- *Electives – 1 year required (extra classes in the above categories also fulfill the elective category unless otherwise specified)*

*(Note: the above curriculum is a sample only. Your high school may offer different guidelines.)*

Generally selective colleges will recommend four years in each of the five core academic areas: English, math, science, history/social studies, and foreign language. A student heading for an Ivy League or top tier college would likely have taken a language (other than English) and first year Algebra class in 8<sup>th</sup> grade, then would have taken 4 more years of Math, Language and Lab Sciences. In addition, many of those would be honors or AP (or IB) classes. Highly selective colleges will see applicants with an average of 18-20 honors/AP semesters and well more than the minimum number of core academic classes shown above.

### **AP and IB Classes**

Your high school may offer classes categorized in several ways. Some identify classes as "college prep", "honors", "AP" (advanced placement) or "IB" (International Baccalaureate). These designations are sometimes an indicator as to whether the grade in that class will be assigned additional "weight" when the GPA is calculated. College prep classes usually do not receive extra weight. AP and IB classes almost always do. Doing well on AP exams has become a proven indicator of college success, hence impresses college admissions staff. Honors classes vary greatly in terms of weighting applied, but it is certainly worth taking them when you can. Try to show a positive progression - either better grades as you go from year to year or harder classes or, preferably, both. Your high school counseling department will advise you in this area.

## **GPA Weighting**

This is an area that tends to frustrate almost everyone. Some high schools apply weighting factors generously, while some do not. For example, at one high school an Honors Chemistry class might be weighted such that an A counts as a 5.0 instead of a 4.0. At another high school, Honors Chemistry might not be weighted. Some high schools take a weighted average when computing class rank. Others don't. However, one thing that seems to be consistent is that colleges and universities DO count the more difficult classes and factor them in somehow. So you are always better off taking honors and AP (or IB) classes – of that there is little doubt. If you are focused on particular colleges, you can often find their specific weighting rules on their websites.

## **What Years Count Most**

You will hear many myths about which high school years count and which don't. The truth is simple – they ALL count. Sophomore and junior year are the most significant, but your freshman year obviously affects your overall GPA. (Some colleges DO count all four years, some don't.) Senior year is becoming increasingly important, too. We've heard of "tragedies" where a student qualified for acceptance but was turned down after the college looked at first semester senior grades. (the mid-year report) Seniors should not take easy schedules, nor can they afford to drop their grades. You can't afford to catch "Senioritis"!

## **Class and School Ranking**

Class rank seems to be counting less and less, perhaps due to the weighting inconsistencies mentioned earlier. However, many colleges still ask for your class rank or at least what percent of your class you fall in. (top 10%, 20%). This is particularly frustrating for students who have pushed themselves with harder classes, gotten B's, then found they were ranked below their friends who took the easiest classes the school offered. But rest assured, the colleges see through this and will always prefer a more challenging curriculum.

Not everyone is aware that many colleges also have a way to rank your high school. A very difficult private high school, for example, might carry a higher weight factor than a public school with a not-so-great academic standing. At the same time, students who excel at a school in an underprivileged area may be looked upon favorably for making the most of what they had to work with. Colleges will often excuse the fact that AP classes weren't offered in these situations, and a lower SAT or ACT score might be acceptable. We have not been able to find any way to research this to determine the high school ranking methodology, but it does seem to occur. The ranking seems more common when you are applying close to home, and is less of a factor if you are applying out of state. In any case, there isn't much you can do about it so just be aware of it.

## **Research Pays**

We've said it already but it bears repeating: Research early and research often. There's an old saying "Begin with the end in mind." and you will see that as a theme in our materials. The "end" is acceptance to the college(s) of your choice. We're sure you've heard about the "big" or "fat" letters arriving in your mailbox. That's the goal. For that reason many of the things you do, beginning as early as 9<sup>th</sup> grade, need to have that ultimate objective in mind. (By the way, acceptance letters aren't always thick these days!)

We are fortunate to have the internet today, which is an incredible tool for digging into your target colleges and becoming what they are looking for. You don't have to have made up your mind for sure, but look on the websites of some colleges that appeal to you. Click on their Admissions section. Look at the information regarding classes required, average GPA of accepted freshmen, average SAT/ACT scores and so on. That will give you a really good idea of where you need to be. A good rule of thumb is to figure you'd better

have the averages *or better* if you really want to get in. Otherwise you are leaving a lot to chance. We will provide you with some even easier ways to determine colleges' admissions requirements later in the handbook.

## **The Resume or Activities List**

If colleges rank students approximately 60-80% on academic record, what makes up the other 20-40%? You guessed it – students' record of extracurricular accomplishments. How do you make yours stand out amidst thousands of other similar students? The resume and/or activities list is a valuable tool that many students aren't aware of and don't use. For that reason, it can become a "secret weapon" that will set you apart. In addition to that, it also makes it easier to fill out the actual applications.

You may have heard of resumes being used when applying for jobs, and this isn't very different. But the sections on this resume (or activities list) are geared toward the "buckets" of information that the applications generally ask for. Your goal is to fill up all the buckets, having at least five or so items in each area. You will also list them strongest first, down to the least significant. (See sample resume in Appendix and downloadable activities list in Word on our resource website.) It probably goes without saying, but your resume and/or activities list is a reflection of you and who you are. Be sure it is neat, error free and printed on nice paper. Have a parent or counselor check it for you.

### **Resume Outline**

Here is a model to follow as a guide:

Full Name  
Address  
Social Security Number  
Phone Email  
High School Name

Academic Honors and Awards  
Other Awards and Distinctions  
High School Leadership Activities  
Community Service and Leadership  
Summer Programs and Internships  
Paid Employment Experience  
Other Activities and Hobbies  
College and Career Goals

### **Strengthen Each Area**

Under each of the above headings, try to list five or so items. You can combine two of the above into one if you are short, or rework the headings to fit your situation. But remember, the colleges expect you to have this type of broad experience. It's a little intimidating, isn't it? But don't worry - you probably have more to put on your resume than you realize. This is the time to dig into all you've done in high school and fit it on the resume. If you are still in 9<sup>th</sup>, 10<sup>th</sup>, or even 11<sup>th</sup> grade, you still have time to shore up some weak areas. It is when you actually get the resume down on paper that you start to see where you can improve. If you don't like the "resume" format, try the activities list (more of a table) to see if you like it better. It is modeled after the activities section on the Common Application.

### **Use Your Summers**

Don't waste your summers. They are the perfect time for activities that will strengthen your resume. Explore your interests and find out or confirm what you are passionate about. Many summer programs have application processes and some require letters of recommendation, so start looking in January. Princeton Review publishes a book called "**The 500 Best Ways for Teens to Spend the Summer**", and here are some of our suggestions:

- Take a summer school class at a college
- Take a summer program related to your major
- Take an educational trip, such as a language immersion program overseas
- Do some community service – there are some excellent summer community service opportunities that combine travel, education and community service. Here are a few examples:\*

Rustic Pathways	<a href="http://www.rusticpathways.com">www.rusticpathways.com</a>
Global Routes	<a href="http://www.globalroutes.org">www.globalroutes.org</a>

- Volunteer at a company that might be a career interest for you or something like:
 

Special Olympics	<a href="http://www.specialolympics.org">www.specialolympics.org</a>
Global Volunteers	<a href="http://www.globalvolunteers.org">www.globalvolunteers.org</a>
Points of Light	<a href="http://www.pointsoflight.org">www.pointsoflight.org</a>

Here are some from the College Board website, volunteer section:

<a href="http://www1.networkforgood.org/">Network for Good</a>	<a href="http://www1.networkforgood.org/">www1.networkforgood.org/</a>
<a href="http://www.idealists.org/">Idealist.org</a>	<a href="http://www.idealists.org/">www.idealists.org/</a>
<a href="http://www.volunteermatch.org">VolunteerMatch</a>	<a href="http://www.volunteermatch.org">www.volunteermatch.org</a>
<a href="http://www.dosomething.org/">Do Something</a>	<a href="http://www.dosomething.org/">www.dosomething.org/</a>

- Take a unique teen adventure trip with students from all over the world, such as:
 

Action Quest	<a href="http://www.actionquest.com">www.actionquest.com</a>
Odyssey Expeditions	<a href="http://www.odysseyexpeditions.com">www.odysseyexpeditions.com</a>
Broadreach	<a href="http://www.gobroadreach.com">www.gobroadreach.com</a>
Adventure Treks	<a href="http://adventuretreks.com">adventuretreks.com</a>
360 Degree Student Travel	<a href="http://www.360studenttravel.com">www.360studenttravel.com</a>

- At least get a paying job. There is usually a place for paid employment on applications.

Note: Be sure to research these thoroughly on your own, as they are not endorsed by or in any way affiliated with Get in 2 College. They are simply ideas and there are many more out there.

### Leadership Counts

For many of the past twenty years, the goal was to be a “well rounded student”. Interestingly, that is not exactly the case any longer. So keep in mind one very important point as you try to develop your activities. Colleges are more interested in “quality” than “quantity” as a general rule. That means that instead of joining half a dozen clubs and playing a minor role in each, it would be better to try to assume a leadership position in at least one. Demonstrated commitment, passion, initiative and/or leadership in even a single activity are worth a great deal to admissions staff. Try to shine in some club, project, sport, activity or endeavor. What about starting a club? Religious involvement may be well received also, and is particularly important when applying to colleges with a religious affiliation. Sadly, simply volunteering a few hours at your local hospital, being an Eagle Scout and joining a couple of clubs has become trite and is not enough to set you apart from other students.

### Academic Record and the Resume

You’ll notice that the resume does not include academic information such as GPA, SAT scores, etc. This is because those are sent to the colleges via transcripts and test reporting services, so it isn’t necessary to repeat them here. However, for interviews or special situations, or to fill the page if you’re really having trouble, you can insert basic academic statistics (assuming they are a positive attribute) in a section at the top. Put it under your name and address and call it Academic Record.

## When the Resume is Used

The resume helps to organize your information in a convenient format that is similar to the activities page on most applications. But it serves more purposes than that:

- *Enclose the resume with the packets you use to ask for letters of recommendation.*
- *Bring the resume with you on interviews.*
- *Mail the resume to private colleges along with a small picture, unless you are specifically told not to by the college.*

In the Appendix (back of the handbook) is a sample resume. This imaginary student is very strong, but not a superstar. Our imaginary student is making the most of what he or she has done, and putting together a very strong “package” to present.

Take a look at the sample and try to fit your own activities and awards into a similar format. Remember to list the items putting the strongest first in each category, down to the least significant. Alternatively, download the sample activities list form in Word from our resource website. (See web address and password after the Table of Contents.)

## Your “ACE”

With a little luck, something else will emerge as you put your resume together. Ask yourself “What is different about ME?” What talent, experience, hobby or passion makes you unique? You are looking for an “ace” that you can build up and use to set yourself apart from the many students that, unfortunately, may look a lot like you on paper. If you can find your “ACE”, it often leads to an exceptional essay on the application. These sorts of things, believe it or not, are often tie-breakers in cases where the student is border-line for admission.

At first you’ll think, “I don’t have one.” But you do... a stamp-collecting hobby that started as a child, building computers from scratch, playing the piano at a retirement home. Think! You have one, and can build a theme around it that can tell a story. Where do you shine or show passion? Initiative? What have you thrown your heart and soul into? Once you identify your “ACE”, try to do things that support it such as clubs, volunteer work, contests or summer programs. That way your applications will show a consistent theme that will make them more credible. We can’t overemphasize how critical this is.

## Standardized Testing

The standardized testing process causes different reactions among students. Some are petrified; some view it as a mild annoyance. Others are a little shocked when they don’t do quite as well as expected. But like it or not, they’re here to stay - at least for a while.

Most colleges require the SAT or ACT tests. Originally the ACT was preferred or required in the mid-west, while the SAT was preferred in the northeast and on the coasts. Now it is common for colleges to take either, which is a nice advantage. Some students take both in order to see if they do better on one style than another. This is certainly a valid idea, but can be costly if you are trying to prep for both. Some students report a significant difference in results between the SAT and ACT, while others perform about the same on both. This is a decision that is yours alone, and you should do the necessary research to make an informed choice. Again, the college websites will almost certainly indicate what they accept and/or prefer. For a list of “test optional” or schools that do not require the SAT or ACT, visit <http://collegeapps.about.com/od/standardizedtests/a/optionalscores.htm>. Compare the SAT and ACT side by side at [www.inlikeme.com/test/sat-vs-act-comparison-chart.html](http://www.inlikeme.com/test/sat-vs-act-comparison-chart.html)

Detailed information about the tests follows.

## The Tests

### EXPLORE

A preliminary, practice ACT test generally taken in 9<sup>th</sup> grade; See [www.actstudent.org/explore/](http://www.actstudent.org/explore/)

### PLAN

A series of achievement tests in core subjects with an emphasis on career exploration and preparation for the ACT test. It is generally offered to sophomores in the fall. See [www.actstudent.org/plan/](http://www.actstudent.org/plan/) for sample test questions and tips. There is a booklet that helps interpret PLAN results at [www.act.org/plan/pdf/UsingPLANResults.pdf](http://www.act.org/plan/pdf/UsingPLANResults.pdf).

### PSAT/NMSQT

This test is designed for juniors to give them an estimate of how they will score on the real SAT Reasoning Test. It is shorter, but similar in content and approach. It is generally offered once per year in October. This test is also used to award National Merit Scholarships, so it's very important. Some high schools offer practice PSATs and SATs as early as freshman or sophomore year. This is a good idea for high achievers or students looking to prepare ahead of time. The PSAT resembles the SAT Reasoning Test, except that it does not include an essay. For additional information, visit:

[www.collegeboard.com/student/testing/psat/about.html](http://www.collegeboard.com/student/testing/psat/about.html) and [www.nationalmerit.org](http://www.nationalmerit.org)

### The SAT Reasoning Test

This test is a measure of the critical thinking skills you'll need for academic success in college. The SAT assesses how well you analyze and solve problems—skills you learned in school that you'll need in college. The SAT is typically taken by high school juniors and seniors. The fee is \$49 as of this printing.

Each section of the SAT is scored on a scale of 200 - 800, with two writing sub-scores for multiple-choice and the essay. It is administered seven times a year in the U.S., Puerto Rico, and U.S. Territories, and six times a year overseas.

Here are some highlights of the SAT Reasoning Test:

#### **WRITING:** (60 minutes)

- *The Writing section includes a student-written essay (25 minutes) and a multiple choice section (35 minutes).*

*The essay measures your ability to:*

- *Organize and express ideas clearly*
- *Develop and support the main idea*
- *Use appropriate word choice and sentence structure*

*You'll be asked to develop a point of a view on an issue, using reasoning and evidence — based on your own experiences, readings, or observations — to support your ideas. The essay will be scored by trained high school and college teachers. Each reader will give the essay a score from 1 to 6 (6 is the highest score) based on the overall quality of the essay and your demonstration of writing competence.*

- *The multiple-choice writing questions measure your ability to:*
  - *Improve sentences and paragraphs*
  - *Identify errors (such as diction, grammar, sentence construction, subject-verb agreement, proper word usage, and wordiness)*

#### **CRITICAL READING:** (70 minutes)

- *Analogies have been eliminated*

- Grammar and usage multiple choice are added
- Short and long reading passages as well as sentence completion remain

**MATH:** (70 minutes)

- New content from third-year college preparatory math - some Algebra II questions such as absolute value, exponential growth, negative and fractional exponents, linear functions, scatter plots
- Quantitative comparisons have been eliminated
- Students can use a four-function, scientific, or graphing calculator. The College Board recommends that students use at least a scientific calculator for the SAT, although it's still possible to solve every question without a calculator.

The bottom line – it's LONG! Be sure to get plenty of sleep the night before and bring snacks and water. Concentrate on staying focused and watch your pacing.

**Scoring and Comparing the SAT Reasoning Test**

Each section uses the familiar 200-800 scale. So the “perfect score” is 2400. You also receive two writing sub-scores: a score of 20-80 for the multiple choices and 2-12 for your essay. You are able to access your score report on-line along with a copy of your essay. Sometimes you are offered a QAS (Question and Answer Service) for a fee (certain dates only). This gives you the questions, correct answers, and your answers. For others, the SAS (Student Answer Service) is available, which provides less detail but gives summaries by difficulty levels and how you fared in each. So check as you register to see if your dates offer QAS or SAS. Many colleges are still not using the Writing Section for admission decisions. Visit the College Board website [www.collegeboard.com](http://www.collegeboard.com) for more detailed information. Wondering if your scores will get you where you want to go? Here are some middle 50% scores from various colleges:

<http://collegeapps.about.com/od/sat/p/sat-score-charts.htm>

**The SAT Subject Tests**

These are the 20 subject tests that measure knowledge or skills in a particular subject. Each test is one hour, and many subjects are offered. Not all colleges require the SAT Subject Tests, and some don't even consider the scores. Those that do will generally want two or three in different subject areas and will probably weight them equally to the SAT Reasoning Test. So once again, research pays. Find out what your prospective colleges require or recommend, and watch for changes. Take the SAT Subject Tests whenever you peak in that particular subject. For instance, if you've taken AP Biology, take the Biology test that May or June.

Visit <http://www.collegeboard.com/student/testing/sat/about/SATII.html> for more info.

**The ACT Test**

The American College Testing (ACT) Assessment is designed to test your skill levels in English, Math, Reading, and Science reasoning. On the test, you will have 2 hours and 55 minutes to complete a variety of multiple choice questions divided into four sections – one for each tested subject area. The English, reading, and science sections each include several reading passages with anywhere from 5 to 15 questions per passage. The Math section includes 60 questions – each with 5 possible answer choices.

ACT has an optional 30-minute Writing Test as a component to the ACT Assessment. Prompts used for the ACT Writing Test describe an issue relevant to high school students and ask students to write about their perspective on the issue. As a starting place, two different perspectives on the issue are provided. Examinees may choose to support one of these perspectives or to develop a response based on their own perspective. They will need to clearly state their position and provide reasons and examples. The ACT Writing Test will be required by some colleges and adds \$15.50 to the \$34 fee for a total of \$49.50 if you take both. (as of this printing – fees may change at any time)

You will actually receive 12 separate scores on the ACT: 1 composite, 4 subject scores, and 7 sub-scores. However the composite – or scaled – score is the most important. It ranges from 1-36. Nearly half of those who take it fall in the 17-23 range.

The ACT test has traditionally been more content-based than the SAT, which focuses more on critical thinking and problem solving skills. The ACT more closely reflects core curriculum taught in high school classes, although the SAT is now doing more of the same. Some other significant differences are that the ACT has a science reasoning section while the SAT does not. The ACT has trigonometry while the SAT does not. The SAT penalizes you for incorrect answers; the ACT does not. Finally, the SAT is not entirely multiple choice – the ACT is. ACT provides a comprehensive 80-page prep booklet free of charge at [www.act.org/aap/pdf/preparing.pdf](http://www.act.org/aap/pdf/preparing.pdf) and one to help you interpret your scores at [www.actstudent.org/pdf/uyar.pdf](http://www.actstudent.org/pdf/uyar.pdf). Visit [www.actstudent.org](http://www.actstudent.org) for more info. Wondering if your scores will get you where you want to go? Here are some middle 50% scores from various colleges: <http://collegeapps.about.com/od/theact/p/act-score-charts.htm>

### **AP Exams**

Advanced Placement exams are taken in order to earn college credit in a particular course. AP tests are administered in early May and scored on a point system, 1-5. Obtaining a 3, 4 or 5 may earn you college credit at some colleges, but you will need to confirm this. AP tests taken junior year or earlier may be reported on applications but are not required as are the SAT Reasoning or ACT tests. Each AP test has a registration fee of \$87 (as of this printing), with fee reductions of \$22 available based on need. There are 37 classes and tests across 22 subject areas. Over a million students per year take these exams, and there is little doubt that they bolster your admission package. More info at: [www.collegeboard.com/student/testing/ap/about.html](http://www.collegeboard.com/student/testing/ap/about.html).

*NOTE: Effective for the May 2011 AP tests, the College Board is removing the penalty for incorrect guessing. As a result, it will now be in students' best interest to answer every question. No such change has been announced for the SAT as of this printing.*

**TOEFL** (test of English as a Foreign Language) - visit [www.ets.org/toefl](http://www.ets.org/toefl) to learn more if English is not your primary language. (*TOEFL may be taken on line in the US.*)

### **The Best Testing Schedule**

There is no one test plan or schedule that is best for everyone. It depends on your schedule, your ability to prep, the classes you're taking, and many other factors. But since we are always pressed for an answer, we will tell you one schedule that works well for many students. Consider taking the SAT Reasoning test in March and June of your junior year. Reserve May for AP tests and SAT Subject tests in the same subjects. If you are taking the ACT, consider April and June. The advantage of this plan is that if you are satisfied with your scores, and have "peaked" in terms of prepping effort, you might be able to consider yourself "done". This reserves the fall of senior year for getting your applications in early. However, if you aren't satisfied and have additional time to prep, you still have the fall to give it another try. We don't recommend taking the SAT or ACT more than three times, but the testing strategy is obviously your decision.

### **Prepping and Registering for the Tests**

The sad reality is that prepping for the SAT Reasoning, ACT and SAT Subject tests has become the rule, not the exception. You must face the fact that students competing with you are probably prepping for these tests in some way.

Our advice is to prep for the test one way or another, by the best method you can afford. At least purchase a book of real practice SATs and take them at home. Time yourself.

Check your answers and go over ones you answered incorrectly. A good book will have explanations along with the answers. Don't pay too much attention to "guarantees" of raising your SAT score 300+ points (or ACT equivalent). However, prepping probably will raise your score by some amount and it is reasonable to expect some improvement. Here are the ways to prep in order of least expensive to most:

- *Internet resources at no cost (sample tests, practice questions, etc)*
- *Books and Software (go to amazon.com or other on-line book stores and search on SAT Prep or Test Prep)*
- *On-line courses*
- *Classes*
- *Private Tutors*

This site reviews SAT and ACT Software products:

<http://act-sat-prep-software-review.toptenreviews.com/>

Here are some resources for test prep at all levels (in no particular order):

[www.prepme.com](http://www.prepme.com) – one of the newer services

[www.actstudent.org](http://www.actstudent.org) - online registration and prep for ACT

[www.Number2.com](http://www.Number2.com) - free SAT coaching

[www.uccp.org](http://www.uccp.org) (free prep for California)

[www.revolutionprep.com](http://www.revolutionprep.com) – relatively new program with several options

[www.princetonreview.com](http://www.princetonreview.com) - a popular service – test prep and more

[www.kaplan.com](http://www.kaplan.com) – another popular service for test prep

[slyvanlearning.com](http://slyvanlearning.com) – another popular service for test prep

[www.collegeboard.com](http://www.collegeboard.com) (this is also where you register)

[www.testu.com](http://www.testu.com) - free coaching for SAT

[www.EurekaReview.com](http://www.EurekaReview.com) – a newer service

[www.freevocabulary.com](http://www.freevocabulary.com) - 5000 vocabulary words that may be on SAT

[www.testprepreview.com/](http://www.testprepreview.com/) - practice tests and advice

[www.compassprep.com/](http://www.compassprep.com/) - California only

Registering on-line at the College Board website [www.collegeboard.com](http://www.collegeboard.com) has several advantages. You can get your scores on-line sooner, can check back to review your scores later, and can send copies to colleges more conveniently. Be careful to keep an eye on the registration deadlines for the test(s) you plan to take. The website also has the current SAT calendar: [sat.collegeboard.com/register/sat-dates](http://sat.collegeboard.com/register/sat-dates)

### **Sending Your Test Scores**

Always check the score reporting requirements for each college, as it can vary. Keep track of what you have sent to which school(s), and be sure you have sent scores to all schools you are applying to (unless not required). Also, if you are applying for early decision or early action, be mindful of the early deadlines.

### **SAT and Score Choice**

Four score reports are free with your SAT registration. These reports encourage immediate and early reporting, even before results are seen. There is a \$10 fee for additional reports. Score reports contain all SAT and Subject Test scores taken up to the request date UNLESS you choose a single score choice. (That is, a score from a single SAT test date or an individual Subject Test score.) Visit these links for more information about "Score Choice" and sending your scores:

<http://professionals.collegeboard.com/profdownload/sat-score-choice.pdf>

<http://professionals.collegeboard.com/testing/sat-reasoning/scores/policy>

<http://sat.collegeboard.org/scores/send-sat-scores>

Colleges will still use their own method to evaluate SAT scores sent. Some colleges take your best single sitting; others take your best from each test section. None average them. For SAT Subject Tests, colleges generally use your highest scores from each test.

### **ACT**

Four score reports are free with your registration. With ACT, you have always been able to choose which scores to send. ACT will send only the score from a single requested test date. The cost is \$10 per report per college as of this printing. There is a rush option that will cost more.

### **Information for Athletes**

High school athletics can be a huge advantage both in gaining admissions to colleges that might otherwise be out of reach, and in obtaining funding for college. However, there are minimum requirements for consideration for an athletic scholarship, and they can change over time. It is becoming harder to qualify, not easier. For an updated list of athletic requirements, visit the NCAA website at [www.ncaa.org](http://www.ncaa.org). Click on the *Academics* menu, then the *Division* you are interested in, then *Eligibility* for that division.

There are 16 core classes required now, and a GPA+SAT or ACT score combination that determines a student's eligibility. (For example, a 2.5 GPA plus some SAT Reasoning or ACT score). As of this printing, the NCAA is keeping their eligibility scale the same by simply not using the ACT Writing Test or the new SAT Writing section - they will only use the Math and Critical Reading sections. However, this could change at any time so visit their website for the most current information.

Although the NCAA sets minimum requirements, many colleges will have their own, more stringent, standards for admitting athletes. The 2011-12 NCAA Guide may be downloaded using the link below and is also available in Spanish. [www.ncaapublications.com/productdownloads/CB12.pdf](http://www.ncaapublications.com/productdownloads/CB12.pdf). Visit [www.ncaapublications.com](http://www.ncaapublications.com) for other NCAA publications.

The Eligibility Center is found at:

[http://eligibilitycenter.org/ECWR2/NCAA\\_EMS/NCAA\\_EMS.html#](http://eligibilitycenter.org/ECWR2/NCAA_EMS/NCAA_EMS.html#)

In order to participate in athletics and receive athletically based financial aid, you must register with the NCAA Eligibility Center and meet academic and amateurism eligibility standards. In order to register with the eligibility center, you must have a valid U.S. Social Security Number and a MasterCard, Visa, American Express or Discover (debit or credit) card for the fee. It should be completed *after* your junior year (and fall of senior year at the latest). The Eligibility Center must also get copies of your SAT (use school code 9999) or ACT scores. The NCAA has adopted new legislation that will require prospects who intend to enroll at NCAA Division I and Division II institutions to supply ACT or SAT scores to the Eligibility Center *directly from the testing agencies*. Test scores on an official high school transcript will no longer be usable for NCAA purposes. All prospective student-athletes must complete the NCAA Amateurism Certification questionnaire. You can reach the Eligibility Center Monday – Friday at 1-877-262-1492.

There are many website for potential college athletes, but be *wary of spending money for services*. You would need to *check these resources very carefully* and obtain references and, above all, listen to the advice of your coach(es):

[www.athleticaid.com](http://www.athleticaid.com)

[www.college-athletic-scholarships.com](http://www.college-athletic-scholarships.com)

[www.athleticscholarships.net](http://www.athleticscholarships.net)

[www.collegesportsscholarships.com](http://www.collegesportsscholarships.com)

If you're an athlete, the best advice we can give you is to keep up your grades. Gone are the days when athletic ability alone will get you accepted.

## Students with Learning Differences

More and more students are being diagnosed with some sort of learning disability. Some colleges have programs especially designed for these students and often special admission criteria and procedures apply. The Princeton Review publishes a guide called "*The K & W Guide to Colleges for Students with Learning Disabilities or Attention Deficit Disorder*". This is an excellent resource and can be purchased at [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com). In addition, here are some websites that can assist you in researching your particular situation:

[www.act.org/aap/disab/index.html](http://www.act.org/aap/disab/index.html) - special ACT assessment testing

[www.collegeboard.com/ssd/student/index.html](http://www.collegeboard.com/ssd/student/index.html) - SAT services for students with disabilities

[www.ssat.org/](http://www.ssat.org/) - SSAT test

[www.erbttest.org/parents/admissions/isee#testing-with-accommodations](http://www.erbttest.org/parents/admissions/isee#testing-with-accommodations) – ISEE test

[www.allkindsofminds.org](http://www.allkindsofminds.org) - resources

[www.ldonline.org](http://www.ldonline.org) - resources

[www.aucd.org](http://www.aucd.org) – Association of University Centers on Disabilities

[www.ahead.org](http://www.ahead.org) - Association of Higher Education and Disability (AHEAD)

[www.add.org](http://www.add.org) - Attention Deficit Disorder Association

[www.chadd.org](http://www.chadd.org) - Children and Adults with Attention Deficit Disorders

[www.nclld.org](http://www.nclld.org) - National Center for Learning Disabilities

## First-Generation College Students

If you are the first person in your immediate family to attend college, you are considered a first-generation college student - and you're not alone. Each year thousands of high school graduates are the first in their families to go on to college. First-generation students often overcome serious obstacles - social, academic, or financial - to get there. Those who succeed have most likely received the support they needed from their parents, their high school, and ultimately the college they attend. Fortunately colleges today are doing a better job of reaching out to first-generation students, educating them and helping them to fit in and succeed. As you apply, ask questions and research your potential colleges with this in mind. You are to be commended for taking this ambitious step.

## Finding your Target Colleges

There are two types of four year colleges in most states: Public and Private. Public schools obtain financial support and are, to some extent, controlled by the state. Private schools are therefore more independent with greater freedom in designing programs, defining admissions criteria, and determining their school culture. Within the private school category there are research institutions, specialized schools, liberal arts schools and small, comprehensive universities.

## Choosing Your Schools Strategically

According to the National Association of College Admission Counseling, 84% of colleges accept more than 50% of their applicants. So what does this mean for you? There are many factors that go into choosing colleges that will be right for you. But here are some general guidelines that are helpful as starters:

- *Be realistic – there are some schools that you just won't qualify for so don't waste your time. Why set yourself up for failure at a college that will be way too competitive for you?*
- *Choose a "LTR" spread – some schools that are **Likely (or at least seem so)**, some that are **Target (good fit)** and some that are **Reach (long shots)**. You should have 2-3 of each, at least at first, in order to give yourself every possible opportunity. You can narrow*

*the list before you actually apply. We hesitate to call any school a "safety school" these days, but your **likely** schools are those where you are significantly over the averages quoted for admitted students. (Both GPA and test scores). Find these schools first. Your **target** schools are those where you fall close to the averages of GPAs and test scores quoted and the colleges admit at least half of their applicants. These are "good fits" for you academically. Your other attributes (such as your "ACE") may increase your chances for acceptance. Your **reach** schools are those where you are below their range of test scores and grades or the percentage of admitted applicants at this college is very small (less than 25%). If both of these situations exist, the college should be considered a "**double reach**" and it is extremely unlikely that you will be admitted.*

- *More isn't necessarily better. There is generally no point in applying to 10-15 colleges. Narrow your list intelligently and save yourself and others a lot of time.*
- *Don't limit yourself to only the well-known institutions. There are some wonderful colleges whose names you might not recognize, but where you might have a better experience. Check out [www.ctcl.com](http://www.ctcl.com) (Colleges That Change Lives) for starters and talk to your high school counselor for ideas.*
- *Seek help from your parents, counselors or others who know you. Talk to older students who are at colleges you might be interested in.*
- *Do your homework. Research a variety of colleges on the internet and look at the admission process and requirements. Look at the averages of admitted students.*
- *At this stage, don't eliminate a college based on cost. If you truly like the school, explore all the opportunities for aid before deciding you can't afford to go there.*
- *Do your own work! This is your process, so take ownership of it. Don't delegate something this important to anyone else, even your parents.*

### **The Common Data Set Initiative**

The Common Data Set (CDS) initiative is a collaborative effort among data providers in the higher education community and publishers such as the College Board, Peterson's, and U.S. News & World Report. The goal is to improve the quality and accuracy of information provided in a student's transition into higher education, and to reduce the reporting burden on data providers.

So what does this mean for you? It provides you with an easy and consistent way to obtain reliable admission statistics and other important information about colleges. To use this valuable resource, simply use your internet search engine (Google, etc.) and type **Common Data Set** xxx where xxx is the college name. For example, search on Common Data Set Yale and you will see a good example. Depending upon how the institution has chosen to store their data, you might need to add the year to the search, such as **Common Data Set Harvard 2010**. In any case, you should find it with little effort. Once in the most current year, you should see various sections including one on freshman admissions. This section will give you a good feel for the school's selectivity.

### **Impacted Majors**

As if things aren't difficult enough, some colleges are labeling certain majors as impacted, and applying a different set of admissions standards to those majors. Most of the time, you can't transfer into that major later. So if you are adamant about a particular major, and it's impacted, you will have to try for it. But if you're not sure, you might want to try for a non-impacted major. It may help somewhat to apply to the less popular or more unusual majors. You can generally find out from the college's website which majors are the most popular, and may want to stay away from those. It may also be an advantage to be a

female applying to a male-dominated major or vice versa. The bottom line is, if the major is the most important thing to you, then you should try for admission in that major at several schools. If the school itself is more important than the major, then it might be wise to list “Undecided” as at least a second choice.

### How to Find Schools

As you start to find colleges that will be good fits for you, here are some factors to consider:

- *Size – do I want large, medium or small? Ratio of males to females?*
  - *Rural or Urban – do I like the city scene, or a more suburban setting?*
  - *Location – do I want to travel out of state, or stay close? Can I handle the weather?*
  - *Campus – what do I want in a campus? How are the dorms? Food?*
  - *Social aspects and lifestyle – will I be likely to join a sorority or fraternity? Do the kids stay on campus over the weekend or do most commute? Is it politically liberal or conservative?*
  - *Academics and programs – do they have majors I would be interested in? What is their reputation in those majors? (note that the same school can be rated highly in one major, while not in others) What about class size?*
  - *Class position – will I be one of the better students at the school? Or struggle to keep up?*
  - *Religion – does the college have a religious affiliation?*
  - *Sports – do they have the sport(s) I am interested in? What Division?*
  - *Honors programs – strong students may want to check into honors programs at colleges.*
  - *Graduation rate and timeframe – do most students return? Graduate in 4 years?*
  - *Calendar – does this matter to me? Semesters? Quarters?*
  - *Are there other special programs involving research, internships or study abroad?*
  - *Cost – what will my cost limitations be, if any? Will I need financial aid?*
- NOTE: Don't eliminate choices based on cost at the early stages of your search.**

These are just a few criteria that a student might consider. You need to develop your own list of what's important to you. (see *detailed questions in the Appendix Section*)

There is a wealth of information to help you research colleges. U.S. News & World Report publishes a book called “America’s Best Colleges” (see link below), and it includes valuable admissions statistics as well as rankings in several categories. Be aware, however, that many published lists take money from the colleges that want to be in them. Others require specific permissions or contracts if the college wants to be included, and some excellent schools may decline; so *don't take rankings very seriously*. Visit [www.usnews.com](http://www.usnews.com) (then click the Education section) The University of Texas maintains a list of colleges by state, with links to their websites. [www.utexas.edu/world/univ/state/](http://www.utexas.edu/world/univ/state/) So there are plenty of places to start. Avoid listening to what others say about their experience. The fact that your best friend's brother's girlfriend hated the school shouldn't really mean much to you. A big name, “popular” school may not be right for you at all. Another caution: Much of what you may hear or even read about admissions is outdated. Many schools that had lightweight academic or even “party” reputations in your parents' day may have changed their focus entirely. The best way to evaluate colleges is to use several current sources along with a visit. That way you eliminate some of the biases.

Once you have a rough list to start with, remember the “LTR” guidelines. Before you get your heart set on any place in particular, take a look at its admissions averages (GPA, SATs, ACT) and place it on the scale of Likely to Double Reach. (See *guidelines earlier in the handbook*.)

The Princeton Review is another good source. You can search for a college by name, and then review a wealth of information about it. They include any rankings among the best or worst in a particular category. You can click on [admissions](#) and see the average GPA and

test scores. You register (free) in order to access the maximum information. Remember, nothing can accurately predict your results at any competitive college; but research helps, so try [www.princetonreview.com](http://www.princetonreview.com), [www.princetonreview.com/colleges-majors.aspx](http://www.princetonreview.com/colleges-majors.aspx) and [www.princetonreview.com/com.aspx](http://www.princetonreview.com/com.aspx).

### **College Visits**

Over and over again we hear stories about college visits that totally changed a student's opinion about a college. There is simply no better way to get a true feel for the atmosphere, student body, campus and general environment. Almost every college has a program for visitation, and their website will tell you how to go about it. Some are impersonal group tours, which are very valuable. Other colleges take appointments for more personal tours. Try to visit when school is in session. Sophomore and junior year are excellent times to start visiting different campuses, and it's a great use of your Spring break. Take pictures and keep a journal, and stay for the post-tour information session if offered. Fill out the information card they will likely provide, so you are on their mailing list.

To set up a visit, check on-line to see what is available. Some colleges allow you to reserve tours or visits on-line. Otherwise call the admissions office and make an appointment. (The student should call, not the parent.) See if there are options to visit your areas of interest, talk to professors, stay overnight in a dorm, etc. When you visit, evaluate these among other criteria:

- *atmosphere, weather and culture*
- *school spirit, pride, involvement – check their newspaper*
- *student union and other facilities*
- *library and research area, computer facilities (wireless, repair facilities etc.)*
- *dorms and eating areas (sample the food!)*
- *professors and coaches as applicable*
- *extra-curricular activities*
- *transportation and parking*

Don't skip the college visits. They can make all the difference in your decision. However, to save cost, it might make sense to visit top choice colleges before applying but save some visits at your lower choices for after acceptances. After all, with luck they may not be necessary. If all else fails, there are virtual visits using websites such as [www.ecampustours.com](http://www.ecampustours.com), [www.campustours.com](http://www.campustours.com) or [www.YOUniversityTV.com](http://www.YOUniversityTV.com)

### **College Fairs**

Ask your high school about college fairs. This is an efficient way to get information from lots of colleges at once. College representatives will answer questions and provide information about their school. They don't replace visits, but they're a good first step in sifting through the wealth of colleges available. A partial list of large, national, registered fairs can be found at:

<http://www.nacacnet.org/EventsTraining/CollegeFairs/ncf/Pages/default.aspx>

Your high school may also be aware of more local opportunities.

### **Preparing for the College Fair**

Prior to attending the fair, have some questions in mind that are important to you and that will help you determine which colleges to target. Think about topics such as admissions criteria – are you likely to get in based on GPA and SAT statistics? Ask about location, is it public or private, total enrollment, cost, majors and/or honors programs offered and strength thereof, the makeup and style of the student body, etc. (*see detailed questions in the Appendix Section*)

Bring a pencil or pen. You will often be given cards to fill out so that the college can send you additional information. Jot down notes as well. For the efficiency-minded, type up your own "card" and print multiple copies so that you can leave them with the colleges you are interested in. This will save you a LOT of time and make a positive impression (neat, organized, error-free). You should be able to fit 2 or 3 of these "cards" on a normal piece of paper. Set it up to look something like this, but with your information filled in:

Name _____	Current Classes:
Address _____	1. _____
City _____	2. _____
State _____ Zip _____ Date of Birth ____/____/____	3. _____
Telephone (     ) _____	4. _____
GPA _____ Rank _____ out of _____	5. _____
PSAT/SAT/ACT Scores: M _____ CR _____ W _____	6. _____
Graduation Year _____ School CEEB Code _____	
School Name _____ Academic Interest _____	
Extracurricular Activities _____	
Email _____	

**More Helpful Links for Finding Colleges and/or Careers**

- [mappingyourfuture.org/Undergraduates/](http://mappingyourfuture.org/Undergraduates/) - what to do and when to prepare for college
- [collegeapps.about.com/](http://collegeapps.about.com/) - all sorts of college prep information including test scores from different college categories
- [www.petersons.com](http://www.petersons.com) - college search
- [www.collegeboard.com](http://www.collegeboard.com) - college search
- [www.princetonreview.com](http://www.princetonreview.com) - college search
- [cnsearch.collegenet.com/cgi-bin/CN/index](http://cnsearch.collegenet.com/cgi-bin/CN/index) – search colleges by keywords

**Two books that we like:**

*College Handbook (College Board)* and *Fiske Guide to Colleges*  
 (both are put out annually and available on Amazon.com)

**Get in Their Database**

As you identify colleges that might be of interest to you, there is something you should always do. Fill out their on-line form to be included on their mailing list. Generally each college will have an Admissions or Prospective Students link off their home page. The form to register to receive future mailings is generally found somewhere in this section. Dig a little and you'll find it. If you cannot find this on-line, call the Admissions Office. Doing this does not obligate you in any way, but does serve to ensure that you'll be advised of critical dates, open houses and other admission-related announcements. It is also a demonstration of interest, something that is gaining importance these days. More on this later...

**Sample Inquiry Letter**

If you can't find an on-line method for getting on a college's mailing list or for requesting their materials, a plain old-fashioned letter works just fine and may even end up in your file reflecting positively on you. Here is a sample of a properly formatted letter. Note that this general format works for any college inquiry - just change the content appropriately.

Ms. Uwanna Gohere (the person and address you are mailing to if known)  
Director of Admissions  
1234 Easy Way  
Showcase College  
Showcase, OK 99999

Dear Dean Gohere, (if no name, then just use Dear Director of Admissions,) September 5, 2011

*I am currently a junior at Bestofall Academy in Bestofall, OK. I am inquiring at colleges that may fit my needs and profile, and Showcase College has caught my attention. Because Showcase offers an excellent engineering program, it is on my list of possible target schools.*

*Please send me any relevant information regarding admissions, financial aid, housing and anything else you would like me to know about Showcase College that will help with my decision making process.*

Yours truly, (or Sincerely,)

(your signature)

Justafine Kidd (your printed name)  
1000 Main Street (your return address)  
Bestofall, OK 99999  
justafinek@gmailoryahoo.com (your email address)

## The Internet, Social Networking Sites and Email

### Websites and Scams

The internet can be an indispensable tool in your college application process if you use caution. If you find something interesting, be sure the source is reliable. Never input any personal information or pay any fee without knowing that the source is valid and secure. Beware of scholarship and other scams, especially when they charge money and make unrealistic promises. Be on the lookout for sites that mimic their real counterparts, such as [www.fafsa.com](http://www.fafsa.com) instead of the real one: [www.fafsa.ed.gov](http://www.fafsa.ed.gov) or [www.commonapp.org](http://www.commonapp.org) instead of the real [www.commonapp.org](http://www.commonapp.org). Check out [www.finaid.org/scholarships/scams.phtml](http://www.finaid.org/scholarships/scams.phtml) and [www.snopes.com](http://www.snopes.com) to help you identify illegitimate sites and emails.

### Email

We advise students to set up a separate, professional email address for use during the college admission process. We recommend [firstname.lastname@...](mailto:firstname.lastname@...). Use that other one for your friends. When emailing colleges, don't abbreviate or use slang or "chat speak" such as LOL or BTW. Treat college emails as if they were business letters.

### Social Networking Sites

Keep your facebook and MySpace sites private. Don't post pictures you wouldn't want an admission officer to see, and be careful who you "friend". Never "friend" an admissions officer or a teacher unless there is some specific instruction to do so at your high school.

### Getting Ready to Apply

Be sure you have your Social Security Number and your high school's CEEB code handy. They will go on all applications. My Social Security Number is \_\_\_\_\_-\_\_\_\_-\_\_\_\_.

(Note: Keep your Social Security Number private.) My school's CEEB code is \_\_\_\_\_.

### **Your Application - Written**

Most applications are now done on-line. But if, for whatever reason, you are submitting a paper application, then take note. Your application is one of the few things that are seen by an admissions officer directly. The appearance of your application is a reflection on you. Start working on your applications early, as rush jobs are easy to spot. Practice by downloading a copy of the application and filling it out. Use a black pen and avoid errors. Think carefully about your answers and review them. Ideally, have a parent check them. Be truthful, be specific, and be accurate; but don't hesitate to put your best foot forward.

### **Your Application – On-Line**

Fortunately, most colleges are now accepting, or even requiring, on-line applications. If offered, the schools generally prefer them. This solves the neatness issue, but can cause other problems. It is easier to make and miss mistakes on an on-line application. You should still download or request a paper copy of the application and fill it out before doing the on-line form. Pay attention to the on-line instructions. If your browser blocks pop-ups, you may need to disable that feature for on-line applications. As the deadlines draw near, the websites begin to slow down tremendously and this dramatically affects your time spent filing them out. Sluggish websites are simply overloaded with applicants, so it pays not to be one of the late ones. Applying on-line early saves time in the end and reflects on your time management skills as well. Procrastinators are easy to identify in the application process; they're the ones on-line at midnight on the deadline day. On the other hand, don't pull an all-nighter to be the first on-line applicant at your school of choice. It's not a race, and there is no advantage to being first.

### **Transcripts**

Many applications will ask for your classes and grades as part of the form. Be accurate and truthful, because they will still obtain an official transcript in the end. Falsifying anything on the application is a sure way to be rejected.

Often the application will include a form for requesting a transcript, but pay attention to the individual instructions for each college's application. Many colleges do not want the transcript initially, but instead will ask for it from accepted students only. Obviously that would be much later in the process. Other colleges, especially privates, may want it initially. Don't send things that the school doesn't want. Pay attention to their instructions.

### **Additional Requirements for Some Majors**

Pay special attention to whether your intended major has additional requirements, such as portfolios, tapes, or additional letters of recommendation. This is not uncommon.

### **Make Copies**

In all cases, make a copy of the application (paper or on-line) before sending it. The on-line ones can generally be printed. But one way or another, save a copy for your files.

### **Certificate of Mailing**

For anything important that you mail, obtain a certificate of mailing (only a little over \$1) from the post office. This gives you proof of the day the item was mailed. Use this for applications, secondary school reports (from your counselor), transcripts, and anything else you consider critical. When close to deadlines, this can be valuable insurance.

### **On-Line Receipt**

Most, if not all, on-line applications finish with a receipt or confirmation page as you submit the application. Print and save this receipt page. It will often indicate that you have paid the application fee by credit card (or whatever) as well. There are generally other ways to pay the fee if you prefer.

## **Fees**

Application fees generally range from \$35 to \$95. Four fee waivers are generally issued to applicants who qualified under the SAT and ACT Fee Waiver programs. The Fee Waiver program is available to juniors and seniors based on economic need. See [www.collegeboard.com/student/testing/sat/calenfees/feewaivers.html](http://www.collegeboard.com/student/testing/sat/calenfees/feewaivers.html) for information.

## **The Common Application(s)**

Colleges and universities have worked together to develop and distribute a Common Application. Colleges “join” this effort, and their membership means that they accept the Common Application and commit to considering it equally to their own. The advantage to students is obvious, in that you fill out the common application and simply submit it multiple times to any member schools you are applying to. What’s the downside? Not all colleges accept it. Some counselors advise against using the common application for your top choice school(s), believing that colleges still “secretly” prefer their own application. There is no evidence of this that we are aware of, but use your own judgment. Some colleges will require their own supplement in addition to the basic common application. You can visit [www.commonapp.org](http://www.commonapp.org) for more information and a list of member institutions (460 this year). The form can be downloaded or completed on-line and submitted electronically to your colleges. Even if you’re a freshman, print out the common app and take a look at it. In a few years, you will be filling out applications that will be quite similar to it, and you’d better have a lot to say. Pay special attention to the activities section. *Note: Applicants are now asked to report only their “best scores (so far)” as opposed to “all scores”.* Another similar program is on-line that attempts to include more public schools, so keep an eye on it at [www.universalcollegeapp.com](http://www.universalcollegeapp.com).

## **Types of Admission**

As if the process isn’t already confusing enough, there are several types of admission. Not all colleges offer all types. But it is important to understand them, then to research what your prospective colleges offer. NACAC offers a flyer you can download at [www.nacacnet.org/PublicationsResources/steps/Articles/Documents/Steps/AdmisOptFlyer\\_Web\\_Color.pdf](http://www.nacacnet.org/PublicationsResources/steps/Articles/Documents/Steps/AdmisOptFlyer_Web_Color.pdf)

### **Regular Admission or Regular Decision**

This is the standard admission, whereby students submit applications by the college’s regular deadline. Students applying under regular admission will generally be notified of the decision in March or April.

### **Early Decision – Binding (ED)**

Have you found a college that is overwhelmingly your first choice? Are you prepared to commit that if accepted you will attend? Then if that school offers early decision, it may be right for you. Early decision is binding; that means if the college accepts you, you **MUST** attend. Obviously you can only apply under early decision to one college. Usually you will sign a contract stating that you understand the binding nature of this admission process. Failure to abide by the restrictions can jeopardize your acceptance to that college and others. Some believe that applying ED can give you an edge at that school, but be very cautious when using that option.

### **Early Action – Not Binding (EA)**

Often confused with Early Decision, Early Action is an opportunity to apply early (usually by some November date) and to be notified by around mid-December or January. Under this plan, you can be accepted early, rejected, or deferred to the regular admission pool. Deferred means they were undecided, but odds of getting in later are generally lower. If accepted under Early Action, you are **NOT** obligated to attend and you still have until May 1 to make a decision. You may generally apply for Early Action to more than one college; however some colleges specify that theirs is a “single school Early Action program”. This

has been true, for example, at Stanford and Harvard. So be sure to research the options carefully as you may be making some sort of promise.

### **Restrictive Early Action (REA) – Not Binding**

If you select this plan, you may be restricted from filing any other ED, EA or REA applications. However, you will receive a decision early and you can apply to as many colleges as you wish for regular admission.

### **Admission Spring Semester**

Some colleges are accepting qualified students, but for a semester other than fall. This represents their attempt to remain at full capacity, knowing they will lose some students after first semester. These students are most likely ones that almost made the “cut” but had to be denied fall admission. However, it’s still an acceptance, so be grateful.

### **Delayed or Deferred Acceptance**

If you have been accepted at a college, you can sometimes arrange to delay your matriculation (attendance) for a year. This is often referred to as a “gap year”. The school will look at your reasons, and they will need to have some merit. Acceptable reasons might be to work to earn tuition money, to travel, or to pursue some particular special internship or program. Any such arrangement must be explicitly set up with the college.

### **Rolling Admission**

Under this plan, applications are considered as they are received and the student is notified of the decision as soon as it is made. A student applying to a college that offers rolling admission is not committing to that college if accepted. There is almost no reason NOT to submit your application early to these schools, as it can only serve to give you an early answer. If accepted, you can relax knowing that you are in but can still wait to see what your additional options may be.

### **Open Admission**

Open admission colleges, such as community colleges or trade schools, generally admit all interested students with a high school diploma. However, some community colleges are no longer open admission. Sometimes admission to particular programs is also more selective and not truly “open”.

### **Transferring from a Community College**

For some, transferring from a community college (CC) to a 4-year college (generally as a junior) might be advantageous and is becoming an increasingly popular option, particularly in this economy. In fact, 45% of all first-year college students start at CCs. You can better prepare, cut costs, save money or even work while attending, live at home, think more about majors and careers before committing, or graduate from the four year college that turned you down for freshman admission. SATs and ACTs aren’t required. CCs generally offer small classes and many at night and/or on weekends. Often, CCs have transfer or “feeder” programs with four year institutions. There may be “articulation agreements” which outline transfer policies and make it easier to transfer smoothly. If this option is of interest to you, you need to research exactly how to make it happen. Connect with an advisor at your local CC(s). There may be lists showing what each CC class equates to at four year colleges. Check to be sure your credits will transfer and that you are preparing correctly for your intended major. You could also take a summer class at a CC – one that you’re dreading in college. But check to be sure that it will transfer and fulfill the requirement(s). There is excellent information available so be sure to do your research up front. Try [www.collegeboard.com/student/csearch/where-to-start/36.html](http://www.collegeboard.com/student/csearch/where-to-start/36.html) for starters, and this website of 2 year colleges: [cset.sp.utoledo.edu/twoyrcol.html](http://cset.sp.utoledo.edu/twoyrcol.html)

## **The Truth about Legacies**

So, you're relaxed because fortunately mom and dad graduated from your first choice school? Don't be. The more competitive the school, the less likely that your being a legacy will get you in. While it is true that a greater percentage of legacy students are admitted versus the general population, there is no guarantee. In addition, legacy status matters a great deal more to some colleges than to others.

## **Applying Out of State**

If you are applying to one or more colleges outside your home state, be aware that it may be more difficult to get in. Look on their website and you may be able to see the percentage of out of state students they accept. If it's small, as it well may be, then you should assume that you will need to be on the higher end of their admission statistics. Sometimes states have an agreement with other states such that out of state tuition is reduced. Ask your counselor for any such arrangements in your region.

## **Letters of Recommendation**

Not all colleges require or even take letters of recommendation. If required or accepted, take them seriously. The more competitive the admission process at your target school, the more a letter can make a difference and set you apart from other applicants. Some colleges might even specify that a recommendation come from a teacher in a specific subject, though this is not common. Equally important, if the college doesn't want letters of recommendation, don't provide them. If they don't specify how many, send at least two.

### **Who to Ask**

Plan to select teachers from 11<sup>th</sup> or 12<sup>th</sup> grade who have gotten to know you. Obviously they should be ones from whom you obtained a strong grade. Do not use a 9<sup>th</sup> or 10<sup>th</sup> grade teacher unless you have a compelling reason to do so. In addition, it might be ideal to obtain one letter from a humanities subject and one from a math/science discipline.

Sometimes the colleges will differentiate between an academic recommendation and a personal one. Academic recommendations are clear-cut (teacher or counselor), but a personal recommendation could come from a coach, employer, friend, pastor or someone associated with your community service work for example. Think carefully and try to select a person who knows you, thinks highly of you, and will make the effort to do a good job for you. Always remember that people are doing these on their own time, so be considerate and gracious when asking.

### **How to Ask**

If your high school publishes a specific process for asking for letters of recommendation, by all means follow it. In the absence of specific instructions, use the following guidelines:

- *Allow plenty of time for the person to complete the letters. Two weeks is an absolute minimum. Remember that most people have to do these letters on their own time, and giving them a "rush assignment" is hardly fair and reflects poorly on you.*
- *Ask the teacher first (in person) if he/she would be able to write a "strong recommendation" on your behalf. Don't assume that the teacher will be comfortable doing a recommendation for you. Give them the "out" just in case; you don't want them to do it if the answer is "no".*
- *Do your homework! Some colleges are requesting recommendations on-line while others want letters. Still others want a specific form filled out. It is YOUR responsibility to provide your letter writers with the form, the on-line link and instructions, or whatever it is that they need to do.*

- *Provide your resume or activities list. Give them some material to work with, so their letter can be detailed and list specific accomplishments. This is where all that hard work on your resume pays off. It works perfectly for this purpose.*
- *Include a picture if the person might not recall having you in class or might appreciate a visual reminder of who you are. However, if that is the case, should you use them?*
- *Include pre-addressed, stamped envelopes for each college you are asking them to mail to. The idea is to enable them to use one letter, and just modify it for each college. Then all they should have to do is insert it in the envelope and mail it. You are trying to make this as easy as possible on the letter writer.*
- *Assemble all this neatly in a large envelope. Appearing organized is just one more positive trait that your letter writers will take notice of.*
- *On the outside of the envelope, or on a cover letter, politely ask for their assistance and list all the colleges with their deadlines. List them in order of due date, so the teacher can easily see when they need to be completed and won't risk missing a date.*
- *Deliver the packets to your letter-writers in person if at all possible. This is not the time to be lazy and mail it. The personal touch sets the process off in the right direction. You need these people to think of you in the best possible light.*

### **Secondary School Report**

Many colleges require a specific form to be completed by your college advisor. Follow the same general guidelines above, but research to see if there is a special form for the Secondary School Report. Often the transcript is included with this form. Your high school will know what to do in this area. Always fill out as much of the form as you can yourself first. (name, address, social security number etc.)

### **Thank You Notes and Follow-up**

A couple of weeks after handing out your requests for letters of recommendation follow up with a hand-written thank you note to each person. This serves two purposes. First, you owe them a thank you and you are providing it. That's simple etiquette. Secondly, in the unlikely event that they forgot about it or haven't gotten to it, it serves as a gentle reminder.

When you are ultimately accepted to some or all of your colleges, be sure to provide these positive results to the people who wrote recommendations for you. They truly want to know and appreciate hearing the good news.

## **Essays**

### **What Essays Are**

Colleges will frequently require an essay or personal statement as part of the application. These will range anywhere from 200 words to 1000. The essays will consist of anything from responding to a quote to the most general "tell us about yourself" type. Regardless of which it is, the essay is important. It is a chance for the college to gain insight into you as an individual. The rest of the application is mostly factual. This is your one opportunity to tell a story about YOU and try to make yourself stand out. We have seen stories about a community service project that are so moving as to make the reader cry. We have seen stories about an unusual hobby, such as building sculptures out of computer parts. We have seen stories about students who formed their own businesses on the internet at age 13. Maybe your story isn't quite that extraordinary, but you can find something to tell about. Go back to the resume and look for your "ACE". Remember that? Now, work a story around it. Ideally, your story might show a progression from younger years into the present. How did you grow? How did you change? How did you make a difference?

What did you learn? Did you overcome adversity or some hardship? Do you have any gaps or lapses in your academic record that need explaining? Above all, be truthful. Admissions staff will see through a greatly exaggerated or fabricated hardship or story.

### **What Essays Are Not**

Equally important, there are some things that essays are NOT. They should not be used to restate accomplishments that are covered elsewhere in the application. They should not be used to talk about someone else. If someone else is involved, such as a role model or mentor, that may work just fine. But remember that the essay has to be about YOU. What did you learn? What did the person or experience mean to YOU? As you write, pretend you are a college admissions officer and keep asking yourself “So what?” How does your story tell them who you are and what you will bring to their campus?

### **Essay Format**

We have some general steps to follow in preparing your essay or personal statement.

1. Brainstorm first. Take a blank sheet of paper and let your mind roam freely through your past up to the present and jot down anything that comes to mind. A person, and experience, a hardship, an accomplishment (not already covered), a life lesson learned, etc. The more freely you brainstorm the better.
2. After brainstorming, go back over your list and try to envision a story around each. Pull out the ones that offer you the most “story telling potential”.
3. Remember to reread the essay question. Before you get too excited over the great story you came up with, remember that some of your colleges may have worded a very specific question or used a quote. Can your story address that quote? You may be lucky enough to be able to modify one essay to work for several schools. But you may need to develop several separate ones to use for different questions.
4. Use this model. Try to format your essays to roughly follow this pattern:
  - *The introduction – Use one to three sentences to catch the reader’s attention. Make them want to read more.*
  - *The theme – What is the main idea (about YOU) that you are trying to get across. Try to state it as part of the introduction.*
  - *Supporting paragraphs (generally three to five depending on the length requirements) - Tell your story in an organized progression that flows and connects well. Be sure your supporting “evidence” connects to your theme.*
  - *Concluding paragraph – Circle back to your theme or main idea. Wrap up with a strong finish that ties it all up. Don’t repeat yourself, but leave the writer with no doubt that you grew, you changed, you conquered etc. (Whatever it was!)*

### **Help With Brainstorming**

Are you having a mental block when trying to find topics? If so, try answering these questions and that should lead to some ideas:

- *What is my greatest accomplishment?*
- *Do I have a talent or a strong trait that I can demonstrate? Think – you probably do.*
- *Did I do a study program abroad or some other special summer program?*
- *Was there a trip that taught me something? Or an event that touched me personally?*
- *What am I passionate about? A subject? A cause? An organization? A role model?*
- *Did I receive any special awards not already covered?*
- *Was there a major community service project I could expand on?*

- *Am I involved with church/synagogue in a meaningful way? Some other organization?*
- *Did I overcome a hardship?*
- *Have I stood up for something I believe in? Some social cause?*
- *What is different about me versus someone else with my same GPA and test scores?*
- *Have I shown leadership? When and how?*
- *What do I struggle with and how do/did I overcome it?*
- *Is there something about my record that I had better explain? (a poor grade?)*

### **No Grammar or Spelling Errors**

It probably goes without saying, but your essay needs to be correct in spelling and grammar. With word processors, reviewers will expect near-perfect essays. Be sure to do your essays in a word processor so they can be spell-checked. However, spell-check will miss some things so don't rely on it. Don't get carried away with trying to use impressive vocabulary words. Express yourself as YOU, not someone you think they are looking for. Extensive use of synonyms will be obvious to the reader. Double space the essay and have teachers, counselors, parents – anyone available – read it over to see if your message comes across.

### **Other Checks**

Read your essay out loud. Does it flow? Did you use "I" too much? Do you convey passion? Does the essay sound sincere? Is there depth? Does it show something about you that will add value to the college? Does it pass the "So what?" test? Does the essay demonstrate your character? Your intelligence? If there was a question to answer or a quote to respond to, do you answer it or respond to it? Does the real YOU come through?

### **Word Count**

Don't forget to be mindful of the length requirement, though not necessarily at first. Sometimes it is better to let the essay evolve to its own natural length initially. Then edit it or expand it to meet the exact requirement. Most word processors have word count features (in Word, pull down the Tools menu, Word Count), which makes this easy. Don't worry about getting an exact word count match. Being over or under by a few words is not a problem. If they give a page length, assume they mean double spaced.

### **Putting the Essay onto the Application**

We have seen several methods by which your essay gets onto your on-line application. Some applications tell you to mail it. Some instruct you to cut and paste it into a particular box on the application. When this is done, we have found that it forces single spacing and sometimes removes paragraph indentations. If this is a problem, try saving your document as a text file (.txt) rather than .doc. But in any case, check to be sure that the entire essay made it onto the application. A third method we've seen is where you "browse" to find your essay on your computer drive, then press an upload button that converts the essay into Adobe .pdf. This is the nicest method, as it preserves all your nice formatting and presents your essay the way you intended it to look. Whatever method is offered or required, just check the result to be sure you got it all, and that nothing was corrupted, truncated, or mangled in the process.

### **Final Tips for Essays**

- *Don't use exclamation points*
- *Generally don't try humor – it often doesn't have the intended effect*
- *Write in a strong, active voice – not passive (use words like led, organized, founded, etc)*
- *Write out numbers and avoid contractions*
- *Be specific and focus on details to make your story believable*
- *Don't use quotes unless they are a personal part of the story*
- *If using the essay for multiple applications, make adjustments so it doesn't appear that way*
- *Write about something that is of interest to YOU, not your parents or someone else*

- *Avoid topics that could be controversial or offensive (drugs, politics, sex, drinking, gangs, partying, etc. – and don't write about your relationship with your girl/boyfriend.)*
- *Avoid topics that could appear trite (how you will save the world or achieve world peace; the value of education, etc.)*
- *Don't reveal things about yourself that are negative. (We want you to be truthful, but that doesn't mean you have to write an essay about all your weaknesses!)*
- *Don't let others write your essays. Help with proofing them is one thing, but if you didn't write them it will show.*

We have included some sample essays in the Appendix.

## **Interviews**

### **Obtaining the Interview**

Fewer colleges had been offering private on-campus interviews, but there seems to be a slight increase lately. If they do, take advantage of this opportunity to make a positive impression. You may have to pursue the interview, because it most likely won't be offered to you. We saw a case where the interview reservation system was put on the internet but with no announcement. If you were lucky enough to find it, the ID number you had been given didn't work properly to reserve the interview. It was almost as if it was a tenacity test! Successful applicants had to call the office and be given yet another ID number that worked. We never determined if it was truly a test, but the persistent students were rewarded with coveted personal interviews.

If there are no on-campus interviews, the next best thing is one offered at your high school or in your area. Sometimes alumni will interview in your area for the colleges they represent. These opportunities should be on the college website, but call if they aren't.

Some colleges will not offer any individual interview opportunity at all; typically the public schools do not. The important thing is to take advantage of those that do.

### **Preparing for the Interview**

Below is a list of actual questions that were asked on interviews. Go over them, and think about an answer for each. Many are similar, as the same concept can be covered in many ways. Design your answers to be 2-3 sentences. One-word answers are too short, but rambling on about a single question is equally poor. The interviewer will dig for more detail if they want it, so be moderate in your response length. Practice answering these questions out loud, either to a parent or to yourself. Better yet, have a parent or counselor conduct a mock interview with you.

### **Sample Interview Questions**

*Why do you want to attend our school?*

*What is your strongest/weakest point?*

*What have you done to prepare for college?*

*What has been your most awful experience/moment you can think of?*

*What has been your greatest experience in high school?*

*What do you want to do in the future?*

*Tell me about yourself. (You should focus on about three things.)*

*Tell me about your interests.*

*Tell me about your involvement in extracurricular activities.*

*What do you think about the election? Did you watch the debates?*

*What is your favorite book? Who is your favorite author?*

*Which of your accomplishments are you the most proud of?*

*If you could meet any important figure in the past or present, who would it be and what would you talk about?*

*If you could be any animal what would you be? Why?*

*Why are you considering this college?  
How did you come to include us among your choices?  
What makes you think this college and you are right for each other?  
Where else are you applying and why?  
Which is your first choice? Why?  
What do you hope to major in? Why?  
What are your plans for the future? What do you expect to be doing years from now?  
What have you liked or disliked about your high school?  
If you were the principal of your school, what would you change?  
What would you like to tell us about yourself?  
What newspapers and magazines do you read? How often?  
What books (not required by your courses) have you read recently?  
What television shows do you watch?  
Tell us about your family.  
How do you spend a typical afternoon after school? Evening? Weekend?  
How do you spend your vacations?  
What extracurricular activities have you found most satisfying?  
Do you have any heroes, contemporary or historical?  
How would your best friend describe you?  
If you could talk with any living person, who would it be and why?  
What events have been crucial in your life?  
What is the most significant contribution you have made to your school or community?  
What is the most important thing you have learned in high school?  
What historical event do you feel has had the most impact on the 20th century?  
Tell us about your innermost fears.  
What do you want to get out of your college experience?  
Why should we accept you?  
What would you say to an admissions officer if one were standing right here, as to why they should admit you?  
What are the three most important possessions in your room?*

### **Questions for You to Ask**

Generally the interviewer will allow time for you to ask questions. Even if you don't really have any, find three to ask. Use this opportunity to demonstrate that you know something about the college. Do your research first. Here are some ideas:

*How are fraternities or sororities perceived on this campus?  
I've heard \_\_\_\_\_ about your \_\_\_\_\_. Could you comment on that?  
Are there ways to become involved with sports?  
Do most kids leave the campus on the weekends?  
How is campus security?  
Are students allowed to live off campus?  
How is dorm preference determined?  
How are roommates selected?  
Tell me about the \_\_\_\_\_ program. (your major) Is there an honors program?  
I notice that you offer \_\_\_\_\_. Could you tell me a little more about that program?  
How large are most classes?  
Are classes taught by professors or teaching assistants? What percent TA's?  
Are there research opportunities available?  
Are there internship opportunities available?  
Are there opportunities to study abroad?  
What percentage of the student body returns after freshman year?  
What percent graduate in four years?  
Etc.*

Try to make your questions specific enough such that the interviewer knows they relate to that college alone. Demonstrate that you've done your homework.

### **How to Dress**

The proper term for interview attire would be “nicer casual.” Avoid old jeans, T-shirts, sandals, short skirts, fancy outfits, gaudy attire, torn or ripped clothing, clothing with slogans (or worse) written on it, etc. Females should wear nice pants or moderate skirts with a conservative sweater or top. Males should wear nice pants with a collared shirt; even sporty golf-type shirts with collars are generally acceptable.

### **Be on Time**

Always allow extra time to get to your interview, because something will inevitably go wrong. Traffic will be horrible, you’ll get lost, or you’ll have trouble parking. Double the expected amount of time and you should be okay. Aim to arrive about twenty minutes early, because often you are given a form to fill out first. You can also relax a bit.

### **Bring Your Resume**

Remember all that work you did on your resume? Well, here’s another chance to use it. Print it on professional, quality paper. (no borders or cute colors). Have it with you, and when you are greeted simply hand it to the interviewer saying “I brought a resume in case it would be helpful to you.” (or something to that effect). Don’t be concerned if they don’t use it. You scored your points by being so well prepared and organized.

### **Get the Name or Card of the Interviewer**

As you depart, the interviewer may hand you a business card. Don’t lose it! If they don’t offer one, ask for one. If they don’t have one, confirm the name and address of the interviewer with correct spelling. This is for the thank you note that you will send next.

### **Send a Thank You Note**

Soon after your interview (one or two days), write a thank you note to your interviewer letting him/her know that you appreciate their taking the time to meet with you. Add a couple of sentences regarding how it helped you, and perhaps hoping that they learned a little more about you. If that college is your first choice, say so in closing. Sign the note with a closing such as Sincerely, Thanks Again or Yours Truly and your full name. If you have a small picture that reflects positively on you, enclose it with the note. It can’t hurt!

### **Demonstration of Interest**

Competitive colleges pay attention to whether applicants have demonstrated genuine interest in their college. Did you ask to be on their mailing list? Did you attend their open house? Did you have an interview? Did you indicate anywhere that you truly want to attend their school? While probably not as important as other factors, demonstration of interest could at least be a tie-breaker between you and another similar student. So be sure to take note of this. Sometimes there is an open-ended area on the application where you could indicate that the college is your first choice. If it isn’t, you could still express that you are very interested in attending.

### **Paying for College**

There are many ways to ease the pain of college tuition. Don’t ever assume that you can’t afford to go. With a little effort, there are lots of ways to make it happen. Working during high school may not have a lot of appeal right now, but the potential might surprise you. A student who works twenty hours per week (more during the summer, less during the school year) and saves \$6 per hour of that throughout high school could have over \$20,000 in savings by the time he/she starts college. Working while in school can also be an exciting way to explore interests, just like any other extracurricular activity. However, working seldom nets enough to pay for college entirely.

## Section 529 Plans

Saving for college, starting very early, is always the best bet. 529 savings plans allow parents, grandparent or anyone to put away large sums of money that will grow tax free. You can use these plans regardless of where you live. Have your parents consult with their financial advisor about using a section 529 plan. For some general information:

[www.savingforcollege.com/intro\\_to\\_529s/what-is-a-529-plan.php](http://www.savingforcollege.com/intro_to_529s/what-is-a-529-plan.php)

There is also an independent 529 plan that enables families to lock in today's tuition costs at even less than today's price with no market risk. Member colleges guarantee to protect the tuition agreed upon, so they effectively absorb the risk. Learn more by visiting [www.independent529plan.org](http://www.independent529plan.org)

If it's too late now to help your tuition situation, it may still be valuable for a younger sibling or grandchild.

## Tax Breaks

You can most likely claim a tax deduction if all of the following apply:

- *You paid interest on a qualified student loan in the tax year*
- *Your filing status is not married filing separately*
- *Your modified adjusted gross income is less than \$65,000 (\$135,000 if filing jointly)*
- *You and your spouse, if filing jointly, cannot be claimed as dependents on someone else's return*

Visit [www.ed.gov/updates/97918tax.html](http://www.ed.gov/updates/97918tax.html) for more information, and see IRS regulation 970 at [www.irs.gov/publications/p970/index.html](http://www.irs.gov/publications/p970/index.html) or call 1-800-4FED-AID. It is wise to contact a tax professional to confirm the most current IRS regulations.

## Financial Aid

Many people don't believe they will qualify for financial aid, so they never apply. Remarkably, there is financial aid available for a large percentage of families – even some with six-figure incomes. But it is important to understand the source of the aid and the conditions and limitations under which it is offered. The two broad categories are “need-based” and “merit-based”. The information below relates primarily to need-based aid.

## Sources of Aid

Students generally have five sources of aid available to them:

- *The federal government – offers grants and low interest loans to students and/or parents*
- *The state government – offers grants based on need and/or merit for in-state schools*
- *Institutional funds (from the college or university) – aid may be based on need and/or merit*
- *Foundations, community, businesses, organizations etc. – research this!*
- *Bonds, savings and loans, credit unions (parent/student loans)*

There are also types of aid available outside the above “system”, such as benefits for veterans, vocational rehabilitation assistance, Aid to Families with Dependent Children, and other military programs.

## Types of Aid Granted

There are two basic types of financial assistance: That which is gifted (not repaid), and that which you work for or borrow. The first type includes grants and scholarships. The second type includes work-study and loans. Qualified students might be offered a combination of these types. Both full-time and part-time students can apply, but part-time students generally receive less aid.

## Loans and Grants

There are many federal resources available to assist parents and students in paying for their education. There are low interest loans such as federal PLUS loans (for parents and not need-based), Stafford loans (for students), and Perkins loans. Subsidized loans are

ones on which the federal government pays the interest while the student is in school. There are need-based grants (Pell, FSEOG, SMART, Academic Competitiveness, institutional) that are renewed annually, and also Work-Study programs where students hold a job during college. The College Cost Reduction and Access Act has reduced the interest rates on subsidized Stafford loans, raised the max on Pell grants (\$5,550), and more so be sure to research the new opportunities. Also, the health care bill introduced the Student Aid and Fiscal Responsibility Act. The final version of this bill froze the top Pell award at \$5,550 until the 2013-2014 school year. However, it also increased the maximum FAFSA EFC allowed to receive an award from \$4,617 to \$5,273.

### **Looking for Scholarships**

Most won't come to you. To find scholarships, you need to look. We will provide numerous internet resources that make this easier for you.

### **The Forms**

#### **FAFSA Form**

The FAFSA (Free Application for Federal Student Aid) form is required by all institutions if you are applying for any type of financial aid. It is available at [www.fafsa.ed.gov](http://www.fafsa.ed.gov). On this form, always list your most expensive college FIRST. It is easier to adjust grants down than up. Mail this form in January. Do not wait until the March 1 deadline. Applying late can cost you funds. Also visit [www.pin.ed.gov](http://www.pin.ed.gov) to get your personal PIN number so you can interact with US Department of Education websites and sign your FAFSA form electronically. Obtaining your PIN can take a few days. After your FAFSA form is submitted, you will receive a SAR (Student Aid Report) that advises you of your aid status for the year. You will see an EFC, or Expected Family Contribution, which represents that amount you are deemed capable of contributing to your child's education for *that year*. Check the SAR for accuracy in terms of the information it was based on. Your SAR will be used to advise colleges or other organizations of your aid status. Colleges that accept you will develop financial aid packages (if applicable) based on this information. The FAFSA must be re-filed each year, so you receive a SAR and an EFC each year. Note that parents are expected to contribute about 5% of income, whereas students are assessed at more like 35%. So it may be unwise to shift income from parents to students.

*Note: Male students who will be 18 at the time they complete the FAFSA are required to register with Selective Service to be eligible for federal and state aid. Students can register for Selective Service at the post office or through the FAFSA form. Call 1-888-655-1825 for more information.*

#### **GPA Verification Form**

Often your state will require some sort of form when awarding state grants. See your high school guidance counselor for advice. This form, if required, is probably due in February or early March so watch your dates.

#### **CSS Profile**

Some private colleges require this form when awarding institutional aid. These are available at [www.collegeboard.com](http://www.collegeboard.com). Fill this out early, between September and October. Download the helpful guide for upcoming year at [http://professionals.collegeboard.com/profdownload/PROFILE\\_Student\\_Guide.pdf](http://professionals.collegeboard.com/profdownload/PROFILE_Student_Guide.pdf)

#### **Financial Aid Estimator**

To obtain a free estimate of your eligibility for federal aid, fill out the estimator forms on [www.finaid.org/calculators](http://www.finaid.org/calculators) or <http://www.collegeboard.com/student/pay/add-it-up/401.html> (see Tools on left) or [www.act.org/fane](http://www.act.org/fane).



## May 1 Deadline

This is the absolute deadline by which to send your SIR (Statement of Intent to Register) to inform the college of your decision. You will lose your acceptance if you do not respond by May 1. Be sure you accept ONLY ONE college. It is unethical to do otherwise (called “double depositing”) and you could be disqualified from all your schools if you fail to follow this rule.

## Waiting List

If you are placed on a waiting list at a top choice, you must go ahead and respond to a school that has accepted you for sure by May 1. Later, if you are notified that you are admitted from the wait list of a school that you prefer, the college that you already accepted will release you from your agreement. However, you will probably forfeit your deposit. Colleges are tending to put more students on wait lists these days, because the increasing number of applicants makes it harder for them to predict how many will actually enroll. The wait list gives them the flexibility to scale their classes more accurately. Mid-year senior grades are often used to determine acceptances off wait lists. It is appropriate to contact the admissions office and ask if the list is ranked or prioritized and what its statistics are, meaning how many waitlisted students are ultimately accepted on average. It used to be around 5%, but the unpredictable yields today may be changing that.

## Notify Schools You Are Turning Down

When you make your final decision, notify ALL colleges so that your spot may be offered to others. Often your acceptance packets include withdrawal cards for this purpose. Sometimes you can decline the offer on the website where you obtained your acceptance notification. Inform your school guidance office of your plans – after all, that’s the fun part!

## Appealing a Rejection

Many colleges offer an appeal process. If you are heartbroken at having been rejected from a top choice, an appeal may be worth the effort. There may be a specific appeals process for your college; but in general, they want additional *compelling* information that will give them a reason to reconsider you. It may be appropriate to submit additional letter(s) of recommendation from different people than before. Has anything changed that would affect their decision? If so, tell them - if it’s positive. Express your interest. Explain to them that theirs was your first choice school. It can’t hurt, and students are occasionally accepted on appeal. Remember, though, you must have a positive acceptance *somewhere* by May 1.

## Get Organized and Get Busy

If you are self-motivated and relatively organized, you may have almost everything you need in this handbook. We also recommend purchasing a portable file container and setting up a folder for each of your target colleges. Then set up folders for testing information, essays, interviews, transcripts, resumes, financial aid forms and other subjects of interest. Keep this container in a handy location so things are placed in it promptly and aren’t lost. Keep your research in the appropriate folders, including news clippings, and correspondence. Keep your certificates of mailing and application copies as well. Staying organized will ensure that you don’t miss deadlines and/or let something slip through the cracks. That could cost you your edge. Finally, here are some websites we’ve discovered that might help you as you head off to college:

[www.chegg.com](http://www.chegg.com) - rent your text books and save  
[www.uroomsurf.com](http://www.uroomsurf.com) – find a compatible roommate  
[www.tampabay.com/blogs/latest-gadgets/content/eight-great-gadgets-college-dorms](http://www.tampabay.com/blogs/latest-gadgets/content/eight-great-gadgets-college-dorms) - latest gadgets for heading off to college

We hope you find our handbook to be helpful. Additional resources are available on our subscriber website including checklists, worksheets and over 600 helpful links. We do our very best to keep our information absolutely current. If you have any suggestions, or if you find any errors or invalid internet addresses, we'd appreciate hearing from you at [info@getin2college.com](mailto:info@getin2college.com).

Best of luck on your college quest!

Don't forget to use our  
subscriber-only resource website at  
**[www.getin2college.com/protected/websource.html](http://www.getin2college.com/protected/websource.html)**  
**User name: 2011 Password: READ** *(all caps)*

## Admission Results 2010 (Nationwide Sample)

Institution	Applicants	Admitted Students	Admit Rate	Offered Spot on Wait List	Agreed to be on Wait List	Admitted Off Wait List	Enrolled	Total Admits Who Enrolled
American (D.C.)	16,939	7,373	44%	2,025	390	40	1,578	21%
Amherst (Mass.)	8,099	1,239	15%	1,098	471	2	501	40%
Bates (Me.)	4,518	1,416	31%	846	223	83	500	35%
Boston College	29,933	9,310	31%	6,026	2,686	103	2,359	25%
Boston U.	38,270	22,143	58%	2,370	1,152	8		19%
Bowdoin (Me.)	6,018	1,185	20%	N/A	N/A	0	512	43%
Brown (R.I.)	30,135	2,820	9%	N/A	N/A	N/A	1,500	53%
Bucknell (Pa.)	7,178	2,252	31%	1,988	691	79	937	42%
California Inst of Tech	4,859	610	13%	529	337	7	226	37%
Carnegie Mellon (PA)	15,487	5,164	33%	4,463	563	70	1,526	30%
Claremont McKenna (CA)	4,264	732	17%	905	384	0	318	43%
Colby (Me.)	4,207	1,445	34%	971	510	9	494	34%
Colgate (N.Y.)	7,871	2,596	33%	N/A	N/A	0	870	34%
Columbia (N.Y.)	26,178	2,472	9%	N/A	N/A	75	1,431	58%
Cornell (N.Y.)	36,338	6,673	18%	2,561	1,492	0	3,238	49%
Dartmouth (N.H.)	18,778	2,165	12%	1,800	1,100	19	1,149	53%
Davidson (N.C.)	4,090	1,214	30%	963	422	14	503	41%
Dickinson (Pa.)	5,030	2,402	48%	432	432	12	671	28%
Duke (N.C.)	26,770	4,207	16%	3,381	N/A	200	1,768	42%
Emerson (Mass.)	6,865	3,200	47%	1,337	486	78	864	27%
Emory (Ga.)	15,550	4,488	29%	3,113	1,092	46	1,387	31%
Fashion Inst of Tech (NY)	5,572	1,684	30%	N/A	N/A	N/A	1,268	75%
Georgetown (D.C.)	18,077	3,619	20%	2,118	1,181	116	1,580	44%
Georgia Tech	13,553	6,976	51%	1,506	873	311	2,785	40%
Grinnell (Iowa)	3,200	1,228	38%	769	355	13	420	34%
Hamilton (N.Y.)	4,857	1,431	29%	1,104	530	52	477	33%
Harvard (Mass.)	30,489	2,184	7%	N/A	N/A	70	1,667	76%
Holy Cross (Mass.)	6,911	2,450	35%	1,691	595	18	741	30%
Johns Hopkins (Md.)	18,459	3,794	21%	3,727	2,121	33	1,267	33%
Juilliard (N.Y.)	2,467	187	8%	40	36	5	131	70%
Kenyon (Ohio)	4,066	1,598	39%	776	271	0	485	30%
Lafayette (Pa.)	5,822	2,425	42%	1,439	535	28	645	27%
Lehigh (Pa.)	10,337	3,900	38%	2,437	N/A	15	1,236	32%
Macalester (Minn.)	4,317	1,837	43%	583	258	0	525	29%
M.I.T. (Mass.)	16,632	1,676	10%	722	606	65	1,070	64%
Middlebury (Vt.)	7,984	1,375	17%	N/A	N/A	N/A	577	42%
Muhlenberg (Pa.)	4,569	2,194	48%	1,451	383	16	612	28%
New York University	38,037	11,327	30%	2,628	1,427	117	3,953	35%
Northeastern (Mass.)	37,691	14,286	38%	4,994	2,074	163	2,800	20%

Northwestern (Ill.)	27,615	6,380	23%	3,188	1,397	21	2,125	33%
Penn State	39,256	19,960	51%	1,315	N/A	680	5,650	28%
Pepperdine (Calif.)	7,942	2,187	28%	1,625	800	20	680	31%
Pomona (Calif.)	6,765	990	15%	500	300	0	404	41%
Princeton (N.J.)	26,247	2,148	8%	1,451	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Purdue (Ind.)	31,002	20,085	65%	571	188	155*	6,682	33%
Rice (Tex.)	12,392	2,634	21%	2,521	1,444	131	958	36%
Rutgers (N.J.)	29,382	17,425	59%	1,652	N/A	176	6,000	34%
Skidmore (N.Y.)	6,044	2,846	47%	1,448	468	0	750	26%
Stanford (Calif.)	32,022	2,340	7%	999	N/A	40	1,675	72%
SUNY Stony Brook NY	27,814	11,374	41%	1,847	726	31	2,700	24%
Swarthmore (Pa.)	6,040	974	16%	996	410	7	391	40%
Syracuse (N.Y.)	22,914	13,659	60%	2,449	1,101	8	3,446	25%
Texas A.&M.	26,632	15,991	60%	7,700	0	451	8,100	51%
Tufts (Mass.)	15,434	3,756	24%	N/A	N/A	0	1,339	36%
Tulane (La.)	43,817	11,371	26%	4,800	2,875	44	1,694	15%
U.C., Berkeley	50,312	12,914	26%	202	121	0	5,247	41%
U.C.L.A.	57,658	13,088	23%	0	0	0	4,801	37%
U. of Chicago	19,353	3,623	19%	N/A	N/A	71	1,416	39%
U. of Colorado, Boulder	21,107	17,423	83%	949	224	0	5,215	30%
U. of Connecticut	22,138	11,947	54%	3,464	1,198	479	3,235	27%
U. of Delaware	26,518	12,755	48%	2,215	767	593	3,422	27%
U. of Florida	27,306	11,464	42%	0	0	0	6,400	56%
U. of Iowa	17,146	13,871	81%	0	0	0	4,485	32%
U. of MD, College Park	26,125	11,667	45%	1,023	N/A	0	4,000	34%
U.N.C., Chapel Hill	23,174	7,461	32%	2,258	1,115	486	4,041	54%
U. of Pennsylvania	26,939	3,847	14%	3,000	1,800	40	2,426	63%
U. of Southern California	35,800	8,725	24%	0	0	0	2,900	33%
U. of Vermont	22,314	15,748	71%	3,176	982	0	2,475	16%
U. of Virginia	22,516	7,200	32%	3,746	2,100	200	3,300	46%
U. of Washington	22,840	12,956	57%	2,582	1,447	426	5,669	44%
U. of Wisconsin, Madison	25,488	14,384	56%	2,500	500	0	6,138	43%
Vanderbilt (Tenn.)	21,827	3,906	18%	N/A	N/A	166	1,600	41%
Vassar (N.Y.)	7,822	1,847	24%	1,421	568	0	680	37%
Virginia Tech	20,083	13,412	67%	2,100	1,350	0	5,378	40%
Villanova (Pa.)	14,376	6,478	45%	4,957	2,427	479	1,684	26%
Wake Forest (N.C.)	10,563	4,232	40%	N/A	N/A	N/A	1,233	29%
Wesleyan (Conn.)	10,656	2,190	21%	N/A	N/A	N/A	745	34%
Wheaton (Ill.)	2,083	1,326	64%	343	250	58	601	45%
Williams (Mass.)	6,636	1,236	19%	1,125	475	32	552	45%
Yale (Conn.)	25,869	1,940	7%	932	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A

*Includes spring 2011*

**Source: New York Times August 2010 (2011 statistics will be posted on our subscriber website)**

## Sample Resume

### Taylor A. Student

1000 Main Street  
Anywhere, CA 99999  
(999) 999-9999

SSN: 999-999-9999 email: [anyone@internet.com](mailto:anyone@internet.com)

Coopersville High School

### Academic Honors and Awards

- **Academic Honor Roll** - all semesters
- **National Honor Society** - 2011
- **Scholar Athlete Award** - all semesters – Volleyball
- **Golden State Exam Honors and Recognition** – Biology

### Other Awards and Distinctions

- **Junior Olympics:** Silver Medalist - Volleyball 2010
- **Youth National Volleyball Team:** 2010-11

### High School Leadership Activities

- **Varsity Letter:** Volleyball 2009-2011
- **Team Captain:** Volleyball - 2011
- **Producer and Director:** Coopersville High School morning news
- **Leader:** Link Crew 2009-2010 - Selected by Administration for mentor program.
- **Educational Advisor Team:** Nominated by principal to select and interview advisors 2010
- **Chairperson:** Spring Canned Foods Drive 2009
- **Active Member:** Chess Club 2008-2009, World Wildlife Club 2007-2010
- **Founder:** Teens Against Tobacco and Drug Use 2009

### Community Service and Leadership

- **President:** Light of Life Philanthropic Organization 2011
- **Volunteer:** Coast Animal Hospital: 2009 (32 hours)
- **Volunteer:** Help for Children - activities for terminally ill, underprivileged area children: 2002 -present (56 hours)
- **Volunteer:** Teens Against Tobacco and Drug Use (30 hours) 2009-2011
- **Certified Junior Lifeguard:** Anywhere Beach, 2006-2007
- **Coach:** Summer Volleyball Camp 2009-10
- **Church:** Confirmed, active member of ABC Church Youth Program 2004-2011

### Summer Programs and Internships

- **Academic:** Journalism Workshop at Boston University: Summer 2011 - 8 week program
- **Community Service:** Rustic Pathways – Costa Rica Community Service 2011
- **Personal Achievement:** Adventure Quest – British Virgin Islands – 3 week program  
\* *ASA/US Sailing and PADI Scuba Diving Certifications: Summer 2009*

### Paid Employment Experience

- **Camp Counselor:** Explorers Beach Camp, Anywhere, CA Summer 2010
- **Website Administrator:** [www.somebusiness.com](http://www.somebusiness.com) 2009-11

### Other Activities and Hobbies

I enjoy recreational sports such as volleyball, scuba diving, surfing, and snowboarding. I also enjoy writing and producing as well as website development.

### College and Career Goals

I have a passion for writing which has resulted in my interest in journalism and communication as possible majors. I hope to pursue a career in broadcasting, and am interested in politics and debate as well. My non-career mission is to work with animals and to donate time and money to the prevention of animal extinction.

*(end of sample resume)*

## Sample Essays

This portion of the appendix provides you with four very different types of essays. We will be posting more on our private subscriber website as well. In our first sample, note that the student didn't have some incredible hardship or rare personal experience. We are intentionally showing you an example of a "normal" student who told an everyday story and made it compelling. This essay was used to specifically address the prompt below, but was then altered to become a general personal statement. This same essay was used on four applications with minor length and other adjustments. (Names have been changed for anonymity.)

**Prompt:** Tell us about an external influence (a person, an event, etc.) that affected you and how it caused you to change direction.

*When I first met Millie Anderson, all I saw was an overweight woman who could barely fit in a chair. She was almost immobile, and I thought to myself, "How could she let herself get that way?" It certainly never occurred to me that she would make a profound difference in my life. I had a lot to learn.*

*I was introduced to the Help for Children program in fifth grade, and learned that Millie Anderson was its founder. It is a local charity that helps terminally ill and underprivileged children throughout the year. There I met a little boy named José who looked about age three and breathed through tubes in his nose. I was shocked to learn that he was actually ten, but suffered from a terminal growth-inhibiting disease. I helped him with arts and crafts projects, and he soon became my friend. For the first time in my life I felt what it was like to make a difference.*

*From that point on I decided to expand my role in the Help for Children organization. I had come to appreciate the important work that Millie Anderson and her group were doing. My mom and I joined the organization officially and began participating in their meetings. We help organize the Halloween and Christmas events and make favors for the kids who attended. Each December, we wrap huge cardboard boxes for toy donations, which are then distributed to local businesses. After the toys are collected, we attend a wrapping event and spend hours sorting the gifts by age and gender.*

*Every year, Help for Children hosts their huge Christmas party at St. Margaret's hospital, with food, arts and crafts, and activities. Even Santa makes an appearance and distributes the toys that we have collected, with every child getting at least one present. I remember Millie telling me that for many, this would be their only gift. And for some, it would also be their last Christmas ever. This was a real wake-up call. I had never been confronted with such sadness. One year, because of my experience and dedication to the program, Millie assigned me to work with a small group of children upstairs. I learned that they were the terminally ill, bed-ridden children who were not permitted to leave their hospital room. I will never forget that experience. We painted their faces, gave them gifts and, for a short time, gave them something to smile about. As sad as it was, it was also very gratifying, bringing a bit of happiness into their lives.*

*The closer I became to Help for Children, the more I wanted to do. I convinced my family to participate in the "Adopt a Family" program, through which we would put together a gift basket with the specific items a particular family needed. At one point, Millie explained to me that our adopted family had shared a toothbrush, and now they wouldn't have to. "Adopt a Family" has become a family tradition, and I am always happy imagining what the family feels when they open our baskets.*

*As I grew older, I realized that the Help for Children program was having another more subtle effect on me. I had watched Millie all these years, giving one hundred percent of herself to these children. I was ashamed to remember how quick I was to judge Millie by her appearance. Her compassion and incredible dedication overshadowed all else, and I came to admire her immensely.*

*Millie Anderson died on Thanksgiving Day, 2009, a victim of the chronic disease that caused her obesity. Although she is no longer here, she will remain with me through the life lessons she taught me. She opened my heart and mind to looking at others in a whole new way. One thing I do know, I will no longer judge people superficially. And if I ever find myself lacking motivation, thinking that nothing I do really matters or that one person can't make a difference, I just think of Millie.*

**(end of sample essay #1)**

In this sample essay, notice the use of the essay model. The first paragraph catches the reader's attention by alluding to a very large woman who somehow taught the student something. The theme of "change" or "growth" is introduced, as we see that the student learned something valuable from this unlikely mentor. We are curious what role this overweight woman could possibly have played in the life of our student. What happened? We want to know. The story then goes back to fifth grade, and shows a progression of increasing involvement in this charity organization. It alludes to growth and change, as the student learns about life situations very different than her own and begins to realize the

power of helping others. Finally, the essay wraps up with a recap of the life lessons this mentor taught our student, resulting in her becoming a more compassionate person.

Here is a second sample. Can you see the use of the essay model in this very different example? What do we know about the author after reading this essay?

*The pain was excruciating and I could barely walk. Mosquitoes found their way in, penetrating the netting surrounding my thin mattress. The air was motionless, exaggerating the oppressive heat and humidity in our open-air shack. As I watched the sun go down, I knew it would soon be time to make a decision about my last night in Costa Rica.*

*My passion for creatures that can't help themselves has led me in many directions. I volunteer countless hours at a local animal hospital, and belong to several activist organizations that help pass legislation to protect endangered species. The number of abandoned cats I've adopted has now reached five. But this past summer, I found a way to channel my energy into making a difference in the fate of some less common friends: helping to save the nearly extinct Lora Sea Turtles in Costa Rica. As it turned out, the experience was much more than that.*

*The PROVCO Turtle Conservation Project is located on the Pacific side of Costa Rica. During the day, we helped the local community with various projects and worked in the turtle hatchery. My favorite day job was painting a small, rundown schoolhouse a bright shade of green. The children ran over to us, clearly thrilled to have the most colorful building in town. I used my limited Spanish to greet my new friends. But our real work began between the hours of 11pm and 3:30am. We patrolled three miles of black sand beach, crossing a small chest-deep river in full clothing. We needed shoes on our feet because the beach was covered with crabs, twigs and sharp pebbles. Our goal was to locate the mother turtle, collect her eggs and protect them from predators. After several nights of patrol, my group had not seen any turtles or nests. Somehow in the process, from sand inside my shoes, I had managed to develop large, quarter-size, oozing blisters all over my feet. The counselor refused to let me go on patrol the following two nights, as my feet looked as if they could become infected.*

*Now here it was, our last night in Costa Rica and I felt a certain emptiness. I hadn't actually rescued any turtles, so it was hard to see that I'd truly helped the species. So, despite my counselor's concern, and the fact the last night's patrol was optional, I bandaged my feet and put on layers of socks. I was going out one last time. My tenacity and dedication paid off, for the few of us that went were rewarded with an incredible experience. We watched a turtle lay the largest nest of eggs ever seen there. I was selected to hold each egg in my hand as we counted them, and prepared them for transport to the hatchery. My blisters are long gone, but the memory of that surreal night will stay with me forever. In some small way, I made a difference.*  
**(end of sample #2)**

This third example works well as a generic personal statement. Note the use of the essay model as the author "hooks" us with a catchy theme introduction. He continues to show growth and maturity within that same theme and provides supporting material. He ties it all together with a strong ending.

*I am a fearless hunter. I don't own a gun and find it hard to kill even an insect. The object of my hunt has always been a new experience or challenge.*

*The thrill of the hunt began at age six with my first garage sale. I've always loved to take things apart, and garage sales offered a perfect outlet. There was an air of anticipation and surprise that made these outings exciting. You never knew what you might find on a given day. Other peoples' junk provided what I needed to disassemble and create my own "inventions". Old appliances, phones, radios and more were taken apart, only to be reassembled in the form of a "computer" or "alarm system". Garage sale hunting gave me a variety of new experiences while teaching me the value of a dollar.*

*By the age of twelve I had embarked on an entirely new type of hunt – baseball cards. There was no pretending involved in this hobby, which dealt with people – not appliances. Because of their financial value, cards were not only fun to collect, but were also an investment. I soon became hooked on packs and boxes, which I considered miniature "presents", with so many possibilities in each. Much like garage sales, you never knew when you might come across a valuable find. By age sixteen, having catalogued most of my 30,000 cards, I decided to try to sell some to support my growing hobby.*

*I stumbled across the Internet, which I have come to see as the greatest garage sale of them all! While searching for buyers, I became interested in the deals I could find there on just about anything – especially music. At seventeen, my hunting interests broadened and I began using the Internet to seek rare and hard to find albums. Before I knew it, baseball cards were out and music was in. I started to buy music with the intent of making a profit, which would meet the costs of my newfound hobby.*

*Upon being introduced to National Public Radio, my music interests exploded. My curiosity took over and I fell in love with anything soulful such as jazz, blues, rap and hip-hop. I still occasionally listen to a late night talk show, and that has inspired me to host my own radio show in college. This experience has also led to a new endeavor relating to the electronic aspect of music – mixing, sampling and sequencing. I love the*

challenge of creating new sounds and mixing styles. I now find myself back at garage sales hunting for weird and eclectic records to sample and mix.

Many years removed from my first "invention", I look at entering college with all the anticipation of another garage sale. Hopefully it will be the most exciting and intriguing of all, full of surprises, challenges and wonderful people. The hunt continues.

**(end of sample #3)**

Finally, we wanted to show you an essay that doesn't follow the traditional model. It takes a risk and makes it work. Use caution when trying this, but it can be very effective as it is in this sample.

***"I'm not suggesting that the play is without fault; all of my plays are imperfect, I'm rather happy to say - it leaves me something to do." - Edward Albee***

*I don't get straight A's  
I don't have a 5.0 out of 4.0 GPA  
I've left all of my homework for Saturday night...Sunday night...early Monday morning  
I've stalled out  
I've talked back to my mom  
I dribble when I should make the pass  
I occasionally put my elbows on the table  
I've passed cars on the right  
I've questioned my religious beliefs  
I've parroted the prompt of an essay  
I occasionally read Vogue instead of Hamlet  
I get caught talking about the Patriots victory over the Jets, instead of over the Loyalists  
I eat in class and have left crumbs  
I've been late to school  
I take mental health days  
Sometimes I am even tired  
My dog has "eaten my homework"  
My cell phone has gone off in the movie theatre, not on vibrate  
I drink from the carton  
I eat dessert before dinner  
Sometimes I just don't know  
Once, my room got so messy I couldn't see my carpet  
I really would rather have junk food  
I pray for snow days  
I'm not perfect.*

*I admit I have fallen, but I always get back up. I make mistakes, but I also make corrections. I learned how to drive stick. My mom is and always will be my best friend. I am a role model for my younger siblings and a leader in my community, through athletics, community service, and religious participation. I have high moral standards and ethics. I do my homework, and I can run faster and farther than most of my male friends. I work harder than anyone I know.*

*Before my parents finished our basement, I used to take advantage of the one gritty, furniture-less room in the house to practice soccer. I nearly dented the back wall from shooting the ball repeatedly at a watermark about waist high--my form of target practice. After games or practices I would consult my coach about what my biggest weakness was so that I could go home and train until I was blue in the face.*

*I don't run away from my faults, but rather I turn and face them, head on, on the offensive. I take them on as weaknesses that I can and will improve, thus there is nothing that I can't overcome and achieve. I know that I am not always going to make the right choice and I am undoubtedly going to stumble on occasion, but I want to succeed and I am going to do everything in my power to attain my goals. I'm going to work my butt off and I will go the extra mile. I'm not perfect, but I'm better for it. I have found a balance in my life. I am stronger and wiser and more experienced and more prepared and excited for the challenges ahead.*

**(end of sample essays)**

## Questions to Ask Your Prospective Colleges

A sampling of these questions would be appropriate to ask at college fairs, interviews, campus visits or any other opportunities you have to talk to college representatives. Select the questions that are most relevant to your situation.

### Questions About Admission Policies

What high school courses do you require?  
What tests are required? What range of scores typifies your admitted students?  
What grade point average and class rank are typical of your admitted students?  
What emphasis is placed on extracurricular activities?  
Do you offer Early Decision or Early Action?  
If yes, what are the deadlines and what is the commitment?  
Do you accept Letters of Recommendation?  
Are personal interviews offered? How do you obtain them?  
Are any majors impacted such that they have additional admission requirements?  
What percent of applicants do you accept? Is there a waitlist? An appeals process?

### Questions About the College or University

Where is the college located? Is the setting rural, urban, suburban, beach, etc.  
What is the community like? College town? Relationship with the community?  
Is the college public or private? Does it have a religious affiliation?  
What is the current enrollment? Of that, what percent live on campus?  
Are there any special programs offered?  
Does the college have a particular program it is known for or ranked in?  
If considering transferring, ask about transfer opportunities and requirements.

### Questions About The Student Body

Where do the majority of students come from?  
How is the Greek System (sororities and fraternities) perceived? (if applicable)  
What percent of students join?  
What role does athletics play in campus life? Are there NCAA sports? Intramural?  
How would you characterize the student body? Diverse? Affluent? Cliquish? Relaxed?  
How would you characterize the school in terms of school spirit?  
Politically would the school be characterized as liberal or conservative?  
Degree of emphasis on social life vs. academic?

### Questions About Academics

What is the average class size? Ratio of professors to students?  
What percent of classes are taught by TAs vs. professors?  
What percent of students return sophomore year? What percent graduate in four years?  
How difficult is it to get your classes? How does registration work? Can I double major?  
Does each student have a counselor?  
How many credits/classes per term? Is a core curriculum required?  
Is the campus networked? What internet access is provided and where? In each room?  
What are the most popular majors? Which of those have special requirements or are impacted?  
Is there an honors program?  
Are there special exchange programs or opportunities to study abroad?  
Are students recruited aggressively? Are they offered internships?  
What percent of the students are accepted to graduate schools?

### Questions About Financial Aid

What percent of students receive financial aid? What are the filing date deadlines?  
Are jobs available on campus? Work-study programs?  
Are there other grants and loans available? How does one qualify or apply?  
What is a typical financial aid package for freshmen?  
When is a student notified about financial aid?  
Are there other special scholarships for athletics? Arts? Leadership? Academics?

## Junior Calendar

SEPTEMBER	OCTOBER	NOVEMBER	DECEMBER	JANUARY
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Register for PSAT.</li> <li>- Continue refining your list of target schools.</li> <li>- Research schools on the internet or via books and visits.</li> <li>- Update your resume with any new information.</li> <li>- Plan next two years' extra-curricular and community service activities.</li> <li>- Think about when to take the SAT or ACT tests – develop your tentative “test plan”</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Take PSAT to be eligible for national Merit Scholarship competition.</li> <li>- Study hard! Aim for A or B grade point average. Do extra credit whenever you can.</li> <li>- Start a personal file updating information for your resume.</li> <li>- Locate and organize all awards, articles, prizes etc. earned.</li> <li>- Acquaint yourself with resources at your school.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Keep grades up. Improvement counts.</li> <li>- Get to know your junior year teachers, as these may be the best ones for letters of recommendation.</li> <li>- Take SAT Subject Tests, such as Language Tests With Listening, if appropriate.</li> <li>- Continue research on specific colleges.</li> <li>- Improve your vocabulary! Learn 20 new words a week.</li> <li>- Think about college majors.</li> <li>-READ!</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Study Hard!</li> <li>- Take SAT Subject Tests if appropriate.</li> <li>- Register for SAT if you would like to take it in January.</li> <li>- Receive results of PSAT/NMSQT. Use results to develop a prepping strategy to improve your SAT scores as needed.</li> <li>- READ over break!</li> <li>- Fill up your spare time with as much community service, volunteer work, club or sport activity etc. as you can.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Continue college research.</li> <li>- Compare PSAT and projected SAT results to the averages at your target schools.</li> <li>- First chance to take the SAT.</li> <li>- Be sure to have your Social Security Number and your school CEEB code number.</li> <li>- Consider SAT prepping for the March or May tests.</li> </ul>
FEBRUARY	MARCH	APRIL	MAY	JUNE
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Register for SAT if you would like to take it in March. Begin to prepare for SAT or ACT.</li> <li>- Remember how important junior grades are for your class rank and college apps.</li> <li>- Plan a challenging Senior curriculum. <i>(An easy schedule can cost you an acceptance.)</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- SAT testing</li> <li>- Research interesting and challenging summer courses, jobs or volunteer activities.</li> <li>- Have your target list down to 10-12 schools.</li> <li>- Plan college visits to nearby colleges.</li> <li>- Register for SAT, ACT or SAT Subject Tests if you plan to take any in May.</li> <li>- Sign up for AP tests in your AP class subjects.</li> <li>- Plan a challenging Senior schedule – no Senioritis!</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- ACT testing</li> <li>- Plan an interesting and challenging summer.</li> <li>- Get into the databases (mailing lists) of your target schools (via internet)</li> <li>- Attend college fairs.</li> <li>- Write letters of intent to the service academies if applicable. (military)</li> <li>- Prep for AP exams if applicable</li> <li>- College visits during Spring Break?</li> <li>- Think about financing college – will you need aid?</li> <li>- READ!</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- SAT testing <i>(many counselors think it is best to reserve May and June for SAT Subject exams in the subjects you will be finishing this year)</i></li> <li>- Students who will be applying Early Decision or Early Action should try to complete all testing during junior year.</li> <li>- Take your AP exams.</li> <li>- Don't forget to study for your high school finals!!</li> <li>- Use Scholarship Search programs to investigate scholarships that might be available to you. <i>(no need to pay for this)</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- SAT and ACT tests as desired.</li> <li>- Arrange college tours for summer. Call Admissions office of schools to set up tours and interviews.</li> <li>- Visit colleges. Take tours and do interviews if offered.</li> <li>- Do something extra with your resume in mind. Develop your “ACE”!</li> <li>- Prep for SAT's and work on vocabulary – READ!</li> <li>- Keep extra-curricular activity and community service efforts going.</li> <li>- Refine your college list.</li> <li>- Athletes, register with NCAA Eligibility Center if applicable.</li> </ul>

# Senior Calendar

<p><b>SEPTEMBER</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Get a file "bin" and set up a file for each target school.</li> <li>- Attend all high school college-related meetings.</li> <li>- Meet with counselor and ask questions.</li> <li>- Identify all the application deadlines for your schools and fill out checklist.</li> <li>- Get your school's CEEB code and have it handy along with your SS#.</li> <li>- Finalize your resume.</li> <li>- Prep for final SAT/ACT testing and register.</li> <li>- Ask teachers for letters of recommendation if your colleges want them.</li> <li>- Request interviews at privates whenever they are available.</li> <li>- Get a good senior picture, formal or informal.</li> <li>- Print practice apps for all your schools even if you will be doing them on-line.</li> </ul>	<p><b>OCTOBER</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Take SAT/ACT as needed (register for Nov/Dec).</li> <li>- Work on applications</li> <li>- See if college applications are on the internet yet <i>(be sure they are for the right admission term)</i> Download &amp; print them for practice and/or get the essays.</li> <li>- Think about essay topics. Brainstorm.</li> <li>- Keep grades up! Many schools will request your senior grades in their decision process.</li> <li>- Are you taking the SAT again?</li> <li>- Did you obtain all letters of recommendation needed?</li> <li>- Decide about applying early decision – you can only do one!</li> <li>- If you're an athlete, talk to coach(es).</li> <li>- Polish your resume for the last time!</li> <li>- Are any of your target schools visiting your high school?</li> </ul>	<p><b>NOVEMBER</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Attend any workshops/ meetings offered by your high school.</li> <li>- think about financial aid needs.</li> <li>- Work on essays and applications. <i>(many early applications are due in November!)</i></li> <li>- Watch deadlines!</li> <li>- Don't procrastinate with your apps! The earlier the better.</li> <li>- Want to take the SAT one more time?</li> <li>- Have your high school send transcripts to colleges that want them.</li> <li>- Send thank you notes to anyone who helped you (letters of recommendation etc).</li> <li>- Be sure your SAT/ACT scores have been sent to all your colleges after your last test. Send AP scores as well if they are strong.</li> </ul>	<p><b>DECEMBER</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Last chance at the standardized tests – use it if you need it.</li> <li>- Study Hard! You can't afford to let your grades slip.</li> <li>- Be sure to report your test scores to all your colleges.</li> <li>- Use the internet to research scholarships.</li> <li>- Finish any remaining applications! Proof them over and over.</li> <li>- Have others read your essays to be sure they demonstrate something unique about you.</li> <li>- Send your final resume, picture and cover letter to your private schools.</li> <li>- Think about financial aid needs and familiarize yourself with the forms.</li> <li>- Keep copies of everything you send.</li> <li>- If accepted Early Decision, inform other schools.</li> </ul>	<p><b>JANUARY</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The last of the applications should be due this month for fall admission.</li> <li>- Are your test scores sent?</li> <li>- Transcripts sent as required?</li> <li>- Letters of recommendation in? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Obtain FAFSA forms and file asap after Jan 1!</li> </ul> </li> <li>- Everyone should do this regardless of need.</li> <li>- Consider using CSS/PROFILE for aid if your college(s) takes it. (College Board website)</li> <li>- You may need a GPA verification form for some state grants (research this).</li> <li>- Attend financial aid workshops at your school or elsewhere.</li> <li>- Research private scholarships via internet</li> </ul>
<p><b>FEBRUARY</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Finish financial aid forms. Timing matters! Being late can literally cost you.</li> <li>- Tell your parents you will need their 1040 tax information (as current as possible, last years at least)</li> <li>- You can estimate the financial aid you will receive.</li> <li>- Have school send updated transcripts or mid-year reports if needed.</li> <li>- Pay attention to correspondence from colleges.</li> <li>- Keep your grades up! Offers can be rescinded!</li> </ul>	<p><b>MARCH</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- FAFSA form due 1<sup>st</sup>! <i>(Review the SAR you will receive to be sure it is using the right data)</i></li> <li>- Register for AP tests.</li> <li>- Wait for acceptance letters! <i>(Pay attention to housing forms in acceptance letters. There may be deadlines and preference options)</i></li> <li>- Consider appealing a rejection. <i>(if it was your first choice and you have a compelling reason for them to reconsider you)</i></li> <li>- Notify your counselor when you receive college decisions and write waitlist letters if appropriate.</li> </ul>	<p><b>APRIL</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Congrats on all your acceptances! You must select a school by May 1.</li> <li>- Final campus visits if needed to help make your decision.</li> <li>- Talk to people who can help you decide: alumni, older friends who are there, parents, and your counselor.</li> <li>- Prepare for AP tests and finals.</li> <li>- Review and discuss financial aid offers as part of your decision making process. These can be appealed also.</li> </ul>	<p><b>MAY</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Most of your schools must be notified by May 1 with an SIR form.</li> <li>- Plan summer employment.</li> <li>- Pay attention to housing and meal plan information contained in your acceptance letter(s).</li> <li>- Inform the schools you will NOT be attending as well.</li> <li>- If needed, research loans (PLUS, Stafford etc) to make up for any financial gap after aid results are known.</li> <li>- Study for finals and APs! (do you want to use prep books?)</li> </ul>	<p><b>JUNE</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Order final transcript and anything else to be sent to your college.</li> <li>- Consider computer needs for next fall (notebooks, wireless connections, etc)</li> <li>- Attend all orientations at your college.</li> <li>- Do some extra research on your college to think about what activities you will pursue.</li> <li>- Respond to any financial aid offers you received.</li> <li>- Keep READING!</li> <li>- Have a great summer and look forward to the amazing adventure that awaits you!</li> </ul>