

College Admission Handbook

2017-2018 Academic Year

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Note: The .pdf version of this handbook allows you to click within the Table of Contents and on the many web links and will take you to the associated location.

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Introduction

Take a deep breath. You are about to embark upon one of the most significant journeys of your life. It will be exiting, challenging, frustrating, time consuming, and more. But it's also among the best investments you'll ever make. As you begin your college journey, keep this quote in mind: *“College admission is a match to be made, not a game to be won.”* So put away the US News and World Report rankings and forget most everything you've heard about a particular school, good or bad. There are many myths and lots of misinformation out there. Keep an open mind and a positive attitude, and let the adventure begin!

What's happening with college admission today? The trends continue, and you are bound to hear all about it. There are more students applying to more schools, allowing colleges and universities to raise their requirements and turn away highly qualified students in significant numbers. The past few admissions seasons were the most competitive and uncertain in history. The percentage of students accepted at top schools hit new lows, while waitlist numbers reached new highs. Yesterday's "safety schools" remain "iffy" today. Recent high school graduation classes have been the largest in our nation's history, with over 60% of the graduating classes enrolling in college. These facts, while true, are often used as scare tactics when products or services are being marketed. The truth is, college-bound students have an excellent chance of getting into the right school for them if they prepare properly. So don't fall prey to the media hype. Getting into college takes a lot of work, but it can be done.

Colleges continue to look for a complete package – students who will add skills and talent, thereby enhancing the vitality and diversity 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 admission 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, achievements, and other strengths.

Most students possess more potential than they realize. Some may even have a unique "hook" that they can use to their advantage. But hook or not, your applications need to be developed and presented properly. They need to be a set of academic accomplishments, abilities, and experiences that will catch the eye of the admissions staff. The recommendations contained in this handbook will help you to fine-tune your application. 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 3,000 in the U.S. alone) and a high percentage of students are accepted at their first or second choice college.

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.)

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 also characterized as stressful and overwhelming. It generates feelings of empowerment, yet also anxiety and helplessness. A college education is one of the most significant investments your family will make, so all related decisions become important. Like other 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 strongest influence 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. Get in touch with school counselors if you have any doubts.*
- *Encourage your student to get to know his or her high school guidance counselor early on. If possible, have them be proactive and make an appointment as soon as it's permitted. Be aware, however, that many counselors have a heavy load and time may be limited.*
- *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 and let them drive the process.*
- *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.*
- *Allow your student to experience a little stress and confusion throughout this process. Don't jump in with immediate solutions. On the other side of confusion is growth and insight!*
- *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. It's a time for reflection and self-discovery.

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, so 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, follow your own path, 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. One popular one is currently found at the link below entitled "*Self Survey for the College-Bound Student*".

<http://schoolbuff.com/2014%20Self-Survey%20for%20the%20College-Bound.pdf>

If these sorts of self-assessment and readiness questionnaires are helpful to you, there are free apps for smart phones such as: Pathsource Career & Job Search or Chroma – College Readiness. The apps change all the time, so best to search yourself using "College Search", "College Readiness", "College Selection", "College Admission" etc. Most should be free.

There is also a great paperback book (sold on Amazon for under \$20) called *Do What You Are: Discover the Perfect Career for You through the Secrets of Personality Type*. Another good book is *College Match: A Blueprint for Choosing the Best School for You*.

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. This is still almost universally the most important factor.*
- *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. Be sure to determine if the interview is purely informational, or will actually become part of your application.*
- *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. Colleges have what are called “institutional priorities” and these differ. This also explains why a seemingly less qualified student might occasionally be accepted over another.

Admission Strategies

Colleges generally use one of two admission policies or approaches. Most public schools use the more quantitative approach, in which criteria such as grades and test scores determine at least the preliminary selection. Most private universities consider extracurricular activities and other factors (references, essays, interviews for example) for a

more comprehensive or “holistic” review. Of course, public institutions may consider these other factors as well.

Authenticity – Keeping it Real

So why don’t the colleges just tell us what they’re looking for? This sort of transparency is the source of much debate, but don’t expect to see colleges disclose their priorities any time soon. Why? Because then every student would try to become exactly what those priorities define. Students would become too motivated to do things for the wrong reasons at the price of what the institutions actually want most: **authenticity**. Keep that word in mind throughout this process, as it’s probably the most important admission quality. Students whose process has been controlled by an overbearing parent, whose application has been “over-packaged” by a pricey, independent counselor, or whose essay wasn’t quite their own are sacrificing their authenticity. Worse yet, they are risking their shot at finding the right college for them. Keep it real and be yourself – starting right now.

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, 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 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 that you can control, 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 that you care about your grades. By the way, here are three important things to do all four years: Read, read, read!

Courses to take in High School

So what should you take? First and foremost, you need to meet the graduation requirements at 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 8th grade, then would have taken 4 more years of Math, Language and Lab Sciences. In addition, many of those would be honors, 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. Colleges will look for a course of study with appropriate challenge and rigor, as this is evidence that you’ve stretched yourself intellectually. Your high school counseling department should help you with this.

Cambridge Advanced International Certificate of Education (AICE)

This is a diploma program that requires the passing of exams in six areas, and which may be used for college credit in some cases.

Dual Enrollment

These programs allow qualified students to enroll in local community colleges or universities for credit toward high school graduation. This is useful when the high school doesn’t offer AP or other advanced classes.

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, 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 situations 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.

The Overscheduled Student

We mentioned that all four years of high school count. But they count in different ways. Use the early years to discover what you like to do outside the classroom. Explore things, try things out, experiment. Resist doing what you think someone else, or even a college, wants you to do. Discover your passions and maybe even some talents. Try as many things as you reasonably can, as you might learn something surprising about yourself. Allow for some downtime. Resist "resume building" at first, and don't allow yourself to be overscheduled. There is truly an epidemic of overscheduling going on today. When your schedule is so tight that you lose downtime and "tinker" time, the results are, at best, unhealthy. At worst, this can lead to anxiety and depression. While activities, and even a little stress, are desirable and positive, talk to your parents or a counselor if you feel that you've lost the balance.

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 9th grade, need to have that ultimate objective in mind. By the way, acceptance letters aren't always in thick packets these days. The more electronic the process becomes, the less you'll hear about the "fat" letters.

The internet is an incredible tool for digging into your target colleges and perhaps gearing some of your choices toward 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 that you should be on the high end of the middle 50% *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.

Extracurricular Activities

You will hear many myths and conflicting theories about extracurricular activities. For example, you **MUST** be well-rounded, or **DON'T** be well rounded – excel at one thing, or you must have a ton of community service hours. The truth is, there is no exact mix of activities that guarantees admission. It is expected, however, that you do something with your time outside the classroom. These activities show the college how you will contribute to, and enhance, their campus community. So our advice is to figure out what you care about or love to do, then commit to it and try to show progression through the high school years. But remember, don't overschedule. It's depth over breadth and quality over quantity. These activities should never compromise your academics. Classes and grades are still number one.

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. It can be something that sets you apart. And at the very least, it makes it easier to fill out the actual applications.

The sections on this activities list are geared toward the categories of information that the applications generally ask for. Ideally you'll have several 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
Phone Email
High School Name and Graduation Year

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 some of this 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 9th, 10th, or even 11th 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 application. 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", (available used and new on Amazon) 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
Global Routes

www.rusticpathways.com
www.globalroutes.org

- *Volunteer at a company that might be a career interest for you or something like:*
Special Olympics www.specialolympics.org
Global Volunteers www.globalvolunteers.org
Points of Light www.pointsoflight.org

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

Idealist.org

www.idealist.org

VolunteerMatch

www.volunteermatch.org

[Do Something](http://DoSomething)

www.dosomething.org

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

Action Quest

www.actionquest.com

Odyssey Expeditions

www.odysseyexpeditions.com

Broadreach

www.gobroadreach.com

Adventure Treks

adventuretreks.com

360 Degree Student Travel

www.360studenttravel.com

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

Note: Be sure to research these and any programs 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.

Beware of Direct Mail “Invitations”

During high school, you may receive what appear to be selective invitations to attend a summer leadership program or conference. These are marketed as if you were chosen or somehow qualified... don't be fooled. In at least most cases, these have a fee and are open to anyone who pays it. They are unlikely to be a factor in admission decisions.

Leadership Counts

For many of the past twenty years, the goal was to be a “well rounded student”. Interestingly, that is not necessarily 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, which goes back to that word we mentioned earlier: **authenticity**. 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, or joining a couple of clubs has become trite and is not enough to set you apart from other students. Keep developing the authentic version of whatever makes you YOU.

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. (some colleges specifically state NOT to send material)*

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 presentation.

Take a look at the sample and try to fit your own activities and awards into a similar format. Remember to list the items 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.)

Do You Have a Hook?

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 me unique? You are looking for something 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 one, and it’s authentic, 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 borderline for admission.

At first you’ll think, “I don’t have one.” But you might... a unique hobby that started as a child, building computers from scratch, a talent that led to something, playing the piano at a retirement home. Think about it. Where do you shine or show passion? Initiative? What have you thrown your heart and soul into? If you come up with something, see if you can build a theme around it that tells a story. 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. If you didn’t come up with anything along these lines, don’t worry. Just have it in the back of your mind in case. Not everyone has, or needs, a “hook” nor is it essential for admission. We just don’t want you to miss it if you have one.

Standardized Testing

The standardized testing process causes different reactions among students. Some are petrified; some view it as a mild annoyance. Some are a little shocked when they don’t do quite as well as expected, while others exceed their expectations. In any case, 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. Recently the ACT surpassed the SAT in popularity, which likely led to the SAT overhaul in 2016. 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. Talk to your school counselor about this decision. 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 the Fair Test website at www.fairtest.org. Detailed information about the tests follows.

The Tests

ACT Aspire

A suite of standardized testing for grades 3-10. Visit <https://www.discoveractaspire.org> for more information.

The New PreACT

This is a new warm-up to the ACT test for 10th graders. Visit <http://www.act.org/content/act/en/products-and-services/preact.html>. The website also has information on using your test results. This test is new, so detailed are just now emerging, but it is intended to line up against the PSAT (preSAT) test.

PSAT/NMSQT and PSAT 10

This test is designed for to give students an idea of how they will score on the real SAT Test. It 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, except that it does not include an essay. For additional information, visit:

www.collegeboard.com/student/testing/psat/about.html and www.nationalmerit.org

The SAT Reasoning Test (changed as of March 2016)

The SAT has changed! The College Board offers a wealth of information, and preparation doesn't have to be expensive. The change is part of their new initiative called “Delivering Opportunity”, which focuses on three major goals:

- *Increased access to higher education through application fee waivers*
- *High quality test prep—free of charge*
- *Classwork emphasis and support for students who are behind*

Navigate from www.collegeboard.org to learn more, and visit this link to learn how to best prepare. <https://www.collegeboard.org/delivering-opportunity/sat/redesign>

For more about the new test design, <https://collegereadiness.collegeboard.org/sat/test-design>. Meanwhile here are some highlights:

- *No points are deducted for incorrect answer, so answer every one*
- *The cost is \$60 or \$46 without the essay*
- *The new SAT is 3 hours plus 50 minutes for the optional essay*
- *The questions focus on what research has shown matters most for college success*
- *Focus on words in context – those used in life vs. obscure vocabulary*
- *Evidence-based reading – interpret, synthesize, and demonstrate*
- *Essay analysis – read a passage and explain how the author persuades*
- *Math focuses on three areas: Problem solving and data analysis, Algebra, and more complex advanced math*
- *More focus on real world context, analysis of charts, graphs, and passages*
- *Apply various skills to answer questions in science, history, and social studies in context*
- *There is a passage from global conversation regarding civic life, which may reference founding documents such as the Bill of Rights*
- *There is an optional 50 minute essay, which you complete on the lines inside the test answer booklet – some colleges will not require the essay while others will*
- *The reading and math sections are scored on a range of 200-800 each, and the essay is scored separately*
- *Sub scores are added to provide greater insight into results*

Here is a link to the timing and structure of the new test versus the current:

<https://collegereadiness.collegeboard.org/sat/test-design/redesign-specifications>

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 new SAT Test

Your **total score** is your overall score and is a combination of your section scores. The highest composite score for the redesigned SAT is 800+800, or 1600. Your **section scores** are the individual scores for the two main sections of the SAT: reading/writing and math. Each of these sections is scored out of 800, and they are added together to get your overall score.

Your **test scores** break out the reading/writing section into reading and writing and language and give you scores out of 40 points as well as a math test score out of 40 points. These are the basis for your section scores, and therefore your overall SAT score.

Your two **cross-test scores**, each scored out of 40 points, demonstrate capabilities that apply to reading, writing and math. The scores are based on your performance answering questions that have science or history/social studies contexts.

Your SAT **sub-scores** show mastery of topics within reading and writing and language, writing and language alone, and math alone. These topics are outlined and covered in Khan Academy's SAT prep program.

The essay is optional in the redesigned SAT and will not be factored into your overall SAT score. The essay scores will be shown separately on the report and are based on three criteria.

Here is the link to view the upcoming SAT test dates.

<https://collegereadiness.collegeboard.org/sat/register/dates-deadlines>

Visit the College Board website www.collegeboard.org 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 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 <https://collegereadiness.collegeboard.org/sat-subject-tests> 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 you to write about your perspective on the issue. As a starting place, two different perspectives on the issue are provided. You may choose to support one of these perspectives or to develop a response based on your own perspective. You will need to clearly state your position and provide reasons and examples. The ACT Writing Test will be required by some colleges and adds \$16.50 to the \$46 fee for a total of \$62.50 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. Visit the link below to learn more, view upcoming test dates here:

<http://www.act.org/content/act/en/products-and-services/the-act/registration.html#dates>

and for more information:

<http://www.act.org/content/act/en/products-and-services/the-act/taking-the-test.html>

SAT vs ACT

Which test should you take? Before the new SAT was introduced, this decision might have been both easier to make and also more significant. The tests have become more similar, so we will have to wait until more data becomes available to give any solid advice. Nevertheless, your counselor may be able to help with your decision. Meanwhile, visit these sites to see comparisons between the ACT, the old SAT and the new SAT:

<https://collegereadiness.collegeboard.org/educators/higher-ed/scoring-changes/concordance>;
<https://collegereadiness.collegeboard.org/sat/inside-the-test/compare-new-sat-act>;
<http://www.princetonreview.com/college/new-sat-vs-act-infographic>

Of course, visit www.actstudent.org and www.sat.collegeboard.org for more information and free online test prep. 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> You can also find concordance tables online that translate the scores from one test into those of the other. We'll need to wait to obtain good historical data on the new SAT.

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 \$94 (as of this printing), with fee reductions of \$30 available based on need. There are over 35 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: <http://apcentral.collegeboard.com>

TOEFL (test of English as a Foreign Language) - visit www.ets.org/toefl to learn more if English is not your primary language. (*TOEFL may be taken online 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 and/or ACT test twice in your junior year: January (if you're ready), March and/or June. Reserve May for AP tests and SAT Subject tests in the same subjects. If you are taking the ACT, consider February (if you're ready), April and/or 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, ACT, and SAT Subject tests has become the rule, not the exception. You must face the fact that other students are probably prepping for these tests in some way. However, high test scores alone do not guarantee admission at selective schools, so consider your options carefully in terms of how much time and money you want to spend.

Our advice is to prep for the test one way or another, by the best method you can afford. At least take practice tests. Time yourself. Check your answers and go over ones you answered incorrectly. Before you pay for any material or services, be sure to see what the SAT and ACT websites are offering at no cost. Both have greatly enhanced their free, online prep services. There's a lot of hype out there. Don't pay too much attention to "guarantees" of raising your SAT score 200+ points (or ACT equivalent). However, prepping will probably 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 – some at no cost (sample tests, practice questions, etc.)*
- *Mobile apps – depending on your device(s), there may be many free apps*
- *Books and Software (go to amazon.com or other online book stores and search on SAT Prep or Test Prep)*
- *Online courses*
- *Classes*
- *Private Tutors*

This site reviews SAT and ACT Software products, but we aren't sure how much weight you should put in the rankings. Research this yourself and draw your own conclusions.

<http://act-sat-prep-software-review.toptenreviews.com/>. Remember that the SAT has changed, so be sure any prep materials you use are for the new version. You can purchase books from the test sources themselves, such as *The Real ACT Prep Guide* or *The Official SAT Study Guide*, both for sale new or used on Amazon. Again, the College Board and ACT websites have been greatly enhanced and offer many options, so this may be the safest low-cost method to prepare.

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

SmartPhone Apps: SAT Exam Prep, ACT Exam Prep, ACT Up, SAT Up, SATFlash, ACTFlash (search your app store using ACT or SAT for more) Most of these should be free.

www.actstudent.org/testprep - prep for the ACT

www.revolutionprep.com – another program with several options

www.princetonreview.com - a popular service – test prep and more

www.kaplan.com – another popular service for test prep

www.collegeboard.org (this is also where you register)

Register online and early for all tests to ensure all possible advantages. You can get your preferred test location, your scores online 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. Don't forget to save your admission ticket, as you need to bring it with you.

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. This is your responsibility, not your counselor's.

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 \$11.25 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.) Some colleges do not accept Score Choice, so research this. Note that if you send your scores at some point, then take the test again later, you need to resend your scores. The testing service will not automatically update the colleges.

Visit these links for more information about "Score Choice" and sending your scores:

<http://sat.collegeboard.org/register/sat-score-choice>

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. For this reason, some advisors recommend NOT using score choice, so be sure to talk to your counselor about this. The SAT Customer Service phone # is 866-756-7346 or www.collegeboard.org.

ACT Score Reports

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 non-rush cost is \$12 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. Visit the NCAA website at www.ncaa.org to find out more about college athletics. Click on the *Student-Athletes* menu, as a starting point. You can go straight to the Eligibility Center by visiting <http://www.ncaa.org/student-athletes/future/eligibility-center>

There are 16 core classes required now, and a 2.3 minimum GPA. 10 of the classes must be taken before senior year. You need a SAT/ACT score that is determined by a sliding scale. See the checklist below:

<http://www.ncaapublications.com/productdownloads/EB15.pdf>

Although the NCAA sets minimum requirements, many colleges will have their own, more stringent, standards for admitting athletes. The 2017-18 NCAA Guide may be downloaded using the link below and is also available in Spanish.

<http://www.ncaapublications.com/productdownloads/CBSA18.pdf>

Visit www.ncaapublications.com for other NCAA publications.

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. You should register at the beginning of your sophomore year. The Eligibility Center must also get copies of your SAT (use school code 9999) or ACT scores sent *directly from the testing agencies*. All prospective student-athletes must also complete the NCAA Amateurism Certification questionnaire. You can reach the Eligibility Center Monday – Friday at 1-877-262-1492.

There are many websites for potential college athletes, but be wary of spending money for services. Check online resources very carefully, obtain references, and, above all, listen to the advice of your coach(es).

Considering making a game video? Listen to you coach’s advice, as sometimes less is more. We’ve heard some quotes from college coaches along the lines of “the worse the football player, the more lavish the video!”

Remember that you’re going to college to get an education, first and foremost. So select a school that you’d still want to attend if you were injured on your first day and never played. Remember that at Division III schools, recruited athletes don’t have to compete in order to retain their aid status.

Finally, 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 challenges. 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. In addition, here are some websites that can assist you in researching your particular situation:

www.act.org/aap/disab/index.html - special ACT assessment testing

www.collegeboard.com/ssd/student/index.html - SAT services for students with disabilities

www.ssat.org/ - SSAT test

www.allkindsofminds.org - resources

www.ldonline.org - resources

www.ahead.org - Association of Higher Education and Disability (AHEAD)

www.add.org - Attention Deficit Disorder Association

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, 80% 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 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" or "lottery school" and it is extremely unlikely that you will be admitted. You may also want to consider a "financial safety" choice, which is one where you will likely be accepted and will be able to afford to attend.

- *More isn't necessarily better. There is generally no point in applying to 10-15 colleges. Narrow your list intelligently to perhaps 6-8, 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.org (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. Remember – authenticity.*

Some of the "big picture" things to think about are location, academics (majors), size, likelihood of acceptance, and cost.

Online Tools and Apps

Assuming you have a smart phone, apps are proliferating at a rapid rate. Better yet, most are free and you can probably get all that you need without paying a cent – at least as of today. Best bet is to go to your app store and search on "college search" or "college admission" since they change so frequently. But here are a few apps we've experimented with in no particular order, and that are free as of this printing:

Peterson's College Search	Max U
College Interactive	College Advisor (Princeton Review)
Applyst.Me	Schoold
College Match	College Guide

Apps are also available for ACT and SAT prep, and we'll mention those later in the handbook.

Here are some of our favorite websites for searching and learning:

<https://bigfuture.collegeboard.org>
<https://colleges.niche.com/>

<http://college-insight.org>
<https://www.unigo.com>

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. You might add the year as well. 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 2017**. In any case, you should find most colleges 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 <https://www.usnews.com/best-colleges>. 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/Lottery. (See guidelines earlier in the handbook.)

One source we like is <http://collegeapps.about.com/>. The Princeton Review is another good source. Use their "School Finder" to filter and choose schools of interest. 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, www.princetonreview.com/colleges-majors.aspx, <http://www.gocollege.com/>; <https://www.petersons.com/>;

College Viewbooks and Catalogs

Colleges are more than happy to provide information to students, and the most reliable is their catalog. It contains less "sales" information and more about course offerings, admission criteria, graduation requirements, etc. These days the catalogs can be downloaded from the college's website.

College Representatives

Often college admissions representatives will make visits to high schools and/or host events locally. Sometimes alumni will do this as well. These are great opportunities to ask questions and narrow your list, but guard against judging a school by whether or not you like the particular representative.

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 of your notes and impressions, and stay for the post-tour information session if offered. Fill out any forms to be sure that you are on their mailing list.

To set up a visit, check online to see what is available. Some colleges allow you to reserve tours or visits online. Otherwise call the admissions office and make an appointment. You should make the call, not your 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*
- *fit – can you picture yourself there?*

“Must-see” stops on your visit include the dorms, classrooms and labs, student center, library, athletic facilities (if relevant), cafeteria and/or dining areas, and specific facilities in your areas of interest. Do your research before the visit and have a plan. See www.college-visits.com or educationunlimited.com/pages/all_camps_summary if you might be interested in joining organized college trips.

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, www.campustours.com or www.YOUniversityTV.com

College Fairs

Ask your counselor 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: www.nacacnet.org/college-fairs/Pages/default.aspx and there is a 2-part video on YouTube that help you prepare for the fairs. Search on “NACAC National College Fairs”. Your guidance counselor may also be aware of more local fair 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*)

You can often pre-register for these and obtain a bar-coded registration sheet that makes requesting more information from particular schools much easier at the fair.

Visit <https://www.gotomyncf.com/Registration/EventSelectForState?stateName=All> to register ahead of time where possible. If the particular fair does not offer this option, type up stick-on labels with your name, address, email, high school name, and graduation date. Bring a pen. You may be given cards to fill out or online forms to complete so that the college can send you additional information. Be sure to have an email address that won't embarrass you! It will be seen by admissions staff. Jot down notes as well.

More Helpful Links for Finding Colleges and/or Careers

<https://bigfuture.collegeboard.org/find-colleges>

www.collegeresults.org – graduations rates and more

<http://nces.ed.gov/collegenavigator> - search with various filters

mappingyourfuture.org/Undergraduates/ - what to do and when to prepare for college

collegeapps.about.com/ - all sorts of college prep information including test scores from different college categories

www.petersons.com - college search

www.collegeboard.org- college search

www.princetonreview.com - college search

www.studentsreview.com – student opinions

colleges.niche.com – student opinions

www.unigo.com - reviews

Two books that we like:

College Handbook (College Board) and *Fiske Guide to Colleges*

(both are put out annually and available on Amazon.com); also Baron's, Peterson's, and Princeton Review.

Specific College Categories

Art Schools – www.aicad.org

Christian Colleges – www.christiancollegeguide.net

Historically Black Institutions – www.uncf.org or www.eduinonline.com

Jesuit Colleges and Universities – www.ajcunet.edu

Law Schools information – www.lsac.org

Medical Schools information – www.aamc.org/students

Nursing Programs – www.aacn.nche.edu

Women's Colleges – www.womenscolleges.org

Of course, this is just a sample. Search for other categories and associations.

Reach Schools

This is a US News listing of the 100 schools with the lowest acceptance rates for the most recent year available. These schools admit a relatively small percentage of applicants and you should almost certainly consider any of them reach or double reach:

<http://colleges.usnews.rankingsandreviews.com/best-colleges/rankings/lowest-acceptance-rate>

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 online 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 online, 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 or Email

If you can't find an online method for getting on a college's mailing list or for requesting their materials, a plain old-fashioned letter or email works just fine and may even end up in your file reflecting positively on you. Here is a sample of a properly formatted letter/email. Note that this general format works for any college inquiry - just change the content appropriately and add specifics as you wish. If you have a specific talent, you may wish to send an email or letter to the coach or appropriate department. You can often find the correct contact person on the college's website. If you are a multicultural, first-generation, or low income student, you may also want to contact the applicable recruitment coordinator.

Ms. Amanda Jones (the person you are mailing to, if known)
Office of Admissions
1234 Easy Way (if emailing, you do not need the street address)
Showcase College
Showcase, OK 99999

November 8, 2017

Ms. Jones: (if no name, then just use To the Office of Admissions:)

I am currently a junior at Bestofall High School 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. I look forward to hearing from you.

Best regards,

(your signature or name if email)

Susie A. Student (your printed name)
1000 Main Street (your return address)
Bestofall, OK 99999
999-999-9999 (your phone number)
Susie.A.Student2@gmail.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. For example, YouTube has a plethora of college admission videos, but you need to try to assess the credibility of the material. 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 instead of the real one: www.fafsa.ed.gov or www.commonap.org instead of the real www.commonapp.org. Check out www.finaid.org/scholarships/scams.phtml and www.snopes.com to help you identify illegitimate sites and emails.

Email

If your high school provides you with an email address, by all means use it according to instructions. If not, we advise students to set up a separate, professional email address for use during the college admission process. We recommend `firstname.lastname@...` (ex. Susan.Smith@gmail.com instead of party.girl@yahoo.com) Save 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 and use spell-check and proper punctuation. Use proper upper and lower case rules such that your emails are not in all lower OR all upper case. Don’t use email subject lines such as “Please Read” or “** IMPORTANT INFORMATION **” as these are common for junk mail and spam. Ask questions that are specific to the college and aren’t readily answerable on the college’s website. Show that you’ve done your research. Remember that your e-mails may be added to your admissions file at the college. Also, don’t forget to check your email regularly.

Social Networking Sites

Keep your Facebook, MySpace, Instagram, and other social media 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

Almost all applications are now done online. But if, for whatever reason, you are submitting a paper application, then take note. Your application is one of the few things that is 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. 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.

Clearly colleges these days prefer online applications. This solves the neatness issue, but can cause other problems. It is easier to make and miss mistakes on an online application. You should still download or request a paper copy of the application and fill it out before doing the online form. Pay attention to the online instructions. If your browser blocks pop-ups, you may need to disable that feature for online 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 online 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 online at midnight on the deadline day. On the other hand, don't pull an all-nighter to be the first online 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, download and/or print/scan a copy of the application before sending it. The online ones can generally be printed. But one way or another, save a copy for your files.

Certificate of Mailing

For anything important that you send via regular mail, obtain a certificate of mailing (not expensive) from the post office. This gives you proof of the day the item was mailed. Use this for non-online applications, secondary school reports (from your counselor),

transcripts, and anything else you consider critical. When close to deadlines, this is can be valuable insurance.

Online Receipt

Most, if not all, online 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 e-check as well. There may be other ways to pay the fee if you prefer.

Fees

Application fees generally range from \$35 to \$90. 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 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 and your counselor’s advice. Some colleges will require their own supplement in addition to the basic common application. You can visit www.commonapp.org for more information and a list of member institutions (600+ this year). The form can be downloaded or completed online 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 online that attempts to include more public schools, so keep an eye on it at www.universalcollegeapp.com. (40+ schools)

Special note: The Common App prompts are changing for 2017-2018. Get an early start on your essays, but be sure to use the current/new prompts.

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.

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. There are lots of theories about applying for ED. For example, if you require financial aid it is NOT generally better to apply ED as you'd want to be able to compare aid offers. Also, ED doesn't necessarily give you an edge at very selective schools.

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 at 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”.

Choice, Priority, Preferred – Beware

Some institutions may encourage you to complete a “shorter” or “faster” or even “free” application. In some cases, these are attempts to boost their application numbers and could be risky for you. They are sometimes called “Candidate’s Choice” applications or have some other catchy pitch. We recommend talking to your counselor before completing these.

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 for starters, or search “List of Community Colleges”.

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 expensive and 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.

Whom to Ask

Plan to select teachers from 11th grade who have gotten to know you. Obviously they should be ones from whom you obtained a strong grade. Do not use a 9th or 10th grade teacher unless you have a compelling reason to do so. Waiting for a 12th grade teacher may be too late, as they won't know you well enough soon enough. 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 has 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 your teachers by late May of your junior year, or early in your senior year.*
- *Ask the teacher first (in person) if he/she would be able to write a "strong" or "positive" 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 online 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 online link and instructions, or whatever it is that they need to do.*

- *If there is a box on whatever form you are using that indicates that you will waive access to the recommendation, indicate YES. This assures the college that the recommendation has been written honestly and candidly. Schools will give those more credibility. (The Common Application has this.)*
- *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?*
- *If regular mail is still used, 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. (This does not apply for online submissions.) You are trying to make this as easy as possible on the letter writer.*
- *Assemble all this neatly in an envelope if applicable. 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.*

Is there someone else outside of school who knows you in some other capacity and could write a compelling letter for you? An employer or coach outside of school? If so, consider sending that as well, but only if it will introduce something about you that is not covered elsewhere. Make sure it's worth it if you're expecting an admissions officer to read yet another additional letter.

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 guidance counselor 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 asking for letters of recommendation follow up with a 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 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 “hook”. Remember that? If you found one, 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? Avoid the trite and overused topics such as winning the big game, your summer vacation, your service trip to build a house, etc. A better idea might be to find a small moment in time that meant something special to you or changed you in some way. These can be far more insightful.

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, an 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. Make it catchy!*
 - *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?*
- *Was there a moment in time that changed me in some way?*
- *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?) If there’s a negative, try to point out a positive outcome.*

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, use the Review tab, then 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 generally not a problem. (Check to be sure.) 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 online application. Some instruct you to cut and paste it into a particular box on the application. When this is done, we have found that it may force 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 yours 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 21st 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 handled?

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. No gum chewing, and turn off electronic devices!

Be on Time

Have reliable directions. 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. Using your phone's navigation should be fine, but again, allow for the unexpected. 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 or email 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), send a thank you note to your interviewer letting him/her know that you appreciate their taking the time to meet with you. Consider whether a hand-written note or email would be the better choice. 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 or email with a closing such as Best regards, and your full name. If you have a 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 get 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.

The Net Price Calculator

The Higher Education Act requires colleges to include a "net price calculator" tool on their websites. This is an online calculator that offers customized approximations of your cost at that institution based on certain inputs such as family size. The intent is to provide students and families with realistic expectations or "sticker price transparency" during their search. You can try searching online listing the college by name followed by "net price calculator". If that doesn't work, you should be able to find it starting on their website. It should take about 15 minutes to complete.

Section 529 Plans

States sponsor 529 plans, qualified savings or tuition programs authorized under section 529 of the Internal Revenue Code, that allow taxpayers to either prepay tuition or contribute to an account for paying a student's qualified higher education expenses. Similarly, colleges and groups of colleges sponsor 529 plans that allow them to prepay a student's qualified education expenses. These 529 plans are a popular way for parents and other family members to save for a child's college education. Though contributions to 529 plans are not deductible, there is also no income limit for contributors.

529 plan distributions are tax-free as long as they are used to pay qualified higher education expenses for a designated beneficiary. Qualified expenses include tuition, required fees, books and supplies, computer technology and equipment, and internet access. For someone who is at least a half-time student, room and board also qualify. Software designed for sports, games, or hobbies does not qualify, unless it is predominantly educational in nature. In general, expenses for computer technology are NOT qualified expenses for the American opportunity credit, lifetime learning credit or tuition and fees deduction.

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

Tax Breaks for Parents and Students

As of this printing, there is still a "Tuition and Fees" tax deduction of up to \$4,000 for qualified tuition and related expenses that were paid for yourself, your spouse, or a dependent. But these tax breaks change, and you are advised to consult with a tax advisor if you are paying education-related expenses. You can search the IRS website for "tuition and fees deduction" for the latest information and qualifications.

Visit IRS regulation 970 at www.irs.gov/publications/p970/index.html or call 1-800-4FED-AID. Again, 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 or direct 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, TEACH, Iraq and Afghanistan Service Grant) that

are renewed or 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 annual Pell grants (\$5920 for 2017-18), and more, so be sure to research the new opportunities. Also, the health care bill introduced the Student Aid and Fiscal Responsibility Act which raised some award levels. However, it also increased the maximum FAFSA EFC allowed to receive an award. Research current grants at <https://studentaid.ed.gov/sa/types/grants-scholarships>

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. 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. (Note: Effective for the 2017-18 filing, you can submit your application in October of the prior year using an earlier tax return – see chart below). Also you will need an FSA ID so you can interact with US Department of Education websites and sign your FAFSA form electronically. Activating your FSA ID can take a few days. To apply for your ID, you'll need your social security number, full name as on your social security card, date of birth, and an email address that you check regularly. Visit <https://fsaid.ed.gov> to obtain your ID.

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.

In 2015 there were significant changes to the *Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA®)* process that will impact millions of students. Students will be able to do the following:

- **Submit a FAFSA® Earlier:** *Students will be able to file a 2017–18 FAFSA as early as Oct. 1, 2016, rather than beginning on Jan. 1, 2017. The earlier submission date will be a permanent change, enabling students to complete and submit a FAFSA as early as October 1 every year.*
- **Use Earlier Income Information:** *Beginning with the 2017–18 FAFSA, students will report income information from an earlier tax year. For example, on the 2017–18 FAFSA, students (and parents, as appropriate) will report their 2015 income information, rather than their 2016 income information.*

The following table provides a summary of key dates as we transition to using the early FAFSA submission timeframe and earlier tax information.

When a Student Is Attending College (School Year)	When a Student Can Submit a FAFSA	Which Year's Income Information Is Required
July 1, 2017–June 30, 2018	October 1, 2016–June 30, 2018	2015
July 1, 2018–June 30, 2019	October 1, 2017–June 30, 2019	2016

This earlier start date and using earlier income information will benefit students. Benefits include (a) alignment: the financial aid application process may be more aligned with the college admission process (b) certainty: applicants will not need to estimate income or taxes paid, and (c) less pressure: more time for students and parents to explore and understand financial aid options and apply for aid before state deadlines.

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.org. Fill these out early, between September and October. Visit <https://student.collegeboard.org/css-financial-aid-profile> for more information.

Financial Aid Estimator

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

Looking for Scholarships

Most won't come to you. To find scholarships, you need to look. Here are some internet and smart phone resources that make this easier for you:

Smart Phone Apps: Financial Aid; Scholly; Scholarships.com

Websites:

www.finaid.org

www.fastweb.com

www.unigo.com/scholarships#/fromscholarshipexperts

<http://www.chegg.com/scholarships?zinch=1>

www.meritaid.org

However, if any of these or other scholarship sites ask for a fee, beware...

There are a lot of scams out there.

Beware of Scams

Some services claim they will search out scholarships for you for a fee of anywhere from \$40 - \$500. They may make other promises as well, such as a refund if no scholarships are found. You can do these searches very effectively on your own, so the safest path is to

of the better offer. Are there other special circumstances that weren't reflected on the forms? It can't hurt to try! Be sure you are clear on all aspects of your aid package, such as whether it is renewed each year and are there GPA qualifications? Ask, ask, ask!

Once You're Accepted or Wait Listed

Often your colleges will offer online notification websites with passwords. If offered, this is usually the fastest way to find out the college's decision. Keep track of these websites and passwords so you can check frequently during notification time. If accepted to a college, you will receive the coveted letter or packet informing you of this. Pay special attention to the information in these letters, as it will contain deadlines and often housing forms. If you are accepted at multiple schools, congratulations! Weigh your decision carefully by talking to your parents, counselors, and anyone else with insight that might be helpful. Another visit might help the decision process as well.

What if You're Deferred?

Students applying ED or EA will be admitted, denied, or deferred. Being deferred generally means an application will be considered with the regular application pool. It means the college was sufficiently impressed with your credentials to give your application a second chance. And, the ED/EA contract is no longer binding, so you are free to apply to other colleges. Remain positive and follow the following helpful tips:

- *Contact the admissions office to seek advice: Keep up your grades, since the school may give your fall semester grades serious consideration. Submit your mid-year grades. Be prepared to provide additional information to further support your application.*
- *Submit a well-written letter of intent to the school: Submit your reaffirmation of serious intent stating you will attend if accepted (if true). Add any additional information that might advance your candidacy like new awards, activities, or leadership roles you have assumed.*
- *Touch base with your interviewer: Let your interviewer know you were deferred and ask for suggestions. They may even be willing to send an email or note to the college in your favor. If you haven't interviewed previously, set up an interview to further demonstrate your interest.*
- *Consider additional letters of recommendation: Consider submitting an additional recommendation that can provide new and additional information about your strengths or new developments or progress.*

What if You're Put on the 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 has been around 5%, but the unpredictable yields today may be changing that.

The 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.

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 or instructions 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 paper folder, and an e-folder on your computer, 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 all this in a handy location so things are placed in it promptly and aren’t lost. Keep your research in the appropriate folders, including news and correspondence. Keep your certificates of mailing and application copies as well. Also identify a secure place to keep track of various online ID’s and passwords. Staying organized will ensure that you don’t miss deadlines and/or let something slip through the cracks. That could cost you your edge.

We recommend printing our College Admission Organizer (suitable for a 3 ring binder) from our subscriber portal (see password below) to plot everything on paper, then using one of the online apps available such as the College Application Wizard in order to set reminder texts or emails.

We hope you find our handbook to be helpful. Additional resources are available on our subscriber website including checklists, worksheets and 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.

Best of luck on your college quest!

Don't forget to use our subscriber-only resource portal.
Simply visit our website www.getin2college.com and click the green LOGIN button at the top right.

Log in using the following:

User name: 2018 Password: Apps18 (case sensitive)

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Sample Resume

Taylor A. Bradford

1000 Main Street

Anywhere, CA 99999

Phone: (999) 999-9999

email: Taylor.A.Bradford512@gmail.com

Coopersville High School Class of 2018

Academic Honors and Awards

- **National Honor Society** - 2016
- **Academic Honor Roll** – all semesters
- **Scholar Athlete Award** – Junior year – Volleyball

Other Awards and Distinctions

- **Youth National Volleyball Team:** 2016-2017

High School Leadership Activities

- **Team Captain:** Volleyball – 2017
- **Varsity:** Volleyball 2014-2017
- **Leader:** Link Crew 2016-2017 - Selected by Administration for mentor program.
- **Chairperson:** Spring Canned Foods Drive 2016
- **Club Founder:** Teens Against Tobacco and Drug Use 2015

Community Service and Leadership

- **Certified Junior Lifeguard:** Anywhere Beach, 2014-15
- **Coach:** Summer Volleyball Camp 2016
- **Volunteer:** Coast Animal Hospital: 2016 (32 hours)
- **Volunteer:** Teens Against Tobacco and Drug Use (30 hours) 2017

Summer Programs and Internships

- **Academic:** Journalism Workshop at Boston University: Summer 2015: 8 week program
- **Community Service:** Rustic Pathways – Costa Rica Community Service 2016 – harvest and rescue project to prevent extinction of Lora sea turtles

Paid Employment Experience

- **Camp Counselor:** ABC Camp, Anywhere, CA Summer 2014
- **Website Administrator:** www.somebusiness.com 2016-present

Other Activities and Hobbies

I enjoy recreational sports such as volleyball, scuba diving, surfing, and snowboarding. I also enjoy writing and 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 the news media industry, 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.

Sample Essays

This portion of the appendix provides you with four very different types of essays. 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 attend. 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 the following year, 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)

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, ask specifics.
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

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?

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 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?
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?
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?
What wi-fi 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?

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?

Junior Calendar

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

Senior Calendar

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