

# GUIDE TO THE COLLEGE ADMISSION PROCESS





## Guide to the College Admission Process

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## About the Author

The *Guide to the College Admission Process* is based on the original guide by Steven C. Munger, former dean and college counselor at Bridgton Academy (ME). Mr. Munger has served as president of the New England Association for College Admission Counseling and was the 1989 recipient of NACAC's John B. Muir Editor's Award. Mr. Munger is the co-author of *Selecting the Right College*.

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# 1

## Chapter 1: An Introduction to the College Search Process

**B**eginning the post-secondary exploration process can be a time defined by mixed emotions: excitement, anticipation, uncertainty, fear, or any combination thereof. While the unknowns of future planning can, at times, be overwhelming, they also present an opportunity for growth, self-reflection, and ownership. Perhaps you already have firm ideas of where you would like to go to college or how you want to spend your time after high school. Maybe you've started to eliminate some possibilities. Wherever you are in this process, this guide is designed to support you.

Remember that applying to college is a highly personal and individual process. Even though you may be navigating the various phases and steps of the process at the same time as your peers, that does not mean that every decision you make will be aligned. Your criteria of what type of college will meet your needs best may look drastically different from that of your friends and classmates, and that's okay. The goal of this process is to discover a range of institutions where you will feel happy, fulfilled, intellectually challenged, and supported. Approaching the college search with this perspective in mind will lead to smooth transitions and sound decision-making.

As tempting as it might be to fast track your timeline, remember that the college process is not something that can be rushed. It plays out on a predictable and relatively set timeline with a beginning, middle, and end. For some students, this may be one of your first exposures to a multi-step, long-term research process. Your energies are best spent investing deeply in the stage of the process at hand, rather than trying to skip ahead and tackle decisions that aren't ready to be made yet. Pacing yourself and chunking out this work is one of the best ways to reduce stress and minimize overwhelm. Ideally, along the way, you will not only identify a list of colleges and universities that excite you, but you will also build beneficial skills in long-term planning and organization, effective communication, accountability, and perspective.

## **Because the process of selecting a college is very personal, it begins with self-reflection.**

Consider your goals, strengths, areas for growth, and reasons for going to college. Genuinely ask yourself the question “why do I want to go to college?” and discuss your answer with the people supporting you through this process. Starting this process without a solid answer to that question is a missed opportunity.

When you begin thinking about yourself and the criteria you’ll base your college search on, be realistic. It is okay to dream as long as you are keeping one foot on the ground. Consult your parents, guardians, school or college counselor, and others about your process, but keep in mind that it is your future and that you must eventually make the decisions.

## **Take advantage of available support systems throughout this process**

Your school-based counselor is often the first and primary resource for you during the college search and selection process. They will know the various steps in the admission process and can help you establish and keep an admission application schedule. Just as important, your counselor can help you better understand yourself, your interests, and your needs. In addition to school-based counselors, many students may also work with community-based organizations or local non-profit organizations to receive support and guidance when applying to college.

Regardless of where your support is coming from, be open to receiving guidance from those willing to provide it and who have years of exposure and experience navigating this process. Work with your counselor or other support systems to determine the factors—from location to academic offerings—that matter most to you. Using the information from these conversations, you and your counselor can begin to develop a list of colleges that meet your established criteria. Self-assessment, evaluation, patience, persistence, organization, and above all, good humor and perspective are the elements of a happy transition from high school to college.

# 2

## Chapter 2: Junior Year & Getting Started with College Research

When it comes to college preparation, freshman and sophomore year should largely be focused on adjusting to high school, finding a level of academic rigor suitable to your needs, building strong study and work habits, and exploring extracurricular opportunities that genuinely excite you or serve an important purpose in your life. Again, this process cannot be rushed. High school is not simply a means or stepping stone to a collegiate end; it is an enriching and exciting opportunity in and of itself, and should be treated as such. Students who navigate high school with tunnel vision toward college often miss out on fulfilling and meaningful experiences as a result—there is an important balance to be struck between being forward thinking and allowing yourself to be in the moment. Leading with authenticity and exploring topics, subjects, and opportunities of interest to you in those first two years will naturally prepare you for what’s to come in the college search process.

### Types of Colleges and Universities & Terminology

Before diving into identifying your college criteria and college-specific research, it’s important to know the different kinds of institutions of higher education available to you in the U.S. Below is terminology to help you navigate this opening stage of your college process.

**Undergraduate Degree:** Two-year (associate) or four-year (bachelor’s) degrees entered into after the completion of secondary school (high school).

**Graduate/Advanced Degree:** A degree completed after the bachelor’s degree. This can include Master’s Degrees and Doctoral Degrees (PhD, MD, JD, etc). Master’s Degrees typically take anywhere from the equivalent of one to three years of full-time study. Doctoral Degrees typically take anywhere from the equivalent of three to four years of full-time study.

**College:** An institution at which students study toward two- or four-year undergraduate degrees after completion of secondary school. Colleges typically do not offer graduate or other advanced degrees.

**University:** An institution that usually offers both undergraduate and graduate degrees. Universities are typically made up of different undergraduate colleges or schools based on academic discipline.

**Public College:** An academic institution financed by tuition, endowments, and state or local taxes. Tuition for in-state students is reduced and programs and policies are state-regulated. Some public colleges have set guidelines on the percentage of in-state students represented in the student body.

**Private College:** An academic institution financed primarily by tuition and endowments that is not regulated by local or state government.

**Community College:** A public academic institution typically offering two-year Associate Degree and Certificate programs with open enrollment policies for students who have received a high school diploma or equivalent. Community colleges, also sometimes known as junior colleges, typically serve a local population as there are usually many community college campuses throughout a given state. Most community colleges do not offer on-campus residential living and may also have limited extracurricular opportunities. They are often a more affordable option and can have valuable, strategic transfer pathways to the public, four-year institutions in the same state for students interested in ultimately earning a Bachelor's Degree. Community colleges can also offer extensive workforce training and English language acquisition programs.

**Trade or Technical Schools:** Trade or Technical schools offer practical training and instruction for specific jobs and fields. Unlike community colleges, which leave room for exploration of different areas of focus, trade schools let you dive into hands-on training in a specific trade or skill of interest that usually culminates in a certificate or license in that area. Most trades schools have programs for aspiring electricians, plumbers, dental hygienists, chefs, pharmacy technicians, mechanics, information technology support staff, and more.

**Research University:** An academic institution with both undergraduate and graduate programs focused on educating students through research that its professors conduct and produce. Research universities are typically broken up into smaller sub-colleges organized by academic discipline that can include pre-professional courses of study, such as business, engineering, and nursing, in addition to traditional arts & sciences majors. Research universities are typically medium-to-large in size and can be public or private.



**Liberal Arts College:** An academic institution with undergraduate degrees that focuses on providing a well-rounded, broad education across a variety of disciplines with an eye toward developing strong writing and critical thinking skills that can be useful across many professional fields. Liberal arts colleges are typically small in size (usually less than 5,000 students) and private.

**Arts-Focused Institutions & Conservatories:** Academic institutions focused specifically on the fine, visual, or performing arts that prepare students for professional careers in their artistic disciplines through intensive and dedicated instruction in theory and practice. Given the strong focus on professional artistic preparation, some conservatories and arts institutions may not offer the same breadth of extracurricular opportunities on campus as do traditional universities. For those that want the best of both worlds, some research universities have conservatories and/or Colleges of Fine Arts housed within them that provide the same intensive, pre-professional instruction but in a more traditional university environment. If you are passionate about your artistic endeavors but are not interested in pursuing them professionally, many liberal arts colleges have strong Bachelor of Arts and Bachelor of Fine Arts programs that still allow the flexibility to take classes across a variety of other disciplines.

**Historically Black Colleges & Universities (HBCUs):** As recognized by the U.S. Department of Education, HBCUs are academic institutions whose core purpose is, and has been, the education of Black Americans.

**Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs):** As recognized by the U.S. Department of Education, HSIs are academic institutions where at least 25% of their undergraduate full-time enrollment is Hispanic students.

**Tribal Colleges & Universities (TCUs):** As recognized by the U.S. Department of Education, TCUs are academic institutions located on or near tribal reservation lands that predominantly serve Native American students and aim to preserve and celebrate traditional tribal cultures and provide accessible higher education to Native American students.

**Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander Serving Institutions (AANAPISIs):** As recognized by the U.S. Department of Education, AANAPISIs are academic institutions where at least 10% of their undergraduate, full-time enrollment is American and Native American Pacific Islander.

**Women’s College:** Academic institutions, most typically liberal arts colleges, whose undergraduate enrollment is entirely or almost entirely women. Many women’s colleges have moved, or are moving, toward more inclusive enrollment policies that welcome transgender and non-binary students in addition to cisgender women.

**Military Service Academies:** Undergraduate academic institutions that provide education and training to future members of the U.S. Armed Forces. The service academies include the U.S. Military Academy (West Point), the U.S. Naval Academy, the U.S. Air Force Academy, the U.S. Coast Guard Academy, and the U.S. Merchant Marine Academy. Each military academy will have its own unique admission requirements.

**Other Specialized Institutions:** Academic institutions dedicated entirely to a specific discipline or area of study. Examples include colleges and universities exclusively focused on instruction in science and engineering or business.

**First-Generation Student:** A student whose biological parent(s) did not receive a four-year baccalaureate degree. First-generation students are often referred to as the first in their family to attend college. At many colleges, first-generation students have access to additional support programs and personnel to help navigate their undergraduate experience.

## **A solid and balanced college list begins with an authentic and reflective list of criteria**

Typically, the post-secondary search and research process begins in earnest during a student’s junior year (11th grade). With the support of your high school counselor, a community-based organization, or other support systems, you will explore the range of opportunities available to you, whether that’s a gap year, a four-year institution, community college, military service, full-time work, and more. For those with an eye toward higher education, you will begin developing a college list that reflects your wants and needs. The foundation of this exploration is self-reflection and authenticity—without those factors, your list may not be representative of what works specifically for you.

Developing a list of specific criteria should always come before choosing colleges to add to your list. To decide on specific schools without a solid sense of your wants and needs is a backward and unhelpful approach, often leading students to focus solely on colleges they have already heard of. You likely wouldn’t purchase an item of clothing before knowing your size, your style preferences, what fabrics are most comfortable to you,

your budget, and more—the same logic should be applied to the college search. As much as you can, avoid the temptation to gravitate only to what is already familiar. Open-mindedness is the key to a balanced and effective college search process.

Start by making a list of what's important to you and discuss it with your counselor. Some students have a strong sense of what they want from the start, while others may need more time and exploration to determine what is truly important to them. What is most important to remember is that criteria can grow, change, and evolve throughout this process. What you want at the beginning of your junior year might look very different from the beginning of your senior year, and that is normal. As long as you remain flexible and self-aware, you will be able to build a list of colleges reflective of your needs. Use these prompts to get started:

- Why do I want to go college? What are my long-term goals?
- Do I want a two- or four-year institution?
- What adjectives would I use in describing my ideal student body and/or campus culture?
- How important will costs be in my final choice? What kind of financial assistance will I need? Are opportunities for part-time jobs important? What qualifications do I have for scholarships? How will travel to and from school impact affordability?
- Do I want to stay near home, or am I prepared to visit my family only a few times each year?
- What kind of setting is most appealing to me? Urban, suburban, small town, or rural?
- How do I learn best? In a smaller classroom environment or larger lecture setting? With hands-on or experiential learning opportunities, a more traditional approach, or a combination? Do I benefit from additional academic supports?
- Is there a special area of study that I'm particularly interested in, or do I want to pursue more general studies? Do I want an open curriculum or am I okay with a range of distribution requirements? Are there certain academic requirements that are wholly unappealing to me?
- Do I want to attend a small, medium, or large institution?
- What career(s) am I considering?

- Am I interested in a diverse student body? What kinds of diversity are most important to me?
- Do I want a demanding academic environment? Do I plan to go to graduate school? Am I comfortable with a curriculum that offers a great deal of independent study? Do my academic interests require specialized facilities?
- What type of mental health support is available on campus?
- Are there certain activities or opportunities it's important to me to have access to (i.e. a strong music or arts scene, a certain type of cuisine, outdoor and wilderness, etc.)?
- Do I prefer on- or off-campus housing? Am I interested in fraternities or sororities? How important are intramural or intercollegiate athletics? Do I want a campus that regularly offers cultural events? How important is school spirit to me?

Feel free to add and consider your own questions and don't be reluctant to express your true feelings. Perhaps you're unsure about some of the questions and answers or need more information before answering thoughtfully. Maybe you think you're not ready to go away to school. It's OK to be apprehensive or uncertain. Not everyone knows exactly what they want at this time and many of these answers evolve and change over the course of your junior and senior years.

## **Good decisions are made by gathering good information and by being organized.**

Once you have a preliminary set of criteria, you're ready to begin college-specific research. You are in control; you are doing the research and selecting the colleges that meet your needs to add to your list. At times, it seems there is an endless supply of information (some more reliable, some less) about both the college admission process and specific institutions. Part of maintaining a strong sense of perspective and accountability in this process is learning how to delineate between fact and opinion, objective and subjective point of views. There is likely more unreliable information out there than not, so it's important to be an informed and aware consumer when researching. In this section you'll find recommendations on not just where to seek out information, but also how to discern what's helpful from what's reductive, and ultimately how to keep the information you find organized and accessible.

A helpful question to ask yourself throughout your research process is “*why this college?*” Not only will some colleges ask you to write essays answering that very question (more on that later), but it is also a mechanism to keep you accountable to your own criteria. If you can’t specifically articulate why a school is interesting or compelling to you and how it specifically aligns with your stated criteria, that is likely a good indication that a) more research is required or b) that school might not actually deserve a spot on your list.

There are a variety of online and printed resources available to you as you begin to navigate this research—from college websites to reference books and materials to social media and review-based search engines. College visits and information sessions, which are also great opportunities for research, will be covered in their own specific chapter.

**College Research Search Engines:** Online search engines can be an excellent tool in identifying colleges that align with your established, working list of criteria. Your counselor may have provided you with a list of suggestions based on your criteria and conversations as well, and search engines can help you expand that initial list if you’re interested. Platforms, such as College Board’s BigFuture, Cappex, or College Navigator (a search engine maintained by the U.S. Department of Education’s National Center for Education Statistics), allow you to search among thousands of higher education options both in the United States and abroad. When using these search engines, make liberal use of the filters that allow you to narrow results by your stated criteria, whether that’s size, location, academic programs, affordability, admissions criteria, religious affiliation, and more. The more granular you are with the filters, the smaller the list of suggestions will get, so be sure to strike a balance and maintain flexibility. Being too restrictive upfront may eliminate colleges that meet most of your criteria and could be a great fit.

**College Websites:** An institution’s website is always going to have the most up-to-date, accurate information on their admission and financial aid policies, academic programs, extracurricular opportunities, campus life, and more, and should therefore be a foundational part of your research. The undergraduate admissions portion of their website will provide information on required materials, deadlines, events and information sessions, FAQs, and more. This is your first stop for any process-related questions for a particular college. Beyond the admissions section lives a treasure trove of information about life as a student. Most colleges will devote sections to their academic program and offerings, campus and residential life, pre-professional advising and opportunities, campus news and events, and more. These sections of the website are largely designed for current students, meaning that

prospective applicants can gain a window into the day-to-day of the student experience both in and out of the classroom in just a few clicks. Be sure to go beyond the landing pages of each section and dive deeply into each school's specific, unique offerings. Whether it's exploring the course catalog, the available clubs and organizations, college traditions and lore, and more, the more time and effort you devote, the better, more comprehensive picture you'll come away with. Use your criteria to guide you in seeking out relevant information—does the school have the specific classes, clubs, or opportunities you've identified as important to you?

**Guidebooks & Reference Books:** In addition to online materials, there are also many print, hard-copy resources that compile data, statistics, and comprehensive information about colleges to provide prospective students with a well-rounded view of a variety of institutions. *The Fiske Guide to Colleges*, *Colleges that Change Lives*, *The College Finder*, *College Match: A Blueprint for Choosing the Best School for You*, are a sample of these resources that are updated regularly in the service of supporting prospective students in accessing accurate, trustworthy information on a wide range of colleges.

**Student Newspapers & Alumni Magazines:** A limitation of college websites and guidebooks is that they can lack direct access to student perspectives that haven't been filtered through a marketing lens. For a more authentic student perspective, student-run newspapers can be an excellent resource for prospective students. Nearly every college newspaper is available online, which provides a window into the issues, topics, and ideas current students are discussing and debating and events and happenings on and around campus. Alumni magazines can also be a helpful resource, as they provide a glimpse into the wide range of paths graduates have taken and how their college experience prepared them for their next step—practical and useful information as you weigh the benefits of a given institution.

**Review-Based Sites:** There are a growing number of websites devoted to ranking or providing report cards for colleges based on the perceived strengths of a variety of factors such as their academic offerings, social life, athletic programs, diversity, affordability, and more. They typically also include a section where current students or alumni can provide reviews of their experience of the institution along with a rating. While these types of first-person accounts can be helpful at times, they should be taken with skepticism. Just like any other review-based platform, they often attract students whose experiences exist on the extreme ends of the spectrum—either overwhelmingly positive or overwhelmingly negative—so the information often lacks nuance. You certainly should not eliminate a school from your list solely based on your impression from these types of sources.

**Social Media:** Every college (and sometimes specifically the admissions office) will have its own verified accounts on major social media platforms that will provide similar information to the website but in more manageable, bite-sized snippets. They are a great way to see what’s happening on campus live and how the college officially responds to current events—a solid gauge of their values and whether they’re in alignment with your own. In addition to these verified accounts, current college students may also create their own accounts or channels devoted to reviewing colleges, providing advice on the admissions process, and more. Just like review-based sites, these posts need to be consumed with a healthy dose of skepticism. What works well for one student in the admissions process or at a specific college may not work for you, so always remain vigilant and avoid taking non-professional advice as hard fact. A good general rule of thumb is, if a person is guaranteeing certain results (i.e. “*here’s how I got into [x school] and you can too!*”), it is likely not accurate, measured, or informed advice. Social media can be a powerful research tool, but only when employed with that advice in mind. As much as you can, avoid the instinct to believe that there is one right way to navigate this process.

While you are looking for colleges, the colleges are also looking for you. Colleges obtain lists of students and their contact information from the College Board’s Student Search Service, the ACT’s Educational Opportunity Service, and other organizations and use them to initiate contact with students via regular mail and, more commonly, email. When registering for the ACT or SAT you may indicate whether you want to share your name with these services. If you participate, count on receiving contact from many colleges. As these emails and viewbooks arrive, keep an open mind and do your due diligence. Just because you haven’t heard of a college that’s reaching out to you does not mean it doesn’t deserve your attention or consideration—it could wind up being an excellent match for your criteria.

***In evaluating a college through these methods of research: Be methodical, look for specific information, and READ—don’t merely skim or look at pictures.***

## It's important to keep your notes on colleges organized and maintain complete and accurate records.

Develop an organizational approach that works best for you. Whether that's keeping a notebook with handwritten notes and reflections on each school or a similar, digital approach in a spreadsheet or document, having your thoughts neatly laid out will become increasingly beneficial as you move through this process. You can structure these notes however makes sense to you, but it is always helpful to make sure you're squaring the information you're receiving with your criteria to ensure there is alignment and consistency. Don't feel obligated to read the material all at once and form an opinion immediately—that's why you're taking notes.

In your research process, you'll likely find that there is a great deal of overlap in what different colleges can offer you both academically and socially. Ultimately, that's a good thing—it means that many institutions can meet your needs! However, when it comes time to articulate *why* you want to attend a certain institution, whether in writing or an interview setting, you'll want to be able to provide specifics beyond your general criteria (size, location, academic program of interest, etc.). This is why it is particularly important to make note of the details that are unique and individual to a given college. As you navigate your research, document interesting, school-specific programs, traditions, services, and more so you can demonstrate the high level of research you've conducted. These are excellent elements to reflect on as you continue to ask yourself the question: "*why this college?*"

Your ultimate goal is to generate a list of colleges and universities that are representative of your criteria and reflect a necessary balance of admissions selectivity. Your counselor will be able to help you determine whether or not a specific college is a Challenge, Possible, or Likely school based on a conservative estimate of admissibility. Your final college list should strike an appropriate balance between Challenge, Possible, and Likely schools.

- **Challenge (also known as Reach):** Your GPA, rigor, and testing (if submitted) are below average based on the college's admitted student profile and/or your high school's application history
- **Possible (also known as Target):** Your GPA, rigor, and testing (if submitted) are around average based on the college's admitted student profile and/or your high school's application history
- **Likely (also known as Safety):** Your GPA, rigor, and testing (if submitted) are above average based on the college's admitted student profile and/or your high school's application history



# 3

## Chapter 3: College Visits, Interviews, and Demonstrated Interest

### The College Campus Visit

Visiting a college campus is among the more helpful ways to determine whether you want to spend several years there. Walking the campus and interacting with current students can provide a perspective on the school not captured in written materials or on the website. Most students do not start visiting colleges until their junior year of high school, often corresponding to a winter or spring vacation, though some students may begin earlier than that. As you discuss this option with your family, be cognizant and realistic about the time and fiscal resources at your disposal. If you are only able to do one round of visits, sometimes saving those until your senior year when you know you've been admitted is the wisest choice.

#### *In-Person Campus Visits*

Most college and university admissions offices offer a variety of on-campus opportunities for prospective students and their families to explore and gather information. Even if you are not able to travel extensively to visit colleges, attending visits at institutions closer to home can provide helpful exposure to different types of schools, even if you are not specifically interested in that college. Not every college will offer the same type or breadth of visit experiences, so your first stop should always be the admissions website of the specific schools you're considering visiting to see what's available. Most colleges require or strongly recommend that visitors sign up for a session prior to coming to campus, though some can accommodate walk-in visitors. While visiting colleges while school is in session is ideal, visiting in the summer will still provide you with a valuable sense of the campus and surrounding area. As with most facets of the college process, you, the student, should be taking the lead on identifying the colleges you want to visit and signing yourself up for events—this is one of many opportunities to demonstrate agency and autonomy.

- **Campus Tours:** Typically led by a current student, campus tours allow you to walk the grounds and see the facilities a school has on offer up close and personally. Tour guides will usually provide a broad overview of academic, extracurricular, dining, and housing opportunities and are, of course, open to questions along the way. If there is a certain area of campus that is not covered on the tour (i.e. athletic or theater facilities), you can always ask if you can visit them on your own time. Take advantage of your time with a current student; even more so than admissions counselors as they are the resident experts on the actual student experience! As you move through campus, be sure to check out bulletin boards or digital monitors displaying announcements and upcoming events—this is a great way to get a sense of what’s happening on campus and what students care about. Prospective students should always be in the driver’s seat of asking questions and interacting with the tour guide.
- **Information Sessions:** Many colleges that have great numbers of prospective students visiting their campuses each year have instituted group information sessions to provide accurate information to several prospective students and their families at the same time. They are often led by a member of the admissions staff or students who work in the admissions office and provide a broad overview of their specific admissions and financial aid review process, academic programs, campus life, and more as well as an opportunity to ask general questions. Combined with campus tours, group information sessions are excellent resources to use in researching and evaluating colleges.
- **Attending a Class:** Some colleges may offer the opportunity to sit in on a class during your visit, which provides a unique and tangible window into the academic experience. Instead of only hearing about the academic values and approach the college takes, you get to see it play out in real life surrounded by potential future classmates. If this is an option, be sure to be flexible with the admissions office when scheduling. They may not be able to provide a class perfectly aligned with your area of interest, as they have to work within the confines of the current academic schedule, but any exposure to the teaching and learning that’s happening on campus can be helpful data.

- **Prospective Student Events:** Many colleges also hold large visit days specifically designed for prospective students and their families. Sometimes called open houses or preview days, these events combine the regular visit offerings (campus tours, information sessions, classroom visits) with enhanced opportunities for research and engagement. Some include panels with current students or faculty members from specific disciplines, admissions and financial aid workshops, and more.
- **Lunch with a Student:** If given the opportunity, it can be great to grab lunch on campus with a current student. Not only does this give you an idea of the school's meal plan and offerings, but it also gives you unstructured, non-evaluative time with a current student to talk in a more relaxed atmosphere. Even if this isn't a formal option through the admissions office, it is worth asking if you can still eat in the dining hall on your own and sample the food!
- **Overnights:** Some colleges may offer the opportunity for prospective students to do a full shadow day and overnight stay hosted by a current student when visiting campus. In many ways, an overnight provides the most unfiltered visit experience—you're essentially navigating the authentic life of a current student with the support of your host. For some populations, such as recruited athletes, an overnight may be required.
- **Meet with an Admissions Counselor:** If you still have specific questions after your tour and information session, some admissions offices will allow you to meet individually with an admissions counselor on staff. Different from a formal interview, this is an opportunity for you to ask them questions, not the other way around. Do not think of this as a necessity or something to do to improve your chances of admission if you do not have anything additional to ask; these are usually informal, unstructured conversations that have no bearing on your admissions process.

### ***Fly-in Opportunities***

An increasing number of schools are beginning to offer fully funded visit opportunities, typically specifically for students from underrepresented and/or low-income backgrounds, where the university will cover the cost of travel, accommodations, and meals for the duration of your stay. If offered, college admissions websites will provide details on how to apply or put your name on an interest list and any associated requirements and deadlines. Since these programs are fully funded, they are often competitive and may require an extensive application process.

## ***Virtual Visit Opportunities***

Since not every family has the time, budget, or flexibility to visit campuses in person, increasingly there are virtual ways to visit campus from the comfort of your own home. Many of the in-person options listed above have a virtual version available. Some options may be pre-recorded and can be watched on your own time, while others might be live events. For live virtual events, you will sign up on the same area of the admissions website as you would for an in-person visit. Be sure to make note of any time differences between where you'll be logging on and what time zone the event is being hosted in so you don't miss it accidentally. Some colleges also partner with one another to provide virtual sessions together so prospective students can hear from multiple schools at once. Just like with in-person events, the admissions office will be able to see if you miss a virtual event, so be sure to only sign up if you're confident you'll be able to attend.

## ***Off-Campus Engagement Opportunities***

In addition to visits and events hosted on campus and virtually, there are also a variety of opportunities for engagement in person, but off campus.

- **On-the-Road Information Sessions:** Many colleges will host information sessions in cities and towns across the country as a part of their recruitment travel, providing the same information as they would on campus, but in a more accessible, convenient location to applicants who live farther away. At times, colleges might even partner to conduct these on-the-road information sessions together, so prospective students can hear from and ask questions of multiple schools in a single event.
- **High School Visits:** Throughout the fall and sometimes spring, admissions counselors from most colleges travel to high schools across the country and provide prospective applicants with the same information as they would on campus, but in the comfort of your own high school. Sometimes, though not always, the admissions counselor visiting will be the staff member responsible for the initial review of your application, as many admissions offices divide application review by geographic territory. High school visits are an easy and convenient way to get information, explore colleges you may never have heard of, and ask important questions along the way. Your counseling office will keep a calendar of upcoming visits and will have their own policies and processes for who is allowed to attend visits and when.

- **College Fairs:** One way to interface with a large number of colleges at once is to attend a college fair. At these events, which can range in size from a handful to hundreds of colleges, admissions counselors will set up their own table or booth that prospective students and families can visit to receive information, get on mailing lists, and ask questions. These events are typically more fast paced than others, where you only have a few minutes at most to chat with the admissions representative to ensure every attendee can get their questions answered. College fairs may be hosted by high schools, community-based organizations, non-profits, or regional or national organizations, such as NACAC (read more about NACAC's National College Fairs in Chapter 4).
- **Case Studies:** Case Study events are a more focused engagement opportunity where students and/or parents and guardians participate in a mock application review committee, typically overseen by current admissions counselors and/or high school counselors. As a participant, you will be tasked with reviewing a series of fake applications and agreeing on an admissions decision with your fellow committee members with guidance from your facilitator(s). Case studies can provide helpful insight into general admissions review practices, though it's always important to keep in mind that each individual college has its own process and set of criteria that may not be universal. Case studies can be hosted by colleges, high schools, community-based organizations, non-profits, or regional or national organizations like NACAC.
- **Portfolio Review or Pre-Screen Days:** For fine and performing arts applicants, colleges or organizations, such as NACAC, host events devoted to providing feedback on the required creative components of your application, whether that's an artistic portfolio or a monologue you are rehearsing. Most of the time these events are organized like college fairs, where you can approach specific colleges' booths or tables for a quick feedback session. Some events may provide more comprehensive programming like panels with artistic faculty on the review committee or creative workshops.

## The College Interview

In addition to the engagement opportunities listed above, some colleges also offer the opportunity for a one-on-one interview. Though some interviews are purely informational in nature, most of the time admissions interviews are evaluative. You can find out whether or not a college offers interviews, and whether they are recommended or required, on their admissions website. Even if they are not required, strongly consider taking advantage of interview opportunities when they're available—they are one of few moments in the admissions process where your voice and personality are on full display.

Admissions interviews can be conducted by a current student, an admissions staff member, or a graduate of the institution. Typically, there is not an advantage to interviewing with one of those options over another, and some schools limit your interviewer options specifically to students or graduates. If the interview is an important part of the college admission at a college, all interview types will be given equal weight and all interviewers will be trained and prepared to represent the institution.

An interview with a senior staff member, such as the Dean or Director of Admission, is not essential. If you are considering colleges that strongly recommend or require an interview, be sure to research when and how you sign up for those opportunities or if the opportunity is assigned to you by the admissions office.

**Interviews allow you to showcase your talents, interests, curiosities, and personality to a welcoming and receptive audience.**

It is natural to be nervous or apprehensive given their evaluative nature, but try to reframe interviews as an opportunity for them to get to know you beyond what is written in your application, where you have a limited capacity to express yourself. As cliché as it may sound, and you will hear interviewers echo this sentiment regularly, admission interviews really are supposed to be a conversation, not an interrogation. Interviews allow you to showcase your talents, interests, curiosities, and personality to a welcoming and receptive audience. It is just as much an opportunity for you to ask probing questions as it is for them. For a list of sample interview questions, see Appendix A.

## ***Interview Etiquette***

Though admission interviews are rarely formal events, there are still guidelines you should follow to demonstrate a level of seriousness and maturity in an interview setting:

- **Prepare.** You will almost certainly be asked why you are interested in the school at which you're interviewing, and providing a detailed, authentic, and specific answer requires prior research. Do not go into an interview setting having only just learned about a school, make sure you can answer the "why this college?" question ahead of time. This is one of the many areas in which your extensive research will come in handy!
- **Be on time.** Whether your interview is in-person or virtual, be sure to leave plenty of time to be punctual. For virtual interviews, try to find a quiet place where you won't be interrupted or distracted.
- **Turn off your cell phone and any digital devices to avoid interruptions.** If you're interviewing virtually, be sure to mute pop-ups or notifications.
- **Dress appropriately.** You do not have to dress formally, but presentability is important. If you are interviewing virtually, make sure your background is appropriate.
- **Answer questions completely and thoroughly.** It is okay to ask for a moment to collect your thoughts after a question has been posed if needed. Don't be afraid to admit you don't know something. Avoid a simple 'yes' or 'no' response—the interviewer shouldn't be working harder than you to gather information.
- **Lead with kindness.** Show appreciation to those supporting you, from the receptionist to your family to the interviewer.
- **Be proud.** Interviews are an opportunity to highlight your strengths and skills. This may take practice if you're not used to talking about yourself, especially in a praiseworthy way. Be mindful of boastfulness though, and avoid comparisons to other students. This interview is about you, no one else.

- **Don't be scripted.** It is encouraged and beneficial to practice and prepare for an interview by talking through your potential answers to commonly asked questions. However, your answers should not sound scripted or robotic in the actual interview—that means they're not experiencing your genuine personality. If you are interviewing virtually, do not have your answers to questions written out next to you off camera. It will be very obvious to your interviewer if you are reading from a prepared script.
- **Ask questions.** Have a few questions ready for your interviewer, as this is an opportunity for you to learn as well. Coming with no prepared question may unintentionally send the message that you are not that invested in their school. When possible, leverage the expertise of your interviewer's experience—if they attend or attended the college, ask them about their experiences, their pros and cons, and what they wish they'd known.
- **Say thank you,** both at the end of the interview and in a follow-up thank you email.

It is worth noting the admissions interview is designed for the prospective applicant. Parents, guardians, or other family members should not expect to sit in or be a part of the interview process, whether in person or virtual, and insisting on doing so could be to the detriment to the student's application. There is often an opportunity for parents and guardians to ask questions after the interview has been conducted.

## Asking Thoughtful Questions During Visits and Interviews

An important piece of advice to remember when asking questions during a campus tour, information session, interview, college fair, etc., is to prepare ahead of time and really consider what information you are seeking. In these venues, there is such a thing as a good and bad question, and much of how it is categorized has to do with the thought and intention behind it. In general, avoid the following types of questions:

- **Questions that can be answered on the website.** If you're genuinely wondering about the student-to-faculty ratio, average class size, or whether or not a college has a Biology major, that is all information that can be easily found through a few minutes of research online. These are not valuable or helpful questions to ask in a structured visit setting, as they demonstrate to the recipient that you haven't done your due diligence or do not care to.



- **Questions too broad for a succinct answer.** With questions like this, sometimes it takes a simple reframe to remind yourself of the information you're really seeking. Instead of asking "how is your psychology program?" (what admissions counselor will ever say, "it's bad, thanks for asking!") think about what specifically you're curious about learning about in their psychology program. Do you want to know about hands-on, practical opportunities in the department? Try "when can undergraduates start conducting research with a professor?" or "what internships have psychology students had in the past?" instead. Even if your admissions counselor or interviewer doesn't know the answer, the specificity of those questions make it far easier for them to follow up with you once they've tracked down the answer.
- **Questions focused on rankings or other flawed methodologies.** Inquiring as to why a college isn't ranked more highly or isn't as seemingly prestigious as others reveals a level of superficiality or materialism that most admissions counselors aren't interested in engaging with.
- **Questions comparing institutions.** Similar to questions about rankings, asking admissions representatives to compare themselves to their peer schools or other schools in the same geographic area is uncomfortable and rarely necessary. Oftentimes, you can determine which schools might be a better fit for you without tasking your admissions counselor with that work. Admissions counselors respect their colleagues at peer institutions and know that every school has something unique and important to offer; it's not their job to minimize another school in favor of their own.

## Demonstrated Interest

In addition to the core factors of an application review process (to be covered in Chapter 7) some colleges use what is called "demonstrated interest" as another evaluative factor in their review processes. Depending on the college, demonstrated interest could have no impact or a substantial impact on an applicant's ultimate admission decision, so it is important for prospective students to be informed about demonstrated interest and who tracks it. It's worth noting, however, that no amount of demonstrated interest can guarantee an acceptance or outweigh an academic record that does not meet a given school's admission criteria.

### ***What is demonstrated interest?***

Demonstrated interest refers to the practice of colleges and universities tracking how much an applicant has officially engaged with their school. For schools that rely on demonstrated interest as an evaluative metric, they believe that a prospective student who has engaged with them at a higher level will be more likely to enroll if admitted. In other words, high engagement sometimes means a higher likelihood of being admitted, since colleges ideally want to admit students who will ultimately enroll (also known as yielding). Colleges that track demonstrated interest may be wary of applicants whose first-ever engagement with the college is the submission of their application. Even if every other facet of your application is appealing, if you've never engaged with the institution despite many opportunities to do so, they may wonder if you'd ever actually enroll.

### ***How do I know if a college tracks demonstrated interest?***

It depends on the college or university! Some colleges are explicit on their admissions websites that demonstrated interest plays a role in their review process, while others are not as transparent or forthcoming. It is absolutely appropriate to ask admissions counselors if their school tracks demonstrated interest if you cannot easily find the answer yourself. There are also websites that keep lists on which colleges track it and how important it is, but it is also important to double check if you're reading from a reliable, updated source. Typically, larger institutions and more selective institutions do not track demonstrated interest, but that is not a universal rule.

### ***How do I demonstrate interest?***

Demonstrating interest is often a natural byproduct of doing intentional and deep research—you may already be doing it without realizing. It should not be treated as simply a box to check. The following are examples of productive and purposeful ways to demonstrate your interest while also receiving valuable information and insights in the process:

- **Join the mailing list:** Every time you enter your contact and demographic information into a form for a college or university, that interaction is logged in their system. Typically, the first way students get information from colleges is by signing up for their mailing list, which gives you access to all of their email and print content for prospective students, and, as a byproduct, is one of the first ways to officially demonstrate interest.

- **Attend an official, live visit or event:** Unlike pre-recorded content, live information sessions or Q&As (whether in person or online) require you to sign up to attend. If you visit a college’s table at a college fair or go to their session when they visit your high school, you will typically be asked to fill out a contact card. If you are unable to attend a visit at your school or in your area because of a conflict, let your admissions counselor know about the conflict and that you wish you could be there. Showing up or logging in to these events is a way to demonstrate interest.
- **Interview:** When offered, interviews are a solid demonstration of interest, especially when they are optional. This shows you are going above and beyond the minimum admissions requirements and have a high level of investment in that institution.
- **Read and engage with email content:** Believe it or not, admissions offices can not only track whether or not you’ve opened their emails, but also if you’ve engaged with the content within the email. Did you click on any of the provided links? Watch any of the included videos? They’ll know. So, if you’re archiving or deleting all of their messages, that may have the unintended consequence of signaling a lack of interest to their admission office.
- **“Why Us?” Essays:** Many colleges will ask you to write an essay on why you’re interested in their school. The specificity, care, and intentionality that goes into your response is, for colleges that track it, an important demonstration of interest. Have you gone beyond surface-level criteria and articulated what specifically about that school makes it a good fit for you and you for it? As stated before, if you can’t execute an effective answer to this question, you either need to research more deeply or consider eliminating the school from your list.
- **Optional Essays:** Some colleges offer the opportunity to write optional essays as a part of your application. You can still submit the application without completing them, but think of the message it sends to them if you bypass that opportunity. To them, it may be interpreted as you not being invested enough to take the time to write the essay, and therefore not invested enough to eventually enroll. In general, optional is rarely ever authentically optional when it comes to college admissions, with the exception of standardized testing (more to come on that in Chapter 5).

- **Apply Early:** When colleges offer early admission plans, whether it's Early Action, Early Decision, Rolling, or any combination thereof, some state that applying earlier in the process improves your chances of being admitted. This is another example of demonstrated interest. For many colleges that offer a binding Early Decision plan, applying with the explicit, stated intent to enroll if admitted is the ultimate display of demonstrated interest. Since many families may need to weigh and compare financial aid packages, Early Decision should never be used as a means to demonstrate interest alone, but rather as a thoughtful result of conversations with your family and counselor.
- **Contacting your admissions counselor:** Intentional communication with your admissions counselor can also fall under the demonstrated umbrella. Keep in mind, this is not an invitation or encouragement to contact your admissions counselor regularly just for the sake of demonstrating your interest—that can actually be detrimental to your process at some schools. Rather, if you have specific questions that haven't been answered through your research process and other engagement opportunities, reaching out to your admissions counselor is a solid next step. These emails should be thoughtful and purposeful, not just emailing for the sake of checking a box. If a college isn't visiting your high school or is your first choice but they don't have an Early Decision option, those might be circumstances in which it's appropriate to reach out as well if they do track demonstrated interest.

### ***What should not be considered demonstrated interest?***

Moderation is a good approach to demonstrated interest. Purposeful and authentic engagement is what admissions offices are looking for. Just because admissions offices may track your interactions with them does not mean that you need to sign up for every engagement opportunity they offer. You do not need to email your admissions counselor daily, nor do you need to ask to interview a second time because you're excited about the school. You do not need to wait in line for 45 minutes at a college fair just to let the admissions rep know you're interested. Again, if you're approaching the research process thoroughly and responsibly and discerning whether a college meets your particular criteria, you will demonstrate an appropriate amount of interest. Don't overthink it and, if you have questions, ask your school counselor how best to approach this part of the process.

# 4

## Chapter 4: National College Fairs

The National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC) is a nonprofit organization of more than 26,000 professionals from around the world dedicated to serving students as they make choices about pursuing postsecondary education.

Many NACAC services are geared toward school counselors and admission officers and help students indirectly. But one service—the National College Fairs program—is offered annually to directly benefit students.

Each year, NACAC sponsors National College Fairs in cities throughout the country.

***Fairs provide high school students, parents, and adult-learners with free access to information about college programs, financial aid, admission requirements, tests, campus life and much more.***

Admission representatives from hundreds of colleges and universities are at each fair to provide information about their respective institutions and programs. NACAC National College Fairs are open to the public and free of charge.

Registering is easy. Follow this three-step process:

1. Submit your name and answer a few short questions at [nacacattend.org/fairs](http://nacacattend.org/fairs). You can also add registration information for any family members who plan to attend.
2. After submitting the online form, a barcode identification will be created. This can be printed or displayed on your smartphone.
3. Once at the fair, college representatives will scan your barcode to access information about you, including your expected major and graduation date.

NACAC fairs also include an exciting feature called MatchMaking. At the time of registration, students will select the attributes that are most important to them in a college. They will then receive an email that best matches them to colleges and universities based on the criteria they provide. They will reference this email on the day of the fair to connect with their best matches! Students should be sure to register early to take advantage of this great feature.

In addition to the National College Fairs, a high school or community may have a college night program, or a state/regional affiliate of NACAC may sponsor a regional college fair.

Before attending any type of college fair, do some homework:

- Establish criteria for choosing the colleges you wish to visit at the fair. Think about majors, the size of the colleges, and their locations.
- Meet with your school counselor and use your criteria to decide which colleges represented at the fair best fit your needs. If you can't meet with your school counselor before the fair, there are qualified counselors available for consultation at every NACAC National College Fair.
- Research the colleges on your list and brainstorm questions to ask their representatives. Be organized. Pack a notebook so you can jot down the answers to your questions. Grab a locator guide as soon as you arrive and take a few minutes to determine the booth locations of the colleges on your list. Form a plan that will allow you to meet with all the representatives on your list. If you haven't yet composed a list of prospective schools, make the fair's counseling center your first stop.

The National College Fairs are for you, so take advantage of them! Don't be afraid to ask questions.

In addition to providing a chance to receive information about specific colleges, National College Fairs offer many other services.

- Visit the college advising center to have college admission questions answered by local school counselors.
- Find information on gap year, summer and veteran programs.
- Attend a workshop covering college admission topics, such as financial aid and crafting a college essay.

## Performing and Visual Arts College Fairs

NACAC also sponsors Performing and Visual Arts College Fairs—free events for college and high school students interested in pursuing undergraduate and graduate programs in the areas of music, visual arts, dance, theater, graphic design, and other related disciplines.

To attend a Performing and Visual Arts College Fair, visit [nacacattend.org/fairs](http://nacacattend.org/fairs) and follow the registration steps listed earlier in this chapter for National College Fairs.

At the Performing and Visual Arts College Fairs, students can discuss admission requirements, financial aid, portfolios, audition and entrance requirements, and more with representatives from colleges, universities, conservatories, festivals, and other educational institutions with specialized arts programs.

Visit [nationalcollegefairs.org](http://nationalcollegefairs.org) to learn more about the National College Fairs and the Performing and Visual Arts National College Fairs, including dates, locations, directions, and exhibiting universities.

## STEM College and Career Fairs

STEM College and Career Fairs are another NACAC offering, providing students interested in science, technology, engineering, and math an opportunity to gather college and career information. And like all NACAC fairs, the events are free and open to the public.

To attend a STEM College and Career Fair, visit [nacacattend.org/fairs](http://nacacattend.org/fairs) and follow the registration steps listed earlier in this chapter for the National College Fairs.

At the fairs, students meet with industry and college officials to learn about STEM-related degrees, scholarships, internships, mentoring initiatives, after-school/summer programs, or other STEM activities.

Visit [nacacfairs.org](http://nacacfairs.org) to learn more about all of NACAC's National College Fairs, including dates, locations, directions, and exhibiting universities.

# 5

## Chapter 5: Standardized Testing

Standardized testing in college admission is just one of many factors that make up an applicant's overall file. Once a mainstay of the college admission landscape, admissions testing requirements and philosophies have shifted dramatically in the last two decades, accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic and the limitations it put on access to testing opportunities. While a small subset of colleges or university systems still require the submission of the SAT or the ACT for admissions consideration, the vast majority of higher education institutions in the United States have made testing optional or wholly eliminated it as a factor in their review process. While testing can be an additional, quantitative data point in a student's application file, it is worth underscoring that the bulk of quantitative weight and emphasis in most review processes is put on a student's high school academic transcript and the rigor of their program of study. At most institutions, test scores alone do not exclude a student from admission, nor do scores alone guarantee admission. If submitted, they are but one piece of a much larger and nuanced application file.

**Standardized testing in college admission is just one of many factors that make up an applicant's overall file.**

The two main college admissions standardized testing companies in the United States are **The College Board** and **ACT, Inc.** They oversee a wide range of standardized testing options as well as other services, such as scholarship search engines, test preparation, and more.



## Types of Standardized Tests

**Preliminary SAT 10 (PSAT10):** A practice test designed to expose sophomores to the structure, pace, and content of the SAT. Individual high schools make the determination of whether to administer the PSAT10.

**Preliminary SAT/National Merit Scholarship Qualifying Test (PSAT/NMSQT):** A practice test designed to expose juniors to the structure, pace, and content of the SAT. It is also used by the National Merit Scholarship Corporation (NMSC) in the selection of top scholars. The test is divided into two categories: evidence-based reading/writing and math. The evidence-based reading/writing section includes both a reading test and a writing and language test. The math section focuses on three areas: problem solving and data analysis, algebra, and advanced math. The minimum score to receive national recognition varies from year to year. PSAT scores are not used by colleges as admission criteria.

**SAT:** Originally, SAT was an acronym for the Scholastic Aptitude Test. Now known simply as the SAT, this test is usually taken by juniors and seniors interested in including standardized testing in their application file. A multiple-choice examination designed to test a student's college readiness, the SAT is divided into two sections: evidence-based reading and writing and math, each worth a maximum of 800 points for a total possible composite score of 1600. SAT exams are typically offered in March, May, June, August, October, November, and December. Registration information and study materials from the College Board are often available in high school counseling offices and online at [sat.collegeboard.org](http://sat.collegeboard.org).

**PreACT:** A practice test designed to expose sophomores to the structure, pace, and content of the ACT test. The PreACT provides a predicted ACT score and offers insight into a student's academic and career-planning needs. Individual high schools make the determination of whether to administer the PreACT. PreACT scores are not used by colleges as admission criteria.

**ACT:** The ACT, originally an abbreviation of American College Testing, is usually taken by juniors and seniors interested in including standardized testing in their application file. The test includes four curriculum-based tests in English, mathematics, reading, and science. Each section is scored on a 36-point scale; the four tests are then averaged to provide a composite score out of 36. The ACT also has an optional writing component. ACT exams are typically offered in February, April, June, July, September, October, and December. Registration information and study materials from the ACT are often available in high school counseling offices and online at [act.org](http://act.org).

**Advanced Placement (AP) Exams:** The Advanced Placement program, created by the College Board, offers college-level courses and curricula for high school students if their school adopts the program. Each Advanced Placement course culminates in a standardized, cumulative Advanced Placement exam in May, which is scored on a scale of 1-5. Some colleges provide college-level credit, or the ability to place out of introductory courses, for students who score within a certain range on Advanced Placement exams. Each college sets their own criteria of which, if any, AP scores qualify for college-level credit. Unlike the SAT and ACT, AP exam scores often do not carry significant weight in the admissions review process. Their benefit is typically relegated to receiving college-level credit once you enroll. However, it is worth inquiring with your colleges of interest if AP exams play a role in the initial review process and, if so, how large of a role they play.

Some high schools that do not offer AP courses provide the opportunity for their students to take AP exams in May after self-studying or enrolling in similar rigorous courses, though this is not a universal policy. Check with your counselor if your high school does not offer AP courses but you are interested in taking an AP exam.

**International Baccalaureate's (IB) Diploma Programme (DP):** This is an academically challenging course of study that culminates in final examinations to prepare students for college. The program is a comprehensive two-year international curriculum that generally allows students to fulfill the requirements of their national or state education systems. The program focuses on six subject groups (studies in language and literature, language acquisition, individuals and societies, science, math, and the arts). Students take written examinations at the end of the program. Scores for each course range from 1 to 7. Diplomas are awarded to students who earn at least 24 points. Some colleges provide college-level credit, or the ability to “place out” of introductory courses, for students who score within a certain range on their IB exams. Each college sets their own criteria of which, if any, IB scores qualify for college-level credit.

**College Level Examination Program (CLEP):** The CLEP is designed primarily for college applicants who have not been in school for some time, but who may have acquired considerable knowledge through a job or life experience. The CLEP follows a format similar to AP exams. It is advised to check admissions websites to determine if CLEP exam credit is accepted.

**English Language Proficiency Tests:** English language proficiency tests, including the TOEFL, IELTS, and Duolingo English Test, are designed for students for whom English is not a native language. For more information on English Language Proficiency Tests and requirements, see Chapter 14.

## Testing Policies and Terminology

**Testing Required:** Colleges that require standardized testing expect applicants to submit their results from the SAT and/or the ACT for their application to be reviewed. Both tests are weighted equally in the admissions process; one is not preferred or advantageous over another. In these cases, standardized testing will remain just one of numerous factors that go into rendering a final admissions decision.

**Test-Optional:** Colleges with a test-optional policy allow the applicant to decide whether or not they want standardized testing to be a part of their application file. Optional truly means optional in these circumstances, meaning the absence of testing will not negatively impact an applicant's review process. Instead, the quantitative portion of the review process will be entirely focused on a student's high school transcript and the rigor of their curriculum. It is important to check individual admissions websites and review their policies to see if there are exceptions to test-optional policies, sometimes including students who are applying for scholarship opportunities, students who have been home-schooled, students seeking admission into accelerated BS/MD or BS/DDS programs, international applicants, and more.

If you have taken the SAT or the ACT and are wondering if your scores should be submitted to a test-optional institution, the general guidance provided is that if your scores fall toward the upper end or exceed a college's published middle 50% range of testing, your scores may be a positive addition to your application. If they fall on the low end or below the published middle 50% range, then you should take advantage of their test-optional policy and not submit them. Since each applicant's circumstances are unique and nuanced, you should always discuss whether to submit your scores with your high school counselor.

**Test-Flexible:** Some institutions that either require testing or are test-optional allow for the submission of testing beyond the SAT or ACT to fulfill that requirement. The tests eligible for submission will depend on the institution, but examples include submitting AP Exam scores, International Baccalaureate (IB) Higher Level Exam results, A-Level results, and more. Be sure to check individual admissions websites to determine which types of standardized testing are acceptable.

**Test-Free:** Test-free institutions do not accept or factor standardized testing results into their admissions process at all. These institutions believe there is ample information included in the application process to make an informed decision on an application without the inclusion of standardized testing.

**Testing Fee Waivers:** It costs \$60 to register for the SAT or the ACT without the optional writing section. It costs \$85 to register for the ACT with Writing. Both the College Board and ACT, Inc. provide fee waivers for eligible students through high school counseling offices. You can find the eligibility requirements on [collegeboard.org](http://collegeboard.org) and [act.org](http://act.org).

**Superscore:** Superscoring is the practice of combining a student's highest section scores from multiple test dates to create a superscore. An example of superscoring is included below:

Test Date	EBRW Score	Math Score	Composite Score
March SAT	620	640	1240
October SAT	680	580	1260
Superscore	680	640	1320

**Score Choice:** Provided by both the SAT and the ACT, Score Choice allows students to submit standardized testing from individual test dates, instead of their entire testing record. For example, if you take the SAT three times and your best superscore comes from the combination of only two test dates, you can opt to only submit those two test results instead of all three. You cannot, however, choose individual sub-sections from a given test date to send. It is important to check individual admissions websites, as some colleges require or recommend that students submit their entire testing history.

**Testing Accommodations:** For students with documented learning differences, you may be able to receive accommodations on the SAT or ACT. It is important to review the College Board and/or ACT website to determine what documentation is required in order to be considered for testing accommodations and any associated submission deadlines. Discuss with your high school counselor whether the accommodations request process occurs through your school or if you are responsible for submitting the request yourself. Receiving accommodations through your high school does not guarantee approval for accommodations on the College Board or ACT exams.

## Standardized Testing Timeline

**Freshman Year:** There is no standardized testing required or recommended for 9th grade students.

**Sophomore Year:** Many students' first exposure to college admissions testing is taking the PSAT and/or the PreACT at their high school as a sophomore. For those where that is not an option and may want exposure to the tests on a practice basis, there are both online and hard-copy practice test booklets available for purchase. It is not typically recommended for sophomores to take an official SAT or ACT and you should consult with your high school counselor if that is being considered.

**Junior Year:** Most high school students will take the PSAT/NMSQT in the fall of their junior year. After that, most students do not begin official college admissions testing until the spring of their junior year—most typically March, April, May, or June. When possible, resist any pressure to take multiple rounds of official standardized testing during the spring of your junior year; there will be an opportunity for you to test again in your senior year if you so desire. With so many colleges adopting test-optional or test-free models, an increasing number of students are also opting to forgo standardized testing completely, focusing their college lists on institutions with that built-in flexibility. If you are considering this path, discuss this with your high school counselor and check admissions websites for their specific policies.

**Senior Year:** Some students choose to take the SAT or ACT again or for the first time during the fall of senior year. Tests are typically offered in August, September, October, November, and December, depending on which exam you'd prefer to take. As a senior, it is important to be mindful of your application deadlines and align your testing schedule accordingly, as some institutions will not accept test scores after their admissions deadline.

## A Note on Standardized Test Preparation and Tutors

Both the College Board and ACT, Inc. offer free test preparation resources on their websites through Khan Academy and MyACT, respectively. Test preparation books are also a low cost way to prepare and gain exposure to the format and pace of each test.

Some students and families may be curious about receiving more comprehensive, individualized support in preparing for or improving their score on the SAT and/or ACT, usually in the form of private or group tutoring sessions. If you are interested in pursuing tutoring, there are a couple of factors to keep in mind:

- **Ensure reputability:** With a seemingly endless, and growing, list of test preparation companies across the U.S. and world, it's critical that you do your due diligence in ensuring that a company is ethical and reputable. Search their website for information on how regularly and comprehensively their tutors are trained, their methodology and approach to teaching and counseling students, how you are matched with a particular tutor, and more. Avoid companies that make promises or guarantees about score increases or their ability to help get you in to certain schools, that are openly dismissive of test-optional policies, try to sell you on services you don't need, or generally appear like they are withholding information about their services or employees. Remember, receiving an education at a highly selective university does not automatically make someone a competent tutor. You may want to consider perusing NACAC's member directory to identify organizations that have been vetted by the association.
- **Ask about sliding scale or need-based discounts:** Tutoring for the SAT and/or ACT can be an expensive endeavor. When researching test preparation companies, make sure they are being transparent with their pricing and, if the information isn't readily available, ask if they offer sliding scale or need-based discounts if their services are unaffordable for your family.

Because your high school record is the single most important part of your admission folder, don't forget that strong grades in demanding courses are more important than standardized test scores. It is counterproductive to spend so much time trying to improve your ACT or SAT score that your grades and involvement in school suffer as a result.

# 6

## Chapter 6: The Parts of an Application File

When you submit an application to a college, an electronic application file is created under your name, which becomes home to the application itself and all other supporting documentation. The main part of an applicant's file is based on quantitative data, while other parts provide important qualitative factors about your time in high school. The key to success in building your application file is to research the specific requirements laid out by your colleges of interest. Most institutions are very explicit about what they want and what they don't want as a part of your application—this is your opportunity to demonstrate that you know how to understand and follow directions.

**Application:** The application itself is the foundation of your admission file. It usually includes basic biographical and demographic information, such as your birthday, address, race and/or ethnicity, educational background, information about your family and more. Depending on which application(s) you fill out, there may be additional sections for you to complete, which are included below.

**Academic Record:** Your curriculum, courses, and grades are the foundation of your admissions review. While there are many nuanced factors that often go into rendering a final admissions decision, the primary question admissions counselors must answer is whether or not an applicant will be able to be academically successful at their institution. If they cannot answer that question affirmatively, the other components of an application cannot compensate for a transcript that does not meet an individual institution's academic standards. Each admissions office will have their own criteria and expectations when it comes to academic performance in high school, including grades and the level of rigor a student pursued.

- **Transcript:** Regardless of a college's admission policy, the most important factor in an applicant's file is their academic record in secondary school, also called a transcript. This will include all courses you've completed and the associated grade and amount of credit you earned in the course (if your high school issues grades).

Most high schools will calculate a grade point average (GPA) on a given scale (4.0, 5.0, 100, etc.), which provides a cumulative statistical summary of your academic performance and is updated any time official grades are issued and added to your transcript. Additionally, some high schools may provide both a weighted and unweighted GPA, with the weighted GPA providing extra points toward the average for grades earned in rigorous courses, such as honors, AP, accelerated, IB, and more. When high schools do not calculate grades or a GPA, they often provide admissions offices with narrative feedback from each of your teachers to contextualize your performance in their class. Some high schools may also provide a class rank, which assigns the students in a graduating class a numerical order based on academic achievement, though many schools have moved away from this practice.

- **Trends & Trajectory:** In general, colleges prefer a steady rate of performance over inconsistent spurts of academic performance; but if the entire record cannot consistently be at your best possible level of performance, the next thing is to show steady improvement from year to year, otherwise known as an upward trend. While typically all four years of high school factor into your review process, most admissions offices view your courses and grades from junior and senior (when available) year as most indicative of your potential success at their institution, since classes become more challenging as you move through high school. When you apply and what decision plans you choose will dictate whether an admissions office will see any official grades from your senior year. For more information about application plans and deadlines, refer to Chapter 7.
- **Curricular Rigor:** Some institutions may simply require students to meet a minimum GPA requirement to be admitted, while more selective institutions may have higher and more extensive academic expectations of applicants. The more selective (competitive) a college is from an admissions perspective, the more likely they are to expect that you have both pursued and succeeded in a high level of rigor in your academic program. How rigor is defined depends on what types of courses and curricula your high school offers. If, for example, your high school offers an Advanced Placement program, more selective colleges will likely want to see that you've challenged yourself beyond the standard curriculum



and enrolled in AP courses. The same is true for students with access to honors-level classes, International Baccalaureate programs, high school-designed advanced study programs, and more. Your level of rigor will only be reviewed in the context of what you have access to at your high school; you will not be penalized or disadvantaged for not enrolling in classes that don't exist at your high school. The important thing to remember is that enrolling in rigorous classes is counterproductive if you are not able to keep up and be successful. This is why it is necessary for all students to find the appropriate academic balance that suits their individual needs and supports their success.

- **School Profile & Report:** Most colleges require high school counselors to submit a School Report and School Profile alongside every student's application. These documents provide important information and context about your high school, including curricular offerings, special programs or tracks, the size of your graduating class, and sometimes GPA and standardized testing distributions. It is up to the discretion of the high school what is and is not included on these forms. The ultimate purpose of them is to ensure admissions counselors are informed on what your high school offers academically and extracurricularly and a broad profile of the current senior class.

Academic success alone does not guarantee or ensure admission into more selective colleges, as they often have more qualified applicants than they do space in the admitted class. Those colleges have more flexibility to rely on the other, qualitative factors (included below) of the application when choosing which applicants to admit.

**It is worth noting that the vast majority of colleges and universities in the U.S. accept the majority of their applicants and do not have extensive or prohibitive expectations when it comes to course rigor or grades.**

The attention that is given to the most highly selective institutions in the U.S. can easily warp your perspective into thinking that being admitted is a herculean feat at every college, when the truth is quite the opposite. In fact, NACAC's research shows that universities across the US have become less selective over the course of the last decade. The focus on prestige, rankings, and perceived reputation can often leave students feeling discouraged and as though they don't have any path to higher education. Whatever your grades and level of rigor in your academic program, there are more than likely hundreds of colleges ready and willing to welcome you to their admitted class. As much as you can, try not to buy into the idea that prestigious = better, since rankings and name recognition tell us next to nothing about how fulfilled, happy, and supported any individual student would be at a given institution.

**Essays:** Most colleges and universities, though not all, will also require you to submit written reflections that provide the admission committee with a larger window into your life—also known as college essays. Essays are the main opportunity in the application process for your voice, values, and personality as an applicant to truly be on display. While essays also allow colleges to assess your writing abilities, their primary purpose is to tell the admission committee something in depth about you and what you care about that isn't captured in another part of the application. Admission essays come in two main forms: The Personal Statement and College-Specific Supplements.

- **The Personal Statement:** When people refer to the college essay, this is the writing piece they're talking about—the Personal Statement. This is a general, longer-form essay about you; it should not be tailored to specific colleges. Unlike the academic writing you may be used to, this essay is written in the first person ("I" statements are okay!) and is less formal in nature. There is no necessity for a thesis statement or supporting evidence paragraphs—this isn't a traditional five paragraph essay. While you should always still proofread carefully, the structure, flow, and tone are much more personal and casual, while still maintaining appropriateness. You have the flexibility and freedom to write about any topic of your choosing, so long as the final product tells the admissions committee something about you, what you care about or value, how you spend your time, a meaningful experience you've had, how you've contributed to the communities you belong to, etc.

Some applications will provide you with a series of prompts to choose from, which may be helpful in brainstorming workable topics. Choose a topic or approach that feels genuinely meaningful to you. Your topic should always be focused and specific. Avoid the temptation to talk about every activity or experience you've had in high school in your Personal Statement. It should not serve as a narrative resumé. Rather, it provides you an opportunity to write in-depth about a specific topic or experience of significance to you.

The strongest personal statements are ones written from a place of authenticity, in your own voice. Instead of asking yourself "*what does that admissions committee want to hear?*", ask instead "*when they finish reading my application, what do I want them to know about me?*" Remember, colleges want to admit you, not someone you're trying to be or an identity you're trying to project.

- **College-Specific Supplements:** In addition to the general Personal Statement, some colleges may ask you to write essay responses to prompts of their choosing, which are called supplements. These prompts can change from year to year, are unique to each college, and allow colleges to ask more targeted questions to gain insight into specific aspects of you that they care about. These essays are typically shorter than the Personal Statement, around 100-350 words a piece, but that does not mean they should be taken any less seriously or given any less effort than the Personal Statement. It can be tempting to rush through these prompts given their smaller word limit, but admissions counselors are paying attention to the time and care you put into these. Remember, these are the questions that colleges have deemed important enough to add to their applications—if they’re important enough for the college to ask, they’re definitely important enough for you to answer thoroughly, sincerely, and effortfully.

Supplement prompts can take a variety of forms, some more straightforward and some more creative. As discussed in Chapter 2, many colleges will choose to ask some version of “*Why This College?*”, which will charge you with providing a thoughtful, personal, and specific articulation of why you think that college is a good fit for you and vice versa. This is an example of a supplement where your initial research will really come in handy. Avoid talking about the general criteria that may have initially put the college on your radar—size, location, weather, reputation, etc., as those are likely unifying draws for all applicants. Refer back to the notes you’ve taken throughout your research process and pull out those unique, specific tidbits and examples about the college that really resonated with you. That will make for a stronger, more memorable essay, as opposed to run-of-the-mill, boilerplate responses. This essay should be so specific and tailored to the individual school that it can’t be recycled from college to college. As referenced in Chapter 3, for the colleges that track demonstrated interest, a “*Why This College?*” is a key opportunity for them to assess your level of interest.

Other common supplement prompts may ask you to expand on your academic area of interest or one of your extracurriculars, to discuss a meaningful or significant part of your identity, or to reflect on how you have contributed to your community. Additionally, colleges may have required essay questions for special programs, such as an Honors College, to which an applicant can apply directly.

Some colleges take a more creative route with their supplement prompts. Some examples include:

- *If you could teach a college course on a topic of your choice, what would you choose and what would be included on the required reading list?*
- *Is there a particular song, poem, novel, or other work of art that you find particularly inspiring?*
- *If you could work on a social cause or movement that is important to you and impacting your community, what cause would you choose and how would you address it?*
- *Share a food dish that has helped to inform and shape your identity.*
- *You're presented with a block of marble and asked to create something that tells the viewer something important about you—what do you carve?*
- *What songs should your admissions counselor listen to while reviewing your application? or In the movie of your life, what song is playing when the credits roll?*

What is important to remember with creative supplemental prompts is that there is rarely ever a “right” or “wrong” answer to these questions, as long as your contribution is appropriate. The purpose of these types of questions is to get a better sense of your personality by allowing you to be creative. As with all things in this process, authenticity is key here. If they ask what you've been enjoying reading lately, don't say *Beowulf* if you've never read it (or have and didn't enjoy it) just because you think it might sound impressive. Admissions counselors know they are reading applications submitted by high school students, so they are expecting answers that are typical of a high school student's experience.

**Extracurricular Involvement:** In addition to your academic record and essays, your involvement in activities can be a significant supporting credential in this process. Most applications will give you the opportunity to provide a snapshot of your extracurricular involvement in high school with a brief description of your role and responsibilities. This can include membership in clubs and organizations, athletics, fine and performing arts, part-time employment, community service and engagement, familial responsibilities, hobbies, and more.

While it can be tempting to think that more is better when it comes to activities, in reality most colleges are looking for depth and intentionality in your activities, not breadth. Consistent, sustained involvement in activities that you genuinely care about is what you'll hear most admissions counselors recommend. An extensive list of activities in which you were sparsely involved will not read as more impressive. Just like your essays, your activities list should not be built around what you think admissions offices want to see, but rather should be a genuine reflection of your interests and values.

On the application itself, activities should be listed in order from most meaningful and/or time consuming to least. In other words, the activities that take up most of your time and/or are most reflective of your interests should go at the top of the list and you can work your way down from there. Be as specific as possible with your descriptions in the limited space you're provided. Another common misconception is that you need to have been the president/leader/founder/captain of every activity in order to be admitted to college. While genuine, demonstrative leadership is certainly valuable, there are always ways to build and display strong leadership skills without holding a formal title. Avoid the inauthenticity and disingenuousness of seeking out leadership positions solely for the sake of your college applications. Again, consistency and sustained commitment to your real interests allows your high school experience to be defined by meaning and purpose, not by potential college outcomes.

When considering activities to add to your list, remember to think outside the box. Many students may not have the flexibility or resources to join organizations or activities with extensive time commitments or costly membership fees. That is why the definition of "activity" is quite broad in this context. It can include a part-time job, extensive family responsibilities like babysitting or caring for an elderly relative, cooking meals, household chores, etc. If you spend most of your time pursuing your interests in an unstructured setting, that counts as well. When in doubt, consult with your high school counselor.

**Letters of Recommendation:** Many colleges will require you to submit a certain number of letters of recommendation to support your application. What is most important is to follow the explicit directions provided by individual colleges on what type and how many letters of recommendations they accept. This is another area where more isn't always better; exceeding or ignoring their directions can be counterproductive in your review process.

These letters typically come in five forms, included below:

- **Counselor/School Recommendation:** Most colleges will require a letter of recommendation or statement of support from your school-based counselor. You can think of the counselor letter of recommendation as a floodlight. The purpose is for your counselor to provide a broad narrative of your academic, extracurricular, and social-emotional experience throughout high school. Counselor letters are also often used to provide context to any part of your application that may need further explanation. For example, if you missed a few weeks of school due to illness or you had a loss in your family and your grades dropped slightly as a result, your counselor can provide that explanation in their letter so admissions counselors understand the broader circumstances in which you were learning at that time. Admission officers are aware that a school counselor may not always have the capacity to write a lengthy letter on a student's behalf. This is another area where you as an applicant will not be penalized based on what's available at your specific school.
- **Teacher Recommendations:** Many colleges will request 1-2 letters of recommendation from your classroom teachers. Unlike the floodlight counselor recommendation, teacher recommendations serve as a spotlight on you in an academic setting. Your teachers will speak to your presence and contributions in the classroom, work ethic, time management, ability to collaborate with your peers, and more. Generally speaking, it is recommended that your teacher recommendations come from junior year teachers, as they have taught you most recently for a complete school year prior to the application process, so can speak most relevantly to your current academic strengths and areas for growth. Some colleges may specifically request one letter from a STEM teacher and one from a Humanities, Social Studies, or World Language teacher in order to get the most well-rounded view of you as a student.
- **Creative Recommendations:** For students applying to fine, visual, or performing arts programs, you may be required to provide an additional creative recommendation from a teacher or mentor in your designated field of study. These recommendations will focus largely on your talents and potential within that specific creative realm.
- **Outside Recommendations:** Some colleges also accept additional, outside recommendations in addition to counselor and teacher letters of recommendations. Outside recommendations typically come from mentors or other significant adults in your life, such as a coach, religious leader, boss, supervisor, etc. The most important thing to

remember with outside recommendations is that the writer should actually know you well. That may seem obvious, but there is sometimes a temptation to have an alumnus or other well-connected person to a specific university write a letter on your behalf. Again, this is only helpful if that person has a longstanding relationship with you. If you are meeting them for the first time to discuss them writing you a letter, that's a good indication that said letter will likely not have any measurable positive impact on your application. Be thorough about reviewing directions from colleges about outside recommendations and whether or not they accept them in the first place.

- **Peer Recommendations:** Though far less common than the letter types listed above, a handful of colleges will ask you to have a peer (a friend or classmate, not family member) submit a recommendation on your behalf as well. Specific instructions typically accompany these requested recommendation letters.

**Test Scores (if applicable):** Most colleges in the U.S. have made the submission of the SAT and/or ACT optional. If submitted, the SAT and/or ACT are an additional quantitative factor on top of your academic record for admissions counselors to consider alongside the rest of your application. For more information about standardized testing policies and terminology, see Chapter 5.

It is worth noting that test-optional and test-free policies typically do not apply to English language proficiency testing requirements. For more information on English language proficiency testing, see Chapter 14.

If you are submitting standardized testing, it is your responsibility as the applicant to determine how each college on your list wants to receive your scores. Some colleges require that you send your testing officially via your College Board or ACT account, which comes with an associated fee unless you have qualified for a fee waiver. Others may accept self-reported test scores, which can often be included on your application or uploaded into your application portal after you apply at no additional cost. Check the admissions websites for each college to determine whether they require official score reports or will accept self-reported scores.

**Self-Reported Academic Record (SRAR) (if applicable):** An SRAR (or SSAR if you're in Florida) is exactly what it sounds like—a form that requires students to self-report their courses and grades from high school. Some colleges require you to complete an SRAR in addition to having your counselor send an official transcript. If the SRAR is required, your application will not be reviewed unless you complete it, so it is important to be aware of which schools on your list, if any, require it.

**Interview (if applicable):** Some colleges offer evaluative interviews either on an optional, recommended, or required basis. Like your admissions essays, interviews provide the admissions office an opportunity to get to know you, your personality, your interests, and your values better on a personal level. In most circumstances, it is advised to take advantage of interview opportunities when offered, even if they are listed as optional or recommended but not required. Discuss these options with your counselor if you are unsure. For the colleges that track demonstrated interest, an interview is a key opportunity for you to demonstrate interest. For more information about demonstrated interest and interviews, see Chapter 3.

**Creative Portfolios, Prescreens, and Auditions (if applicable):** For fine, visual, and performing arts applicants, you may be asked to submit a creative portfolio or participate in a prescreen and/or audition process as a part of your review. Not all colleges require the submission of a supplemental portfolio, but those that do often have extensive and specific guidelines and expectations for you to follow. It is important to identify portfolio and/or audition requirements early in your research process, since these requirements are often time consuming and demanding. If a college does not require a portfolio submission, be sure to check their website to see if they will accept one as an optional submission. If they explicitly state that they do not accept these types of submissions, do not send them.

**Additional Information (if applicable):** Some applications have an optional writing section usually titled Additional Information. Unlike the Personal Statement and supplements, the purpose of Additional Information is to provide necessary or illuminating context to your application. Not dissimilar to the function of the counselor letter of recommendation, this allows you to inform the admissions committee of any disruptions or challenges that may have impacted your high school experience. Even if your grades did not suffer as a result of said circumstances, providing them with this information can be helpful as they evaluate your application. This can include physical or mental health struggles, family or social issues, learning differences, family relocations, and more. This section should not be used for a second Personal Statement. Consult with your counselor if you are considering including anything in the Additional Information section.



## Who Submits What In The Application Process?

There are two main sources who submit the components of an application file to colleges and universities: you, the applicant, and your school-based counselor.

Who Submits What?		
Application Component	Student/ Applicant	Counselor
Application (including essays, activities list, and additional information)	✓	
Transcript		✓
School Report & Profile		✓
Letters of Recommendation		✓
Standardized Testing	✓	
Financial Aid Applications	✓	
Creative Portfolios/Auditions	✓	

While not every college will require or accept each piece listed above, you can see that admissions offices are asking for components that give them as well-rounded and comprehensive a view of you as a student and community member as possible. A broad overview of how application files are actually reviewed is included in Chapter 7.

## Types of College Applications

**The Common Application:** An online application platform that allows a student to fill out one standardized (common) application form and submit it to more than one college. Over 900 colleges and universities accept the Common Application. When applying with the Common Application, students will fill out the core, standardized portion of the application, which is sent to every college to which you apply through the platform. Additionally, specific colleges are able to add custom Member Questions and Writing Supplements, which will require you to provide more information on your academic and extracurricular areas of interest and, for some colleges, additional supplemental essay questions. You can learn more and create an account at [commonapp.org](http://commonapp.org).

**The Coalition Application:** Similar to the Common Application, the Coalition Application allows a student to fill out one application form and submit it to more than one college. The application platform is a service of the Coalition of Access, Affordability, and Success, which also offers a set of free online college planning tools that help students learn about and prepare for college. More than 150 colleges accept the Coalition Application, some of which also accept the Common Application. You can learn more and create an account at [coalitionforcollegeaccess.org](http://coalitionforcollegeaccess.org).

**School/System-Specific Applications:** Some colleges or larger university systems, such as the California and Texas public colleges, have created their own applications. For some, such as the state of California, Georgetown University, and Massachusetts Institute of Technology, this is the only way in which you can apply. For others, they may offer their own application in addition to accepting the Common and/or Coalition application. For colleges that accept applications from multiple sources, there is typically not an advantage or benefit to choosing one over another, but it is also worth checking the school's admission website to confirm if they have a preference. Some colleges may incentivize the use of their specific application by waiving application fees or providing an accelerated review process.



**Some colleges may incentivize the use of their specific application by waiving application fees or providing an accelerated review process.**

# 7

## Chapter 7: Application Decision Plans, Review Process, and Possible Outcomes

As you enter your senior year, the information gathering and list building are nearly finished. You've ideally compiled a manageable list of colleges that reflect your unique criteria and strike an appropriate balance between Challenge, Possible, and Likely schools. Every college on your list should be one that you'd be happy to attend if it is the only school to which you were admitted. Approaching your college list with this mentality will ensure intentionality and thoughtfulness.

Now begins the last and most crucial stage of the process: completing and submitting applications. Throughout the fall of your senior year, as you are completing the required steps of the application process, you may still be visiting colleges and sitting for interviews. Colleges will also be sending representatives to your high school to talk with you and other prospective students. All of these events occur during a fast-paced period of three or four months while you are still balancing your academics, extracurriculars, social life, and other responsibilities.

Organization is more important than ever during the fall of your senior year. Be diligent about keeping track of varying admission requirements, deadlines, events, visits, test dates, and other priorities. Some students find it helpful to have a calendar devoted to their college admissions process so that all of their important dates can be found in one place.

The following pages contain information on the timeline and terminology to know when you begin to submit your applications.

**Be diligent about keeping track of varying admission requirements, deadlines, events, visits, test dates, and other priorities.**

## A Note on Application Fees

Many colleges charge a flat fee to submit your application for review. These fees typically range anywhere from \$35–\$120 per application, and are sometimes higher for international applicants. These costs can quickly add up as you consider applying to multiple colleges. High school counseling offices, colleges, and NACAC (via the *NACAC Request for Application Fee Waiver Form*) all offer processes to assist with application fee waivers if the fees would be financially burdensome to you and your family. Check in with your counselor about your eligibility and the best course of action for qualifying for application fee waivers.

## Application Decision Plans

Now that you have a solid idea of *where* you're planning to apply and the components you need to complete in your application, the next step is to figure out when you're going to apply by selecting the application decision plan that makes most sense for your goals and workflow. Each college determines which decision plans and subsequent deadlines they want to offer, and those policies can shift and change from year to year. Below are the most common decision plans you'll encounter during the application process:

**Open Admission:** Some colleges do not practice selective admission and offer admission to virtually all students who apply.

**Rolling Admission (RA):** Applications are reviewed as they are submitted and admissions offices render and release decisions throughout the admission cycle. Typically, with rolling applications, the earlier you apply, the earlier you hear back. Some institutions may have a final cut-off deadline late in the spring or summer, but many institutions keep rolling admissions open and available until they have filled their incoming first-year class, sometimes up until the start date of the term for which you are applying.

**Early Action (EA):** Students apply by an earlier deadline—usually in November or early December—to receive a decision in advance of the college's Regular Decision notification date. Decisions for Early Action applications are usually released between December–February. Given the common deadlines, most Early Action applications will only include your grades from freshman, sophomore, and junior year. There are some exceptions where colleges may ask for mid-term or mid-semester grades from senior year with an Early Action application. If admitted under an Early Action plan, you will typically have until May 1 to make your final enrollment decision.

**Restrictive/Single Choice Early Action (REA):** Similar to Early Action, REA applicants apply by an earlier deadline—usually in November—to receive an admission decision in advance of the Regular Decision notification date. In addition to the earlier deadline, REA applications come with specific regulations and restrictions the applicant must abide by. The most common restrictions prohibit students from submitting either a) any Early Decision applications, b) any other Early Action applications, or c) both a and b. Given the application deadline, most Restrictive Early Action applications will only include your grades from freshman, sophomore, and junior year. There are some exceptions where colleges may ask for mid-term or mid-semester grades from senior year with an REA application. Very few colleges use REA plans and you should always consult their individual websites to confirm what their specific restrictions are. If admitted under a Restrictive Early Action plan, you will typically have until May 1 to make your final enrollment decision.

**Priority Admission:** Students submit their application by an earlier deadline—usually November or December—in order to be considered and prioritized for scholarship opportunities or admission to special academic programs, such as Honors Colleges. If admitted under a Priority Admission plan, you will typically have until May 1 to make your final enrollment decision.

**Early Decision (ED):** ED is a **binding** admission plan that requires you to commit to a first-choice college at the time of application and, if admitted, you agree to enroll and withdraw your other college applications. You, the student, a parent or guardian, and your high school counselor are all required to sign an Early Decision Agreement as confirmation that you understand the binding, restrictive nature of this decision plan and that you commit to the Agreement's components.

Colleges may offer ED I and II options with different deadlines. Most ED I deadlines fall in November and applicants will receive their decision by mid-to-late December, while most ED II deadlines fall in January and applicants will receive their decision by the end of February. You may only have one active Early Decision application at a time. If admitted under an Early Decision plan, your deadline to officially enroll will be approximately two to four weeks after you receive your acceptance letter.

Given the common deadlines, Early Decision I applications may only include your grades from freshman, sophomore, and junior year. It is more common for colleges to ask for mid-term or mid-semester grades from senior year with an Early Decision I application.

As stated in Chapter 3, given the binding commitment it requires, applying Early Decision is essentially the ultimate demonstration of interest for those schools that track it, and can sometimes (not always) come with an advantage as a result. That being said, you should not apply Early Decision for the potential advantage alone. **An Early Decision application should be the result of a thorough research process and thoughtful conversations with your family and counselor where you have determined that this particular school is indeed your first choice and that you are comfortable not being able to compare other offers of admission or financial aid packages.** If you are uncomfortable with a binding commitment, it is important to your family to be able to weigh different offers and financial aid packages, or you just simply don't have a clear first choice, Early Decision may not be the appropriate decision plan for you.

**Regular Decision (RD):** Students submit their applications by a specified deadline—usually in January or February—and are typically notified of their decision by the end of March or in early April. If admitted under a Regular Decision plan, you will typically have until May 1 to make your final enrollment decision.

## How Applications are Reviewed and Decisions Are Made

As with most facets of the college admission process, there is not one set way that applications are reviewed and final decisions are made; those processes are unique to each individual college and university. Even so, there are some unifying themes when it comes to application review to be aware of as you begin submitting yours.

As mentioned in Chapter 6, some colleges and universities have explicit GPA and/or standardized testing (if required) thresholds that, if met, you will be admitted. These colleges may not require essays, extracurricular lists, or letters of recommendations; their review process is entirely quantitative. This is most common at large public universities that admit the majority of their applicants.

Conversely, colleges that are more selective in their application process often employ a practice called **holistic admissions review**. Holistic review tasks admission counselors with considering the whole student when reviewing applications. In a holistic admission process, decisions are not made solely based on grades and testing, rather, all of the qualitative factors mentioned previously, including essays, extracurriculars, interviews, letters of recommendations, etc., are considered as an admission decision

is weighed. Remember, college admissions offices are hoping to admit a class of vibrant and diverse students, and a holistic approach allows them to see and consider students beyond just the numbers and statistics associated with their application. If you are considering applying to selective colleges that have more qualified applicants than they do space in their admitted class, your application could be strong, compelling, and meet all of the college's criteria and you still may not be admitted.

There may also be different admissions standards and levels of competition for individual schools or programs within one university, in which case your application will be considered alongside others for the same college (i.e. business, engineering, arts & sciences, nursing, etc.). For example, it may be less competitive applying as a potential history major as it would be as a potential computer science or engineering major.

An additional factor that often plays a role in the admission review process include **institutional priorities**, which are goals and benchmarks typically set out by the university President, Board of Trustees, and other senior university administrators. The admission office is then tasked with meeting these goals as they determine who to admit from the current applicant pool. Institutional priorities are programmatic and strategic visions as the college identifies areas for growth in the coming years. Examples of institutional priorities could include increased enrollment in a certain major or academic discipline, increased racial, ethnic, gender, socioeconomic, or geographic diversity, development and fundraising, athletic recruitment, legacy considerations, and more. Though they are first and foremost institutions of higher learning, colleges are also functioning businesses, meaning that part of the admission process for most colleges is securing the necessary tuition revenue to ensure the continued financial health and stability of the institution.

## While You Wait...

The waiting period between when you submit your application and when you receive your admission decisions can sometimes feel endless. The good news is, there are tangible steps you can take while you wait to ensure your review process is as streamlined and smooth as possible.

**Application Portals:** After you submit your application, nearly every college will send you directions on how to set up your online application portal. These portals are specific and unique to each college to which you apply, and will serve as your homebase for the remainder of the admissions and enrollment process.

Admissions portals nearly always include a live checklist of which required materials the college has and has not received. It is crucially important to be patient with both your high school counselor and admissions offices during busy times of the process, especially around major application deadlines. It can sometimes take up to three weeks for required materials submitted by your counselor to be electronically linked to your application file in the admissions office. If items on your checklist are marked as missing, take a deep breath, ensure that you have followed the necessary steps laid out by your counselor to inform them you've submitted an application, and exercise patience. Chances are, the documents have been submitted and are enqueued to be linked to your file. If you are at all concerned, reach out to your counselor, but always from a place of respect and assuming best intentions. At most institutions, as long as the application itself is submitted by the posted deadline, supporting documents can trickle in after the deadline date, though always check the admissions website to confirm.

It is important to be diligent about regularly checking your email and application portals throughout this waiting period. These are the two primary ways colleges will communicate with you if they are missing anything from your application or need additional information from you. They will also typically post your actual admission decision on your application portal, and notify you via email when that happens. Building strong email etiquette as a high school student will only prepare you better for your college experience, where email remains the primary form of contact between you and your professors and administrators. Colleges will rarely communicate with your parents or guardians—since you are the applicant, you are the primary contact.

**Stay Focused:** Just because you have submitted your applications does not mean you get to check out for the rest of your senior year. All college acceptances are conditional on your continued academic performance, meaning they expect you to stay focused and keep your grades as consistent as possible. The college at which you enroll will receive a final high school transcript including your senior grades from spring. All colleges reserve the right to rescind your admission if your academic performance declines significantly. You have agency over whether or not that happens.



## Possible Application Decisions and Outcomes

After submitting your applications and navigating the subsequent waiting period, you'll begin to receive the results—or admission decisions—of your applications. When you hear back will depend on the decision plan which you chose to apply under. Listed below are the possible admission decision outcomes you may receive. Make sure to update your counselor and other supporters with every decision you receive.

**Admit:** Congratulations! This is the news every applicant hopes for. Students admitted in the Rolling, Early Action, Restrictive Early Action, Priority, and Regular Decision rounds will not be required to make a final decision on enrollment until at least May 1.

**Defer:** If you applied Early Action, Restrictive Early Action, or Early Decision I and/or II, it is possible your application could be deferred. Unlike students who have been denied, deferred applicants receive another round of review during the Regular Decision round. Deferrals are usually an indication that the admissions office wants more information from an applicant before rendering a final decision, typically in the form of official senior grades from your first term or semester, which were not available during the early round of review. Always follow the explicit directions provided by the college as a deferred applicant, as you may need to opt-in to being moved to the Regular Decision pool and/or be asked to submit a statement of continued interest or additional application updates and materials. Let your counselor know of your deferral as soon as possible so they know to send your senior year grades.

Early Decision applicants who are deferred to Regular Decision are no longer bound by the Early Decision Agreement, meaning that if you are admitted after being deferred, you are no longer required to attend that institution and can weigh your other options before making a final decision. Additionally, if you are deferred as an Early Decision I applicant, you are free to apply Early Decision II to a different college.

Some colleges offer deferred Early Action applicants the opportunity to switch their application plan to Early Decision II. This should only be done if the college is truly your first choice and you have followed the guidance listed above under the Early Decision description.

**Deny:** This means your application process is over at that particular college or university. Most colleges and universities do not accept admission decision appeals, and those that do typically only do so if there was a tangible, clerical error made on behalf of the college, rather than a philosophical disagreement about the outcome itself.

In some cases, you may be disappointed, but don't let a college's admission decision have a negative impact on your life. There are a lot of colleges and many paths leading to the same objective. The important thing is to set goals and work toward them. If you are denied admission, don't take it personally or feel you've failed. Take a deep breath and turn your attention to the other options available.

**Waitlist:** A waitlist offer is a maybe, not an acceptance. By placing a student on the waitlist, an institution does not initially offer or deny admission, but extends to a candidate the possibility of admission in the future, prior to the conclusion of the institution's admission cycle. Waitlisted students are typically given the option of opting in or out of the waitlist. If interested in remaining on the waitlist, follow the specific instructions provided by the college. It is essential to understand that if you choose to remain on any waitlists, you should also submit an enrollment deposit at a college to which you were already admitted by May 1, as most colleges will not know if or how they will use their waitlist until after the May 1 deadline. For more information on admissions waitlists, see Chapter 10.

**Spring/Special Program Admit:** Some colleges may offer you admission to the spring term instead of the traditional fall start term. Usually it is not possible to appeal to start in the fall if you've received spring admission. Some colleges that offer spring admission may also provide you the opportunity to study in a special program, sometimes earning college credit, during the fall term prior to officially enrolling. These programs are often destination experiences abroad or in different cities throughout the United States and may or may not be directly affiliated with the university in which you intend to enroll in spring.

**Guaranteed Transfer Admission:** Some colleges may also offer you a guaranteed transfer pathway to their institution. This decision is essentially a denial for the term for which you applied, but gives you the opportunity to enroll elsewhere, meet a minimum GPA and credit requirement, and be guaranteed admission as a transfer student typically after your freshman year.

**Conditional Admission:** These are acceptances that come with certain conditions you have to meet in order to fully enroll as a degree-seeking student. Conditions may include participating in a specific summer or school-year program to improve English language, writing, or math skills, taking specific remedial courses, or simply sending your final senior year grades for confirmation that you successfully completed the year.

## Timeline of the Application Submission and Review Process

With the above information in mind, included below is a general timeline for the application submission, review, and decision process. Since each college has the agency to set their own deadlines and release dates, this timeline is not representative or exhaustive of every college in the U.S., but rather a broad overview that captures the majority of institutions' approaches.

**August:** Most application platforms update and open for the rising senior class.

**October:** The two main financial aid applications—the FAFSA and CSS Profile—open for the current application cycle.

**November:** Early application deadlines fall most commonly on November 1 or 15.

**December:** Admission results from all Early Decision applications and many Early Action and Priority applications are released.

**January–February:** Most Regular Decision and Early Decision II application deadlines fall in January through early February, most commonly on January 1, 5, and 15.

Admission and results from remaining Early Action and Priority applications and Early Decision II applications are typically released from mid-January through late February.

**March:** Admissions results from nearly all Regular Decision applications are released throughout March, by April 1 at the latest.

**April:** Most colleges will host on- and off-campus programming for their admitted students.

**May:** May 1 (or the first weekday in May) is typically the deadline to confirm your enrollment at your college of choice, otherwise known as the **National Candidates Reply Date**. Many colleges will require a monetary deposit alongside your confirmation of enrollment.



# 8

## Chapter 8: Financial Aid for College

### An Introduction

As college costs continue to rise in the U.S., the conversation around financial aid is as important as ever. With the cost of attendance at many institutions surpassing \$80,000 for one academic year, it is critical that you and your family are open and honest about what is affordable and informed early on on how to access different forms of financial support and aid. The cost of college is a source of stress or overwhelm for many students and families, and the process for applying for financial aid can be confusing and cumbersome in and of itself. All the more reason to make cost and affordability a built-in part of your initial research process so you are as informed as possible when it comes time to apply. Though discussing family finances may seem uncomfortable, it is far better to go into the application process knowing what is affordable for your family, rather than being surprised or disappointed after you've already received your admission results.

Most colleges have generous and robust financial aid budgets that aggressively cut down costs for families in need of support. Sticker price alone should not be a deterrent to whether you choose to apply to a certain school or not. Rather, use the resources available from the college, the federal government, and your high school counselor to assist you in determining whether you may receive an aid package that would make that institution realistic and affordable for you and your family. There are certainly circumstances that a university with a much higher sticker price than another comes out to similar or better affordability after financial aid is factored in. The student and parents/guardians are responsible for paying what they can; financial aid is intended to supplement such efforts, not substitute for them. Financing a higher education can be thought of as a partnership among the family, the federal and state governments, and the college or university.

The most expensive schools often also have the most aid to give. During the application process, it is a good strategy to add colleges to your list with a range of costs, including some that are within your reach financially. Since colleges are not obligated to provide financial aid to all accepted students (though most want to and do), it is crucial to have colleges on your list that are within your reach without substantial aid. It's just as important to find a good financial fit as it is to find a good academic and social fit.

It is only after you are admitted that the financial aid staff will review your aid application and make its decision. A favorable admission decision will not guarantee you financial aid. This chapter deals with financial aid as an aspect of the admission process. Before making any decisions about college selection, read this chapter and talk to your counselor, who has access to the latest and most complete information about financial aid programs. The U.S. Department of Education's College Affordability and Transparency Center is also a helpful resource when exploring financial aid and affordability: [collegecost.ed.gov](http://collegecost.ed.gov)

## Types of Financial Aid

Generally speaking, there are two main forms of financial aid: need-based financial aid and non-need-based financial aid (also known as merit aid).

**Need-Based Financial Aid:** This type of financial support is provided to families who, as a result of submitting the required financial aid applications and supporting forms, have demonstrated a level of financial need that requires support to meet the total cost of attendance. Academics, testing, or extracurricular accolades have no bearing on whether you qualify for need-based financial aid or how much aid you receive. Need-based financial aid packages usually include monies from the federal government and the institution itself. At public colleges they may also include monies from the state government for residents. Need-based aid can come in the following forms:

- **Grants:** a form of aid that does not need to be repaid and can be offered by the federal and/or state government and the institution.
- **Loans:** a form of aid that allows students to borrow money for the cost of their college education that eventually must be paid back, usually with interest. Loans can be offered by the federal and state government, the college itself, or can be borrowed from banks and private lenders. Accepting or taking out loans is a significant commitment, so it's important to fully understand the components

and conditions set out by the lender. Generally speaking, federal loans will have the best and fixed interest rates and are more beneficial than loans from private lenders. It is rare to receive a financial aid package that doesn't include loans. It is up to the student to decide whether or not they want to accept any loans offered to them.

**Non-Need Based Financial Aid/Merit Aid:** This type of financial support is typically available to every admitted student at colleges and universities that offer these kinds of programs, regardless of financial need. Sometimes referred to as merit scholarships, these awards are distributed by the college or university at their discretion and schools have their own unique methodology for determining eligibility. This means you may qualify for merit aid at some schools and not others. Since they are merit-based in nature, most of these scholarships are awarded based on academic or extracurricular achievement and may have GPA requirements in order to maintain your eligibility. Usually, students are automatically considered for this type of aid by virtue of submitting an admissions application; they usually do not require a separate application of their own. There are, however, notable exceptions of colleges that do require an application, essays, or both in order to receive merit aid consideration. Always check the admissions website to determine whether or not the college offers merit aid and, if so, how an applicant can be considered. Merit aid is also sometimes referred to as a tuition discount, and can be used as an incentivisation strategy by colleges to attract talented students to their school. Not every college offers merit aid; some direct their financial aid budget exclusively to need-based support. The more selective an institution is, the less likely they are to offer merit aid.

## The Terminology of Financial Aid

**FAFSA:** Every student must complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) if they want to be considered for need-based financial aid. The FAFSA is created and overseen by the U.S. Department of Education. This is the only financial aid application required by many colleges, and should be filed as soon as possible after it becomes available on Oct. 1 of your senior year. Both students and parents/guardians have their own component of the FAFSA to complete. You do not need to wait to submit financial aid applications until you have submitted your admissions applications, they can and usually should be submitted ahead of time. As the name says, this application is free to complete, so do not be misled by websites that attempt to charge you to complete the FAFSA! Get started and create an account at [fafsa.gov](http://fafsa.gov).

**Federal Methodology (FM):** Created and set by the federal government, FM is the procedure that colleges that only require the FAFSA use to determine a student and family's financial need. FM uses a variety of information collected from the FAFSA to determine need, including family size, number of children enrolled in college, income and assets of both parents/legal guardians and the student, and the age of the older parent. Colleges can use FM to award available federal, state, and institutional monies.

**Student Aid Index (SAI):** The factors listed under Federal Methodology, that are included in the FAFSA, determine a family's Student Aid Index, or SAI (formerly known as Estimated Family Contribution or EFC). The SAI is a monetary amount that represents a family's approximate financial resources to contribute toward the student's college costs for a single academic year. The SAI is a fixed number that does not change, even if costs differ from college to college.

**CSS Profile:** The College Scholarship Service (CSS) PROFILE application, which is offered through the College Board, is an additional financial aid application required by around 300 mostly private colleges in the United States. At colleges where the CSS Profile is required, you and your family will submit *both* the FAFSA and the CSS Profile for financial aid consideration. The CSS Profile can provide colleges with a more detailed and comprehensive view of your family's finances than the FAFSA alone. There is a fee for this form, but fee waivers are available through school counseling and college financial aid offices.

**Institutional Methodology (IM):** The IM is used in combination with FM by colleges that also require the CSS Profile to award institutional-specific grants and scholarships. Since the CSS Profile captures additional financial information about the family on top of the information provided by the FAFSA, IM allows colleges more flexibility and ownership over how to allocate aid and can tweak the IM formula to their and the students' individual needs. Based on the information included in IM, colleges may adjust the SAI provided by the FAFSA as they prepare your financial aid package.

**Demonstrated Need:** Simply put, you can calculate your demonstrated need by subtracting your SAI from the college's Cost of Attendance (COA). Financial aid packages are then built toward providing support for as much of that demonstrated need as is possible for the college. Some colleges commit to meeting 100% of a family's demonstrated need in their financial aid package. A fewer number of schools commit to meeting 100% of need without including loans in the package.

$$\text{COA} - \text{SAI} = \text{Demonstrated Need}$$

**Financial Aid Package/Award:** This is the culmination of the financial aid application process and provides a comprehensive overview of the financial support for which you have qualified. Financial aid packages are unique to each college and university. Financial aid packages usually include a combination of federal aid, sometimes state aid, and institutional aid.

**Gapping:** When a student's financial aid package does not meet 100% of their demonstrated need, meaning there is a gap in support that the student and family are responsible for filling on top of the original determined contribution provided by the SAI. For example, if a student's demonstrated need is \$25,000, but the financial aid package only provides \$20,000 in aid, the family would be responsible for paying the gap of \$5,000 in addition to the amount determined by the Student Aid Index.

**Net Price Calculator:** All accredited colleges and universities in the United States are federally mandated to provide Net Price Calculators on their financial aid websites. These calculators are not perfect tools, but do provide families with a general estimate of potential aid at that particular institution. You can search for individual colleges' Net Price Calculators by using the U.S. Department of Education's search tool: [collegecost.ed.gov/net-price](http://collegecost.ed.gov/net-price).

## Federal Student Aid Programs

Eligibility for federal student aid programs—except the PLUS loan and unsubsidized Stafford Loan—is primarily based on financial need. Families demonstrate need for federal student aid by completing and filing the FAFSA. You can get an early estimate of your Federal Student Aid by using the Federal Student Aid Estimator at [studentaid.gov/aid-estimator/](http://studentaid.gov/aid-estimator/) or the Department of Education's NetPrice Calculator at [nces.ed.gov/ipeds/netpricecalculator](http://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/netpricecalculator).

**Federal Pell Grant:** The largest source of free money for college from the federal government, Pell Grants, are awarded to undergraduate students who demonstrate a high level of financial need. To be considered, the student must file the FAFSA. The award varies annually, according to the level of federal funding. For the 2022–23 filing year, the maximum award was \$6,895.

**Federal Supplemental Educational Opportunity Grant (FSEOG):** A federal campus-based grant awarded to students with exceptional financial need at participating schools. Filing the FAFSA is all that is needed, and students who qualify for a Pell Grant will be given priority consideration. The grants range from \$100 to \$4,000 per year.



**Federal Work-Study (FWS):** A form of self-help aid, this program provides part-time jobs for students with financial need. Jobs are usually available on- and off-campus, and are typically listed through the school's financial aid office. In a federal work-study position you will earn, at minimum, the federal minimum wage and usually work between 10-15 hours per week.

**Federal Direct Subsidized Loan:** awarded to undergraduate students with demonstrated financial need. The U.S. government covers the cost of the loan's interest while you are enrolled more than half-time and for the first six months after you complete your undergraduate degree.

**Federal Direct Unsubsidized Loan:** awarded to undergraduate students regardless of financial need. You are responsible for covering the cost of the loan's interest from the start of its disbursement.

**Federal Direct PLUS Loan:** awarded to parents of dependent undergraduate students to support higher education costs not covered by other financial aid. Eligibility is not based on financial need, but a credit check is required. PLUS loans allow parents to borrow up to the total cost of attendance, less any other aid the student receives. These loans are unsubsidized, so the parent is responsible for paying the interest.

## Institutional Aid Programs

**Institutional Scholarships and Grants:** Non-federal gift aid programs administered by the college. Institutional grants are generally based on financial need. Institutional scholarships are often awarded based on particular abilities or skills in areas such as athletics, music, or academics, also referred to as merit scholarships. These scholarships are often renewable each school year, usually contingent on the student's continued engagement in the activity that prompted the award, or, in the case of academic achievement, maintenance of a certain GPA.

**Institutional Loans:** Non-federal loan programs administered by the college. These loans usually bear low-interest rates and have favorable repayment terms. In many cases, loan payments are deferred while the student is enrolled in school. Colleges have individual application requirements for institutional loans. Applicants should contact the college to learn the types of loans that are available, qualifying criteria, terms, and conditions. Note that institutional loans offered by for-profit institutions do not have low-interest rates or favorable terms.

**Institutional Student Employment:** On- or off-campus employment programs, similar to the Federal Work-Study program. These positions may be awarded based on financial need, the student's job qualifications, or a combination of the two. In some cases, these positions may be related to the student's field of study. Contact the financial aid office to learn what types of student employment are available through the school

## State Aid Programs

Various states have financial aid programs for their residents. To determine the programs available to you, consult your school counseling office or visit the website of your state's education department.

## Private Aid Sources

**Private Scholarships:** Non-federal scholarships that originate outside of the college, and generally require students to file a separate application. Although academic standing or financial need may be conditions for some private scholarships, funds may also be awarded based on field of study, religious affiliation, racial or ethnic background, leadership skills, place of residence, skills and talents, or other criteria. Because these scholarships are funded by private sources, the criteria can reflect whatever qualities their benefactors wish to reward or encourage. High schools, churches, local businesses, and civic service organizations frequently have scholarship programs. Be sure to be an informed and vigilant consumer and make sure the sources you're using are reputable; unfortunately, there are many scholarship scams out there that seek to take advantage of students and their families. Generally speaking, you should avoid anything that requires you to pay to submit an application for a scholarship. It is also worth noting that you should not rely on outside, private scholarships alone to cover the entire cost of your college education. In addition to many private online search engines, The U.S. Department of Labor provides its own scholarship search engine here: [careeronestop.org/toolkit/training/find-scholarships.aspx](http://careeronestop.org/toolkit/training/find-scholarships.aspx).

**Private Loans:** Private loans originate outside of the college and federal government and usually require a separate application. They can help pay for college if families come up short after exhausting all other sources of financial aid. Private loans usually carry a higher interest rate than federal loans, and they may not have as favorable of repayment terms.

## Applying for Financial Aid

Now that you have a working background in the terminology, types of financial aid, and associated applications, it's time to actually apply! Both the FAFSA and the CSS Profile applications open to current high school seniors and their families on October 1 each year.

The instructions that accompany the FAFSA and CSS Profile are very explicit. Read these directions carefully. Follow them step by step, and begin early enough to allow for some inevitable delays as you seek answers to your questions. Be thorough and organized.

**Deadlines:** It's important to be just as aware of financial aid deadlines as you are of your admission deadlines. Again, financial aid applications can be submitted prior to admission applications, you do not have to wait. Though financial aid is not first-come, first-served, it is beneficial to submit your FAFSA (and CSS Profile if required) as early as possible in case colleges have follow-up questions or require you to go through a verification process. Your aid package may be impacted if you miss the published deadline.

**Required Forms:** In order to successfully complete financial aid applications, you will need copies of certain forms to provide accurate financial information. Many financial aid offices require a copy of the federal income tax forms filed by the family and/or student to confirm FAFSA data. If there are significant differences between the tax return data and the data on the FAFSA, your original financial aid offer may be revised.

***Applying for financial aid can seem complex and confusing, but the reward of an education is too great not to give the process a chance.***

Help is available. Your high school counselor can answer questions. Additionally, just as there are admissions counselors to support you in that portion of the application process, financial aid offices have specific counselors as well to provide assistance. Finally, you can contact the Federal Student Aid Information Center for help via phone (1-800-433-3243) or visit [studentaid.gov](http://studentaid.gov) to have your questions answered via chat or email. Think of your college education as an investment that will repay its cost to you many times over during your lifetime.

## How Does Financial Aid Impact Admissions?

While it is common for admissions and financial aid offices to be separate entities, they work closely and in collaboration with one another. If and how your demonstrated need may impact your admission decision is entirely dependent on the individual college, their financial budget, and their institutional priorities in a given application cycle. Colleges typically adopt one of the two following policies when considering the impact of financial aid on admissions:

**Need-Aware/Conscious Institutions:** Colleges that may consider financial need in their admissions decisions in order to meet budgetary goals. This does not mean that you are automatically disadvantaged at these colleges if you apply for financial aid; remember, most applicants do! Most colleges in the U.S. are need aware on some level, because most do not have unlimited financial aid budgets. To that end, some colleges are able to use their need-aware policies to ensure they meet 100% of all admitted applicants' demonstrated need. However, not all need-aware colleges meet 100% of demonstrated need. It is important to check admissions and financial aid websites to determine a college's policy.

**Need-Blind Institutions:** Colleges that do not consider an applicant's financial need when making admissions decisions. It is important to note that need-blind institutions are not guaranteed to meet 100% of your demonstrated need, and if they do, are not guaranteed to meet it without packaging you with loans. It is worth noting that need-blind institutions may be need-aware specifically for international applicants.

## Advice for Undocumented Students

Undocumented students, including Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) recipients, are not eligible for any federal financial aid programs. However, undocumented students, including DACA recipients, may be eligible for state, institutional, and private sources of aid, including in-state tuition rates in certain states.

DACA recipients with a Social Security Number are able and eligible to complete the FAFSA. Keep in mind, completing the FAFSA does not provide DACA recipients with access to federal financial aid. Rather, it provides them with the opportunity to receive a Student Aid Report that can be used by institutions to grant state and institutional financial aid. If you are not a DACA recipient, or you are and do not have a Social Security Number, you will not be able to complete and submit the FAFSA.

If you live in a state that provides financial aid to undocumented students, regardless of their DACA status, there may be an application instead of the FAFSA for you to complete that will give you access to state financial aid resources. Currently, these states include California, Washington, Texas, Oklahoma, and New Mexico. It is important to note that, whether you are completing the FAFSA or a state-specific financial aid application, your parents do not need to be citizens in order for you to apply for financial aid.

Private college and universities may also have designated financial aid fund for undocumented applicants. In order to be eligible, you may need to complete the CSS Profile or a school-specific financial aid application. For more information about financial aid opportunities for undocumented students, consult with your high school counselor, check the policies at the colleges to which you plan to apply, and review your state's educational resources and policies.

## Advice for International Students

For information on applying to U.S. colleges as an international applicant, including information on financial aid, please see Chapter 14.

## Student Debt

Many students and their families use loans to help cover college costs, but before agreeing to any loan terms, consider your potential for debt. Have a conversation with your family about the cost of higher education at the beginning of your college search to ease stress and frustration later in the process.

A commonly cited rule of thumb is to not borrow more than your expected starting salary after graduation. The average debt in 2019–2020 for graduates who borrowed money for college was around \$26,000 at public, four-year colleges and around \$34,000 at private, nonprofit colleges, according to data compiled by the College Board.

Federal loans are always a safer alternative to private loans, but any loan requires a careful eye and an understanding of financial limitations.

Check with your high school's counseling office for further information about financial aid, including loans. Consider attending one of NACAC's National College Fairs to learn more about college costs (see Chapter 4 for registration details). Many of the fairs include workshops offering unbiased information about student borrowing.

Other helpful sources of information on this topic include:

- Federal Student Aid Office: [studentaid.ed.gov](http://studentaid.ed.gov)
- The Institute for College Access & Success: [ticas.org](http://ticas.org)
- FinAid: The SmartStudent Guide to Financial Aid: [finaid.org](http://finaid.org).



# 9

## Chapter 9: Choosing and Enrolling in a College

The waiting period is over! You have submitted your applications, diligently stayed on top of your email and portals, and received your admissions results from all of the colleges to which you applied—congratulations! Take a deep breath and pat yourself on the back for successfully navigating the most challenging and overwhelming part of this journey. Now that you have your admission decisions and financial aid packages in hand, the ball is officially in your court. At this stage, instead of hoping colleges will see value in your application, colleges are hoping you see enough value in them to enroll. These pages will include information on your next steps in making a final enrollment decision.

Trust your instincts and return to the list of criteria that you put together throughout your search. Which school of the options you have meets that criteria most closely? You may have attended admitted student programming either on campus or in your local area that helped you narrow down your options as well. It can be helpful to chat with current students about their experience if you are having difficulty making a final decision. Do not be afraid to ask the admissions office to connect you to resources like students, professors, and support offices on campus if you have questions that will help you determine your decision.

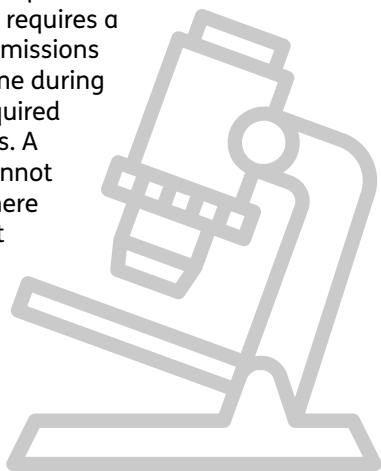
**Confirming Enrollment:** When you're ready to officially enroll, you will likely be required to complete a form via your application portal confirming your enrollment. This often comes with the requirement of submitting an enrollment deposit as well. The money (also known as an admission deposit, commitment deposit, or commitment fee) is usually applied to your tuition charges for the upcoming academic year. Colleges that are members of the National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC) allow accepted applicants the opportunity to learn the decisions of all colleges they have applied to before requiring deposits, provided that all decisions are made before May 1. The student, in turn, is obligated to submit a tuition deposit to only one college before the required deadline (typically May 1).

**Colleges view dual or multiple deposits by students as serious violations of trust. They may revoke a previous offer of admission from any student who is found to have sent tuition deposits to more than one college.**

**Withdraw Other Acceptances:** Once you have officially enrolled, notify the other colleges to which you were admitted that you have decided not to enroll. If done in advance of May 1, this practice gives colleges the opportunity to more quickly assess if they will use their waitlist and in what capacity.

**Stay on Top of Enrollment Requirements:** After enrollment, be diligent about continuing to check your application portal or whatever system is available to enrolled students. Throughout May and June you will likely be asked to complete a series of tasks which can include housing applications, orientation forms, pre-registration for courses, and more. The last required supporting document to submit will be your final high school transcript, which includes your final senior year grades. Your counselor will send this to your college of choice once your grades are finalized. Remember, all acceptances are conditional on your successful completion of your senior year.

**Deferring Enrollment:** Many colleges offer an opportunity for a student who has been admitted to delay or defer enrollment for a year or a semester. Students who defer an offer of admission may choose to work, travel, pursue special programs, or complete required military service. Requesting a deferral usually requires a written explanation, to be reviewed by the admissions committee, of how you plan to spend your time during the deferral period. A deposit is also often required by the college to hold a place in the next class. A student who defers admission to a college cannot attend another college or earn credits elsewhere during the time off, unless the institution that extended deferred admission is notified in advance and agrees.





# 10

## Chapter 10: The Waitlist and Alternative Options

Each college has a yearly target enrollment number—a goal of how many incoming first year students will say yes to their offer of admission. If you receive a waitlist decision from a college or university, it means that the school believes you have the potential to succeed there, but they also had more qualified applicants than they were able to accept right away. A waitlist is never a guarantee—it is a “maybe, we’ll see.”

Colleges use waitlists as insurance. If enough accepted students enroll for freshman year, the college won’t accept anyone from the waitlist. If the college ends up with open spaces in the freshman class, it may admit a few or many students from its waitlist. Unfortunately, college admission counselors often can’t predict whether they will go to the waitlist or how many students from the list they will need, because they need to first see what the accepted pool of students ultimately decides.

You should never depend on a waitlist, but rather focus on the schools to which you’ve been admitted and allow the waitlist process to play out on its own timeline, which can sometimes extend well into the summer months. **Since many colleges will not know their waitlist needs until *after* the May 1 commitment deadline, it is critical that you enroll at a college to which you’ve already been accepted.**

**You should never depend on a waitlist, but rather focus on the schools to which you’ve been admitted and allow the waitlist process to play out on its own timeline, which can sometimes extend well into the summer months.**

## Waitlist Frequently Asked Questions

### ***What should I do if I'm waitlisted?***

If you are interested in staying on the waitlist—follow the specific directions the college provides to waitlisted applicants and continue to check your email. Some may have you fill out a form to join the waitlist, others may have you fill out a form to remove yourself from the waitlist, while others may not ask anything of you at all. Follow directions, as each college has their own approach to managing their waitlist. If a college allows you to submit additional documents in support of your application (recommendations, updated grades and activities, a letter of continued interest), discuss this process with your counselor. The admission page on each college's website or application portal will more than likely have a section devoted to Waitlist FAQs as well that are more specific to their school.

### ***Do I have to stay on the waitlist?***

No! If you are not interested in waiting to hear back from a school where you've been placed on the waitlist you can simply decline your spot on the waitlist.

### ***Do colleges always use their waitlist?***

No. Sometimes a school hits their enrollment goal with the admitted cohort of students and does not need to use their waitlist to fill the incoming class. That will depend from year to year.

### ***How do I find out how many students are on the waitlist?***

Colleges will have their own individual policies about this, but many do not disclose how many students are on the waitlist.



## ***The college is saying that waitlist decisions won't be communicated until after May 1, but that's the enrollment deadline for most colleges—how does that work?***

The waitlist process is similar to a domino effect—colleges need to see how many admitted students say yes to them before they can determine what their waitlist needs may be. Since many admitted students wait until that May 1 deadline to say yes, most colleges will not have a sense of if or how they will use their waitlist until after that deadline passes. One domino has to fall before the other is pushed into motion. After May 1, when all admitted students have sent their replies, colleges will determine if they need to go to their waitlist or not, and if so, how many students they need to admit. At this point, colleges may begin admitting students from the waitlist.

**What this means for you:** all students should submit an enrollment deposit to a school at which they've been admitted by the May 1 deadline. You should not cross your fingers and depend on being taken off a waitlist without enrolling somewhere else. If you are admitted from a waitlist and choose to enroll at that school, you will typically forfeit your enrollment deposit at the other college.

There are instances, though rare, where colleges may be able to start their waitlist process before May 1. This should never be something a student relies on; it is always more safe to assume waitlist action will happen after May 1.

## ***How likely is it that I'll be admitted off the waitlist?***

Unfortunately, that's nearly impossible for colleges or counselors to predict. Waitlist use varies from year to year and school to school. Waitlist needs are entirely dependent on the decisions of admitted students, and it's difficult to predict that behavior ahead of time.

## ***Are waitlists ranked? In other words, do I have a specific spot on the list?***

It depends! Some schools assign students a specific place or number on the waitlist, so if you're #59 and they accept 60 students from the waitlist, you're in! More often, waitlists are unranked. Since many colleges won't know what their needs might be when delivering a waitlist decision, keeping the list unranked gives them flexibility to admit students who fill those unforeseen needs. For example, if the school doesn't enroll their target number of business students or international students or wants to increase diversity of any kind, they can then look specifically for those students on the waitlist without worrying about rank.

### ***If I'm admitted from the waitlist am I still eligible for financial aid?***

Yes, though this is something you should inquire about with each individual school, as the range of aid available may vary. Now is a good time to double check if you have all your required financial aid documents submitted (FAFSA, CSS Profile, etc.) so if you are admitted from the waitlist they have everything they need to build you a financial aid package. Usually, waitlisted students are not eligible for merit-based scholarships.

### ***What should I NOT do as a waitlisted student?***

Do not do anything beyond the directions provided from the specific college. Some colleges are very explicit in their advice of what not to do, so pay attention to the messaging you're receiving. This is another instance where more is not always better. Flying to campus, sending baked goods or mixtapes or flowers, emailing your admissions counselor daily for updates, etc. will not increase your likelihood of admission and may very well work against you in this process. Just follow the directions, take a deep breath, and really focus on the options that you DO have.

## **What If You're Not Accepted to College?**

This situation is rare if you've approached your college application process with open-mindedness, responsibility, and realism and generated a list with strong balance when it comes to selectivity. But it can happen. The good news is that you still have options.

### ***Late Openings***

First, see your high school counselor. They may be able to help you debrief your admissions process and unpack how your decisions played out. Perhaps your aim was too high; you didn't include a Likely school; or just faced a more competitive pool of applicants than expected. Don't lose hope.

After May 1, the National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC) maintains a list of colleges that still have openings, financial aid, and housing available. Your counselor can help you decide if applying to one or more of these colleges is a good next step.

## ***A Year Off or Gap Year***

If you're a bit unsure whether you're ready for college at all, consider taking a year off. You can use that time to work, travel, volunteer, or participate in any of the hundreds of education, leadership, and career exploration programs for young people.

If this option appeals to you, talk to your counselor and family about gap year options. As attractive as it may seem right now, hanging out in front of the TV gets old fast, and it doesn't help you with your college or career decisions. Your experience during a gap year may lead to a more compelling college application or change your mind about the criteria that is important to you.

For information about gap years, The Gap Year Association has a wide range of resources and a list of reputable programs: [gapyearassociation.org](http://gapyearassociation.org)



# 11

## Chapter 11: The Transition to College

The college or university environment differs greatly from that of high school. The academic work will be more rigorous and demanding. Residence hall living will be a dramatic change from life at home. And you'll be surrounded by an array of new people—new friends, new classmates, and new professors.

Possibly the most significant difference will be the new independence you find as a college student. What you do, when you do it, and how things get done will be entirely up to you. That means new responsibilities and challenges.

### On the Academic Front

Higher education entails what the title implies—higher standards, more difficult subject matter, and greater expectations of you as a student.

Remember, students are admitted to their college or university based upon an appraisal of their ability. If you weren't capable of meeting the academic challenges, you wouldn't be there.

***Budgeting time and establishing priorities are among the most difficult challenges new college students face.***

College classes follow a different schedule and structure. Some meet every day. Others meet only one, two, or three times a week. You may also have evening or online courses. Depending on the college, some lecture-oriented subjects may be taught in an auditorium setting, with more than a hundred students in attendance. In general, classes are longer and more intensive and the volume of work required by college instructors will likely be greater than what you are accustomed to in high school. Allow several hours outside of class to complete the required readings and other assignments.

Establishing good habits—and arranging your time to allow for study, leisure, and rest—will serve you well throughout your college career.

If you're struggling in a course or have questions about the material, make sure to talk with your professor, teaching assistants, and/or your academic advisor.

Take advantage of your college's support services, academic and otherwise.

Seek the assistance of the professionals in the counseling center, health center, or student services department if you experience any difficulty making the adjustment to school.

## Navigating Campus Life

The independence you gain as a college student comes with new responsibilities.

Arranging for housing, managing money, and making new friends are all part of the college experience for students who move away to school.

As a freshman, you will likely live in a dorm or apartment. In most instances, you will share these spaces with a roommate. It is your responsibility to work with your roommate to maintain an environment that is comfortable for both living and studying. Many freshmen go in expecting to become best friends with their roommate. Sometimes it happens; often it doesn't. Try to develop a positive relationship built on open communication, trust, flexibility, and understanding.

You will be extremely fortunate if you find a roommate who shares your philosophy of neatness and taste, and who operates according to a clock and calendar similar to yours. In most cases, you will need to make compromises. Be polite, open-minded, and willing to meet in the middle.

Money management is another responsibility you'll take on. If you've had summer or part-time jobs, you've been exposed to the process of earning, saving, and spending. As a college student, you must manage your spending over time. Make sure you know the items, like books and supplies, which you will need to pay for on a regular basis. Like the monitoring of your time, money management requires discipline.

Get as much practice as you can while still in high school. Learn to handle a checkbook and/or debit or credit card. Practice allocating money for the things you need first, while conserving some for nonessential items and leisure.

Making new friends is another vital part of your transition from high school to college.

You may be going to a college with some high school acquaintances. You may have relatives or friends who are upperclassmen. Or you may be starting from scratch, and have to begin making friends all over again.

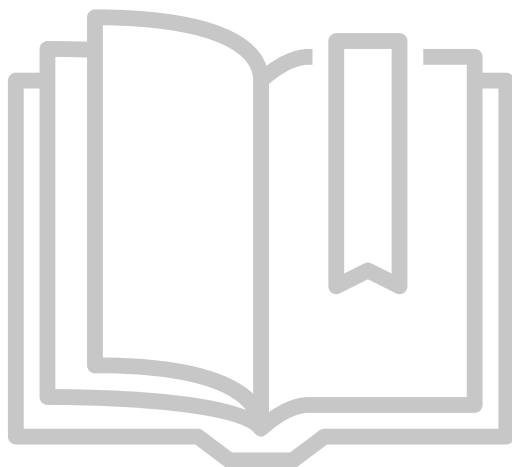
It's important to remember that your quest for new friends is one that you share with just about all other freshmen. A little bit of initiative on your part is likely to be appreciated and result in the creation of new relationships.

Student organizations—including sororities; fraternities; and special interest groups such as drama, athletics, music, community service, and more—offer opportunities for you to meet people with similar interests and expand your social contacts beyond your roommate and fellow dorm residents.

***Approach your first year of college with enthusiasm, anticipation, and willingness to adapt.***

It's an exciting time in your life. By taking charge of the changes that lie ahead, you can eliminate or minimize pressures and go forward with confidence.

Have a great freshman year and a great college career!





# 12

## Chapter 12: Transferring Colleges

### *Applying to college as a transfer student? You're in good company.*

Roughly one-third of students change schools over the course of their college career. Much of the advice offered in this guide to incoming freshmen remains valuable. No matter when you apply, admission officers look favorably on students with solid academic records, strong letters of recommendation, and involvement outside the classroom.

But applying to college as a transfer student is different from the process high school seniors follow to secure a place in an institution's freshman class. A successful transition requires planning and research that begins well in advance of your projected transfer date. Nearly every college will have a section of their admissions website dedicated to transfer applicants and the policies and procedures you need to follow.

You can save yourself time, money, and a lot of headaches by getting to know as much as possible about your current college, as well as the schools to which you plan to apply.

- **Review your college transcript.** How many credits have you earned? Are those credits transferable to the schools you are considering? If applying for a specific program or major within a college, have you met the prerequisites?
- **Research admission/graduation requirements.** Each college sets its own policies. Many schools, for instance, require transfer students to earn a minimum number of credits before they can be considered for admission. Where do you stand? If accepted by your desired school, what's your anticipated graduation date?

- **Ask about financial aid.** You must file a FAFSA, and sometimes the CSS Profile, each year in order to be considered for most types of student financial aid, including non-need-based federal aid. See Chapter 8 for a more in-depth exploration of the financial aid application process. In addition, students who have limited financial resources can use the NACAC Request for Application Fee Waiver Form when applying for college. Research whether or not your colleges of interest offer merit scholarships for transfer students.
- **Make note of deadlines.** Due dates vary from school to school. And even within a single university, application deadlines for admission, housing, financial aid, or entry into specific academic programs can differ. Carve out time in your schedule to complete the necessary paperwork, as well as any required essays or personal statements.
- **Look for a good fit.** Just like incoming freshmen, transfer students should make sure that their prospective school aligns with their educational goals and preferred learning style. Visit colleges in advance of application deadlines if possible. Arrange to sit in on a class in your projected major if available. Investigate housing options, if applicable.

All transitions worth making in life are stressful. You'll be better able to ride out the changes if you keep a positive attitude and remain focused on the future.

***Start the process early to make sure your time—and money—is spent wisely.***

- **Be strategic:** Many classes offered at your current college or university, particularly introductory and general education courses, may transfer for credit to another school. The important thing to be mindful of is if, within your area of study, the colleges you're considering require that certain courses be taken at their institution rather than being transferred in. For example, if you're on a pre-medical track, the college to which you want to transfer might require that Organic Chemistry be taken in their program, not transferred in. That knowledge will help you strategically build your schedule at your current school accordingly. Check to see if your school has articulation agreements with four-year colleges and universities, including certain majors or programs within those schools. Work with your academic advisor to select classes that are likely to transfer, and make a list of schools where you would like to continue your education.

- **Apply yourself:** The grades you earn matter. Demonstrating the ability to be successful in a college-level curriculum will be the most significant factor in a transfer review process. Depending on how many college credits you have earned, your high school transcript may or may not be included in your review process as a transfer student. College admission offices will usually be specific about this in the transfer section of their website. Some colleges won't offer credit for any college class where you earned below a C. Take advantage of tutoring and consider remedial courses in any subjects where you need extra help.
- **Pick a major:** Colleges may have limits on the number of transfer students they can admit, and some majors may be more challenging to transfer into than others. For example, it is typically much more challenging to transfer into an engineering program at a different college. Share your plans with your advisor and see if your desired major and/or prospective transfer school will affect the number of math, science, or foreign language courses you should complete during your first two years of college.
- **Get involved:** Activities and campus engagement can also be important factors in a transfer review process. Participating in service learning projects, performing well in the workplace, or taking on campus leadership positions can help you stand out. Get to know faculty members who can write letters of recommendation on your behalf.

Regardless of whether you are transferring from a two- or four-year school, plan to meet with counseling and admission officials. Most admissions offices have a counselor or team of counselors designated to the transfer process.

**Most admissions offices have a counselor or team of counselors designated to the transfer process.**

## Transfer Process Terminology

**Articulation Agreement:** Formal arrangements between two or more colleges and universities that specify how courses, a general education plan, and/or major requirements transfer from one institution of higher education to another. Agreements can be made on a statewide basis or made between two colleges. For more details on articulation agreements, visit the Knowledge Center at [nacacnet.org](http://nacacnet.org).

**Lateral Transfer:** Transfer from a four-year institution to another four-year institution, or, from a two-year institution to another two-year institution.

**Reverse Transfer:** Transfer from a four-year institution to a two-year institution. This term is also used to refer to a process where academic credits at a four-year college or university are transferred back to the community college for the purpose of awarding an associate degree.

**Vertical Transfer:** Transfer from a two-year institution to a four-year institution; also referred to as traditional, forward, updated, or 2/4 transfers.



# 13

## Chapter 13: For-Profit Colleges, MOOCs, and More

**D**ue to advances in technology, prospective students have more options than ever before. That said, it is just as important—even more so—to do your research when considering alternative higher education options.

Online courses, for-profit colleges, and college search services—all of which have proliferated in recent years—are less-regulated, making it doubly important that you ask questions and read the fine print before signing up.

### For-Profit Colleges

For-profit colleges are run by companies that operate under the demands of investors or stockholders. These private institutions exist, at least in part, to maximize profits for their owners.

Not all for-profit schools are predatory. But countless instances of unscrupulous conduct by for-profit colleges have been revealed through investigations by the federal government, media, and state attorneys general.

***Institutions that are run by large, publicly-traded companies, in particular, have a record of engaging in deceptive, aggressive, and manipulative tactics to enroll as many people as possible—without regard for students' potential for success or ability to afford tuition.***

Before you enroll, know your options and take steps to protect your wallet.

- **Calculate the Costs:** Most for-profit colleges charge higher tuition than similar programs at community colleges or public universities. Comparison shop before you enroll at any institution and consider community colleges and state schools—options that are often more affordable, equally as accessible, and may offer greater flexibility than for-profit schools in the long run.

- **Do Independent Research:** Job placement and graduation statistics from for-profit schools may be deceptive or inflated. If a school representative tells you how much money you can earn after completing their program, do not rely on their claims or the school's statistics alone. Look at job postings online and talk to potential employers.
- **Don't Cave Under High-Pressure Tactics:** If a school is pressuring you to enroll, beware. A reputable college will allow time for you to weigh your options, read the fine print, and talk to a school counselor, financial aid advisor, or someone else you trust. Students at for-profit schools must sign enrollment agreements. These contracts outline the responsibilities of the institution and of the student. Some enrollment agreements also include clauses preventing students from filing class action lawsuits against their college, citing that any disputes must be handled instead through third-party arbitration.
- **Consider Your Goals:** If a degree seems too easy to obtain, be cautious. In some cases, such degrees are not recognized by employers, state licensing agencies, or other institutions. Do your research and make sure the college/program has undergone an evaluation and meets certain requirements. Also, determine in advance whether your credits will transfer to other colleges should you wish to enroll in another program or school. In many instances, public colleges and non-profit colleges will not accept credits earned at for-profits, requiring you to retake those classes at an additional expense. If you have questions about the value of a program, check with an admission officer at a local nonprofit college.

## MOOCs

Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) are internet-based classes that offer students of all ages the opportunity to learn about topics that interest them.

MOOCs offer several perks: In addition to being free, the format provides open access to lectures by faculty members from some of the world's top universities. The online platform also allows thousands of students from across the globe to engage in a topic simultaneously.

Some MOOCs offer certificates to students who meet class requirements.

***However, unlike traditional online college courses, the majority of MOOCs do not confer academic credit.***

Although MOOC instructors are aligned with higher education institutions, the world's three leading providers of MOOCs are independent education organizations. Coursera and Udacity are for-profit companies, while edX is a nonprofit.

The most practical application of MOOCs is exposure to college-level learning.

## Third-Party Course Providers

Third-party course providers are also emerging online. Like MOOCs, these businesses offer students a chance to sample college-level work without going through the traditional admission process.

Unlike MOOCs, however, students are charged enrollment and course fees for the chance to prove their competency. If students meet class requirements and are admitted to one of the company's partner colleges, their online credits will transfer to their new school.

***However, be sure to investigate costs and determine your transfer options before enrolling in classes through a third-party course provider.***

Many of the educational companies that serve as course providers are unaccredited, but have partnerships with accredited colleges that accept their courses. Talk to a school counselor, nonprofit admission officer or state/local education agency before signing up, and follow up with an admission officer at the college or university you plan to transfer into.

Remember, the credits you earn through third-party course providers are not transferable into all colleges and/or degree pathways.



## Lead Generators

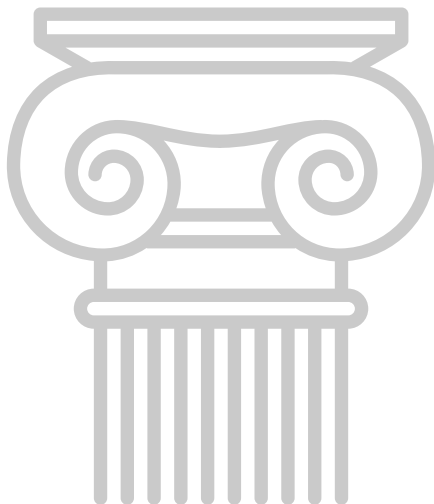
The internet can be a powerful ally in the college search process, but not all websites are created equal.

***Some sites claiming to provide free information about colleges exist only to capture your personal contact information, which the company can then sell to others.***

Known as lead generators, these websites may promise to help you find the perfect school, but generally direct students to only those colleges and programs that pay them.

Be wary of any website that requires you to enter personal data while accessing information about colleges, especially if it is unclear how the information will be used.

As stated before, one of your greatest resources throughout the college search and selection process is your school counselor. They can refer you to high-quality college search websites, such as those operated by state officials or the federal government. Two valuable sites include the U.S. Department of Education's College Navigator and College Scorecard.





# 14

## Chapter 14: Applying to US Universities and Colleges as an International Student

**H**undreds of thousands of international students apply—and are admitted—to U.S. colleges and universities each year.

Like domestic applicants, researching prospective schools and following testing and admission requirements are paramount to success. But preparing for the application process in the United States also requires additional steps for international students.

### ***You will need to:***

- understand the admission process for U.S. colleges and universities
- assess your English skills (if English is not your first language)
- make a plan to finance your education
- secure a student visa

## **US Colleges and Universities**

Unlike many countries, the U.S. has no national system of higher education; it is home to over 4,500 two- and four-year institutions. Admission requirements and deadlines are determined on a campus-by-campus basis. Due to this autonomy, it is essential for you to research each school individually and make note of differing requirements.

Nearly all admissions offices have counselors responsible for designated international territories. If you are an international student who is attending high school in the United States, be sure to ask whether you should direct questions to the regional admissions counselor who oversees the territory where your high school is located or the admissions counselor who oversees your country of origin. You will find their contact information on the admission section of an institution's website.

At most institutions in the United States, the admissions review process for international students is aligned or very similar to that for domestic applicants who are citizens or permanent residents of the United States. As covered in previous chapters, your admissions decision will be determined based on your academic profile and the qualitative factors (extracurriculars, interviews, essays, etc.) that are included in your application. In addition to these baseline requirements, international applicants are usually required to submit additional application materials that fall into two broad categories: English language proficiency testing and documentation of financial support.

## Assess your English skills

Officials at U.S. colleges and universities will want to make sure you are proficient in the English language, a key component of postsecondary success for international students.

If English is not your first language, most institutions will ask you to take an English language proficiency exam as part of the admission process. These exams test your reading, writing, listening, and speaking skills, with results remaining valid for two years.

The most frequently accepted assessments are the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), the International English Language Testing System (IELTS), and the Duolingo English Test. It is imperative that you check on individual colleges' admissions websites to confirm which English proficiency tests they accept. The TOEFL is the most commonly accepted test.

Many colleges list minimum/recommended scores directly on their admission webpages. English proficiency testing results can also provide context to your scores on other tests that assume English proficiency, such as the ACT or SAT. For applicants who do not meet the minimum expected/required English proficiency threshold, your application may be denied on that factor alone.

For international students who are attending high school in the United States or whose primary language of instruction for high school has been English, it is possible at some colleges to receive a waiver for English language proficiency testing, even if English is not your first language. Many colleges will list the requirements to be eligible for a waiver on their admissions website. If they don't, it is appropriate to reach out to the admissions office to ask if you qualify. For colleges that do offer waivers, they typically expect applicants to have studied in an English-speaking institution for all four years of high school.

Some U.S. universities will also offer conditional acceptance to talented international students with low English language scores. This option grants you more time to gain proficiency, often through participation in an on-campus English immersion or intensive study program. Once you achieve the required score on the TOEFL or other comparable exam, you are granted full admission and can enter one of the university's degree-granting programs. However, it is important to understand that enrolling in a preparatory language program—and the associated costs—may increase the time and cost of your degree.

Community colleges provide another avenue for international students with lower English proficiency. These two-year schools typically do not require students to submit English language test scores; and they offer English as a second language instruction at a lower cost than most four-year institutions. International students can use their time at a community college to bolster their language skills and become better acclimated with a new culture and educational system.

See Chapter 12 for tips on how to transfer from a two-year college to a four-year university.

## Calculate the Costs

Cost is one of the most important factors international applicants need to keep in mind when applying to college in the United States. The cost of higher education varies widely in the US, with each university setting its own tuition and fees. You can find the projected cost of attendance—including tuition, room and board, and other fees on the college's financial aid website.

**The vast majority of colleges in the United States do not offer need-based financial aid to non-U.S. citizens or permanent residents and expect international students to provide evidence of the ability to pay the full cost of attendance.** At these colleges and universities, international applicants will be asked to complete a financial certification either during the application process or prior to enrollment that serves as confirmation of your ability to pay the full cost of attendance. Some universities may also ask for copies of bank statements as an extra layer of confirmation. Not only are these documents required for admissions and enrollment purposes, but they will also be required to process your Form I-20, which is necessary to obtain a student visa.

For colleges that offer merit-based scholarships, typically international students are equally as eligible for those awards as domestic applicants since the funding comes directly from the institution, not the federal or state government. However, even institutions where international applicants are eligible for merit scholarships often still require proof of the ability to pay the full cost of attendance and advise international applicants not to rely on a merit scholarship to make up the difference in affordability.

### ***Colleges That Offer Need-Based Financial Aid for International Applicants***

Although most financial aid in the U.S. is intended for U.S. citizens or permanent residents, a small number of colleges offer need-based financial aid to international students. **It is important to note that most of these institutions have a finite budget for international need-based aid, which can make the admissions process as a whole more competitive for international applicants seeking financial support.** In other words, your application could be among the strongest in a given school's pool, but if they do not have room in their budget to support you financially, you will likely not be admitted.

The international section of admissions and financial aid websites will usually clearly state whether or not the institution can provide need-based financial aid for international students. If they do, be sure to read their website thoroughly to determine if they:

- have specific eligibility requirements
- have a minimum expected financial contribution for consideration
- meet 100% of demonstrated need or if you can expect to make up the difference from a gap in your financial aid package on top of your original contribution

While most institutions that offer need-based financial aid to international applicants are need-aware—meaning an applicant's level of need may be a factor in their admissibility—there is also a smaller subset of colleges that are need-blind for international applicants as well as domestic. At these colleges, an international applicant's level of financial need will not impact their admissibility. Typically, these institutions are also able to meet 100% of demonstrated need for international applicants. The handful of colleges that fall into this category are among the most highly selective in the United States, so no applicant should rely solely on gaining admission to these institutions just based on the high level of competition.

Colleges that offer need-based aid to international students will typically require international applicants to complete the CSS Profile, The International Student Financial Aid Application (ISFAA), or a school-specific financial aid application.

Ultimately, it is the responsibility of the applicant to fully research the individual financial aid policies and expectations at the colleges in which they are interested.

### ***Outside and Private Scholarships***

Some international students may find it beneficial to seek out private or outside scholarships that are available from organizations outside of the college. There are a number of useful search engines and websites where students can find applications for independent scholarships. While these scholarships can be helpful at defraying higher education costs, they should not be relied upon to cover the entire cost of attendance at an institution in the United States. Independent scholarship amounts are rarely that high.

Also check online and with those in your home country as you search for potential sources of financial aid. Representatives of EducationUSA advising centers, your country's U.S. embassy or consulate, and your ministry of education may have helpful tips.

Organizations with online information for international students seeking financial aid include:

- EducationUSA: [educationusa.state.gov](http://educationusa.state.gov) (Click on “Your 5 Steps to U.S. Study,” followed by “Finance Your Studies.”)
- Institute of International Education: [fundingusstudy.org](http://fundingusstudy.org)
- NAFSA: Association of International Educators: [nafsa.org](http://nafsa.org) (Click on the “About Us” tab, select the “About International Education,” and click on the “For Students” section.)

## Securing Your Student Visa

To study at a U.S. college or university, international students must first obtain a visa, which will allow you to lawfully enter the U.S.

The two most common types of visas issued to students are:

- F-1 visas, for students who have been accepted to an academic or English language program
- J-1 visas, for students enrolled in a short-term exchange program

Begin the visa application process as soon as you have confirmed your enrollment at a U.S. college or university.

For students seeking an initial F-1 visa, the admissions office or the international student office at your school of choice will provide you with instructions and required documentation to submit in order to receive your Immigration Form I-20. This document certifies that you have been admitted to a full-time academic or English language program and that you have demonstrated sufficient financial resources to study and stay in the U.S. Be sure to pay close attention to any deadlines they provide so as not to delay your visa process.

Most international students apply for their visas at the U.S. embassy or consulate closest to their home country residence. The visa application process usually involves a brief in-person interview. Application instructions may vary by location.

***For international students on an F-1 visa who are already in the United States at a secondary school, English language program, college, or university, talk with a school counselor and/or international student advisor about how to transfer your Immigration Form I-20 to a different institution.***

All international students should pay attention to dates when applying for their visas and making travel plans.

## Advice about Consultants and Agents

Many individuals and organizations offer advice about applying to U.S. universities and colleges. School-based counselors, university admission officers, and U.S. government-supported EducationUSA advisors are a few examples.

Many private businesses also specialize in advising students who are interested in attending a U.S. university. There are two main types of these businesses:

**Independent Educational Consultants:** Independent educational consultants provide personalized advice about the U.S. university application and admission process, and charge fees for their advice and support. They expose you to a full range of higher education options so you can identify the universities that meet your academic and personal goals. Independent educational consultants work for you. They are independent from the universities and colleges they offer advice about.

**Agents:** An agent is a company or individual contracted and paid by universities in other countries to advise and recruit students to those universities. Agents are most likely to recommend universities they recruit for and represent. Usually, the agent is paid by its partner university only if and after a referred student enrolls and begins taking classes. This payment is often a percentage of your tuition fees, and is called a commission.



# 15

## Chapter 15: Advice and Encouragement for Families

The college admission process has real potential as a learning experience; it gives your child the opportunity to make decisions and develop a valuable sense of responsibility, autonomy, confidence, and more, if they're allowed the flexibility and support to take ownership over it. Discuss any of your concerns up front, but remember that you are not the one going to college—it's your child taking this important step toward responsible adulthood. Keep in mind that the key word here is encourage, not push.

For many parents, guardians, and caretakers, there is great temptation to step in and do many things for your student during the college admission process. As best you can, resist the urge to take over or micromanage as a way to ease your own stress or anxiety about this process. Particularly during the fall of their senior year, carve out dedicated, standing time each week to check in about your student's progress. This makes your family conversations about college intentional, focused, and mutually consensual, and avoids the tension that often comes with unexpected or rapid-fire check-ins with your student.

Open, honest communication between you and your student is critical. As you see them through the college admission process, try to:

- Always keep your student, their criteria, and their perspective at the center of the process
- Urge your child to apply to the schools that offer the best fit and remind them regularly that college admission decisions are never a reflection of their self worth
- Recognize and celebrate the individual nature of this process; there is no one-size-fits-all approach
- Model openness to and curiosity about the new and unfamiliar



- Preserve their self-esteem, confidence, and responsibility
- Encourage autonomy and ownership by helping them build strong organization and communication systems
- Support your student in creating and maintaining appropriate boundaries when it comes to sharing about their process
- Celebrate all milestones and acceptances
- Discuss college finances early, often, and openly
- Be mindful about using social media to share admissions news or to comment on others' news
- Pose questions and seek support from experienced professionals, such as your student's counselor, rather than relying on word-of-mouth or common misconceptions

The college admission process can be stressful. Your student may feel uncertain about the decisions they must make, fearful of rejection from colleges, or anxious about meeting deadlines for their college applications and school work. Over the course of the search process, they may change their mind (more than once) about their career aspirations, academic goals, or what they want in a college. All of this is normal. The best thing you can provide as one of their primary support systems is unconditional reassurance and regular reminders that where they go to college matters far less than what they choose to do and who they hope to become once they get there.



# Appendix A:

## Common College Interview Questions

Included below are a number of common questions you may encounter during a college admissions interview. Use these questions to help you prepare, but remember not to prepare to the point of scriptedness. Interviews are an opportunity to let your personality shine through, so overpreparation can sometimes have a counterproductive effect.

Remember, it is almost guaranteed that you will be asked “*Why are you interested in our college?*”, and just like the essay version of that question, you should be prepared to answer specifically and thoughtfully.

### Academic-Focused Questions

- Do you know what you might want to study in college? If so, why? If not, what general areas are you interested in exploring?
- What have been your favorite courses in high school? Why have they resonated with you?
- When you think about a favorite teacher, what about their teaching style resonated with you?
- What are your biggest academic strengths? Areas for growth?
- What is your ideal learning environment? How do you learn best?
- What role do you typically take on in a classroom setting? How would your teachers describe you as a student?
- Are there any subjects or topics you’ve chosen to learn about outside of your high school classes?

## Extracurricular Questions

- Which of your activities is the most meaningful and why?
- Are there certain activities you know you want to participate in in college? Any specific ones from our school that seem exciting?
- What do you typically do in the summer?

## Personal Questions

- If you could describe yourself in three words, which would you choose?
- If you could change one thing about your high school what would it be?
- What's a book/podcast/movie/tv show you've read/seen recently that you'd recommend
- In looking back over high school, what are you most proud of academically and/or personally?
- Discuss a challenge you've faced and how you overcame it or are working to overcome it
- If you had an entire day free of access to any sort of technology, how would you spend it?
- Who is your biggest role model?
- If I was visiting your hometown, what are three things you'd recommend I do?
- If you could have any superpower, what would you choose?
- If you could teach a class on a topic of your choice, what would you choose?

# Appendix B:

## Sample Financial Aid Package

<b>Sample Financial Aid Award Letter</b>			
<b>Estimated Cost of Attendance</b>			<b>\$68,550</b>
<b>Direct Billable Costs</b>	<b>Fall</b>	<b>Spring</b>	<b>Total</b>
Tuition	\$25,100	\$25,100	\$50,200
Room	\$4,250	\$4,250	\$8,500
Board	\$3,000	\$3,000	\$6,000
University Fees	\$225	\$225	\$450
<b>Indirect Costs</b>	<b>Fall</b>	<b>Spring</b>	<b>Total</b>
Books & Supplies	\$450	\$450	\$900
Transportation	\$750	\$750	\$1,500
Personal Expenses	\$500	\$500	\$1,000
<b>Financial Aid Award</b>			
<b>Grants &amp; Scholarships</b>	<b>Fall</b>	<b>Spring</b>	<b>Total</b>
Federal Pell Grant	\$2,250	\$2,250	\$4,500
Federal Supplemental Educational Opportunity Grant (FSEOG)	\$400	\$400	\$800
University Merit Scholarship	\$12,500	\$12,500	\$25,000
University Grant	\$7,500	\$75,00	\$15,000
<b>Total Gift Aid</b>			<b>\$45,300</b>

### Sample Financial Aid Award Letter *Continued*

Loans & Work-Study			
Federal Direct Subsidized Loan	\$1,750	\$1,750	\$3,500
Federal Direct Unsubsidized Loan	\$1,000	\$1,000	\$2,000
Federal Work-Study Program	\$750	\$750	\$1,500
<b>Total Self-Help Aid:</b>			<b>\$7,000</b>
<b>Total Financial Aid Offered:</b>			<b>\$52,300</b>
<b>Total Estimated Student Cost:</b> <i>(Cost of Attendance—Gift Aid—Self-Help Aid = Total Estimated Student Cost)</i>			<b>\$16,250</b>



# Notes





# NACAC

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College Admission Counseling



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