

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION TO THE COLLEGE ADMISSIONS PROCESS

Congratulations! You are about to embark on the college admissions process – an exhilarating time in your life! Applying to college is exciting, but it requires careful planning and organization to effectively and successfully navigate a somewhat complicated process.

Why is this important?

This guide is designed to make you aware of the preparation and research you need to do; the information you need to gather; the tests you need to take; the contacts you need to make; and the timeline you need to follow to successfully submit college applications to the schools you would like to attend.

You can find a lot of excellent information about the college admissions process on the Internet, but the sheer volume is overwhelming and some of it can be misleading and/or incomplete. For that reason, we include several accurate, trusted online informational resources throughout this guide to ensure that you access the material you need when you need it. Our first online source recommendation is an article about the college admissions process by the Editor-in-Chief at *The Princeton Review*:

<https://www.princetonreview.com/college-advice/college-admissions-guide>

Also, if you need advice on how to stay focused on your current school workload, here is helpful information shared by the Khan Academy: <https://docs.google.com/document/d/e/2PACX-1vSZhOdEPAWjUQpqDkVAJrFwxZ9Sa6zGOq0CNRms6Z7DZNq-tQWS3OhuVCUbh-P-WmksHAzbsrk9d/pub>

Congratulations on taking the first step in your college applications journey and good luck getting admitted to your dream school!

Five Stages of The College Admissions Process

Your goal is to find a college where you can thrive academically and personally; therefore, your college admissions journey should focus on discovering the school that is the right fit for you. Your ally will be the college admissions officers whose goal is to identify students who will benefit from their unique collegiate communities.

Let's begin your journey with an overview of each stage of the college admissions process.

COLLEGE PLANNING

Your path to college begins during your first year in high school as you make yourself college-ready. You may have already taken your first steps to college readiness in junior high/middle school by taking high school-level classes. While college admissions officers are interested in good grades and high test scores, they also are searching for candidates who demonstrate that they are curious, engaged, and eager to explore their academic options.

Grades & Classes

Many college admissions officers report that in addition to your grade point average (GPA), the most important element of your college application is the rigor of your high school curriculum. Here are guidelines to follow when planning your high school course load.

- [Choose your high school classes carefully](#). Challenge yourself by taking honors classes; Advanced Placement (AP) classes that can earn you college credit and/or qualify you for more advanced classes in college; and classes in the International Baccalaureate (IB) program (where available), which allows students to take college-level courses while in high school.
- Begin focusing on your grades DAY ONE of your freshman year of high school – they matter. When college admissions officers review your transcript, they focus on the grades you earn during your sophomore and junior years but will notice if your grades were low – or high – during your freshman and senior years.
- Start preparing for college early! Respondents to Princeton Review’s 2018 College Hopes & Worries Survey say that the moment you start high school you should focus on getting good grades, take rigorous courses, do your homework and get help when you need it to stay on track.
- Don’t despair! Even if you experience a rough year, you still have time to make changes and improvements. Many schools will reward your upward trajectory.

Test Scores

Scholastic Aptitude Test ([SAT](#)) and/or American College Test ([ACT](#)) scores are preferred by college admissions officers, but they will also consider your performance on other standardized tests.

- You have the option to take the Preliminary Scholastic Aptitude Test ([PSAT](#)) during your sophomore year but be sure to take it your junior year because junior-level [PSAT scores](#) can qualify you for scholarship programs. For example, winning a prestigious National Merit® Scholarship can help get you to get into an excellent college and cover the cost of tuition. A helpful online resource for test prep: [The best way to prep for the PSAT is to prep for the SAT](#).
- Schools accept [SAT and ACT scores](#) equally, so it’s up to you which test you take – or take both! Though the essay sections of both tests are optional, some colleges require them so it is in your best interest to complete those sections. Keep your options open!
- Many selective colleges require you to submit [SAT Subject Test](#) scores, which are one-hour, multiple-choice SATs on specific subjects (English, Math, Science, History, Languages). Some colleges grant course credit for excellent performance on these tests.

It is a good idea to sit for the Subject Tests soon after completing related high school classes.

- Admissions officers view good performances on [AP exams](#) as one indicator of your college achievement potential. More than 1,400 colleges and universities accept high scores on AP exams for course credits.
- Test-optional schools do not require standardized test scores as part of their application process. It is still a good idea to prep for and take the ACT and/or SAT since your test scores could qualify you for [merit scholarships](#) that could significantly boost your college experience!

Extracurricular Activities

Participating in [extracurricular activities](#) demonstrates who you are outside of the classroom and the talents and abilities you'll bring to a college campus.

- Commitment to a sport, hobby, religious organization, or job throughout your high school career is key. Colleges prefer to see you dedicated to a few worthwhile endeavors rather than marginally involved with several clubs.
- Don't be concerned if your after-school job is cutting into your participation in extracurricular activities. Work experience on your college application illustrates your level of maturity and responsibility.
- Stay active during your high school summers! Some students enroll in university programs during the summer to start earning college credits. Others volunteer or find a summer job. Your [summer activities](#) can make your college application stand out in a competitive applicant pool.

COLLEGE SEARCH

There is no other student like you, so you need – and deserve – to find a college that best fits you. With that said, no two colleges are exactly alike. Here are some guidelines to follow as you search for your [best fit](#):

- Meet with a [college admissions counselor](#) and discuss what's important to you in terms of academics, campus culture, and financial aid. This will help guide your overall college search.
- Research is a must. Attend college fairs, consult [college profiles](#), and visit campuses to absorb information firsthand. Research each college's offerings, including majors, dorms, clubs, career services, and other features so that you can use the information later in your college comparisons.
- Create a list of dream, target, and safety schools (the article at [this link](#) will guide you in preparing the list). Make sure that each of the colleges on your list is a fit for your personality and interests.
- How many colleges should you apply to? According to the College Hopes & Worries Survey, 40% of students apply to 5-8 schools, while 30% apply to 9 or more colleges.

APPLICATION PROCESS

Do your research before you fill out your college applications. You will be required to make decisions along the way that could affect your placement, so weigh your options carefully.

- Though most college applications have the same basic components, read through each school's requirements so that you do not unintentionally submit an incomplete application. Assemble and organize the primary application components required by all colleges:
 - ⇒ Transcripts – high school and college
 - ⇒ Test scores – SAT and ACT
 - ⇒ Letters of recommendation
 - ⇒ Personal statement
 - ⇒ Essays required by each college
 - ⇒ List of extracurricular activities
- Research admissions requirements for each college to which you plan to apply and prepare a separate checklist for each school. These lists will guide you through the application process. For example, note what type of SAT Subject Tests are required or if the school expects you to submit your SAT or ACT scores with an essay.
- Explore early action and early decision programs, which enable you to submit your application early and/or receive your admission decision early (learn more about early action versus early decision by reading [this article](#)). While these can be helpful in your college decision-making process, read the fine print to determine if there are restrictions attached to the programs, including:
 - ⇒ By what date must you submit your application to participate in the program?
 - ⇒ Are you prohibited from participating in other colleges' early admission/decision programs?
 - ⇒ Is your early admission decision binding? Are you required to attend the college if your application is approved?
- Once you have compiled your application components and completed your research into each college's application requirements, it is time to tackle the applications themselves. There are several types of applications that you can fill out once and submit to multiple schools, like the Common Application, but be aware that many colleges require school-specific essays, [supplemental essays](#), and/or test score requirements. Refer to your checklists to ensure that you complete unique requirements for each college.
- If the college(s) to which you are applying offers the opportunity to [interview](#) with alumni or an admissions officer – take advantage! You can learn more about the college, its programs, and its culture, and provide the college's representatives a glimpse at you and what you have to offer their school!

FINANCIAL AID

Incurring debt is a concern for prospective students who are pondering how they will pay for their college education. Debt continually ranks as the top concern for students in the College Hopes & Worries survey. Learn more about [how financial aid works](#) so you can make informed choices for yourself and your family.

- Be aware that applying to college and applying for financial aid are two separate application processes.
- Check out each prospective school's financial aid website when you are conducting your research. Schools typically have an online net-price calculator you can use to estimate the out-of-pocket costs you could incur while attending their school.
- When applying for financial aid, start with the Free Application for Federal Student Aid ([FAFSA](#)®), which is available around October 1 each year (since 2016). The FAFSA requests information about your income and the size of your household to determine the expected family contribution (EFC) toward your college tuition.
- **Please note:** Schools may also use their own forms or use the [Colleges Scholarship Service \(CSS\) Profile](#) for non-federal aid.
- Your [financial aid package](#) is designed to meet your college financial needs and will consist of the following:
 - ⇒ Grants and scholarships
 - ⇒ Federal work-study opportunities
 - ⇒ Student loans
- Apart from these financial aid resources, several organizations offer [scholarships](#) tailored to academic interests, talents, extracurricular activities, career goals, geographic location, and other factors. Research scholarship opportunities and note application deadlines, which could fall as early as the summer before your senior year in high school.

CHOOSING YOUR SCHOOL

Once the notifications start rolling in, celebrate your acceptances with your college counselor, weigh your options and be sure to make your final decision by National College Decision Day, which is typically May 1.

- What factors should you consider when making your decision? The College Hopes & Worries survey found that 42% of respondents choose the college that is the "best for their career interests," and another 40% choose the college that is the "best overall fit."
- Talk with students to find out what they like and dislike about their college experience. Visit campuses to learn more about programs and on-campus activities, and tour dorms and other facilities.
- [Compare financial aid packages](#) of schools on your list to determine which one makes the most financial sense for you and your family.
- Don't despair if you end up on your dream college's waitlist. You move up the list as students decline acceptance, so you still have a chance of attending your school of choice. For advice on managing your anticipation, check out Princeton Review's [college waitlist strategies](#).

- Your application may be deferred, which means your application will be evaluated by the school at a later date pending additional data or information. For example, the admissions officer may want to review your senior year grades and/or test scores at the end of your senior year, so keep studying!
- You may also decide to defer your acceptance to take a [gap year](#) to work, travel, or volunteer.

One Step Further

You may come across several unfamiliar words, acronyms, and terms during your college admissions journey, so you should “learn the lingo” to make sure nothing falls through the cracks. Do you know the terms listed below? If not, look them up to see what they mean. Here is a link to a glossary of common admissions terms to get you started:

https://www.firstinthefamily.org/highschool/Downloads_files/Glossary%20of%20College%20Application%20Terms.PDF

- GPA
- Course Rigor
- Standardized Test Scores
- Extracurricular Activities
- Recommendation Letters
- Strength of School
- Essays
- Demonstrated Interest

For more information about how college admissions officers evaluate applications, check out this online resource:

- <https://www.ivywise.com/ivywise-knowledgebase/newsletter/article/how-college-applications-are-evaluated/>