

**PLANNING FOR COLLEGE**  
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**ADMISSION:**

- The **TRANSCRIPT** is the dominant factor in college admission.
  - The TRANSCRIPT lists grade nine through twelve courses along with academic levels and grades.
  - College admission officers “read” the transcript (often assisted by a high school profile) to determine the applicant’s chances for collegiate success.
  - Grade point average (GPA) is often included on the transcript.
- Secondary in importance are:
  - **ESSAYS**
    - ESSAYS are often ignored at large colleges and universities if the student’s transcript and test scores meet the individual school’s parameters. They play a larger role in the selective admission and/or small college markets and, in some cases, will push the borderline student into the admitted pool. At some colleges ESSAYS are only used to see if the applicant can write a coherent paragraph, but selective colleges place a premium on writing ability.
  - **CO & EXTRA CURRICULAR ACTIVITIES, SPECIAL TALENTS**
    - CO & EXTRA CURRICULAR ACTIVITIES have varying degrees of clout in the admission process. Generally, colleges favor students with pursued passions over those with a laundry list of multiple, sporadic activities. It is important to indicate whether any will be pursued in college. SPECIAL TALENTS can be pivotal: For instance, the all-star basketball player and the published poet may have a lower grade in Chemistry overlooked. (This would not, however, happen to the prospective Pre-med or Engineering student).
  - **TEST SCORES (SAT or ACT and SAT Subject Tests)**
    - Standardized TESTING often begins in the sophomore year with the October PSAT (although the PSAT only “counts” when taken in the junior year). SAT and ACT testing is most frequently taken in spring of the junior year and/or fall of the senior year. SAT Subject Tests (one hour specific subject exams) are normally taken at the end of tenth and eleventh grades and at the beginning of the twelfth. ACT or SAT scores are required at most four year colleges. Only ten percent—heavily weighted toward the elites—require SAT Subject Tests. An increasing number of colleges are test-optional or test-flex, offering students the choice of whether or not to submit scores. (See [www.FairTest.org](http://www.FairTest.org)).
  - **RECOMMENDATIONS**
    - RECOMMENDATIONS are normally written by the school counselor and two teachers. If a student is undecided about a major it is wise to get recommendations from teachers who know the student well in different subject areas, such as English/Social Science and Math/Science.
  - **ALUMNI CONNECTIONS**
    - A student has “ALUMNI CONNECTIONS” if a relative (preferably a parent or sibling) went to the college the student hopes to attend. A student whose parent went to the college the student is applying to is called a “legacy”. A legacy may get a closer look by admission officers but still has to demonstrate academic strength.

- The path toward college admission normally begins with ninth grade course selection. Up through eighth grade, except for Math and sometimes Foreign Language, most academic classes are not leveled (heterogeneously grouped). In high school, courses are more likely to be leveled (homogeneously grouped). From most challenging to least challenging levels are often named:

- Accelerated/Honors/Advanced Placement (AP)/International Baccalaureate (IB)
- College Preparatory/College Sequence
- College Preparatory II/Survey/Standard
- Basic/Skills

Note: Different schools use different names, therefore it is crucial to know what classes prepare a student for college admission (and what courses are necessary for NCAA I and II athletic eligibility).

- Most four-year colleges require a **MINIMUM** of sixteen high school academic units: English (4), Math and Science (3), History and Foreign Language (2), plus two other elective courses. Most students applying to selective colleges have completed at least twenty academic units.
- There are approximately 2800 four-year colleges in the United States. They range from **OPEN ADMISSION** (every applicant admitted) to **HIGHLY SELECTIVE** (fewer than half admitted). The media focus is often on the difficulty of getting into highly selective, “brand name” colleges, institutions that admit fewer than 20% of their applicants. This is unfortunate as there are many colleges where each applicant could be well-served: Check out Colleges That Change Lives (ctcl.org).
- **FIT** is the operable word in college admission. Students need to visit colleges and “try them on” to determine their comfort level. It involves objective (does the college have the right course of study?) and subjective (does my gut tell me I’ll be comfortable here?) criteria to decide the right **FIT**. Many students (and their parents) check out websites ([www.collegeconfidential.com](http://www.collegeconfidential.com), [www.unigo.com](http://www.unigo.com), etc.) to get “inside” information on colleges.

## **THE CALENDAR:**

- **Freshman & Sophomore Years**
  - Take challenging courses.
  - Get involved in the life of the community and school.
- **Spring of Junior Year**
  - Start to identify possible colleges:
    - Check programs offered– are they what you want? (Actually, the majority of students applying to college are undecided about a major).
    - Is the cost manageable? Is sufficient financial aid available?
    - Is the location acceptable? Most students go to college close to home: Are you willing to challenge yourself by going further away?
    - Campus environment: Will you be comfortable with the size and location? What is the campus environment on weekends?
    - Academics: What is the quality of the programs? Who teaches – full-time faculty members or “adjuncts” (part time teachers) and graduate students?
    - What type of teaching environment do you want, large lecture halls or smaller, discussion based classes?
    - Visit college websites and request information.
    - Attend college fairs: The person representing the college is likely to be the reader of your application.
    - If interested in military service academies or ROTC programs remember the application process starts in July before the senior year.

- Visit colleges/attend college open houses and receptions.
  - Course Selection for Senior Year:
    - Choose courses that interest you and strengthen your transcript.
    - Choose courses that meet the entrance requirements of the colleges you are interested in. (Plan to explain “free” periods at selective colleges.)
  - Take the ACT and/or SAT in May and SAT Subject Tests in June (if appropriate)
  - Consider test-optional colleges.
- **Summer before Senior Year**
  - Continue visiting colleges – tour campus and interview with an admission officer. Trust your gut.
- **Fall of Senior Year**
  - Attend college fairs and college open houses.
  - Pare your list to ten or fewer schools that you are excited about.
  - Take the ACT and/or SAT and SAT Subject Tests (if applicable).
  - Applications are generally filled out online. Many colleges use the “Common App” (commonapp.org) but be aware that some Common App colleges require an additional Supplement.
  - Discuss applications with your school guidance counselor or college advisor. Consider the difficulty and ease of getting into the colleges on your list.
  - Write essays – It is often OK to use the same essay for more than one school.
  - Secure recommendations from teachers.
  - Pay attention to deadlines:
    - Early Decision, usually 11/01, 11/15 or 01/01. (A student is committed to attending the ED college if admitted)
    - Early Action, usually 11/01, 11/15 or 12/1. (A student still has until May 1 to decide whether or not to attend an EA college to which they have been admitted). (A handful of super elite colleges allow only one, single choice EA application).
    - Regular Decision deadlines normally begin 01/01.
    - “Rolling” admissions: Discuss with your counselor as some special programs fill up early.
- **Fall/Winter of Senior Year**
  - Check Guidance Office for available scholarships.
  - Pick up information about financial aid forms, CSS Profile and FAFSA.
  - Attend financial aid information nights with your parents.
- **Spring of Senior Year**
  - Applicant is admitted! Send a thank you note (email is fine) to each college of interest and say you will let the college know of your decision ASAP, but no later than May 1<sup>st</sup>.
  - Applicant is wait-listed. If you still wish to be considered for admission, send a convincing email or letter indicating that and provide new supporting information.
  - Applicant is denied admission. There are still alternatives such as community college, “gap year” programs, or other colleges that still have space available. Work with your college guidance counselor to determine your next step.

### **FINANCIAL AID:**

- Financial aid is accessed by filling out forms: FAFSA (Free Application for Federal Student Aid required of all colleges), the CSS Profile (required by many private colleges), individual

institutional forms, and various stand-alone scholarship applications. The cost of college is often a long term commitment/investment, taking more time to pay than the length of college attendance. An excellent web resource is [www.finaid.org](http://www.finaid.org). Colleges are required to provide a cost calculator on their websites but these can be imprecise in determining costs/potential financial aid. Investigate the average loan burden for graduating students at colleges on your list.

- Most financial aid is need-based, as determined by federal and institutional guidelines. Merit scholarships are somewhat plentiful and are used both as a marketing tool and in an attempt to attract students with impressive academic credentials and/or special talents. Most colleges automatically consider applicants for merit aid but some merit aid is “won” by audition or the submission of extra materials. Some merit scholarships require maintaining a certain Grade Point Average (GPA). Check out [www.cappex.com](http://www.cappex.com). Athletic grants are a form of merit aid that can only be offered at NCAA and NAIA Division I and II colleges.
- A financial aid “package” consists of loans, work study, and grants/scholarships (free money). In an ideal world, this package makes up the difference between what you can supposedly afford and what the college costs. But the world is not ideal so often a student is “gapped”, meaning the package does not entirely make up that difference. Local scholarships, second jobs, and deeper loan burdens often bridge the gap. Also, college financial aid officers will consult with parents whose financial circumstances have changed. These people take their jobs seriously and can be helpful in devising payment strategies. Most colleges are “need sensitive”, meaning the ability to pay can be factored into an admission decision. This generally does not impact the strongest of applicants.
- Sometimes there is family tension over the cost of college. Many parents are understandably shocked by the “sticker price” and discourage applications to expensive colleges. This is unwise: Colleges can offer very attractive financial aid packages. Families need to make their decisions about what is affordable AFTER receiving the financial aid letter which arrives with or follows the offer of admission.
- In most families, where paying between \$20,000 and \$70,000 a year for college is a challenge, parents and students need to talk candidly about the issues involved. You may not be on the same page but you at least need to be in the same book.
- Loan burdens are attracting a lot of media attention and one rule of thumb is that a student should not graduate owing more than their first year’s salary. In our current economy many college grads will initially be marginally employed and a significant percentage returns home until they can afford to be independent.
- There is an array of information about financial aid available. It can be overwhelming. Ask questions: The best source is a financial aid officer.