The College-Bound Student: A Preparation Timeline

Tips and resources for preparing for and applying to college from junior high through high school
Doing homework proactively and independently
Developing a positive work ethic and earning good grades as a result of hard work in junior high stays with students throughout school.

Staring to save for college
Learning about the cost of college and different ways to save for tuition allows students and parents to plan ahead. Financial tools, like the FAFSA4caster, are a way to see how much financial aid might be awarded.

Sharpening study skills
Successful students develop and refine effective study habits in junior high, high school and college. Study skills include note- and test-taking, active listening and reading, focusing, and concentrating. Setting goals, prioritizing tasks and staying organized help improve study skills.

Talking about college as a family
Discussing college plans as a family helps plant the seed of continuing education and reinforces the benefit of building on K-12 education. It can also help create the connection of owning a future of success and happiness.

Preparing for high school
Discuss interests and skills as a way to help identify challenging and enjoyable classes to take during high school. Getting involved in school activities helps with learning new things.

Never stop reading
Reading is important because it increases learning and comprehension. Avid readers become better writers and develop higher-level language and critical thinking skills.

School work and standardized tests are important, so students should do their best. Get help from a teacher or tutor if things get difficult.
Taking summer classes is a great way to get ahead and explore interests. Ask the school counselor to see what’s available. Also try some casual or academic reading. Get book recommendations from an English teacher or librarian.

Taking college prep courses
Consider challenging courses, like honors, Advanced Placement and dual enrollment classes. Focus on the core academics: English, math, science, history and foreign language. Rigorous courses that go beyond the minimum graduation requirements make a more prepared applicant and can be a way to earn college credit while in high school.

Taking career interest tests
There are many tests designed to help students find careers they would excel at and enjoy. High school counselors can answer questions about and administer career testing.

Meeting with a guidance counselor
Get to know the guidance counselor early on and meet with them regularly. Check in with them about classes, grades and campus opportunities for students. They can help navigate the high school journey and planning for college.

Actively start planning to go to college
Conversations about going to college and how to pay for it are important. Make sure everyone is comfortable with the plan and on the same page of the decision-making process.

Focusing on grades
High school transcripts are an important part of a college application. Good grades will distinguish applicants from each other and are a way to earn money for college.

Getting involved in extracurricular and leadership activities
Students can try several different extracurricular activities to find out which ones are most interesting.

Tracking accomplishments
It can be difficult to remember every accomplishment when filling out applications for colleges, financial aid and scholarships. Create and maintain a list of academic and athletic awards, extracurricular activities, volunteer work and community service.

Continuing to save for college
Even if only $50 is saved each month, every little bit helps, and creating a college savings account makes the idea of going to college feel much more real.
Sophomore

Staying involved in extracurricular activities
Consider student government, theatre, clubs, sports, the school newspaper or yearbook, or community service. Try new and different activities as a way to explore talents and interests.

Learning about colleges
Start researching schools. Get familiar with college options, cost and available majors by searching online. Learn more about financial aid opportunities. Begin to put together a list of schools.

Taking practice tests
Begin preparing for the SAT and ACT. It’s a good idea to take a full-length practice test of each and use the results to help decide which one is the best fit. There are tons of PSAT practice tests available online. PSAT and PreACT scores aren’t used for college admission. Many students take their test of choice two or three times, with the final test in early fall of their senior year.

Looking for summer growth opportunities
Summer is a great time to earn extra money for high school and college expenses. Volunteering and getting a job or internship are ways to explore different career fields, gain job experience and learn to work with others.

Asking college students you know
Talk to a current college student who’s home for the summer. Most colleges offer similar experiences, but it’s helpful to get a genuine perspective, especially if they go to a school being considered. Ask questions that are hard to find real answers to anywhere else.

Searching and earning scholarships
Begin learning about financial aid. Though most scholarships are available to juniors and seniors, there are some scholarships available to all high school students. Look into Niche, ACT, The College Board and RaiseMe.

Two of the things admission officers look for when reviewing a transcript are course difficulty and performance consistency — not just good grades, but the ability to maintain steady grades.
Taking the PSAT
Take the PSAT in October to practice for the SAT and qualify for the National Merit Scholarship program. High school counselors have information about dates and registration. Test takers are put on college mailing lists and will begin receiving information from various universities.

Visiting local colleges
Even if these schools aren’t on the top of the list, visiting local colleges will provide a sense of what college is like.

Creating a resume
Outline academic accomplishments, extracurricular activities and work experiences since the start of high school.

Participating in extracurricular activities
Colleges like well-rounded students, especially if they display consistent involvement or take a leadership role. Try the debate team, academic teams (math, robotics, decathlon), music or visual arts.

Making an official college list
Start reviewing schools. Attend college fairs, speak with college reps and request information from universities online to begin formulating an opinion of where to go. Continue this process throughout junior and senior year.

Taking SAT subject tests for courses ending in the fall
SAT subject tests, required for some colleges, are best taken immediately after completing the relevant class and while the material is still fresh.

Refining list of colleges
Identify, prioritize and categorize 10 to 15 colleges. Consider a wide range of schools, both local and out of state. Include safety schools and target and reach options. Continue updating this list throughout junior year and at the beginning of senior year.

Taking the SAT or ACT
Take the SAT or ACT for the first time. Plan to take the test again the spring of junior year or fall of senior year. If the cost of the test is a concern, guidance counselors can provide a fee waiver.
Think about how summer work will look on a college application, and fill in any missing activities by seeking out those opportunities.
Determining application deadlines
Early decision and early action applications are generally due by November of senior year. Most regular admission applications are due between January 1 and March 1. Confirm the dates for each target school. The Common App, usually available at the beginning of August, will consolidate the deadlines.

Reaching out to recommendation writers
Recommendation letters are part of college application requirements, so beat the rush by contacting those writers early (teachers, coaches, mentors) so they’ll have time to prepare and meet fall deadlines. Explain why they were chosen as recommenders and offer examples of why they should write a positive letter. Provide an academic record outline and extracurricular activities.

Outlining costs and a financial aid plan
Use tuition and financial aid calculators (also called net price calculators) on college websites to determine how much is usually needed to contribute to a college education. Create a list of tuition costs and all financial aid options to pursue. Add any deadlines for each.

Applying for scholarships
Apply for about 30 scholarships. Don’t shy away from smaller amounts or applications that require essays. Begin applying between junior and senior year and continue throughout the school year.

Beginning college application essays
Tailor each college application essay to the individual school. Review essay prompts as soon as possible and spend some time outlining responses before sitting down to write.

Prepping for a college interview
Identify colleges being considered that may offer optional interviews and practice with a teacher, counselor, mentor, parent or friend.

Visiting target colleges
Visit a few of the top-choice schools. Travel to the campuses to visit residence halls, classrooms and libraries. Check college websites for details on info sessions, tour dates and interview opportunities.

Narrowing the list of colleges
Begin to finalize a top-10 list. Meet with a counselor about potential college choices and plan to visit as many of these colleges as possible.

Visiting colleges and universities gives access to the best insights — these will be helpful if there are multiple offers to consider and tough decisions to make.
Stay organized by marking a calendar with important dates like financial aid workshops, early and regular decision application deadlines, test dates, and scholarship deadlines.

Meeting with a school counselor
Talk with a school counselor about class scheduling, application deadlines, and any transcripts or letters that should be sent to colleges. Provide a list that includes first and last name so that the counselor can remember specific requests easily. Also ask for help requesting fee waivers for application or test fees.

Making a final list of top colleges
Decide on five to 10 colleges to apply to. Include reach and safety schools. Look into the fees associated with each application, and consider using the Common App to apply to multiple schools.

Completing all college essays
The college essay is an important part of the application process. A teacher or parent can proofread essays for mistakes and provide feedback.

Preparing for early decision, early action or rolling admission deadlines
Some colleges offer early admission for students who submit test scores and applications between October 1 and November 30.

Finishing and submitting college applications
Submit applications online. The majority of decisions are made in March and April, although schools with rolling admission may send decisions sooner.

Taking the SAT or ACT
Many seniors retake the SAT or ACT in the fall. Coursework completed since the last test could help boost performance and score. Plus, students already know what to expect on test day. Have scores sent to the top-choice colleges.

Applying for financial aid
Fill out the FAFSA and submit it as soon as possible after October 1 to receive financial aid. Talk with a counselor about financial aid workshops to learn more about filing the FAFSA. Also find out if any schools of interest use the CSS PROFILE (to determine eligibility for university aid) and if so, file it online.

Continuing to make campus visits
Make plans to visit any colleges in the top five not yet visited. Take the campus tour, but also wander around alone. Sit in on a class of a subject that seems interesting. Speak with teachers, students, school admission counselors and financial aid staff. If visiting is not possible, look for virtual tours and online college forums.

Gathering letters of recommendation
Now’s the time to approach teachers and counselors for recommendation letters or to follow up on previously requested letters.

Sending transcripts to colleges
Give counselors the proper forms for sending transcripts at least two weeks before colleges require them.
Keep track of all applications and scholarship confirmations, and organize information as applications and essays are finished and sent.
Waitlisted by a college? Be clear about intentions to enroll if accepted. Talk with the admission director and request application feedback. Ask whether funds will be available. Work with a counselor to resolve any admission or financial aid issues.
Taking summer college classes can help first-year students prepare for upcoming college-level courses, or provide a jump-start on required classes. Fall admission usually allows students to take classes the summer prior.

**Signing up for orientation**
Attend an on-campus or online orientation to learn the first-year basics and register for classes.

**Figuring out living arrangements**
If not living at home, confirm on-campus housing assignment and make a connection with a new roommate or locate off-campus housing.

**Making a list of what to bring to college**
Put together a list of things to take to the college dorm room or apartment. Learn about any housing rules and furniture restrictions.

**Making travel plans if school is far away**
Decide on how to get to college and the best time to arrive.

**Purchasing items needed during the first year**
Prepare for academic and personal needs. Purchase big-ticket items and weather-conscious clothing.

**Preparing to begin college**
Share the good news. Be sure to let extended family, friends, employers and others know about college plans. That way they can prepare for the change as well.