

College Guide for Students and Parents

College preparation for 9th graders

College seems a long way off in 9th grade, but you need to start thinking about it seriously now. The reason is simple -- your 9th grade academic and extracurricular record will be part of your college application. The primary advice for 9th grade is this: keep your grades up, and be active outside of the classroom. The list below outlines these points in more detail.

1. Meet with your High School Counselor

Your high school counselor will have an informal group meeting with you to introduce you to the 4 year plan. An Informational Night for high school students and parents is held at the beginning of each school year. The counselor will talk about the steps to attending college in the United States.

2. Focus on Grades

Grades matter in your freshman year. No part of your college application carries more weight than the courses you take and the grades you earn. College may seem like it's a long way off, but bad freshman grades might hurt your chances of getting into a selective college.

3. Get Help if You Need It

If you find you're struggling in a subject, don't ignore the issue. You don't want your difficulties with any subject in 9th grade to create difficulties for you later in high school. Ask your teachers for extra help if needed.

4. Extracurricular Activities

By 9th grade you should be focusing on a couple of extracurricular activities that you're passionate about. Colleges are looking for students with varied interests and evidence of leadership potential; your involvement in activities outside of the classroom often reveal this information to the college admissions folks.

5. Read a Lot

This advice is important for 7th through 12th grades. The more you read, the stronger your verbal, writing and critical thinking abilities will be. Reading beyond your homework will help you do well in school, on the ACT and SAT, and in college.

6. Don't Waste Your Summer

While it may be tempting to spend your whole summer sitting by the pool, try to do something more productive. Summer is a great opportunity to have meaningful experiences that will be rewarding for you and impressive on your college application. Travel, community service, volunteerism, sports or music camp, and employment are all good options.

College preparation for 10th graders

Your college applications are still a couple of years off when you start 10th grade, but you need to keep your long-term goals in mind. Work on keeping your grades up, taking challenging courses, and gaining depth in your extracurricular activities.

1. Continue to Take Challenging Courses

Your success in challenging academic courses provides the college admissions folks with the best evidence of your ability to succeed in college. Throughout high school, your academic record is extremely important. Work on self-discipline and time management in an effort to earn the highest grades possible.

2. Put Effort Into Extracurricular Activities

By the time you apply to colleges, you should be able to demonstrate **depth** and **leadership** in an extracurricular area. Colleges will be more impressed with the applicant who played first-chair clarinet in the All-State Band than the applicant who took a year of music, a year of dance, three months of chess club and a weekend volunteering at a soup kitchen. Think about what it is that you'll bring to a college community. A long but shallow list of extracurricular involvement really doesn't amount to anything meaningful.

3. Take the PSAT 10

The PSAT 10 is one of the SAT suite of assessment tests which we offer at GISSV. The consequences of doing poorly are zero, and the practice can help you figure out what type of preparation you need before PSAT and SAT time in your junior and senior years. The PSAT won't be part of your college application, but be sure to read why the PSAT matters.

4. Take SAT II and AP Exams as Appropriate

You're more likely to take these exams in your junior and senior years, but it is appropriate for native speakers of a language to take the foreign language subject test in the 10th grade. We recommend the **Languages with Listening** rather than the **Languages Reading Only** test. It is offered only once a year in November. The German AP Language and Culture exam can also be taken in 10th grade.

5. Visit Colleges and Browse the Web

Your sophomore year is a good time to do some low-pressure exploration of the college options out there. If you find yourself near a campus, stop by and take the tour. If you have more than an hour, look online for college visit tips to get the most out of your time on campus. Also, lots of schools offer informative virtual tours on their websites. This preliminary research will help you make good decisions in your junior and senior years.

6. Scholarship Search

Even though many of the merit scholarships are for juniors and seniors, start looking at scholarship websites and literature to find out what is out there. Ask your counselor for a list of the most popular scholarship websites.

7. College Fairs

These are a wonderful way to be exposed to a lot of different colleges at one venue. Try to attend the local College Fair held at one of the Palo Alto high schools in October. Check with your counselor or online to see when and where the WACAC College Fair is held each year.

8. Keep Reading

This is good advice for any grade. The more you read, the stronger your verbal, writing and critical thinking abilities will be. Reading beyond your homework will help you do well in school, on the SAT and ACT, and in college. You'll be improving your vocabulary, training your ear to recognize strong language, and introducing yourself to new ideas.

9. Have a Summer Plan

There's no formula for what defines a productive summer, but you should make sure you do something that leads to personal growth and valuable experiences. The options are many: volunteer work, a summer program at a local college, sports related activities, apprenticing with a local politician, living with a host family abroad, working in the family business... try to plan your summer so as to maximize your opportunities.

College preparation for 11th graders

In 11th grade, the college preparation process accelerates and you need to start paying careful attention to looming deadlines and application requirements. Realize that in 11th grade you don't need to choose exactly where to apply yet, but you do need to have a plan mapped out for achieving your broad educational goals.

1. In October, take the PSAT/NMSQT

Colleges won't see your PSAT scores, but scoring highly on the PSAT test can result in NMSQT candidates. <http://www.nationalmerit.org/nmsp.php>. Also, the exam will give you a good sense of your preparedness for the SAT. Take a look at some college profiles and see if your PSAT scores are in line with the SAT ranges listed for the schools you like. If not, you still have plenty of time to improve your test-taking skills. Take Advantage of AP courses. No piece of your college application carries more weight than your **academic record**. If you can take AP courses in 11th grade, do so. If you can take a course at a local college, do so. Your success in upper-level and college-level courses is a clear indicator that you have the skills to succeed in college.

2. Keep Your Grades Up

11th grade is probably your most important year for earning high grades in challenging courses. If you had a few marginal grades in 9th or 10th grade, improvement in 11th grade shows a college that you've learned how to be a good student. Many of your senior year grades come too late to play a big role on your application, so junior year is essential. A drop in your grades in 11th grade shows a move in the wrong direction, and it will raise red flags for the college admissions folks.

3. Assume a Leadership Role in an Extracurricular Activity

Colleges like to see that you're a band section leader, a team captain or an event organizer. Realize that you don't need to be a prodigy to be a leader -- a second-string football player or third-chair trumpet player can be a leader in fundraising or community outreach. Think about ways that you can contribute to your organization or community. Colleges are looking for future leaders, not passive bystanders. Remember also it is depth and not breadth of activities colleges are looking at.

4 In the Spring, take the SAT and/or ACT

Keep track of SAT registration deadlines and test dates (and ACT dates). It's a good idea to start taking the take the SAT or ACT in March of your junior year and then again once before the summer.. If you don't get good scores, you can spend some time in the summer building your skills before retaking the exam in the fall. Colleges consider only your highest scores. Remember October is the last time for Early Decision students to take the SAT and have it count for colleges the following year. Talk with your counselor to plan a test schedule which includes which tests to take and when.

5. College Fairs

These are a wonderful way to be exposed to a lot of different colleges at one venue. Try to attend the local College Fair held at one of the Palo Alto high schools in October. Check with your counselor or online to see when and where the WACAC College Fair is held each year.

6. Visit Colleges and Browse the Web

By the summer of your junior year, you want to begin creating the list of colleges to which you'll apply. Take advantage of every opportunity to visit a college campus. Browse the web to learn more about different types of colleges. Read through the brochures you receive in the spring after taking the PSAT. Try to figure out if your personality is better suited for a small college or large university.

7. In the Spring, Meet with Your Counselor and Draft a College List

Once you have some junior year grades and your PSAT scores, you'll be able to start predicting which colleges and universities will be reach schools, target schools and safety schools. Look over the college profiles to see average acceptance rates and SAT/ACT score ranges. For now, a list of 15 or 20 schools is a good starting point. You'll want to narrow down the list before you begin applying in senior year. Meet with your guidance counselor to get feedback and suggestions on your list. The Common Application includes a Search Engine for Colleges and will match your interests, ability, preferences to colleges.

College preparation for 12th graders

Senior year is a busy and extremely important time in the college admissions process. This is your last chance to get the ACT and SAT scores you need, and senior year is when you have to narrow down your college options to the handful of schools to which you'll apply. You'll need to get your college essay written, line up your letters of recommendation, and apply for financial aid. During the application process, you'll need to keep active in extracurricular activities and maintain high grades.

1. Summer before Senior Year

Come up with a preliminary list of colleges that includes reach, target and safety schools.
Explore the websites of the colleges that interest you to learn about admissions requirements.
Look over the Common Application and begin thinking about potential topics for your personal essay.

2. September

Register for October or November SAT and SAT Subject tests (check SAT dates).
Meet with your guidance counselor to discuss the colleges to which you're thinking of applying.
Request letters of recommendation, especially if you are applying early.
Visit campuses and interview with college admissions representatives.
Create an account with The Common Application if the colleges you've selected use it.
Pay particular attention to Early Decision, Early Action, and preferred application deadlines.
If appropriate, register for the October ACT exam.
Work on your college essays.
Try to assume a leadership position in an extracurricular activity.
Work to strengthen your academic record.

3. October

Take the SAT, SAT Subject exams, and/or ACT as appropriate.
Continue to research schools to narrow your list to roughly 6 - 8 schools.
Take advantage of college fairs and virtual tours.
Complete your applications if you are applying early decision or early action.
Research financial aid and scholarships. Do your parents' places of employment offer college scholarships for employee children?
Get your college essay in shape. Get feedback on your writing from your counselor.
Request your high school transcript and check it for accuracy.
Keep track of all application components and deadlines: applications, test scores, letters of recommendation, and financial aid materials. An incomplete application will ruin your chances for admission.

4. November

Register for the December SAT or ACT if appropriate.
Take the November SAT if appropriate.
Don't let your grades slide. It's easy to be distracted from school work when working on applications.
Make sure you've submitted all components of your applications if you are applying to colleges with November deadlines for early decision or preferred application.
Put the final touches on your application essays, and get feedback on your essays from your counselor

5. December – January

Complete your applications for regular admissions.

Make sure you've had your test scores sent to all colleges that require them.

Confirm that your letters of recommendation have been sent.

Submit the FAFSA (Free Application for Financial Aid).

If you are accepted to a school through Early Decision, be sure to follow directions carefully. Submit required forms, and notify the other schools to which you applied of your decision.

Continue to focus on your grades and extracurricular involvement.

Continue to keep track of all deadlines and application components.

Continue to research scholarships. Apply for scholarships well in advance of deadlines.

6. February – March

If you submitted the FAFSA, you should receive the Student Aid Report (SAR). Carefully look it over for accuracy. Errors can cost you thousands of dollars.

Contact colleges that didn't send you a confirmation receipt for your application.

Don't put off applying to schools with rolling admissions or late deadlines -- the available spaces can fill up.

Keep your grades high. Colleges can revoke offers of admission if your grades take a nosedive senior year.

Some acceptance letters may arrive. Compare financial aid offers and visit campus before making a decision.

7. April

Keep track of all acceptances, rejections, and waitlists.

If waitlisted, learn more about waitlists and talk to your counselor. and move ahead with other plans.

If you have ruled out any colleges that accepted you, notify them. This is a courtesy to other applicants, and it will help the colleges manage their waitlists and extend the correct number of acceptance letters. Go to accepted student open houses if offered.

A couple circumstances may warrant an appeal of a college rejection.

8. May – June

Most schools have a deposit deadline of May 1st. Do not be late! If needed, you may be able to request an extension.

Prepare for and take any appropriate AP exams. Most colleges offer course credit for high AP scores; this gives you more academic options when you get to college.

Have your final transcripts sent to colleges.

Send thank you letters to everyone who helped you in the application process. Let your mentors and recommenders know the results of your college search.

Keep on top of procuring student loans. Notify your college if you receive any scholarships.

9. July - August after Senior Year

Read all mailings from your college carefully. Often important registration and housing material is sent in the summer.

Register for your classes as soon as possible. Classes often fill, and registration is usually on a first-come, first-served basis.

TRANSCRIPT AND CURRICULUM

Your high school transcript is the first application document colleges review in order to determine if you have the preparation and ability to succeed at their college. Colleges expect applicants to pursue a reasonably challenging curriculum, choosing courses from among the most demanding courses available. You should consult with your GISSV college counselor, your teachers, and your parents as you choose courses that are right for you, taking into consideration the many obligations and expectations you have both in and out of the classroom.

Overview of Curricular Requirements

Students are advised to review the admission requirements for individual colleges in which they have an interest and to consult with the GISSV college counselor when selecting, adding, or dropping courses. Colleges know that course availability and conflicting schedules often preclude students from taking a specific course of study, and in almost all instances prefer that students pursue a course of study that challenges them, allows them time for outside interests and family, and introduces them to new topics while allowing them to study in depth those topics they love.

UC and CSU Minimum Course Requirements

To satisfy the University of California minimum course requirements, students must complete the “a-g” high school courses listed below. At least 11 of the 15 courses must be completed by the end of the junior year. Note that these are the **minimum requirements**; courses taken that exceed these minimum requirements better prepare students for success at the college level and place the applicant in a stronger position for admission to the UC system.

(a) History / Social Science – Two years, including one year of world history, cultures, and historical geography **and** one year of us history or one-half year of us history and one-half year of civics or American government.

(b) English – Four years of college preparatory English that include frequent and regular writing, and reading of classic and modern literature.

(c) Mathematics – Three years of college preparatory mathematics that include the topics covered in elementary and advanced algebra and two- and three-dimensional geometry. 4 years recommended by UC

(d) Laboratory Science – Two years of laboratory science providing fundamental knowledge in at least two of these three disciplines: biology, chemistry, and physics. 3 years recommended by UC

(e) Language Other Than English – Two years of the same language other than English. 3 years recommended by UC

(f) Visual & Performing Arts – One year, including dance, drama/theater, music, or visual art.

(g) College Preparatory Elective – One year (two semesters), chosen from additional “a-f” courses beyond those used to satisfy the requirements above, or courses that have been approved solely for use as “g” electives.

STANDARDIZED TESTS

Standardized tests are part of what colleges consider when evaluating your application. In nearly every instance colleges place far more emphasis on the high school transcript, including the rigor of the courses you have taken as well as the grades earned in those courses, than they do on your test scores. This is not to imply that test scores have no value in the process, but it does underscore that your course selection and grades are more important, and that the way you think, how you approach your studies, and how you choose to spend your time outside the classroom all contribute to the strength of your application. GISSV is not a test site for any of the standardized tests except the PSAT. You will take the ACT, SAT, and Subject Tests at a location of your choosing when you register online.

Test Descriptions

The PSAT: The Preliminary SAT/National Merit Scholarship Qualifying Test (PSAT/NMSQT) measures the skills students have developed over time, including critical reading skills, math problem-solving skills, and writing skills, mirroring the areas tested on the SAT. The PSAT/NMSQT is the best preparation for the SAT. Students at GISSV often take the PSAT twice: in October of tenth grade and October of eleventh grade, in order to gain important standardized test-taking skills that will serve them well in the college application process. PSAT scores are not sent to the colleges and do not factor in the college admission decision whatsoever. Scores from the eleventh grade test are used to determine eligibility for the National Merit Scholarship Program.

The SAT: The **Redesigned SAT** (as of March 2016) is a standardized assessment of the critical reading, mathematical reasoning, and writing skills students have developed over time. The SAT is offered seven times a year and consists of four tests with the Essay being optional. It takes three hours and 50 minutes. The test includes three kinds of questions: multiple choice, student-produced responses (mathematics only), and essay. Usually the SAT is taken not earlier than March of the junior year, in order to capitalize on as much of the English and math curriculum as possible, and to further develop critical thinking skills. Many students will not take the SAT until May or June of the junior year, and then take it again in the fall of the senior year. Discussion with the GISSV counselor is important to **determine the best testing dates.**

Subject Tests: Students take Subject Tests to demonstrate their mastery of specific subjects. Tests are offered in Literature, U.S. History, World History, Mathematics Level 1, Mathematics Level 2, Biology-Ecological or Biology Molecular (one test, but the student selects which “track” to take during the test itself), Chemistry, Physics, Chinese with Listening, French, French with Listening, German, German with Listening, Modern Hebrew, Italian, Japanese, Japanese with Listening, Korean, Korean with Listening, Latin, Spanish, and Spanish with Listening. Most Subject Tests are offered six times a year and students can take one, two, or three tests on a single test date. Each Subject Test takes one hour and consists of multiple-choice questions, but some have unique features or formats. Subject Tests are machine scored, using a scale of 200-800, the same as the SAT. Students may not take the SAT and the Subject Tests on the same day, so you need to plan carefully with the counselor in determining test dates and college application deadlines. Colleges that require Subject Tests ask for two. If you are thinking of applying to engineering programs, you should plan on taking Math Level 2 and either Chemistry or Physics.

NOTE: Although the UC system no longer requires Subject Tests for admission, many programs of study within the UC system do; students must check with specific departments and majors.

Ø Subject Tests should be taken upon completion of the course that best prepares students for a given test, as these tests are content-driven and not tied to a specific year in high school.

The ACT: The ACT assesses general educational development and specific subject knowledge. Offered six times a year, the ACT is a multiple-choice test that covers four skill areas: English, mathematics, reading, and science. The ACT Plus Writing measures the same four areas plus has a section that measures skills in interpreting and responding to 3 perspectives on a given topic. Students who choose to take the ACT in addition to or in lieu of the SAT should take the ACT Plus Writing. All U.S. colleges now accept the ACT equal to the SAT.

AP Exams: AP (Advanced Placement) exams enable students to demonstrate their competence in college-level AP courses through three-hour exams in May. Offered in some 30 subjects, these tests contain objective and written sections, and, in the case of foreign languages, a listening and speaking portion as well. These tests are scored on a scale of 1-5, with 5 being the highest. Students with scores of 4 and 5 (in some cases 3) may be granted a higher course placement in college and/or some college credit, but credit is always awarded at the discretion of the college the student attends and according to that college's AP policy. AP exams were not designed for college admission purposes, although scores of 4 and 5 earned in the junior year can strengthen an applicant's file in terms of academic profile. **Students wishing to enroll in AP courses at GISSV need to discuss this with their subject teacher and counselor and sign a commitment contract with parents. Students who do not fulfill the requirements of the course may be asked to drop the AP course after a semester, following a discussion with parent, student and subject teacher.** AP exams in the courses we offer are given in May at GISSV.

When to Take the Tests

Sophomore Year: Sophomores should take the PSAT 10 in the spring window as practice. Usually no other standardized tests are necessary, although you could consider taking the Subject Test in German listening in November (offered only once a year)

Junior Year: Juniors should take the PSAT/NMSQT in October in order to qualify for the NMSQT, a national merit scholarship. You should then take the SAT in March, May or June of the junior year or the ACT Plus Writing in February, April, or June.. Look carefully at the subject test requirements from the colleges you apply to, and plan when to take these.

Senior Year: You should re-take the SAT or the ACT Plus Writing in the fall of the senior year, preferably in October, if you are not satisfied with your junior year scores. Take additional Subject Tests in the fall as needed .Keep college application deadlines in mind when registering for these tests, as in most cases the November test dates will not arrive in time for any early applications with deadlines in November or early December. We recommend taking the SAT or ACT Plus Writing twice, and three times at most.

Test Preparation

The first place to look for test preparation is on the College Board and/or ACT websites, both of which offer comprehensive materials and advice, including tips for taking the tests, sample questions, timed

tests and test scoring. This is free and can be accessed whenever the student wants. Many other college search websites provide free test preparation as well. The value of test prep courses offered by for-profit companies and tutors depends upon the motivation and receptiveness of the student, learning style, the individual tutor, time available, parent support, and so on. Most test prep courses and tutors are expensive and require a great amount of time, which can affect the student's ability to participate in co-curricular activities, complete homework, earn good grades, and can place more emphasis on a score than is warranted.

Testing Deadlines

SAT and SAT Subject Tests: The SAT is administered on seven national test dates, and the Subject Tests are administered on six national test dates: October, November, December, January, March (SAT only), May, and June. Registration deadlines are about six weeks before the test date. You should register online at the College Board website.

The ACT is administered on six national test dates.

Registration Dates and Deadlines:

<http://sat.collegeboard.org/register/>

<http://www.actstudent.org/regist/dates.html>

The choices you make in your activities outside the classroom, the time you spend on those endeavors, and the leadership roles you play in extra-curricular activities and nonacademic interests tell colleges a lot about you. Describing what you love about these interests in your application helps the admission committees discover your potential contributions to their communities, and brings an important perspective to understanding the full picture of who you are. It's not about the number of activities you can list on an application grid. Depth of experience in one or two activities may demonstrate your passion more than minimal participation in five or six clubs. The impact you have had on a club, in your school, or in the larger community--and the impact that experience has had on you--are of much more importance than a lengthy resume. Learn to choose from among your interests rather than running the risk of burning out on all of them. If you are a student-athlete interested in participating in sports at the varsity level at NCAA Division I and II schools, you should consult your GISSV college counselor early in your junior year, in order to ensure adherence with all NCAA rules and regulations. You must register with the NCAA Eligibility Center at the end of your junior year. College applications usually ask if you have worked, either in the summer or during the school year. Many students do work, but not all do, so if you have not yet had a paid job, don't worry. Colleges do not have an expectation that you will work. Summer provides time for you to explore new interests and/or delve more deeply into current ones.

The primary criterion for admission to college is academic excellence. Colleges look for your preparation and potential to succeed. They expect you to challenge yourself by taking a strong program throughout high school and earning good grades. The most important credential that enables a college to evaluate your academic record is your transcript. Remember, however, that the evaluation of your application goes beyond any numerical formula. Colleges want to see your commitment, dedication, and genuine interest in expanding your intellectual horizons. They want to see the kind of curiosity and enthusiasm that will allow you to spark a lively discussion in the classroom and continue the conversation in your dorm. They want to see the energy and depth of commitment you bring to your endeavors, whether that means in a class, while being part of a community organization, during a performance, or on an athletic field. They want to see the initiative with which you seek out opportunities that expand your perspective and that allow you to grow as a student and as a human being.

Teacher Recommendations

Most private colleges require one or two recommendations from teachers who have taught you in the 11th and/or 12th grades in one of the core academic subjects (English, math, foreign language, social studies, or science), though some will accept evaluations from earlier grades and teachers in other disciplines, in unusual circumstances and with permission. The teacher recommendation lets your colleges know what you are like in the classroom setting, and what their faculty can expect from you as a college student. Your teachers will write about your classroom participation, your writing, your critical thinking skills, your daily preparation, your attitude and how you approach learning, your ability to meet deadlines, your attendance, how you contribute to the classroom, how your thinking has matured, and how you have developed as a student over time, among many other aspects of your academic life.

It is the student's responsibility to know and track what the requirements are at each school to which she is applying. but a few simple guidelines are helpful: choose those teachers who know the most about your performance in an academic setting, and, if possible, with whom you have a solid relationship, in whose classroom you either excel or have made great progress after initially encountering some difficulty. Make sure to give your recommendation writers plenty of time—at least one month before letters are due—to complete and send your recommendations. You should let the teachers know early enough if you are applying under Early Decision or Early Action plans since they need the recommendations earlier. Above all, thank your teachers for taking so much time to support you in your college applications.

College Counselor Recommendations

Colleges also want to hear from your college counselor, who will write about you in the larger school context, not just in the classroom. The counselor at GISSV is closely acquainted with the students through meetings during the four years of high school ,through discussion with teachers and attendance at high school conferences and report card conferences. The counselor recommendation is submitted along with the Secondary School Report (SSR), your transcript, and the GISSV School Profile, which provides additional contextual information for interpreting your courses and grades.

Essays

It is in the college application, sometimes called the personal statement, where you are best able to distinguish yourself from other equally qualified applicants. Through your own writing, in your own voice, you are able to “talk” to the admission committee. It is here that you let them know who you are, what you value, how you think, what you think about, what excites or interests you, and what you would bring to their campus. The colleges want to discover who you really are. It is best to begin drafting your college essays early in the junior year, if nothing more than to become more comfortable writing about yourself and thinking about what matters most to you. Start by asking yourself a few basic questions: When the time comes, sit with your counselor to talk more about how to create the personal statement.

College Supplements

There are two broad types of supplements to a college application. One is the Supplement to the Common Application that a majority of member colleges require, and the other is an institutional or Common Application supplement that supports a specific area of interest or talent, such as athletics or the arts. Not all colleges accept such supplements, so it is your responsibility to research whether or not any of your colleges do. The required Supplement to the Common Application allows colleges to ask additional questions not covered in the basic application so they can better know you as a candidate and why you would be a good match (or not) for their college. Each college creates its own unique supplement. This supplement is often where admission committees learn the most about you, why you are interested in their particular college, and where you can (or will not) emerge as a compelling candidate. Supplements often require multiple short answers plus several additional essays. It is usually not possible, and certainly is not a good idea in general, to use responses to supplement questions for one college when completing the supplement for a different college. Keep in mind that supplements take time, so do not wait until December Break to complete them, as your responses will not be as well thought out as they really need to be as you rush headlong to the deadlines. Do not make the mistake of thinking that because it is easy to apply to multiple colleges using the Common Application you can simply add on a few more colleges at the last minute—the supplements will require a lot of time and energy, and if you don’t invest in the supplements, the colleges will know that and the decision will most likely not be in your favor.

The second type of supplement is the Athletic Supplement and the Arts Supplement. The Athletic Supplement is for students who are looking to play or even are thinking about playing varsity sports at the NCAA Division III level. This form is not intended for Division I and II athletes, who follow an entirely different process. The Arts Supplement is for visual and performing artists who have achieved at a high level and want colleges to review their portfolios or auditions as part of the admission process.

Deadlines for College Applications

Early Decision (ED): Students make a commitment to a first-choice institution where, if admitted, they definitely will enroll. Applications are typically due around Nov. 1, students learn of their decision by mid-December, and they must deposit and enroll if offered admission. Some qualified candidates will be deferred to Regular Decision for consideration in the standard admission cycle, while some may be denied at this time. In both instances, applicants are then free to apply to other colleges.

Early Action (EA): Students apply early, usually around Nov. 1, and receive a decision well in advance of the institution's regular response date, usually around the middle of December. Applicants are free to apply to other Early Action colleges as well as Regular Decision and Rolling Admission colleges, whatever the decision, and have until May 1 to respond to an offer of admission.

Restrictive Early Action (REA): Students apply to an institution of preference early, usually around Nov. 1, and receive a decision early, usually in mid-December. They are restricted from applying ED or EA or REA to other institutions. If offered admission, they are under no obligation to enroll, and have until May 1 to confirm. Some qualified candidates will be deferred to Regular Decision for consideration in the standard admission cycle, while some may be denied at this time. In both instances, applicants are then free to apply to other colleges.

Regular Decision (RD): Students submit an application by a specified date, anywhere from Dec. 15-Jan. 15 typically, and receive a decision in a clearly stated period of time, usually on or before April 1. Students have until May 1 to reply to offers of admission.

Rolling Admission: Institutions review applications as they are submitted and render admission decisions throughout the admission cycle. Applications close when the class is full, which may be at any time during the admission cycle.

National Candidate's Reply Date: Most colleges in the U.S. require admitted students to reply to an offer of admission (whether yes or no) by May 1; many colleges require a deposit with a commitment to enroll; students may deposit at only one college, but can remain on another college's waiting list as well. Remember: submitting your deposit late or not at all can mean the loss of your spot at the college of your choice.

College Visits

A campus visit is the best opportunity to get a firsthand view of a college. To really get a feel for the school, you need to walk around the quad, sit in on a class, and visit the dorms. Campus visits may not be a possibility for every family, but it is very beneficial to visit some of the schools that you are most interested in attending. If you can visit only one time, save your visit until you have been offered admission and then visit in April of your senior year. At the very least, use local resources, even if you aren't considering any of the colleges in the immediate area. You may be surprised by what you learn when you visit and add a local school to your list. of colleges in order to get a feel for location, size, and other broad characteristics in general. You can narrow your focus later.

Get Answers to Your Questions

A visit gives you the chance to talk to students, faculty, and financial aid and admissions professionals. You can get answers to your questions, such as: What is the average class size, and the student to faculty ratio? Are most classes taught by professors or by teaching assistants? Are the faculty accessible to undergraduates? What is the campus meal plan like? How is the food? Is there ample space in dorms or does there seem to be a housing crunch? What is the make-up of the current freshman class? Is the campus fairly diverse? What's the social scene like? How many students commute, and how many live on campus?

Pick up any official school material you see, such as brochures and financial aid forms. Don't forget to get business cards, too, so you will have a real, live contact if you have a question about admissions or financial aid and a person to write a thank you note to later. Student-produced material will give you a sense of what campus life is really like. Look around for newspapers and activity calendars.

How to Schedule a Visit

Many colleges use online registration for campus visits, while some colleges will accept or still prefer phone reservations, so check the website for each college you are considering visiting. Pick a time that's convenient for you and your family, but try to go when the college is in session, if at all possible. That way, you can sit in on a class or possibly stay in a dorm overnight. (Colleges rarely allow dorm overnights on weekends, and some colleges don't offer this at all.) You'll get a truer feel for the campus if you're there on a day when classes are in full swing. Many colleges will offer additional sessions in the summer months to accommodate families' summer vacations.

Don't worry if you can't visit while classes are in session, but do keep in mind that the campuses won't feel as vibrant when all the students aren't there, and you may not get a true sense of the place. Try not to let that affect your opinion of the school unfairly. But visiting even when classes aren't in session is better than not visiting at all. Perhaps you can go back at another time, if the college remains on your list and you are offered admission. In some of the larger metropolitan areas you will be able to include 2 colleges in a day, but don't forget to allow for rush-hour traffic and getting lost! Include some of the lesser-known colleges in an area that you aren't considering at this time; it's a great means of comparison, and you might be pleasantly surprised!

Parents: You will certainly be welcome to accompany your child on the campus tour, and the admissions office may also welcome you at a group information session. But remember that the campus visit is really meant to help your son/ daughter get a feel for the college. Your support is important to your child, but it is very important that he/she be able to explore the college on his/her own. If you're traveling as a family, you should plan to occupy other family members with alternative activities while your college-bound student explores the campus in depth. (And remember that prospective students should be at the front of the tours, with the tour guides, asking the questions, not the parents.)

Research the College

Do some research on the college before you arrive on campus, especially if you have an interview scheduled. Some colleges offer informational interviews in lieu of group information sessions; some colleges include the information session in the tour and offer a conversation with an admission officer as an option; some colleges require interviews, which are usually evaluative in nature. Know before you go! Review the school's course catalogs, and any other information of interest. Spend some time surfing the college's website to answer your own questions before you go; it doesn't make a good impression when you ask questions that you could have researched for yourself. Talk to currently enrolled students or alumni about the college. Make a list of what college characteristics are most important to you, so you know what to look for when you arrive.

Is This College Right for You?

You may discover, after visiting a college, that some of the qualities you thought were vitally important to you no longer are, and that other aspects of a college begin to gain importance in your search. Listen to your inner voice, or gut.

- Do you feel comfortable walking around campus? Do you click with the students and faculty?
- Are the dorms where you want to live for four years?
- Can you change your major, study off-campus, explore the curriculum before declaring a major?
- Will your classes be taught by faculty or grad students? Does that matter to you?
- Are classes taught in a way that supports your learning style?
- Do you feel at home here? Is this how you pictured college?

Many families find the financial aid process overwhelming, or assume they will not qualify for need-based financial aid, or do not understand that private colleges oftentimes are less expensive than public universities once financial aid is factored in. If you find yourself in one of these categories, read on!

Cautionary Note: If you remember only one thing about financial aid and scholarships, it is this: Never pay any person or organization or website vendor to do a scholarship search for you, or to fill out financial aid forms and applications for you. More often than not, such "services" are scams, despite how "official" their materials might look. There is a wealth of free information and search sites available to you.

Financial Aid 101

College costs continue to rise at schools across the nation. Fortunately, financial aid budgets have also grown. There is certainly competition for these funds, and you may wonder whether you will even qualify. The only way to find out is to apply for aid. Mandated by federal law, every college website now has a financial aid calculator that will project what amount of aid you might expect to receive at that college. Stated simply, financial aid comes in two basic forms: 1) Need-Based Financial Aid and 2) Non-Need Based Financial Aid (or Merit Aid). The former depends on your family's ability to pay; the latter is more frequently tied to academic, athletic, artistic, or some other college-defined achievement or ability. Need-based financial aid is determined by a "Federal Methodology" developed and approved by the U.S. government. The FAFSA (Free Application for Federal Student Aid) is the form you must submit in order to determine the amount your family (parents and student together) can contribute to the cost of college. It reviews your assets, income, and other financial and biographical characteristics, such as age of older parent, number of children in college at the same time. This amount is known as the Expected Family Contribution (EFC) and does not vary, regardless of the costs of different colleges. Many private colleges and universities also require families to submit either the CSS Profile, or a college generated form, both of which seek additional information about your family's financial situation. The colleges then use their own "Institutional Methodology," in combination with the Federal Methodology, to determine what your revised Expected Family Contribution (EFC) will be. To calculate your need, each college or university will take the total cost of attending their school, called the "Student Budget," which includes tuition, room and board, fees, travel, books, and miscellaneous personal fees, and will then subtract your EFC from that budget. The result is your family's "Demonstrated Need" at that specific college.

Some colleges will commit to meeting a family's full demonstrated need all four years, whether that need increases (e.g., another student enters college) or decreases (e.g., family wins the lottery). Other colleges will meet as much need as their endowments or financial aid policies allow, leaving families to fill in the remainder through other sources. (This is sometimes called "Gapping.") The financial aid offer is known as an "Award Package," whether that aid comes from 1) the federal government in the form of loans and work ("Self-Help") and/or grants ("Gift Aid"), or 2) the college you are attending, also in the form of work, loans, grants, and scholarships. Grants may be federal or institutional, but are essentially "free money"; you are not expected to pay the money back. College work/study or some form of campus employment is frequently offered as well, as colleges expect students to contribute to the cost of their own education. Loans may be offered to the student and even to the parents, whether subsidized by the federal government or not. Some of these loans include the Federal Stafford Loan, the Federal Perkins Loan, and the PLUS Loan. It is always important to review the Student Budget to determine if all anticipated expenses have been included (sometimes they are not, so comparing aid awards can be more difficult), and to see what the balance of Gift Aid to Self Help Aid is.

Remember: In applying for financial aid, families work with each college individually, and it is critical that all deadlines are met. You need to check with each school about what is required and when. It is important to remember the following: There are two "universal" dates for financial aid:

1) the FAFSA cannot be submitted until January 1 of the senior year, and generally should be completed no later than **February 1**

2) the Cal Grant GPA Verification Form for students applying for aid in California schools must be submitted no later than **March 2**.

Forms to Complete

FAFSA (Free Application for Federal Student Aid): An online form from the federal government required of all aid applicants at both public and private colleges and universities; the new FAFSA becomes available online on January 1 of your senior year and must be completed each year for which you are applying for financial aid. Deadline: February 1 of the senior year, in most instances, but check the requirements of each college.

CSS Profile: An online financial aid supplemental application found on the College Board website, required by many private colleges and universities, in addition to the FAFSA; usually available online in October of your senior year; there is a fee to submit the CSS Profile; the College Board automatically awards fee waivers based on the information you provide on the form. Deadline: Check the requirements of each college; Early Decision applicants will have to submit this in the fall.

GPA Verification Form: Required if you are applying for need-based aid at any college in California, under the Cal Grant program. You must also submit the FAFSA to be considered for a Cal Grant. Deadline: March 2 of the senior year.

SAR: The Student Aid Report sent to you after your EFC has been determined using the information submitted on the FAFSA; this indicates only what Federal Aid you might be eligible for, not what a financial aid award might look like, which will vary college by college.

Standardized Tests

The SAT

<http://www.sat.org/>

The ACT

<http://www.act.org/>

The College Board

<http://www.collegeboard.com/>

Financial Aid and Scholarships

The CSS/PROFILE Financial Aid Application

<https://profileonline.collegeboard.com/index.jsp>

FAFSA-Free Application for Federal Student Aid

<http://www.fafsa.ed.gov/>

FastWeb Scholarship Search

<http://www.fastweb.com/>

Overview of Federal Student Aid

<http://www.fafsa4caster.ed.gov/F4CApp/>

Scholarships Search-School Soup

<http://www.schoolsoup.com>

General Admission Information

The Common Application

<https://www.commonapp.org/>

The Unified Application for Conservatory Admission

<http://www.unifiedapps.org/>

The UC System

<http://www.universityofcalifornia.edu/admissions/>

The Cal State System

<http://www.calstate.edu/>

Colleges That Change Lives

<http://www.CTCL.org/>

College Prowler

<http://collegeprowler.com/>

U. S. Dept. of Ed. College Navigator

<http://nces.ed.gov/collegenavigator/>

Unigo—College Reviews by College Students

<http://www.unigo.com/>

National Survey of Student Engagement

<http://nsse.iub.edu/index.cfm>

Virtual College Tours

<http://www.ecampustours.com/>

For Athletes

NCAA Eligibility Center for Division I and II

<http://eligibilitycenter.org/>

NCAA College Search by Sport

<http://web1.ncaa.org/onlineDir/exec/sponsorship>

NCAA Information and Resources for Student-Athletes and Parents

http://eligibilitycenter.org/ECWR2/NCAA_EMS/NCAA.html

Gap Year Opportunities and Summer Programs

Source Site for Summer Enrichment and Gap Years

<http://www.enrichmentalley.com/>

Fine and Performing Arts Camps

<http://www.usperformingarts.com/>

Thousands of Jobs in Great Places

<http://www.coolworks.com/>

Gap Year Programs Around the World

<http://www.usagapyearfairs.org/index.html>

Books

Admission Matters: What Students and Parents Need to Know about Getting into College

Sally Springer, Jon Reider, and Marion Franck *Colleges That Change Lives* Loren Pope, Penguin Books

Fiske Guide to Colleges 2011 Edward Fiske

The College Book of Majors College Board

The Ultimate Scholarship Book Gen and Kelly Tanabe

Get Free Cash for College Gen and Kelly Tanabe

Fiske Guide to Getting Into The Right College Edward Fiske and Bruce G. Hammond *Best Colleges*

The Ultimate Guide To America's Best Colleges Gen and Kelly Tanabe

