

# Educational Planning Guide

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A Road Map for High School  
Students & Parents

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# Getting Started

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Throughout your education, you must learn how to navigate a series of decisions and choices. From looking for an edge on your next test to needing guidance as you apply for college, you want to feel confident and in control.

Planning is essential to setting and realizing goals, so you can make the best decisions for yourself. Although identifying and managing your options can be confusing, help is available to you. An educational planner can support you through the benefit of one-on-one instruction and offer a tailored plan that will optimize your high school experience. Whether you are a freshman or even a senior, it is never too late to make good decisions.

In this guide, consideration has been given to both the milestones of the high school years and the key elements of a college application. As the road narrows and your vision of college becomes clear, you will be thankful that your good planning has put you in a good position. Preparation as early as freshman year will help you move confidently into your future.

The following pages offer a way to think about how to use each year of high school to put yourself in the best position for selecting – and being admitted to – a college that is right for you.

# Freshman Year

## The Year of Discovery

Welcome to high school! You're a freshman now and freshman year is about breaking ground, but even while you're adjusting and exploring new opportunities, your academic life is being recorded on your official transcript that one day will be sent to colleges. As a result, strategic planning should increasingly become a significant part of your daily routine. Managing your time becomes essential as preparing for tests, papers, and in-class projects becomes an exciting challenge. School becomes busy with responsibility and new possibilities, so prepare yourself for a fun and productive high school experience.

Take advantage of new opportunities and you will grow to recognize your strengths, interests, and passions along the way. Open yourself to academic endeavors, excel, and begin shaping your life—class by class, year by year. Practice making one good decision after another and you will find that you have created dynamic college options for yourself. Think about incorporating key building blocks into your freshman year experience

## Planning Ahead

Carefully plan your course schedule from the beginning. Think about how your course load will unfold over four years and begin creating a map for setting and accomplishing your goals. Seek advice and consider teacher feedback when you choose your classes. Grades are important in ninth grade, but rigor is key, so don't just go for easy A's. There's no way to over-emphasize the importance of good planning.

## Accepting Help

Ask for help when you run into trouble. If you earn a low grade, accept it as constructive criticism. Carefully read (or listen) to your teacher's comments and figure out how to select and apply good advice.

## Getting Involved

In addition to academics, develop talents and interests outside the classroom. Times of change, such as the beginning of high school, are often the best times to try something new. Use your freshmen year to join the debate team, take up a new sport, explore theater (on-stage or behind the curtain as stage crew), rally for the

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recycling club, or create a unique cultural event. You will find school is more fun when you are involved, and your perk, may be that your preferred activity is just the detail that catches a college's eye.

## Identifying Your Friends

Put yourself out there. Find people who share your interests and even challenge yourself to go beyond your comfort zone. Your peer group is important, so choose yours wisely.

## Reading Voraciously

Whether books, newspapers, magazines, or blogs, choose what engages you and remember to look up unfamiliar words. Additionally, check out TEDtalks, YouTube videos, MOOCs, or micro-videos to stay up-to-date on subjects you find interesting. Read constantly and talk with your friends about information that is particularly interesting to you.

## Finding Mentors

You may be successful working on your own, but great success often involves the support of others. Let people in, especially your teachers. Meet upperclass students and ask them for advice since they have already lived through the first year.

## Creating Balance

It is easy to stay busy, so remembering to schedule downtime is key to staying fresh and productive. Strike a balance, and remember the importance of time with family and friends, not to mention keeping some space for yourself.

# Sophomore Year

## The Year of Refinement

Sophomore year is a keystone year. The transition from freshman to sophomore year of high school is rooted in refinement of the goals you have set. Decisions and choices reach a little deeper than before. Fine tune your curriculum and continue developing expertise in your abilities and talents.

Reflect on experiences from freshman year and identify academic and personal goals for the remaining years. What were your triumphs? What were your struggles? Of course, this is not a lifelong trajectory set in stone, but it is a way to deepen the school experience you began your freshman year.

Educational planning is critical now. As a sophomore, you face crossroads and choices. The selection process begins as you take the first steps toward your specific trajectory. It is a time to determine the right degree of rigor in the curriculum, commit to developing personal interests, and devise a plan for your remaining high school years that will ensure growth and reward.

Your journey through sophomore year will fine tune your academic interests, social dynamic, and individual passions. As you go forward, keep your focus on the key blocs described in the paragraphs that follow.

## Plan Your Curriculum Strategically

Every student needs a four-year plan to stay on track for graduation. Choices suddenly become plentiful. It is important to determine the degree of rigor, and think about strengths and challenges as you consider honors classes, AP courses, dual enrollment, or IB curriculum.

Carefully review your course selection. Seek out a trusted advisor, such as an educational planner to help you discern how your strengths and weaknesses apply to course selection. Not interested in a third year of foreign language? Many colleges put a premium on that as an indication of academic rigor. Eager to drop math? This is also an omission on your transcript that will be noticed by admission officials. Lacking a foundation in a key subject area might cast doubt on your application. If you decide to pass on the standard college prep path, be sure to replace it with a course that is equally challenging.

Incorporate challenge, but wisely. Engaging just the right amount of challenge will allow you to master difficult material with a sense of reward and accomplishment. This is the fine tuning that defines sophomore year.

## Select Key Activities

Sophomore year is a chance to review how you are spending your time. What changes are you envisioning? Take inventory of your personal interests and consider

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your strengths and passions. Ask yourself what clubs, organizations, and sports teams you enjoyed during freshman year? Keep a digital record of your pursuits and accomplishments including an activity list of clubs, hobbies, sports, work, volunteer, or camp experiences. Use this list to hone your time commitments to just a few main activities. Think about an area of expertise you want to develop further. It is a question of depth verses breadth, quality over quantity. Sophomore year lends an opportunity to devote more time to key activities and, in doing so, offers

valuable experience that may result in leadership roles. Commit to your highest interests and take them to a new level.

## **Look to Leadership**

Take a step in the direction of leadership and become a future standout in your chosen interests. This is the year to read voraciously, acquire great skill in writing, and speak up in class. By exercising your strengths and developing insight about the challenges your face, you will find your voice. Articulating and discussing your thoughts and ideas will bring clarity to the direction you want to take.

## **Take Practice Tests**

Practice makes (near) perfect and sophomore year is the year of the practice test. Consider your test strategy and begin to get some experience with the PSAT/ACT. Use your PSAT scores and other practice tests to get a sense of how you are doing and what kind of test prep you will need before you take the official test during junior year. If you are applying for testing accommodations, be sure to submit the proper application and documentation to the test agency. An educational planner can assist with the submission of this application.

## Consider College

Start a conversation with family, teachers, and an educational planner about the college experience. Visit a campus or two to gain perspective. Talk to recent graduates or students currently enrolled in college. Describe your academic interests to them because they may have valuable insights or advice for you. If you are a student-athlete, talk to your coach and research your potential opportunities as a recruit.

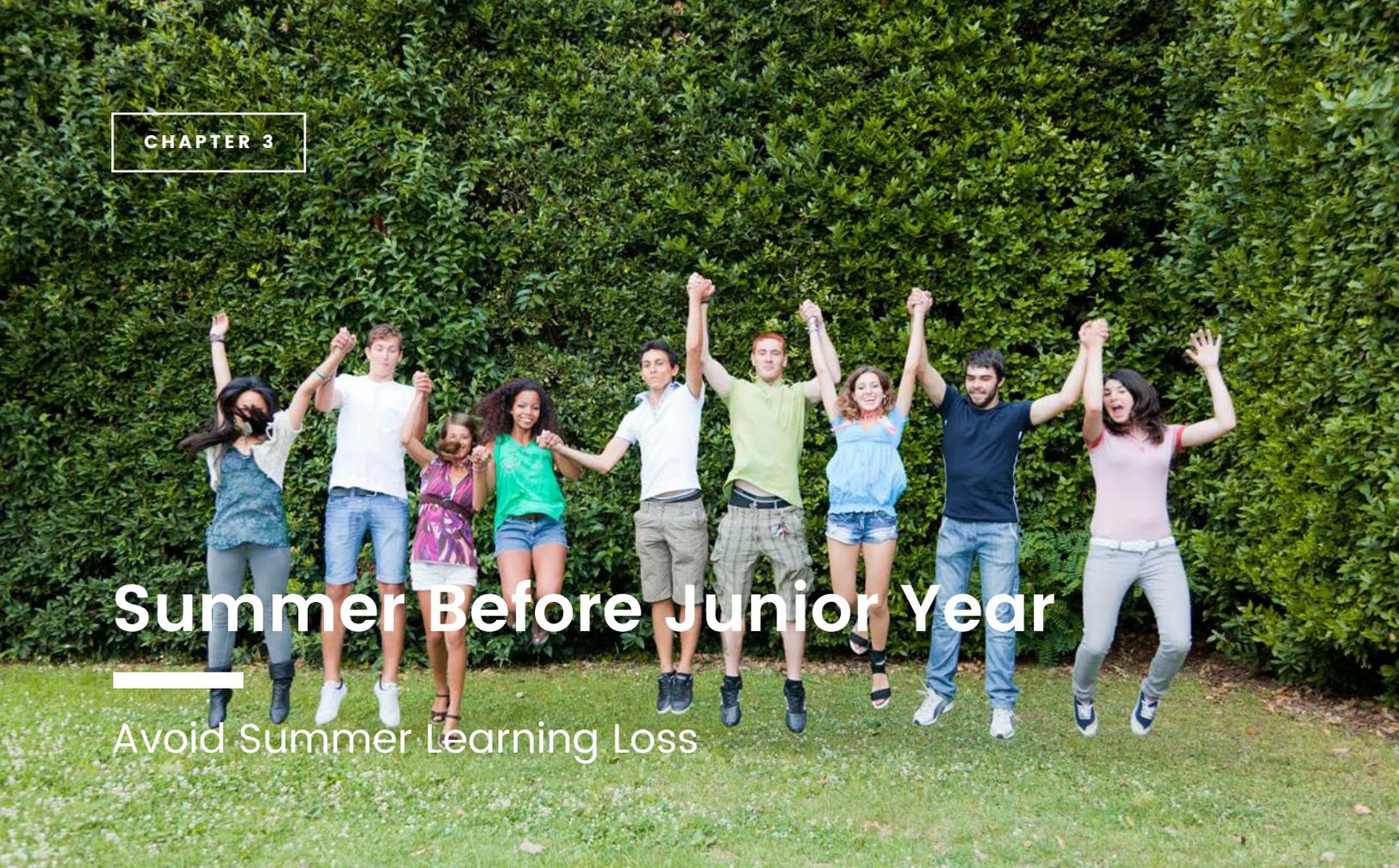
Finding the right match in a college requires a thorough investigation. There are many unique colleges and universities that serve the needs of all types of students. For example, schools may offer unique programs in a particular major or significant learning support for student who need accommodations.

## Live with Intention

As you increasingly focus on your specific interests and personal academic plan, you may find that friendships also take on a new shape. This second year is about seeking friends with whom you can share your thoughts. Rather than getting to know everyone, a tighter group may appear in your daily life. Make conscious choices about where to spend time, with whom to spend time; approach your life with intention. Manage your studies, invest in good sleep habits, and commit to a physically healthy routine.

## Cultivate Your Narrative

As you begin to emerge from all of the decisions you have made during your sophomore year, you will begin to see patterns in your choices. Your story is beginning to emerge. During the freshman and sophomore years, growth in knowledge and personal stories has given purpose and meaning to your high school experience. Your decisions, accomplishments, and activities have begun to shape your story.



# Summer Before Junior Year

## Avoid Summer Learning Loss

Education research confirms that learning loss over the summer months is a reality. The decline of academic knowledge and skills over the summer happens, but the good news is that it is preventable. The solution? Stay plugged in with an exciting, beyond-the-classroom experiential experience, and seek opportunities that will stimulate your mind.

Participation in a summer program can help you discover your authentic passions and strengths in addition to demonstrating a wise use of time. If you would like to pursue a particular academic subject or are curious about a new interest, dive in.

Find opportunities that will let you explore as well as reaffirm your interests. Consider these ideas during the summer months.

## College Programs for High School Students

Many colleges offer academic programs to high school students. Program guidelines may vary and include academic or age specifications, so read the application instructions carefully. The courses may be designed to introduce disciplines, such as engineering, medicine, creative writing, or they may offer multidisciplinary options. The duration of classes can range from one week to the entire summer. Although some will be offered for college credit, others are for pure enrichment and exploration.

The benefits of a summer college program include living on a residential campus, meeting a diverse group of people, and exercising independent judgment in shaping your daily routine. Note, however, that summer programs are independent of the college admissions process. The selectivity of summer programs usually does not correspond to the selectivity of the school's undergraduate admissions practice.

## Internships and Paid Work

An internship or a job may provide a brilliant opportunity for applying knowledge while gaining significant work experience. Internships and paid positions often require a resume and interview, both of which provide useful practice for the college application process.

Finding an internship or work opportunities can be difficult. Take advantage of your network of friends, teachers, or parents to connect with options that align with your interests.

## Volunteering and Service

Many high schools require or strongly recommend that students participate in community service. Think about opportunities that will take advantage of your strengths and appeal to your sense of adventure. If you enjoy the type of volunteer work asked of you, you will provide a better service to others.

# Junior Year

## The Year of Focus

Welcome to junior year, the most important year of the high school transcript. This will be the most recent full-year of grades submitted with your college applications. This is the year that highlights your mastery and expertise. The juggling act has begun as you manage AP classes, debate team, sports, and such, all while keeping in mind the end goal—college. You live in two time zones, present and future, and the key to success lies in the balance.

With the demands of coursework reaching a new high, you should be mindful of how you are doing in your classes. Focus and attention are required. This succession of weeks and months just may be the most dramatic and significant transition of

events before your final exit on graduation day. Step up the work in developing and refining your college admissions strategy.

At the junior year mark, two years of high school training is complete. When planning for the future, it is often useful to consider the past and define what has been most successful. Through your freshman and sophomore years, you have

explored and tested the rigor of coursework in different academic areas, and have experienced the reward of activities, and excitement of new friends. By reflecting on that history, you can learn much about your preferences and priorities and how each decision you have made along the way has been an expression of your unique take on life.

The groundwork is set and now is the time to continue to shape your path with intent.

The lessons learned through your consistent effort and good choices still apply. Work hard and create options for yourself. This will allow you to

forge a path for success that is right for you. As you move through your junior year, keep the following ideas in mind.

## **Increase Your Course Load**

Junior year is a time for widening and deepening your commitments, such as expanding your number of AP courses or gaining a leadership position. Know what is expected of you and try to stay one step ahead of your next project deadline.

Become expert in managing coursework and developing study skills. Junior year covers some ground: tough courses, the PSAT, SAT or ACT prep, college lists, campus visits, becoming a peer mentor, activities, portfolios, jobs, internships, summer pre-college courses, lists, recommendations, or auditions, just to name a few.

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## Take on Leadership Roles

Find deeper involvement in the activities you enjoy, especially in the form of leadership. It is great to show you have worked hard, are dedicated to an activity, and play well with others. Aim to leave a legacy, and make an impact that will last after you graduate. Step forward as a leader and explore pursuits that interest you. Be sure to update and polish your résumé because it will come in handy when you're filling out applications and preparing for admissions interviews.

## Maintain a Healthy Pace

Pace yourself, keep your balance, eat well, sleep, and exercise. The year may be intense, but think about what has worked for you thus far. Keep a check on what you can regulate, such as the best way to study (for you), your activity choices, and how you spend time with friends. Accept what you cannot control such as, your English teacher's method for grading essays, a standardized testing policy for Dream U, or the coach's required six a.m. practice on Saturday. Make single, good choices over an extended period of time and you will find yourself headed in the right direction.

## Nail the Standardized Test

Plan your testing calendar. Test scores and grades matter. Talk with an Educational planner to discuss which tests to take and how to best prepare for them. Consider the following tests.

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- **PSAT** – If your 10th-grade scores on this preliminary test put you in reach of a National Merit Scholarship, it might be wise to spend concentrated time practicing. Think of your results as a diagnostic. After you celebrate your areas of success, take a closer look at weaker areas to concentrate your practice in the weeks ahead.
- **SAT/ACT** – Take the SAT or ACT during the winter or early spring months. Do not worry if you do not get your ideal score because you can try again in late spring, summer or the fall of senior year.
- **SAT Subject Tests** – Tests may be required, recommended, or considered. Check the school testing policy for details. If not required, you may choose to take a subject test to demonstrate subject matter proficiency. A strong score may enhance your college application profile.

These tests are offered at the same time that the SAT is available—except for the March test date. In addition to test dates, check the list of subjects being administered on each date. The information is available at [www.collegeboard.org](http://www.collegeboard.org).

- **AP Exams** – If your junior year curriculum includes an AP or honors course, take the corresponding AP exam. The College Board posts online exams for practice.

## Visit College Fairs

Talk with the admission representatives, who are good future contacts. Ask questions and get to know the college firsthand.

## Develop a College List

Build your college list. Once you have received your test scores, talk to an educational planner and start putting together a list of target, reach, and safety schools. Make use of new technology and apps to aid your research. Explore college websites and online resources for college and financial planning such as [ed.gov/](http://ed.gov/) [finaid](http://finaid) and [usnews.com/best colleges](http://usnews.com/best-colleges).

## Visit College Campuses

Make time to be on campus. You may have already visited a few colleges to gain perspective. Consider taking careful notes of your preferences and any hesitations. The notes may be useful in evaluating schools and writing supplemental essays. Be sure to register to attend the information session and tour offered by the admissions department. Colleges may consider demonstrated interest as part of the application process, so it is important to show up and sign in.

## Advocate for Yourself

As you embrace the dynamic junior year, keep in mind that not all transitions are smooth. Expect a glitch or two. Remember to ask for help because true independence lies in the ability to articulate your needs.

## Ask for Recommendations

Ask two teachers if they are willing to write a letter of recommendation for you. It is a required part of most college applications. Choose teachers with whom you have a good relationship and who will effectively communicate your academic and personal qualities. You will want to select people who can offer different perspectives on your performance. To prepare you may choose to finalize your résumé and share a comprehensive look at your accomplishments with your teachers. Be sure to express your appreciation to them.

## Finalize your Senior Year Schedule

Finalize a rigorous senior schedule before you leave for summer vacation. Knowing what awaits you come September will help you to set clear, practical goals and create a successful working plan. Proper preparation and intentional course choices should give you a feeling of confidence as you contemplate your final year of high school.

## Plan the Summer Months

The intensity of the college application season can be managed through careful planning. Take a realistic look at your summer months and create a working schedule that makes sense for your life. Challenge yourself to find the balance in achieving your college application goals, while also spending pleasurable times with friends and family.

Set out for your paid job, internship, service position, sports camp or pre-college course and embrace the present. Being resourceful and managing your time are key to using the summer months to your advantage.

## Write College Essays

Summer is a great time to write your college essay. In addition to managing your daily activities, schedule precise times to write your college essay(s) and prepare applications. This exercise will take discipline because you will need to sit down and complete a number of drafts over several days or weeks. Incorporate writing into your summer schedule and remember that schools often have individual or supplemental essays in addition to the general college essay or personal statement.

## Portfolios and Multi-Media

Collections of paintings, poetry, sculpture, film, and other creative pursuits need to be carefully curated. Summer offers the perfect time to work on an artist's portfolio and demo videos.

## Review your Online Presence

Take an inventory of your social media content, polish your representation, and make your public profiles private. Review your online presence, delete questionable posts, celebrate your accomplishments, and present your strongest self. Your social media is likely to get a look from the college admissions representatives.

# Senior Year

## The Year of Consistency

It is true that junior year grades are paramount, but colleges do consider senior year transcripts. Work hard and continue to prepare because this fall will be the busiest yet. Colleges want to admit individuals who are committed, engaged, and exuberant participants in life.

Balancing standardized tests, athletic events, activities, jobs, family, friends, is now the focus. As you approach the finish line, consider these ideas.

### Keep Your Grades Strong

Second semester senior grades are part of the final transcript sent to your college choice. Stay academically strong. If you fall below the academic profile (GPA) for

the school that accepted, your you may be reevaluated. Senioritis may result in your being moved from admitted to wait list status. In addition, your second semester grades could be important in your movement from a wait list to an acceptance.

## **Continue College Research**

The fall of senior year may involve more travel and preparation as some schools require an interview. Will you be interviewing on campus, via Skype, or with a local alum? With the admissions staff or with a current student? Be very clear on the expectations of the colleges on your list.

## **Consider Testing Requirements**

If you are testing in the fall of your senior year, think carefully about your testing strategy. Review your college list and be clear about the testing requirements of each school. Are they test-optional, or do they require the SAT or ACT? Should you take the writing section or look into SAT Subject Tests? Does your engineering program require Math Level 2, Physics, or Chemistry subject tests?

By taking the tests in early fall, you will have time to apply early. Remember, early applications require early planning. Check the websites of your colleges to determine the last accepted test date for applications. Be sure to arrange to have your scores sent from the testing organization.

Colleges may be test-optional. Consult [www.fairtest.org](http://www.fairtest.org) for a list of test-optional schools. Be aware that some financial aid applications will require test scores. As always, be clear on the testing requirements and options for each of the schools on your list.

## **Check Your Transcript**

Obtain a copy of your transcript from your high school registrar and confirm that your grades are correct and your transcript is in order. Junior year is the most important year on your academic record so be sure your transcript is accurate,

current, and complete. This is the document that colleges will use to assess your academic performance.

Look closer. Have you displayed an upward trend that should be discussed? Is there an anomaly that needs context and warrants an explanation in the “Additional Information” section of the application?

## Know Your Deadlines

Narrowing the choice to attend one particular school may be an obvious path for some students. These students can submit an early decision (ED) application in the fall and receive an early response. This is a binding agreement that requires attendance if accepted.

- **Early Decision I & II (ED)** – ED I deadlines traditionally fall in November and ED II traditionally falls in January. This is a second round of a binding admissions program. Candidates must withdraw applications submitted to other schools, if admitted through the binding ED agreement. Check the school website for specific information related to the early decision program.

For many students, the college process requires a more expansive application strategy.

- **Early Action (EA)** – Students may submit early applications by the fall deadlines as outlined by individual school policy. This is a non-binding agreement.
- **Restrictive Early Action (REA) or Single-Choice Early Action (SCEA)** – Although the result is non-binding, under these programs, very specific restrictions are attached to early applications. Consult school policy for details.
- **Regular Decision** – The regular decision plan generally has a late December, January, or February deadline.

- **Rolling Admissions** – Colleges and universities will begin reviewing applications on a case-by-case basis as they are received.
- **Immediate Decision Days** – A few colleges designate immediate decision days by offering a quick response through a personal admissions review.

Study the options offered by the schools on your list. Be clear on each deadline, and your personal application strategy. Take note that even within one college, there may be different deadlines for different programs.

## Submit Applications

Does the school accept *The Common Application*, *The Coalition Application for Access, Affordability, and Success* application, or a school-specific application?

**Keep in mind that there is a strategic process to the application narrative.**

Preparing your applications takes careful thought and planning. Begin by reviewing the instructions for each school on your list. Make sure there are no errors, typos, or omissions on your application. Proofread carefully.

Keep in mind that there is a strategic process to the application narrative. This is an area critical to a student's application. It is wise to consult

with an educational planner to best approach issues, such as school changes and disciplinary issues, so the information is revealed holistically.

Check that your colleges have received your complete application. Be sure to monitor all communication including personal email and application portals. Manage your usernames and passwords with finesse by keeping a list.

## Review Financial Aid Awards

Check with each college for specific financial aid application requirements. Dates and forms may vary. Considering financial aid packages or merit scholarships takes time. Keep an eye on the details.

## Count Admission Notifications

Check the outcome in March and April (unless you applied early). Were you accepted? Congrats. Flat out rejected? Move on. Receive a different response, such as spring start or waitlist? Consult with your educational planner on your options.

As you evaluate outcomes, revisit your priorities, and review your current school options to determine your first choice from your admitted results. If applicable, research your chances of being moved from the wait list to admittance. Read the entire acceptance or denial letter. Be clear on the specific agreement into which you may be entering.

Keep in mind that schools may take all summer, until August 1, to make a decision about the wait list. This is the time to engage your best decision-making skills. Then, if your number does come up and you are offered a spot, you can confidently notify the college of your decision.

## Choose Your College

Finally, it is time to decide. Engage the decision-making skills you have cultivated over the last four years. Revisit your priorities, and review your current school options to determine your first choice. Try to visit or even revisit the colleges where you have been accepted. Talk with alumni or attend an accepted-student reception. Then confidently make your college choice official by sending in your deposit. You have until May 1, the National College Decision Day, to notify the school of your decision.

You are nearing the end of your high school journey, so now is the time for you to enjoy the anticipation of a great achievement—your high school graduation. You have come a long way and should be proud of what you have accomplished.

Graduation is a time for looking back and looking ahead. Your world will expand and the independence of college life will introduce a new network of friends, professors, and advisors. Interdependence becomes key as you develop new relationships, while keeping ties with your current friends and family. Move forward with confidence and enjoy a bright future.

# How PrepMatters Can Help

## Educational Planning Services

We know that effective educational planning demands a thorough review of the academic history, interests, and goals of each student. We demystify the process, helping students navigate their own educational paths and choices with individualized, trusted guidance.

## Take the Next Step

For additional information, call 301.951.0350 or email us at [info@prepmatters.com](mailto:info@prepmatters.com). Contact us to learn more about our 30-minute complimentary meet and greet.

## Getting Started

Successful educational planning requires knowing the student, knowing the schools, and knowing the current—and often changing—admissions landscape. How do we accomplish this?

We'll tell you.

At PrepMatters, all educational planning begins with a comprehensive assessment with one of our expert counselors. This is where our services begin. We will collect and review information essential to the planning process and engage the family as a fully committed partner. The Counseling Assessment culminates with strategic plan or road map. The plan will:

- Reflect a student's academic strengths
- Consider extracurricular and summer plans
- Include a strategy for standardized tests
- Identify prospective colleges that fit the student based on academics, social style, and admissibility



# About PrepMatters

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At PrepMatters, our one-on-one tutoring helps shape the way students approach standardized testing and educational planning. We know that the most important skill to cultivate when working with students is the ability to listen well and often. That's why we work hard to create a positive and supportive relationship with our students, helping them to feel comfortable being honest with us and with themselves.

By making sure students feel heard and by earning their trust, we're able to equip them with the tools and strategies they need the most on test day. With hard work and proper guidance, the road to success is clear.

**Better Scores. Better Choices.**

## Contact us:

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