

Financial Aid Bulletin

COLLEGE ADMISSION TIMELINE

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Parents: Know the College Admissions Timeline

The college admissions process can be tricky for any family, especially those going through it for the first time. Separate financial aid and admissions applications, multiple deadlines at each school, standardized exams, letters of recommendation, required essays, and, this year, changes to federal financial aid. No wonder you feel stress.

Here's the good news: starting early and staying ahead of the process can not only adequately prepare your student but also can make the process more fun for you and them. Yes, the college admissions process can be fun!

The college admissions timeline below is a great starting point to help you keep track of all the important deadlines and “to-do” items on the journey to college. Now, every student is different so it's important to note that this timeline may need to be adjusted depending upon their respective needs.

Freshman and Sophomore Years

While there aren't specific exams or deadlines yet associated with college admissions, these years lay the foundation for a great college application. In a sense, the college application is the story of a student's life over the first three years of high school: grades, extracurricular activities, community service, etc. With that in mind, students should focus on:

1. **Academics.** Getting good grades is very important. But while high marks are important, taking challenging courses, such as AP or dual credit courses, is equally important.
2. **Activities/Volunteering.** It's time to get involved! Extracurricular and community-based activities help students grow, allow them to pursue passions, and provide opportunities to develop important skills like teamwork and leadership. Picking 2-3 activities that show passion and a commitment of time is preferable to participating in many low-engagement activities.
3. **Get to Know the Counselor.** Every school district is different, but most assign school counselors near the end of sophomore or beginning of junior year. Guidance, college, and career counselors each know the college process and will be a big help and a great resource. They are also often spread very thin, so meeting with them as early and as regularly as possible is a good idea.
4. **Start Saving!** It's never too late to start saving for college. Putting money away – whether it's from a summer job or a gift – into a savings account for college is a great idea and could help reduce student loan debt in the future.

Junior Year

This is a big year! Although college applications won't be due until next year, there is a lot going on and the pressure to begin the college process will increase as the year goes on. In order to make the most of it, we recommend planning ahead: know what needs to be done and when.

1. **Academics.** With two years of grades in place, this is often a critical year in terms of taking challenging courses and maintaining a strong GPA.
2. **Activities/Volunteering.** Now is the time to step up and take on leadership roles where possible. These experiences will prove very useful when writing application essays as well as in college interviews. Taking notes and recording details like how many hours were spent each week on these activities will make filling out college applications that much easier.
3. **PSAT.** Most high schools offer the PSAT in October. The PSAT is not an entrance exam, but rather a great practice for the SAT and is used to select the prestigious National Merit Scholars, an academic scholarship program for top-performing high school students. Taking it seriously can pay dividends!
4. **SAT and/or ACT.** While some colleges may not require the SAT and/or ACT for admission, most still do and some use them for merit-based scholarships. Discuss the differences between each of the exams with the school counselor to determine which may best suit your student. Most students take the SAT and/or ACT more than once because colleges "super-score" the results, essentially taking the highest score in each area.

Tip 1: Test-Free vs. Test-Optional

If a school is Test-Free, that means that they do NOT accept SAT and/or ACT scores as part of the application. Test-Optional schools, on the other hand, will accept scores, but they are not required. Check each college's website to see which test, if any, that they require. FairTest.org is a great source for a list of current Test-Optional and Test-Free colleges.

Tip 2: Obtain Testing Accommodations Early

If your student has a diagnosed learning disability or is on an IEP, start the process for obtaining special test accommodations such as extra time, among others that are appropriate for your student.

5. **Start Visiting Schools.** Junior year spring break and the summer between junior and senior year are excellent times to visit potential colleges. When visiting, really try to get as close to the student experience as possible. Take a tour, go to a sports event, eat on campus, go to the bookstore, and ask current students what their experience has been. What do they like? What surprised them – positively and negatively. And then imagine yourself living there!
6. **Career Search.** While students don't have to figure out what they want to do today, they should start thinking about what they'd like to study in college and ultimately what they want to do after college.
7. **Keep Social Media Clean.** Colleges look at social accounts and have been known to withdraw acceptance letters based on what they see, so keep it clean. On the other side of the coin, social media can be very powerful as an opportunity to showcase passions and talents.

Senior Year

This is it! The finish line is in sight. It's incredibly important to not miss application or financial aid deadlines and to prevent grades from slipping.

1. **Retake the SAT and/or ACT.**
2. **Submit the Free Application for Federal Student Aid ("FAFSA").** Normally available on October 1, the FAFSA release has been delayed this year until December. Get more information about the FAFSA and when it will be available [here](#). The FAFSA determines the Student Aid Index. Read more about the Student Aid Index [here](#) and use [this free calculator to estimate your student's SAI](#).
3. **Get Ready to Complete Applications.** Prepare the following:
 - a. **Resume/CV.** Very handy when filling out the Common Application or an institution-specific college application. Include activities, leadership posts, awards, and hours spent each week.
 - b. **Application Essays.** The Common Application essays are available every year in August. Start them early; they take time to develop appropriately. Have them reviewed by a counselor or other trusted advisor.
 - c. **Target List of Schools.** A list of 7-10 colleges with some "safety" and "reach" schools is advisable. Determine if Early Decision or Early Action applications will be filed.
 - d. **Letters of Recommendation.** Three letters of recommendation with at least two from teachers and school counselors who can speak to character and academic abilities. Many students line these up before the summer of senior year.
 - e. **Transcripts.** Last, but not least, see the high school counselor about obtaining high school transcripts.
4. **Complete any Interviews.** Some colleges may require in-person or virtual interviews with alumni or admissions staff.
5. **Compare Financial Aid Packages.** Once you start hearing back from schools, you can start to determine which college offers the best financial, academic, and social fit for your son or daughter.
6. **Submit the Enrollment Deposit on or about May 1st.**

Now, it's time to celebrate! You and your student have accomplished a lot to deserve this moment. Take some time to enjoy it as you move onto this very exciting next stage of life.