



THADEN  
SCHOOL

COLLEGE COUNSELING

HANDBOOK

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# Philosophy





The process of selecting a college is a valuable and personal exercise — one which affords students the opportunity to further develop their interests, identify their unique gifts and talents, and consider their individual preferences and values. As your college counselors facilitate this process of self-discovery, we ensure that every Thaden student is equipped to navigate the college application process with confidence and receives ample individualized guidance along the way.



Thaden students learn that the primary objective of a sound college search is to identify potential colleges that best fit their needs. Finding a good college match means they will be putting themselves in the best possible position to reap the most from their undergraduate experience. In order to answer with confidence the question of what colleges would be a good fit in terms of size, location, academic offerings, student makeup, and the like, it is first necessary for Thaden students to reflect on who they are. What are their strengths, their interests, their values, their talents, their accomplishments? Honest self-reflection will allow students to put their needs front and center when evaluating potential college options. A well-curated application list is a product of considering the most appropriate — not the most prestigious — colleges for which one is competitive.

# Roles and Responsibilities



## STUDENT

- Challenge yourself in your curricular and co-curricular activities.
- Seek out and seize opportunities to develop talents and passions that are unique to you.
- Explore summer activities that extend and amplify your interests.
- Assess your goals and aspirations for your college experience.
- Work closely with the college counseling office, and communicate with your counselor about the colleges to which you are applying and the decisions you receive.
- Educate yourself about colleges/universities and make the most of visits — whether in-person or online — by contacting admissions offices, faculty in your academic area(s) of interest, and/or coaches.
- Utilize [Cialfo](#) as a resource to research colleges and manage applications.
- Know the requirements and deadlines of each college to which you are applying.
- Complete your applications thoroughly and on time, giving ample time for review and revision.
- Report official test scores from the College Board and/or ACT to all colleges that require them.
- Enjoy the journey!





## PARENT/GUARDIAN

- Help your child set goals during their time at Thaden School.
- Communicate early any strict parameters that should inform your child's college search (*i.e.*, financial, geographic, etc.).
- Support meaningful summer activities, such as community service, a job, pursuit of a passion, travel, and/or academic enrichment.
- Share your child's story with the college counseling team.
- Be open-minded to a range of colleges, and facilitate visits to a variety of campuses when possible.
- If your child is interested in playing a varsity sport in college or pursuing art, music, or drama, encourage them to talk to coaches and teachers as well as the college counseling team.
- Educate yourself about financing college and submit financial forms by deadline.



## COLLEGE COUNSELOR

- Meet students where they are.
- Encourage intellectual, personal, and character development rather than “getting in.”
- Educate students and families about the college search and selection process.
- Encourage students and families to prioritize fit over prestige.
- Assist in the creation of a college list.
- Recommend new colleges for students to research.
- Provide feedback on plans for visiting prospective colleges.
- Advise families about financial aid and merit scholarships where appropriate.
- Consult on the college essay and application materials.
- Leverage expertise and professional relationships to provide strong, current advice.





# Process of Discovery





## CONDUCTING A COLLEGE SEARCH

While not all students are on the same timeline, the college search process can begin as early as the freshman year with exploratory college visits, and culminate late in the senior year when students choose among their offers of admission and secure their spot in the incoming class with a deposit. A college search necessarily involves research — primarily online — before the student is ready to engage in campus-based information sessions and tours. Thaden's college counselors will work with students during the search process to establish a robust list of prospective colleges — often of twenty or more schools — that students will pare down before eventually applying to approximately five to ten schools.



### **CIALFO** <https://thaden.cialfo.co/signin>

A useful resource for students and families is the web-based college counseling tool Cialfo. For students beginning to engage the college search process, Cialfo serves as a robust research tool, providing information from the Common Data Set, as well as access to sources such as US News, Niche, College Navigator, Unigo, and College Results Online. Cialfo also serves as an effective organizational tool that can help students stay up-to-date on important tasks associated with the college search and application process. Furthermore, Cialfo serves as the submission platform for students' transcripts and recommendations.

## MAKING CONNECTIONS

Primarily during the fall, representatives from colleges and universities call on Thaden, either in person or virtually, to meet with interested students and share information about their institutions. These representatives serve as the point of contact for Thaden students, and often evaluate admission applications coming from Thaden. Students should take full advantage of the opportunity to get to know these admission officers and use them as resources during the process.



## RANKINGS vs. FIT

While college rankings are helpful for exposing students and families to lists of well-regarded colleges, they are limited, sometimes superficial, assessments of schools and should never dominate or dictate a search. Assessing fit — how a student's interests, needs, values, and preferences match with a particular college — is far more important than rankings. Thaden's college counselors use their wealth of experience to help students find colleges that are a good academic and personal fit.



## DEMONSTRATION OF INTEREST

Many colleges consider a student's level of "demonstrated interest" when evaluating their applications. Students can first demonstrate interest by attending information sessions when a college sets up a virtual or in-person visit to Thaden. When and where possible, visiting campus for an official tour and information session is another critical indicator of interest.



## SUMMERS

How students use their summer break can distinguish them from other applicants of similar academic caliber. Whether they invest themselves in a community service project, get a job or internship, enroll in enrichment courses, or go to a camp, summer is an excellent time to explore interests or activities not available during the school year. While college counselors, advisors, and coaches are all resources for summer options, parents often know of potential opportunities in the surrounding area and are likely to be a primary resource for facilitating these opportunities. No one option is inherently better — colleges are mainly interested in seeing students use their free time in a meaningful way. Students need not be unduly drawn in by costly programs hosted at name-brand institutions. The summer academic programs at a number of highly selective universities, for example, are primarily revenue generators for those institutions and will not confer admission benefits. Though conventional wisdom might suggest that these opportunities "look good on a college application," colleges do not weigh them heavily in selection.

## MAKING THE MOST OF A COLLEGE VISIT

While there's no wrong time to visit campuses, a good plan of action would involve scheduling exploratory visits no later than the summer between Grades 9 and 10 to get a feel for the difference in the types and sizes of colleges (*i.e.*, small liberal arts colleges, mid-size universities, and large research universities). If attending sporting events or visiting friends and family on a college campus, make the most of the opportunity by taking full advantage of official visits hosted by college admissions offices. Here are some helpful tips when planning college visits:

- **Plan ahead:** Colleges usually host one to two information sessions each weekday and sometimes on Saturdays. Information sessions are usually followed by a campus tour led by a current student. To ensure you get the most out of your visit, a good rule of thumb is to schedule your visit with the admissions or visitors office two to three weeks in advance.
- **Document your visit:** Visiting multiple colleges in a matter of days can lead to sensory overload. So campus impressions don't later blend together, it is highly recommended to take notes and photograph landmark structures.
- **Admissions interviews are helpful conversations:** Although more the exception than the rule, interviews are sometimes available for juniors and seniors. Where available, they are highly recommended as an effective means to both learn more about the prospective college and allow the admission office additional context to a potential application.
- **Tap Thaden connections:** Although Thaden is a young school, ask the college counseling office if there are any former Barnstormers currently attending a college where you have a visit scheduled.
- **Veni, Vidi, Vici:** No other type of research moves the college search along quite like the firsthand knowledge gained while visiting a college campus. That said, the time and expense necessary to facilitate a campus visit can limit one's options. When in-person visits just aren't possible, take full advantage of the virtual visit options available on college websites.

# INTERVIEWING

Interviews are becoming increasingly rare in the college admissions process. A student is most likely to be afforded this opportunity when visiting a small college, or when a finalist for a major campus scholarship. If a student does attend an admissions interview, here are some things to be mindful of:

- Admission interviews are not tests, but rather conversations where both parties are feeling each other out for compatibility.
- Be prepared to talk candidly about interests and accomplishments.
- Authenticity is always a plus, so students shouldn't be afraid to let their true personality shine through.
- Know the basics. Don't ask questions that reveal an ignorance of the college being visited.
- Ask questions whose answers might help differentiate the college from others being considered:
  - What job offers or graduate school acceptances have graduates (with the degree you are considering) received in the last two to three years?
  - What are the big issues on campus this year?
  - What campus traditions do students get the most excited about?
- Scholarship interviews are quite different from admissions interviews and should involve focused preparation. If invited to interview for a scholarship, students should schedule a time with their college counselor to preview potential questions and answers.



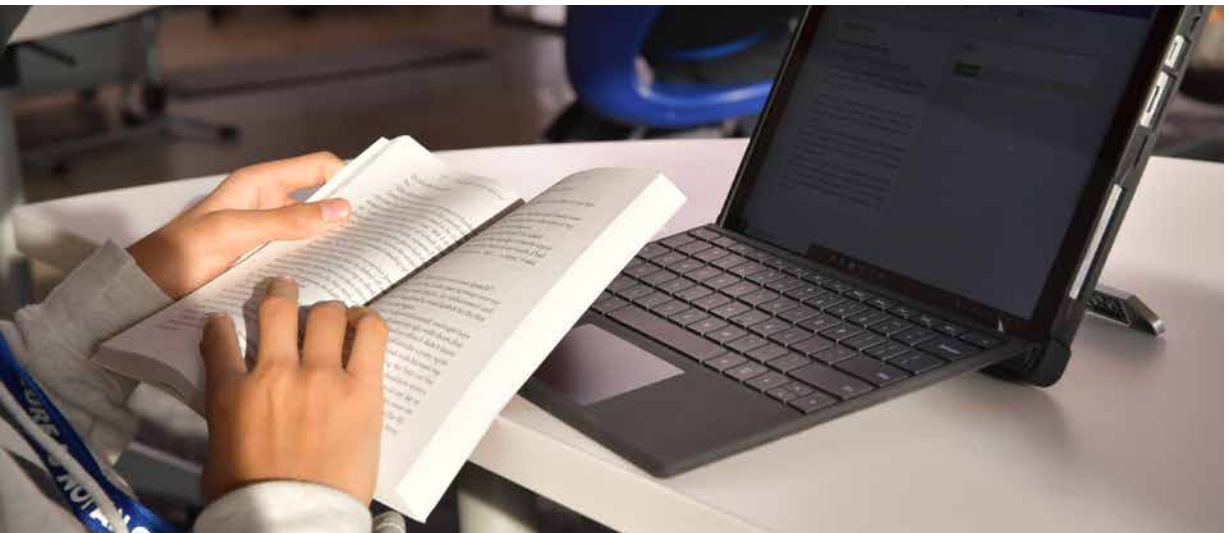


# Standardized Testing



## PSAT and PreACT

The PSAT and PreACT are practice tests for the eventual SAT and ACT, and are therefore administered — at no cost to Thaden families — in Grade 10. The PSAT is administered once again early in Grade 11 as this is the qualifying test for the National Merit Scholarship Program. Scores from both tests give students valuable insights into the nature and challenges of standardized testing and can inform their preparation efforts going forward.



## SAT and ACT

The Covid-19 pandemic ushered in many changes to the way business is conducted, and in the college admissions world none so profound as the seemingly wholesale adoption by colleges of a “test optional” (student may elect to submit or not submit scores) or “test blind” (scores are not considered for any applicant) admissions process. At least for the short term, it appears that most selective college admission offices are prepared to continue to practice a holistic review of a candidate’s academic and extra-curricular record, essays, and recommendations without considering test scores.

Despite the current prevalence of test optional and test blind colleges, Thaden students are nonetheless encouraged to take the SAT and ACT starting in the late fall or winter of their junior year, and to retake one or both tests in the spring of the junior year, and then again in the fall of the senior year. Studies suggest that even without test prep

courses, students tend to improve their scores over time simply by re-testing, owing to added familiarity and comfort with the tests, the rapid development and maturation that can occur in teens in their last two years of high school, and additional progress in a challenging set of college preparatory courses. Following such a strategy could very well produce a test score that enhances a student's admission or scholarship candidacy at one or more of the colleges to which they are applying.

Students can register for the ACT at [act.org](https://act.org), and for the SAT at [collegeboard.org](https://collegeboard.org). The personal account set up when registering can be used to access scores, re-register for additional testing, and send official score reports to colleges (many colleges allow self-reporting of scores on the Common Application or through a personalized applicant account).



## TEST PREP

The prevalence of test-optional colleges notwithstanding, Thaden is committed to helping Grade 11 students reach their standardized testing potential by providing some form of test preparation before taking ACTs and SATs. Should families seek additional test prep on their own, bear in mind that the course length and timing should not impede the student's academic performance nor interfere with extracurricular commitments.



# Applying to College



## APPLYING TO COLLEGE

While students submit college applications during the first half of their senior year, preparation of the application begins months earlier. As juniors they begin work on application essays and the Common App — an application used by over 900 colleges and universities across the United States and abroad. In consultation with their college counselor, Grade 11 students also begin building a list of prospective colleges and settle on a standardized testing strategy and timeline. In addition, a late summer application workshop affords rising seniors the opportunity to have a significant portion — if not all — of their application and essays completed before schoolwork and co-curriculars become the focus of their attention.



## THE COLLEGE LIST

The ultimate goal of the college search process is the curation of a sound application list, which is accomplished through consultations with one's college counselor, virtual and in-person campus information sessions and tours, and research utilizing college websites and independent college guidance resources. Ideally, the college list — containing anywhere from five to ten schools — should be finalized by late September of the senior year and represent a healthy balance between three levels of admissions likelihood:

- **Likely** school: the student's academic credentials are above the accepted student profile
- **Target** school: one or more of the student's academic credentials are in line with the accepted student profile
- **Reach** school: the student's academic credentials are below the accepted student profile

Starting the college research and application processes early gives students a chance to put together a strong list and to build thoughtful applications and essays. It also allows counselors and teachers time to review essays and application materials and make recommendations for improvements. As a general rule of thumb, if a student wants their application or essays reviewed prior to submission, they should share those materials no less than two weeks prior to the colleges' deadline. The college counseling office supports students by submitting transcripts and recommendation letters on their behalf, and is guided by published submission deadlines listed in Cialfo. It is the student's responsibility to submit applications by those deadlines.





## REQUESTING LETTERS OF RECOMMENDATION

A student will usually submit three letters of recommendation to a college. One comes from the college counselor; two come from faculty members who have taught the student. Students should select faculty members who know them well and have taught them recently. They do not need to be teachers in a student's strongest subject; it's more important that the teacher know the student well and be able to show a college how they would perform academically and contribute to its community. Students are strongly encouraged to seek recommendations from junior- and senior-year teachers of core area subjects unless they are pursuing a fine arts major, in which case a teacher recommendation from that area is advised. Students should request one teacher recommendation before the end of the junior year.

## PREPARING AND SUBMITTING APPLICATIONS

When reviewing application options, a student should use the Common Application unless otherwise directed by the college. A handful of colleges provide only an institution-specific application found on their website.



## TYPES OF APPLICATIONS

- **Common Application:** The overwhelming majority of U.S. colleges and universities accept the Common Application, as do many international institutions. It enables students to apply to several schools using one platform, consolidating application data in one place. Be aware that colleges that accept the Common Application might also require school-specific supplemental materials accessible via the Common Application platform.
- **Coalition Application** (The Coalition for Access, Affordability, and Success): A relatively new application platform, the Coalition Application gives admission access to nearly two hundred member schools and is meant to encourage students to engage in application-related activities earlier than they might otherwise. The college counseling office is open to providing support for students engaging the Coalition Application but encourages students to prioritize use of the Common Application.
- **Specifying a college within a university:** At a number of universities — the University of Virginia and North Carolina State University are notable examples — students might be asked to apply to a specific school or college within the greater university (such as the College of Business, School of Engineering, School of Education, etc.). Students should check the deadlines and requirements of these subunits carefully.
- **“Fast” applications:** Some colleges, in order to artificially boost application numbers, will offer — usually via email — an application with the student’s biographical information pre-populated. These efforts are sometimes called “Fast Apps” or “Priority Apps” and require very little effort from the applicant. “Because it’s easy” or “because it’s free” are rarely good reasons to apply to a college; our advice is for students to be more deliberate and apply to colleges that offer a good match. Moreover, if these schools are also Common App members, using the “fast app” will preclude the college counseling office’s ability to submit the student’s school materials online.

## APPLICATION CYCLES

- **Regular Decision:** The most common admission application with deadlines for submission between December and February and notification by April 1 of senior year.
- **Early Decision:** An Early Decision application may be submitted for only one school; an applicant is obligated to enroll if admitted. Deadlines typically fall around November 1 of senior year, with decisions released four to six weeks after the deadline.
- **Early Action:** A non-binding early admission application with early notification. Application and notification dates vary widely, but students are not required to make a final enrollment decision until May 1.
- **Restricted Early Action:** A handful of highly selective schools — e.g., Princeton, Stanford, Harvard, and Yale — will offer a restricted early action program with specific rules about which application types may be submitted to other colleges. Students agree not to apply to any other early decision or early action program (with the exception of early action programs at public universities). If accepted, they are not obligated to attend that school. Students will be accepted, deferred into the regular decision process, or denied admission.
- **Rolling Admission:** Schools announce admission decisions throughout the year. Typically, a decision is rendered three to five weeks after a complete application is received by the college.





## VISUAL AND PERFORMING ARTS

Creative talents can sometimes enhance a student's candidacy to college. Many colleges offer opportunities to showcase ability in visual and performing arts in the application process even if the applicant does not plan to pursue a major in the arts.

### Visual Arts

Preparing an art portfolio to submit with an application requires planning ahead. It is advisable to consult with the visual arts faculty and college counselor in the junior year about such plans, and to aim to finalize the portfolio during the summer between junior and senior year.

### Performing Arts

Students are encouraged to audition for some music and drama programs via online video submissions, while some programs may also offer or require in-person auditions during senior year. Members of Thaden's theatre and music faculty stand ready to help students record performances.



## ATHLETICS

If a student excels at a varsity sport in high school, it's possible that they could also play competitively in college. Recruitment could begin as early as sophomore year depending on the sport. Division I (D-I) and Division II (D-II) athletics tend to garner the most attention due to the scholarships available and the recruiting regulations imposed by the NCAA. Aspiring athletes and their parents should familiarize themselves with the NCAA's academic requirements as early as possible if competitive for D-I or D-II teams. While athletic scholarships are not available at Division III (D-III) colleges and universities, many of them offer a high level of intercollegiate competition mixed with outstanding academics.



## The Division III Option

D-III colleges are able to field highly competitive athletic teams while maintaining an emphasis on top-quality academic programs. Many D-III colleges are among the most selective schools in the U.S. Many are also liberal arts and sciences colleges and, in keeping with that philosophy, offer much more flexibility in the off-season, allowing students to take advantage of internships, research, and study abroad alongside their athletic commitments.

## The NCAA Clearinghouse

In order to be eligible to compete in intercollegiate athletics, a student must register online with the NCAA Clearinghouse (<https://web3.ncaa.org/ecwr3/>) and have their academic program of study cleared by the NCAA. Upon registering with the Clearinghouse — preferably by the end of the junior year — Thaden School will be prompted to upload the student's transcript to the site for eventual approval.





# Selecting a College



## SELECTING A COLLEGE

Students applying through Regular Decision generally receive admission decisions by April 1. The next step is for each student, with the help of their parents/guardians, to consider their options carefully and decide where to enroll. Important steps in this process are:

- Review all offers of admission (including any available scholarships, grants, loans, work-study programs, honor colleges, etc.) and discuss them with their college counselor.
- Consider deferrals or wait-list offers and discuss them with their college counselor.
- Where possible, attend special admitted-student programs, receptions, or overnight visits offered by schools to get a better feeling for the campus and community.
- Select one school — and only one school — to commit to by or before May 1.
- Notify the college counselor of the enrollment decision immediately.
- After making a deposit, promptly decline all other offers of admission.



## ACCEPTING AN OFFER

When a student receives all of their college decisions, they work with their college counselor and parents/guardians to make a final decision. Many factors go into a final decision, including academic and extracurricular program fit, college location, and scholarship and financial aid packages. Each college has its own process for accepting an offer, though nearly all are now done online and involve submitting an enrollment deposit. Students must send a deposit to their school of choice no later than May 1. Deposit deadlines may occur sooner for Early Decision admits and scholarship recipients.



## DON'T DOUBLE DEPOSIT

“Double depositing” is accepting a position and sending a deposit to more than one college. This act is unethical. It prevents colleges from planning their classes and unnecessarily reserves a spot that would gladly be taken by a student on the waiting list. Depositing at more than one school also violates terms each student agrees to when they fill out college applications. Double depositing harms other prospective students and future Thaden graduates. If a Thaden student submits a deposit and then does not follow through on their pledge to attend, a college may be less likely to admit other Thaden students in the future.



## TAKING A GAP YEAR

Colleges are usually quite supportive of the idea of high school graduates taking a gap before enrolling in college. In some cases students will defer their matriculation to a college for one year and plan to attend that school after the gap year. In other cases a student may conduct a new college application process after the gap year. Colleges are most interested in students who use a gap year to challenge themselves, whether through work, volunteer activities, or travel. The possibilities are nearly limitless, but what matters most to the college evaluating the gap year request is that a student will choose to do something during that year that helps them grow and mature.



# Paying for College



## PAYING FOR COLLEGE

A college education is expensive, and the means by which eligibility for financial assistance is determined are not always obvious. A good tool for estimating a family's eligibility is the Net Price Calculator provided on all college websites. Some colleges offer merit scholarships to students without regard to need. Merit scholarships vary from college to college and may take into consideration factors such as academics, extracurricular activities, and leadership. Most merit awards are partial scholarships. Often the application for admission also serves as the application for scholarship, although full-ride scholarships generally require nominations and extra essays and involve an earlier application deadline.

There are also community organizations that offer scholarships. These may supplement aid received from colleges. The best scholarships to apply for are those renewable all four years. Parents should research financial aid application requirements at each school on their child's list. The common denominator for applying for financial assistance is the submission of the FAFSA, the Free Application for Federal Student Aid, found at [fafsa.gov](http://fafsa.gov) and available October 1 of a student's senior year. Tax information filed in the previous year is used to fill out a FAFSA application. Some private colleges also require a supplemental financial aid form known as the CSS Profile, which can be found at [collegeboard.org](http://collegeboard.org) starting in September. In addition to the above forms, some colleges also require a copy of the tax forms for verification. Please consult the financial aid pages of colleges' websites for specific information.

When filing the FAFSA, the key result is what is referred to as the EFC, or Expected Family Contribution. This is the amount of money that a family *should* have on hand for one-year's college cost. If a college meets 100% of demonstrated need, the formula for determining the value of a family's financial aid package is simple:

### **College's Total Cost - EFC = The Value of a Family's Aid Package**

A financial aid package can and often includes three forms of aid: grants, loans, and work study. Grants and work study are referred to as gift money since they don't have to be paid back. Loans come in two forms: subsidized and non-subsidized. Both are low-interest loans, but subsidized loans are far more attractive since interest doesn't begin to accrue and repayment doesn't start until 10 months after a student leaves college, and the student has a lengthy repayment schedule from that point.



