

Before you study, schedule your time.

High school students should begin preparing for college as soon as their freshman year by focusing on academics and pursuing a healthy dose of extracurricular activities.

Many activities that should be taken up in freshman year revolve around deciding what the student is going to want out of life and will naturally play a part in all four years of high school and college preparation.

As sophomores, students should begin thinking more deeply about career aspirations, and juniors should turn their attention to completing academic requirements for college admission and what it takes to pay for college. Senior year is about deciding and applying to the student's colleges of choice and confirming admission and funding.

High school years can be a busy time. It's easy to be overwhelmed by how to prepare for college and the many steps and considerations involved in the college search, application, and financing process.

To help you and your student stay on track, below is a year-by-year checklist of college preparation for high school students.

College Preparation Checklist for High School Freshmen and Sophomores

Freshmen preparing for college should plan to:

Take challenging classes in core academic courses.

Work with their school counselors to create a yearly schedule to meet graduation and college admissions requirements.

Talk to their school counselor about taking Advanced Placement and honors courses.

Identify interests and potential career fields through online resources and by attending career fairs and other events.

Get involved with community-based and leadership-oriented activities that best reflect their interests.

Browse colleges and universities to see what types of schools interest them.

As they find and review them, bookmark resources for college planning.

Start a running list of accomplishments, awards, and recognitions to use when completing college applications and writing résumés.

Sophomores preparing for college should:

Consider taking a practice test to prepare for the PSAT.

Attend college and career information events.

Start learning about funding for college, including scholarships, grants, loans, work-study jobs, etc.

Consider the types of careers that fit their interests and what college majors they require.

Reach out to school counselors to discuss occupational interests and college requirements.

How to Get Ready for College in Your Junior Year

In the fall semester, juniors should:

Take the PSAT if they have not already. Students should generally take the test no later than fall semester of the eleventh grade to qualify for National Merit scholarships and programs.

Attend in-person or online college fairs.

Explore careers and their earning potentials.

In the spring semester, juniors need to:

Register for college admission exams—SAT and ACT—and take practice tests. College admissions professionals recommend students have at least one standardized score before the end of their junior year.

Research how to pay for college and what federal student aid may be available to you.

Identify scholarship opportunities to pursue; note deadlines on calendar.

Contact colleges to request information and applications.

College Prep Checklist for High School Seniors

During the **summer**, rising seniors should:

Plan college visits.

Narrow down the colleges under consideration.

Make decisions required by colleges' early-decision or early-action programs.

In the **fall semester**, seniors will need to:

Register for and take (or retake) the SAT and/or ACT, if not already done.

Complete and submit college applications prior to deadlines.

Request transcripts and letters of recommendation at least 30 days before they are due.

Work with parents to complete and submit the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA® form). Before each year of college, you'll need to apply for federal grants, work-study, and loans with the FAFSA.

Complete and submit scholarship applications prior to deadlines.

Meet with a counselor to verify that they'll meet graduation requirements on schedule.

During the **winter months**, seniors should:

Review and make any necessary changes/corrections to their Student Aid Report.

Finish submitting scholarship applications.

In the **spring semester**, seniors will need to:

Visit colleges on their "short list."

Consider college acceptances; compare financial aid packages offered.

Decide on the college to attend (typically by May 1) and contact its offices.

Make informed decisions about student loans.

While some seniors think they've "made it" and can coast in their last year of high school, students preparing for college should recognize that college admissions officers will expect to see they've worked hard to keep grades up and stayed involved in school and community activities. Parents may reassure aspiring college students that they can still enjoy life and time with friends while remaining focused on larger goals.