A Family's Handbook to College Admissions

F **A** **C** **E**

Your Future

FAFSA Application College Applications Scholarship Info College Fairs

Financial **A**id and **C**ollege **E**ntrance

College Essay Guy

www.collegeessayguy.com

Special thanks to **College Essay Guy** for creating this guide

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1. Introduction and Overview

Our school counseling team relies on the College Essay Guy and his team for so many resources in the college process. We are thrilled to be able to share this resource with you, in collaboration with the College Essay Guy team. For information specific to our school, please see the last page of the guide.

1.1. How we see the college admissions world



Before we dive into the what and the why and the when of the application process, we'd like to take a minute to step back and talk about how we like to view it, and why we think ours is a useful frame for thinking about what can seem like a cutthroat, competitive (and likely confusing) process.

We think the college application process can actually be a meaningful experience (particularly in a culture that has fairly few rites of passage), one that allows for what we'd guess is one of the most important things to your family: creating space for your children to grow.

In fact, we think growth—in the form of greater introspection and reflection on a student's part—leads to stronger applications anyway. Though we do worry that telling students this is good for them may be like telling a kid who loves eating broccoli that it's great for them...

We also think that it's possible for a family to grow closer through this process, as teenagers step into their own and explore what they value and how they want to engage with the world. And to our minds, that's a beautiful opportunity as your family gets ready to send them off into this next phase of their lives.

How and why we're building this handbook

We wanted to offer this handbook for a few different reasons. Here are some of the biggest:

- **Access and equity**—we've tried to build our company in ways that help to democratize education and the admissions process, and though our society has a ways to go, we'd like to think this handbook can be one step among many.

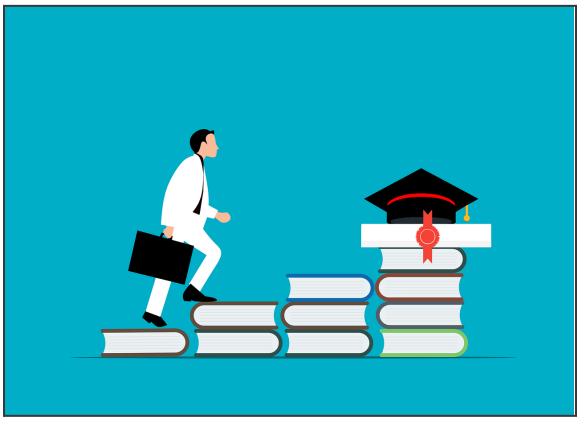
- Creating some **ease and clarity** around what can feel to many families like a stressful, confusing, momentous time, one that can raise difficult questions: How can parents or guardians best help their students in this process? What should we be doing now? Was I firm enough in trying to get them to eat their broccoli? (Answers: That's why you're

here. We'll take it a step at a time. There was probably nothing else you could have done.)

And since we've spent a lot of time building some level of expertise in these areas (we're not sure how many people around the world spend time sitting in a room talking through 9 different transition techniques for essays, for example, but we have a hunch it may not be many), we're excited to share.

1.2. College admissions vs. college applications: How involved should parents be—and when?

We juxtaposed "college admissions vs. college applications" because we think there's an important difference.



We think it can definitely be beneficial for parents/guardians to be involved in elements of the admissions process—but almost always in a supporting role, and preferably when their teen asks them. Kind of like when you were maybe helping them learn to drive: holding the wheel for them while they work the pedals doesn't work out so well. So be there to be a sounding board for their ideas, nudge them to explore and reflect on their values and goals, accompany them on campus visits, model how to manage stress and emotion, and help them keep track of deadlines, but ultimately, make sure this feels like their process as they transition to adulthood.

That them-feeling-ownership part applies especially to college application choices, such as where to apply, communicating with admission officers, and in particular, essays (both because student voice is important and what admissions officers want to hear, and because they're good at spotting when an adult has done a lot of writing/editing). It's rare, but we've seen parents/guardians unintentionally sabotage their child's application chances by being too heavy handed, especially with things like essays. Essentially, pay attention to when you might be confusing your interests or desires with theirs.

Two important areas where a parent/guardian may want to play more of a co-lead:

- Discussing finances
- Assessing how an institution supports a student's needs.

We'll get into more detail with financial aid in a bit, but you likely have a far better understanding of how debt will impact their future than they do (we have friends who thought loans were basically free money—great spot for an adult to step in and maybe clarify some things). Talk with them about family finances, about what you can or can't help with (and be honest), about what they'll be responsible for, and ideally, do so early in the process (though this is definitely a better-late-than-never kind of thing).

And you may also want to take more of an active role in understanding the relative strengths and weaknesses of various colleges your teen is interested in regarding things like mental health or academic support—what a college offers can vary greatly, and your understanding of your child and their needs can be important.

The core takeaway here: Keep the focus on the student.

1.3. Parent checklist + Important timing/deadlines



We're organizing the checklist below by year, but if you're first seeing this during the fall of your or your student's senior year, don't fret—that happens all the time, and students still go on to live fulfilled lives (We know 40 year olds who still say they don't know what they want to be when they grow up. They're fine). If that's the case, just do your best to look through each year and address pieces as best you can.

9th Grade

- ☐ If you haven't previously, start planning out how to pay for college (use that guide).
- ☐ Encourage your teen to explore their interests and values
- ☐ Option: take an interest and/or strengths assessment (caveat: these can easily change over time)
- ☐ Plan high school classes (especially if a student is interested in a particular subject or field)
- ☐ Explore extracurricular interests (Recommended: as long as it doesn't dampen the experience, keep an activity log throughout high school)
- ☐ PSAT: School-by-school basis → some high schools allow students to take the October PSAT as a freshman
- ☐ Student should meet with school counselor, start building a relationship
- ☐ Summer: students have options. We'd recommend families read that post and then play sounding board with them. (Note that, from an admissions standpoint, colleges generally like seeing a story arc, with summers, and school year, building on one another.)

10th Grade

- ☐ Deepen involvement in extracurricular activities that align with values, interests, and long-term goals (But also useful to explore new things)
- ☐ Maintain grades + take more challenging courses
- ☐ PSAT: School-by-school basis → some high schools allow students to take the October PSAT as a sophomore
- ☐ Meet with school counselor, continue building a relationship
- ☐ Take a practice SAT or ACT (Note: often useful to take both and see if a student has any preference)

11th Grade

- ☐ Maintain grades
- ☐ Continue deepening involvement in extracurricular activities. If they haven't already, explore leadership opportunities
- ☐ Option: take an aptitude or career assessment test such as YouScience (understanding that interests and strengths will evolve and grow)
- ☐ Attend a college fair, talk with admission reps
- ☐ Start building a balanced college list
- ☐ Meet with you counselor to talk about your list and preferences, and ask for suggestions
- ☐ PSAT/NMSQT—generally administered fall of junior year. (Scores on the PSAT are used to qualify for the National Merit Scholarship)
- ☐ SAT + ACT—registration deadlines (SAT and ACT) vary year to year. Common advice is to plan on taking a test at least once spring of junior year (though often earlier for recruited athletes) and then again in the fall of senior year

  *Note that some schools no longer require or accept standardized test scores. For detail/nuance, see the section on testing.
- ☐ AP Tests—typically early to mid-May
- ☐ Ask for letters of recommendation (ideally, speak with teachers before the end of junior year; if past that, do so now)
- ☐ Schedule (virtual or in-person) school tours (if planning on in-person, highly recommended to do virtual first, unless the school is very close to home)
- ☐ During summer, begin working on main personal statement + supplemental essays

12th Grade

- ☐ Maintain grades
- ☐ Continue working on main personal statement + supplemental essays
- ☐ Ask for letters of recommendation (ideally, speak with teachers before the end of junior year; if past that, do so now)
- ☐ Apply for scholarships throughout the year
- ☐ Continue building a balanced college list
- ☐ Likely take the SAT and/or ACT again
- ☐ Complete a profile on the Common App and/or Coalition App after Aug 1 during summer before senior year
- ☐ If applying to the UCs, complete a profile after Aug 1

- [ ] Complete the FAFSA (and possibly CSS) in October (ideally, as close to Oct. 1 as possible)
- [ ] Common App early deadlines (varies by school; typically early November)
- [ ] UC deadline (for 2022, submit between November 1-30; starting 2023, submit between Oct 1 - Nov 30)
- [ ] UT Deadline Dec 1
- [ ] Regular decision deadlines (varies by school; typically early January)
- [ ] Rolling admissions (dates vary by school)
- [ ] If deferred/waitlisted, possibly send a letter of continued interest
- [ ] May 1: National Candidates Reply Date (deadline to commit to a school, deposit funds)
- [ ] AP/IB exams

1.4. Note on Glossary + Further Resources

Just a quick note that, if any terms are new or confusing to you (like ED vs REA), there's a glossary at the end, as well as links to more focused resources (we have hundreds of pages on our website—if it has to do with college admissions, chances are we've written about it).

2. Building a college list

2.1. Reframing college rankings



We're going to give you some specific tools to help you build a balanced college list.

Before we do, for some context, we want to have a brief discussion about (and perhaps debunk) some common college rankings.

Many parents and students look to things like *U.S. News and World Report's* rankings to determine where to apply. We'd recommend taking those rankings with a large grain of salt, for several reasons.

- One big reason: those rankings don't really give a student a sense of whether they fit well with a school (unless a student's criteria happen to match perfectly with *U.S. News*' criteria, which seems... unlikely). For example, in 2011, 20% of a school's ranking was based on graduation and freshman retention rates. We have yet to meet a single student who has said that freshman graduation and retention rates are an important factor in their college selection process. Furthermore, top companies like Google no longer focus on the prestige of a degree, instead focusing more on someone's knowledge in the field, applied skills developed, and relevant experience.

- Another really big reason: those rankings are highly likely to be flawed—if you'd like to read a paper by a Columbia mathematics professor, Michael Thaddeus, debunking Columbia's own ranking, you can check it out in detail here. The synopsis is that Columbia (and it seems likely that most if not all other ranked schools to some degree) reported numbers in a way that was likely to shift its ranking up, but that didn't really reflect the school's internal data (or only did so if heavily massaged. Like deep-tissue style).

- But an even bigger reason we'd recommend not building a list simply based on rankings like *U.S. News*' is summed up nicely by Colin Driver in *The Atlantic*: "Trying to rank institutions of higher education is a little like trying to rank religions or philosophies. The entire enterprise is flawed, not only in detail but also in conception."

Or you can read Malcolm Gladwell critiquing rankings in *The New Yorker* (the gist: "There's no direct way to measure the quality of an institution—how well a college manages to inform, inspire, and challenge its students. So the U.S. News algorithm relies instead on proxies for quality—and the proxies for educational quality turn out to be flimsy at best.").

In short, linear ranking systems are enticing, and appeal to the parts of human nature that want a simple button and values prestige, but we think you can do far better by using other systems and methodologies to develop a balanced college list.

Government sites like College Navigator or College Scorecard allow for more nuanced means of comparison. *Washington Monthly* offers an alternative to *U.S. News*, building rankings based on things like social mobility, research, and promoting the public good. When we work with students, we often use Corsava to help them explore schools through figuring out their must-haves, would be nices, no ways, and don't cares. Using these tools and a couple others is far more likely, to our minds, to help your teen end up someplace that helps them thrive.

2.2. How to build a college list

Here are the steps for helping your teen choose a college:

- Get to know their interests and preferences
- Discover what specific qualities they want in a college
- Create an initial list of colleges that match this criteria
- Research their chances of getting into each of these colleges and organize the school list by "reach," "maybe," and "likely."
- Narrow down those results into a final list of colleges
- Apply away!

MAPPING INTERESTS, PREFERENCES, AND COLLEGE QUALITIES

Ideally, a student can go somewhere quiet, like the top of a mountain, and really think about two things: Who are they and what do they want?

This also offers a way that parents and students can grow closer through this process—help them think through what they value (maybe even do this Values Exercise together; we'll recommend it for essay brainstorming anyway) and what kind of life they want to live.

For a brief breakdown of differences between different types of schools (Public v private, in vs out of state, etc), please check this section of the Paying for College Guide—we'd highly recommend thinking through financial aid as your family builds a college list.

We also recommend the 80-question "Self-Survey for the College Bound" in Dr. Steven Antonoff's book *The College Match*. If you're unable to buy the book and just want the worksheet, Steven **gives it away on his website**.

DOWNLOAD THE SELF-SURVEY WORKSHEET FOR THE COLLEGE BOUND

And to further explore, students can use these:

College Planning Values Assessment
Self-Knowledge Questionnaire
Qualities That Will Make a College Right for You
Activities and Experiences Worksheet

These aren't meant to be exhaustive, says Dr. Antonoff, but instead are meant to start a conversation. Complete these exercises over the course of an afternoon, and you'll have begun that conversation.

Another way is to start with the key characteristics that might differentiate colleges from one another. For this, Corsava offers tools to sort and rate preferences.

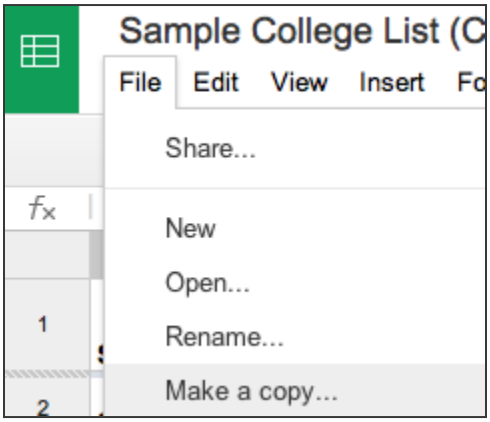
WHERE TO START FINDING THE RIGHT COLLEGES?

After some self-discovery with the above exercises, we highly recommend using collegexpress.com to search according to interests. There, you can type in anything from "Schools for the Free Spirit" to "Great Private Colleges for the B Student," and you'll get results.

Next, download and make a copy of our Ultimate College List Research Tracker.

[DOWNLOAD THE COLLEGE LIST RESEARCH TRACKER]

Go to “File” and click “Make a copy...” so you can have an editable version.



As students research, notice which colleges are coming up repeatedly.

Type the list of schools into that document.

Like this:

	SCHOOL	general % acceptan	How many students?	How many students?
2	**Site**		x	x
3	**Login/password**		x	x
4	**REACH**	**1-24%**	ANSWER THESE QUESTIONS:	
5	Amherst	12%	1800	
6	Wesleyan	20%	3200	
7	Tufts	21%	around 10,000	
8				
9	**MAYBE**	**25-75%**		
10	Brandeis	39%	around 5,000	
11	Hampshire College	63%	1500	
12	Mt. Holyoke	42%	2400	
13	Emerson College	48%	4500	
14	Boston College	28%	13000	
15	**MATCH**	**76-100%**		
16	Wheaton College	64%	1600	

At first, aim for 15-20 colleges on an initial list, and whittle it down over time through further research.

A student can share this list with anyone helping them (a counselor, friend, or parent) using the "Share" button in the top right corner.

WHERE SHOULD STUDENTS RESEARCH COLLEGES?

Here are a few of our favorite places.

- Stay on www.collegexpress.com**, and type in the school name.** Then click "Lists" to see what other lists that school is on.
- For the pro perspective, check out the Fiske Guide to Colleges, which is the go-to guide for college research. It has great 2- 3-page summaries of hundreds of colleges and is a great starting point.
- For the student perspective, go to unigo.com to read real students' opinions on their schools. But don't just read 1-2 reviews; read a bunch of them.
- For virtual campus tours, check out CampusReel.org, led by real, current students, usually in selfie-mode on their phone.
- Students can participate in virtual college fairs through StriveScan, and here's a guide to how to make the most of an in-person college fair.

HOW MANY COLLEGES SHOULD STUDENTS APPLY TO?

A good range to aim for is about 6-12 schools, but we like to recommend 10 schools. Why 10? Because that allows students to divide a list like this:

- **1 Wild Card (1-10%)**
- **3 Reach - Low Chance of Acceptance (11%-25% chance of acceptance)**
- **3 Maybe - Medium Chance (26%-60% chance)**
- **3 Likely - High Chance (61%+ chance)**

We'd recommend building from the bottom up, rather than top down: Find schools a student would be happy to go to at each level, rather than pinning emotional hopes on schools that are long shots for every applicant.

HOW CAN STUDENTS KNOW THEIR CHANCES OF GETTING IN?

In general, it's tough to perfectly predict someone's chances of getting into any college. Why?

Colleges often have institutional goals they have to meet that you have no control over and are tough to predict, including ensuring that they admit students to certain majors, from diverse backgrounds or geographic areas, like in state vs. out of state. This is why it's *super* important to have a balanced list of colleges, and the four categories above are a good guideline.



With that in mind, to find out generally whether a school is a Wild Card, Reach, Maybe, or Likely, it can help to look at three main factors:

1. The school's general acceptance rate
2. Average weighted and unweighted GPA for last year's incoming freshman
3. Average SAT/ACT scores for last year's incoming freshman

There are other factors that can impact chances of acceptance and become important factors for very selective colleges, including:

- Whether someone has a "hook" or unique story that helps them stand out among thousands of other applicants
- The popularity or competitiveness of a major (e.g., computer science or other STEM majors tend to be much more competitive)
- A school's institutional priorities
- What students are doing outside of class (extracurricular activities)
- Whether students are applying Early Decision, Early Action, or Regular Decision

But rather than spending endless hours debating whether a school is a reach or a wild card, it's best to use general acceptance rate, GPA, and test scores as a good guide in deciding whether a school is a Wild Card, Reach, Maybe, or Likely.

Here are a few of our favorite tools for assessing your chances.

> Mark Moody's Quick and Dirty College List Builder is a great tool for helping students get a rough idea of their college admissions chances.

Cappex provides a great tool that allows students to input weighted and unweighted GPA, test scores, and college preferences, and it will match students with schools that meet those preferences but will also provide a rough sense of chance of admission. Bonus: Cappex also will give you the average Net Price paid by students (which is different from the sticker price) as well as the merit scholarships that are available at each school to which you are applying under the "Scholarships" tab.

CollegeData**,** as its name suggests, has TONS of data on the average test scores, general acceptance rates, and average GPAs of incoming college freshmen. But it also provides great data around average financial aid packages offered, specific financial aid packages offered to students who were admitted, and loads of other numbers that might help your family plan for college costs. Keep in mind that this is mostly self-reported data, so use it with a grain of salt.

For First Generation Low Income students, we've built a doc with some of our favorite resources for building a college list.

And for students in the American west, the Western Undergraduate Exchange (WUE) is... well, they say it nicely:

> WUE is an agreement among WICHE's 16 member states and territories, through which 160+ participating public colleges and universities provide steep nonresident tuition savings for Western students.
>
> Through WUE, eligible students can choose from hundreds of undergraduate programs outside their home state, and pay no more than 150 percent of that institution's resident tuition rate.
>
> Since full nonresident college-tuition rates may exceed 300 percent of resident rates, WUE increases affordable higher-education choices for students, and minimizes the adverse impacts of student loan debt.

There's a list of WUE four year universities here, and you can check on eligibility here.

3. Discussing finances + financial aid



Parents and guardians: When you're 17, it can be hard to understand that going $100k into debt for a degree from an art school... may not be a sound long-term financial decision. As your student builds a college list, we highly recommend taking family finances into account, and this is a key area where you as a parent or guardian can likely offer insight and perspective that students tend to lack.

We've mentioned this elsewhere, but this is a great chance for students to learn some financial literacy skills by talking about family finances, what you can or can't help with, and what they'll be responsible for. Ideally, do so early in the process.

Here, we want to briefly talk through some core components of the college financial picture. For an in-depth, step-by-step guide, head to our Paying for College in Four Steps modules (and we offer a pay-what-you-can online video course here).

Here are some key terms and aspects of the financial aid process that students need to be aware of:

- FAFSA stands for Free Application for Federal Student Aid. Students need to complete this **every October** in order to qualify for federal aid for the following school year. Many colleges use this to calculate your Expected Family Contribution (EFC). Here's our guide to completing the FAFSA, plus common mistakes.
- The CSS Profile, developed and maintained by the College Board, is a more detailed look at a student's/family's finances that some schools (around 400 of them) use to determine financial aid eligibility. It's like the FAFSA ... but longer.
- A Net Price Calculator should appear on a college's website, offering a place to enter a few financial variables and estimate what the cost of attendance would roughly be for a student. (Take advantage of these calculators—most students don't actually pay full tuition price, and for some families, high sticker price private schools can end up being cheaper than moderately priced state schools.)
- Private vs local vs institutional scholarships? Each has pros and cons. For an in-depth walkthrough of each, head here.

- “Need blind” vs “need aware”—some schools consider family finances as a factor in their application review (need aware), while others don’t (need blind). As students builds their list, it can be helpful to keep this difference in mind.

For more key terms and definitions, please jump to the Glossary at the end of this handbook. And if you missed it at the end of the college list section, for students in the American west, be sure to check out the WUE.

4. Testing

4.1. Test-optional, test-blind, test scores and scholarships

When they say “optional,” they don’t really mean it… right? No? Maybe?



The confusion and skepticism is understandable. Over the last several years, many schools have changed their policies on testing. The UCs, for example, have dropped the SAT entirely. MIT, on the other hand, will again require SAT scores after not doing so during the height of the pandemic.

Because plenty of schools have gone test-optional or test-blind, we want to clarify those terms. And because other schools seem likely to also shift their policies, we’ll highlight some ways to help students think through their choices.

“Test-optional” means that a school allows students to decide whether to submit test scores, and if a student chooses not to do so, it won’t be counted against them. According to the College Board, about 80% of applicants chose to submit test scores to test-optional colleges.

“Test-blind” is what you’re probably thinking it is: Test scores won’t be considered by a school in the evaluation process (even if a student submits them). Here’s a list from FairTest of test blind schools.

So what should students do? As Akil Bello frames it in this conversation, that varies by goal and circumstance, but these three questions can help students think through it:

Should you prep? Should you test? Should you submit?

Should you prep? Generally yes, unless you are absolutely certain you are only applying to schools (like the UCs) that don’t want test scores. Spend some time prepping just to see if the test will help your chances as an applicant. Download a free practice test. If you crush it, awesome. Doing so on the real thing will probably help you.

Should you test? If you're applying to schools that require test scores, then (obviously) yes. If every school you're applying to is optional, whether you should test depends on whether doing so will strengthen your application—if you're scoring solidly above the average applicant at a school, that can work in your favor. (You can easily search for average test scores at different schools.)

Which basically answers the third question: Should you submit? If doing so helps your application, or is required by the school, then yup.

It's also important to keep in mind that *plenty of scholarships require test scores*, so even if a student is planning on applying only to schools that don't require or don't take test scores for the application process, they may still want or need to take an SAT or ACT.

4.2. P/SAT, ACT

The PSAT/NMSQT (Preliminary SAT/National Merit Scholarship Qualifying Test) is used, as the full name (as opposed to the giant and possibly confusing acronym) makes clear, to qualify for the National Merit Scholarship Program. As such, it's useful for students to spend some time doing test prep, whether free or paid. Students must score in the top 1% of their state to become National Merit Semifinalists.

The SAT and ACT are fairly similar tests, though some students do perform better with one over the other. The biggest difference is that the ACT offers a "Science" section (though it requires little-to-no actual scientific knowledge, and tends to be more of a scientific critical reading and thinking section—does a student understand the scientific process, and can they read graphs and charts?)

4.3. How important are test scores for college admissions?

The short (somewhat vague) answer: fairly important.

The slightly more detailed answer: Test scores are not the most important factor to any school that we've ever heard of. Almost all colleges give the most weight to a student's GPA, the strength of the school's curriculum, and the rigor of the student's course load (if a student has a 4.0, but didn't take any hard classes, that GPA doesn't help nearly as much as it does if they've taken the hardest courses available to them, even if they got lower grades). Letters of recommendation (from teachers and school counselors) and essays also tend to be given a

good amount of weight in the application process. Test scores can fall above or below letters and essays, varying from school to school (though in general, more schools give considerable importance to test scores than to essays or recommendations).

4.4. AP Tests

In general, AP test scores won't make or break whether a student gets into a college. That said, high scores can help, in particular for the most selective colleges, since applicants to such schools tend to have stellar grades, test scores, etc. As a corollary, low AP scores can be a red flag to such schools.

Grades in AP classes themselves, though, can be very important, since, as mentioned above, GPA and course rigor are generally the biggest things schools consider when assessing applicants.

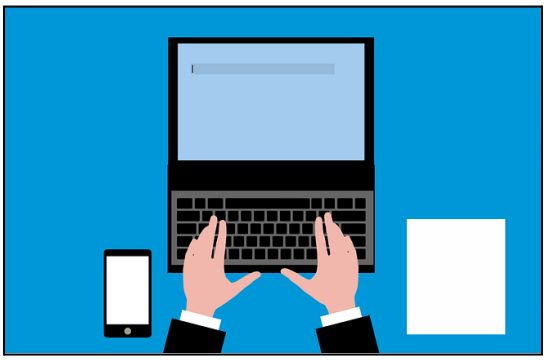
Not every college will allow students to skip pre-requisite courses in college based on AP scores, but some will—a nice bonus, especially when it comes to trying to finish in 4 years and keep debt low.

5. Essays/Applications

5.1. When, for whom, and how much do college essays matter?

5.1.1. The purpose of the personal statement

To understand when, for whom, and how much college essays affect the chance of admissions, it's important to understand the purpose of the personal statement, since this essay is different from most (frequently all) essays a student has written during high school. Which is a weird bait and switch to pull on them: "We know we've been teaching you these other ways to write this whole time, but now to get into college, we're going to need you to do this totally different thing. Cool? Go." But that's why it's really useful to understand some key differences.



For example, a typical English class essay is supposed to make an argument and support it with evidence (often the classic intro with thesis, three body paragraphs, conclusion that restates the thesis, hopefully in different words), and its tone is more analytical.

That's not what students should be doing in a personal statement for college admissions.

The purpose of a personal statement for college admissions (such as the Common App main statement) is to demonstrate who a student is through illustrating the values, skills, qualities, and interests they'll bring to the college and community. Generally, no explicit, argumentative thesis in the intro. Tone is more casual. The essay helps readers understand not just how a student thinks, but also how they feel, work, play, and live. And possibly the biggest difference: Personal vulnerability can be a great thing to express in a personal statement (it's one of the qualities that we think can make for an outstanding personal statement when we work with students), whereas in an academic essay, vulnerability tends to be unnecessary at the least.

So, with that framing in mind, when, for whom, and how much do college essays matter?

Essays generally aren't what's looked at first in the admissions process—as we mentioned before, GPA, rigor of course load, testing, and background are the first step. But as admissions

becomes increasingly competitive (for example, Stanford has admitted between 3-5% over the last few years, especially taking into account athletes and legacies, who get in at a higher rate) essays, as a general rule, become increasingly important. That's because, if your teen is hoping to apply to such schools, many applicants have near perfect (or actually perfect) scores.

(Important side note: This is part of why we recommend building a list from the bottom up—the most amazing students in America can get turned down from the most highly selective schools. In fact, they do every year: There just aren't enough spots for deserving students. So to our minds, it's worth applying if students have the numbers. But they should also be sure to apply to a range of schools they'd be happy to attend.)

For "your average run of the mill really smart person" (as our friend Parke Muth puts it) applying to highly selective schools, "essays can make or break you." We don't want to provoke anxiety by saying this (though we realize that may be unavoidable for some people), but instead emphasize that, the more selective the schools a student wants to apply to are, the more time they should spend on their essays. Ideally, begin in early summer, and work through several drafts, possibly trying a few different topics and structural approaches. (We'll offer a guide on essay writing in a bit, but because essay writing is complex, we'll point you to other resources we offer that provide a more in-depth take.)

Weak or poorly written essays can torpedo an otherwise strong application, but it's pretty rare for great essays to overcome a significant gap in numbers—if a student was hoping to somehow write their way into Harvard with a C+ GPA... you're going to need to let them down easy.

5.1.2. The UC and Cal State system

The UC PIQs are pretty different in focus, content, and approach from Common/Coalition App personal statements.



We cover differences between the Common App and the UC PIQs here in greater depth. Perhaps the biggest difference is that the PIQs require four written responses of 250-350 words, chosen from eight different possible prompts. The purpose/goal of the PIQs is to help address the UC system's 13 points of comprehensive review. (And at that link, you can see how the

different campuses evaluate those factors slightly differently.) Here's some analysis/explanation of the 13 points. The PIQs can also be far more straightforward and simple than some personal statements—on the spectrum from poetry to information, the UC PIQs are pretty far toward the information side.

If a student is planning on applying to the UCs, we offer a pay-what-you-can PIQ Writing Tool and online course here.

If you're thinking about applying to the Cal State system, you can start here.

And for both, as well as for California community colleges, be sure to read up on California's Educational Opportunity Program.

5.1.3. The UT System

Students have a few different options if you want to apply to schools in the Lone Star State. The ApplyTexas portal allows you to submit to multiple schools with a single application.

Many accept applications through ApplyTexas *and* other portals. Baylor, for example, also uses the Common App. Texas State also uses the Coalition App. And Rice goes for the trifecta, making its application available through all three platforms.

Here's a guide to applying to college in Texas in general, and, because it's what we're most frequently asked for, a guide to applying to UT Austin specifically. Important note: if you're applying to UT Austin, their Expanded Resume is particularly important (explanation and examples on that guide).

5.2. How colleges generally evaluate applications

We covered this when we talked about testing, but in case you skipped that part, we'll repeat here: When evaluating an application, almost all colleges give the most weight to a student's GPA, the strength of the school's curriculum, and the rigor of the student's course load (if a student has a 4.0, but didn't take any hard classes, that GPA doesn't help nearly as much as it does if they've taken the hardest courses available to them). Letters of recommendation (from teachers and school counselors) and essays also tend to be given a good amount of weight in

the application process. Test scores can fall above or below letters and essays, varying from school to school (though in general, more schools give considerable importance to test scores than to essays or recommendations).

5.3. How do I write (or help a student write) a college essay?

We think the essay can be the most meaningful part of the application to a student—it can be difficult and frustrating, but it also offers a chance for great introspection, the kind that students aren't often asked to perform in our society, and that can lead to growth, a greater sense of purpose, and a stronger sense of self.

Because of that, we think the essay also offers a chance for students and parents/guardians to become closer to each other through this process. Again, we want to emphasize that students need to be in the driver's seat here—they need a sense of autonomy with topic selection, and they should definitely do their own writing (we know admissions officers who red flag applications that feel like an adult had a heavy hand in writing or editing). But the writing process also offers parents/guardians great potential to be a sounding board for your teen, to nudge them to lean into vulnerable places and explore what truly matters to them and what they want out of life.

It will also be helpful to emphasize that this kind of writing is *a process*—the vast majority of essays we see go through 5+ drafts, and we think all students benefit from building through brainstorming to outlining to drafting to revising. That approach also can take the pressure off early drafts: It doesn't need to be perfect, it just needs to give a student a sense of where they're heading next.

For a more in-depth guide to writing a personal statement, head there. Or check out our pay-what-you-can courses here.

For the brief version:

Brainstorming

Below are five exercises that thousands of students have used to write compelling essays.

Values Exercise: 4 min.
Essence Objects Exercise: 12 min.

21 Details Exercise: 20 min.
Everything I Want Colleges to Know About Me Exercise: 20 min.
The Feelings and Needs Exercise: 15-20 min.

That Values Exercise is the cornerstone—we like to see core values illustrated throughout a student's application. This is also a great chance for adults and teens to connect and help them explore: Work through the Values Exercise together, discuss and compare, and adults can (we'd say should, in fact) encourage students to identify values that are truly theirs (as opposed to yours, or their friends', or their society's). Nudge students to reflect on how those values inform what they want to do with their lives.

Structure

We think you can really boil structure down to just two approaches for college essays: montage or narrative.

Whether students take a Narrative or Montage Approach to structuring their essay depends on their answer to this question:

Do you feel like you've faced significant challenges in your life... or not so much?

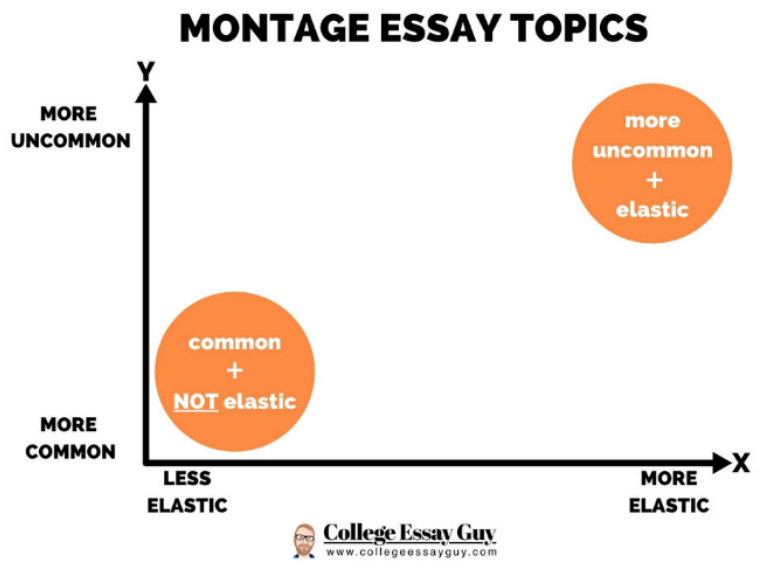
(And do you want to write about them? Because you don't have to. Really.)

If yes (to both), they'll most likely want to use Narrative Structure.

If no (to either), they'll probably want to try Montage Structure.

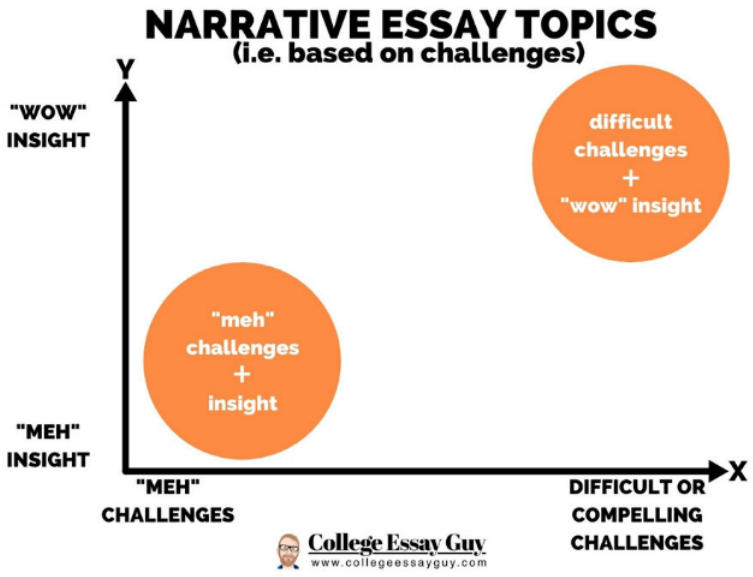
The above links dive into greater detail, but essentially, Narrative Structure is classic Western culture story structure, focusing roughly equally on a) Challenges You Faced, b) What You Did About Them, and c) What You Learned. Paragraphs and events are connected causally.

Montage Structure focuses on a series of experiences and insights that are connected thematically (so, for example, 5 pairs of pants that connect to 5 different sides of who someone is).



We believe a montage essay (i.e., an essay NOT about challenges) is more likely to stand out if the topic or theme of the essay is:

X. Elastic (i.e., something you can connect to a variety of examples, moments, or values)
Y. Less common (i.e., something other students probably aren't writing about)



We believe that a narrative essay is more likely to stand out if it contains:

X. Difficult or compelling challenges
Y. Insight

These aren't binary—rather, each can be placed on a spectrum.

"Elastic" will vary from person to person. You might be able to connect mountain climbing to family, history, literature, science, social justice, environmentalism, growth, insight … and someone else might not connect it to much of anything. Maybe trees?

"Less common"—every year, thousands of students write about mission trips, sports, or music. It's not that you can't write about these things, but it's a lot harder to stand out.

"Difficult or compelling challenges" can be put on a spectrum with things like getting a bad grade or not making a sports team on the weaker end, and things like escaping war or living homeless for three years (essay topics we've seen before) on the stronger side. While someone can possibly write a strong essay about a weaker challenge, it's really hard to do.

"Insight"—Essentially, has the student worked on developing the capacity to reflect? (Side note that this is especially where writing-is-a-process is useful to emphasize: insight is something they'll develop in an essay over time. But it's useful to understand that some topics are probably easier to pull insights from than others.)

Outline, Draft, Revise

In the interest of keeping this brief, we'll recommend taking advantage of the resources we've linked above (which include several ways to revise), and again simply emphasize that students will be served well by treating this as a process (sorry if we're getting broken record-y here, but the essay writing is our favorite part). Ideally, spend several weeks (or possibly months) outlining, drafting, and revising (and for specific tools for each, check out the links at the end of this handbook).

5.4. Supplemental Essays

Some colleges only require the main personal statement. But many require supplemental essays. The most common supplemental prompts are the "Why us?" essay, the "Why X major?" essay, the "Community" essay, and the "Extracurricular activity" essay.

These prompts offer ways for colleges to get to know more about who a student is, and, through the "Why us?" essay, get a sense of whether a student has really done their homework researching how they might fit with a particular school.

Because what each student has to write may vary greatly from what someone else does, we'll keep this brief and point to the guides above. But we do want to emphasize that students should spend a good amount of time on their supplemental essays—schools generally care just as much about these as they do about the personal statement (and in some cases, more). And because so many schools have overlapping prompts, we highly recommend taking what we call the "super essay" approach: It can save students hours of writing time.

5.5. What should students put in the Activities List + Add'l Info sections?

Because students and parents may not know what these sections of the Common App are and how to take advantage of them (we think these are frequently underutilized, but can really strengthen an application if used effectively), we'll clarify what these sections are, and link you to our in-depth guides for the how-to.



Here's how Jorge Delgado, Associate Director of International Admissions at Brandeis, thinks about the Activities List: "Extracurricular activities can be a great opportunity to see how an applicant has self-directed their passions and interests. There are only so many hours in the day, so seeing how a student has involved themselves outside the academic arena is a great way of understanding their potential fit for a university campus."

Keys to making a strong Activities List are

Use stronger verbs. In short: Are you describing your activity in the most dynamic way possible? Most students aren't. Why? Because they're using just-okay verbs.
Develop better (and perhaps a bit more) content. Have you included a wide range of responsibilities? Most students forget to include solving problems, gaining skills, and making tangible (and even quantifiable!) impact.
Demonstrate skills & values. Are you communicating what you learned or how an activity changed you? If not, you may be leaving money on the table.

For how to do so, check out our Activities List guide here.

The Additional Info section should be thought of as "additional"—if a student leaves it blank, that can be totally fine. And the "information" part is really important—don't try to sneak in an extra essay (that can actually piss off a reader). But this can also be a great tool for adding context to an application. If there are things that don't fit elsewhere in a student's application—that they live in a single-parent or low-income household, for example, or that they'll be the first generation to attend college, or that they have online courses and other activities that didn't fit elsewhere and that give a fuller picture of who they are and what they've done—then the Additional Info section is a great place to clarify those things.

5.6. Teacher/Counselor Recs

Teacher and counselor letters of recommendation tend to rank just below essays in terms of importance and impact—so ideally, these aren't something to treat as an add-on or afterthought.



These letters give schools a sense of who the student is in the classroom.

Important note that letters of recommendation can also be used by some schools to help decide who gets scholarships or into honors programs.

Who should students ask for teacher letters of recommendation?

Ideally:

Someone who knows them well and likes them
Someone who taught them recently

Someone who teaches a core subject*

*Important note: Some colleges require or recommend that students submit recommendations from teachers in certain subject areas. Be sure you double check that.

Because of the above, it helps if students spend time building a relationship with their teachers. And while it can work out just fine if students are asking teachers for letters during the fall of senior year (three weeks minimum before application deadlines), we'd highly recommend whenever possible that they ask for those during the spring of junior year, as those teachers will have more of a relationship with and understanding of your child, and will be able to write a better letter given more time.

We have a larger guide to letters of rec that walks through asking for a letter in detail, but a few big tips for students to keep in mind:

Ask in person (unless that's impossible).
Ask (well) in advance. (Ideally, spring of junior year.)
Ask one on one (not in a group with other students).
Give your teachers whatever they need (e.g., their own questionnaire) when they need it.
Thank them for their kindness.

5.7. Special circumstances: NCAA, foster youth, students without homes, students with accomodations

If a student is planning or hoping to play sports in college, timing and aspects of the application process can shift. The NCAA offers a nice hub here with links to various focused resources and information.

California offers resources specifically for foster youth here.

The NCHE offers tools and resources for students experiencing homelessness.

And there are various resources for students with accommodations:

- Understood.org- Article: 7-things-to-know-about-college-disability-services
- Bestvalueschools.com- Rankings: Students with Learning Disabilities
- Understood.org- Article: Financial Aid and Scholarships for Students with Learning and Thinking Differences

- National Alliance on Mental Illness- Article: Mental-Health-in-College
- WSJ Article: Good Mental Health Away From Home Starts Before College

5.8. Performing Arts + portfolios

Commenting on portfolios is generally out of our wheelhouse, but Artprof.org provides tons of resources, including art professors critiquing applicant portfolios.

5.9. College Interviews

We have a giant guide to college interviews here, and plenty of students won't be applying to schools that do interviews, so we'll just point you in the direction of that guide if you're applying to schools that offer or require interviews. It varies how important interviews are from school to school, so in that guide, we walk you through, among many other things, how to find out how important an interview is to a school.



6. Choosing which school to attend

6.1. Managing expectations pre-acceptances

One great thing parents/guardians can do in this process is help your teen learn to manage emotions and expectations, particularly when it comes to acceptances. We say this especially because we have friends who have said they felt as though they supported their children well through the application process, but managed this particular point... not so well. And that had a large, and to some degree avoidable, impact on their children's experience.



Social norms and values around perceptions of college (as in, thinking where you go is who you'll be) can be problematic if not downright unhealthy (because where you go is definitely not who you'll be). Because their society in general and maybe their peers specifically mistakenly create a link between things like where one goes to college and one's value as a person, it can be easy for students to be powerfully emotionally affected by their acceptances and denials. Helping them remember that they're good humans who will live good lives by making good choices, regardless of where they go to college, is huge.

6.2. After acceptances: breaking down factors to consider when choosing a college

This is a highly personalized process, but here are some things for students/families to keep in mind:

- How much and what kind of financial aid are they being offered?
- How does that impact the level of debt they'll graduate with? (Particularly if they want to pursue a degree in a field that has lower average pay—we don't think degrees should be thought of purely in terms of financial value, but debt level can have a significant impact on quality of life.)
- Is class size important, and if so, which schools offer the most opportunity for small, intimate classes/discussions in a student's major/academic areas of interest?

- How important is personal interaction with professors, and how much does this vary between schools?
- Do different schools offer different options for community and sense of belonging?
- What different support systems (such as mental health or academic support) are important?
- Are there certain extracurriculars students want access to (like club sports, group outdoors activities, LGBTQ+ community, etc.)?
- Do they prefer a big campus vs. a small campus, or vice-versa? To be rural or near a big city? Cold weather vs. warmer climates?
- What kind of internship or co-op experiences are available, either on campus or in the nearby community?
- What are the schools' relative post-graduation placement rates?
- What kind of networking opportunities, both in school and after, are available? How available/robust is the school's alumni network in terms of pre- and post-graduate support for mentoring and job placement/connections?
- Are things like D1 sports important (in terms of quality of life)?

7. Glossary of terms + Further Focused Resources

Award Letter: a list of all the different kinds of money—scholarships, grants, loans, work study—you've received to go to a particular college next year. Head here for greater detail and an example award letter.

Deferred: deferral occurs during the early action / early decision process. Rather than accept or simply reject a student, a school may opt to defer their application to the regular decision period. This means that, if a student is accepted, they are no longer contractually bound to accept the school's offer as they would have been with early decision. (see Letter of Continued Interest)

Demonstrated Interest: some schools track different types of engagement from a student (e.g. early application, interaction at college fairs, contacting admission reps, campus tours, etc) in order to gauge how much the prospective student likes the school and thus how likely they seem to enroll if admitted. Here's a full guide to demonstrated interest. To check if a school tracks DI, you can check its Common Data Set (see below).

Coalition Application: The Coalition App is an online application for first-year and transfer students to quickly and easily apply to colleges and universities across the United States. Like the Common App, the Coalition App stores your information and application materials in its system to be used on multiple college applications. Currently, there are only 150+ colleges and universities on the Coalition App, because the Coalition only accepts colleges and universities that provide substantial financial support to lower-income and underrepresented students.

Common Application: The Common App is a free online application used by 900+ colleges and universities in the United States and 20 foreign countries. The Common App stores your information and application materials in its system to be used on multiple college applications.

Common Data Set: from their site: "The Common Data Set (CDS) initiative is a collaborative effort among data providers in the higher education community and publishers as represented by the College Board, Peterson's, and U.S. News & World Report. The combined goal of this collaboration is to improve the quality and accuracy of information provided to all involved in a student's transition into higher education, as well as to reduce the reporting burden on data providers." Here's a list of links to schools' common data sets.

CSS Profile: developed and maintained by the College Board, is a more detailed look at a student's/family's finances that some schools (around 400 of them) use to determine financial aid eligibility. It's like the FAFSA... but longer.

Early Action (EA): The early action deadline is generally at the beginning of November (most schools are Nov. 1). Students will tend to hear back from early action schools in January or February. An important difference between early action and early decision: early action is non-binding—students don't have to commit to the college until the May 1 Reply Date, and are free to attend another school. Early action tends to bump a student's chances some, but generally not as much as early decision can. For variations on EA, please see REA and SCEA.

Early Decision (ED): Early decision has two versions: ED1 and ED2. The ED1 deadline is also generally at the beginning of November. ED2 is usually January 1 or 15. Both ED1 and ED2 are binding—if a student is accepted, they are obligated to attend that school. This can be problematic for some students, as they won't know what kind of financial aid they will receive prior to committing to attend. In general, ED1 boosts admissions chances more than ED2, but ED2 can still raise a student's chances.

FAFSA: stands for Free Application for Federal Student Aid. Parents/guardians need to help complete this **every October** in order to qualify for federal aid for the following school year. Many colleges use this to calculate your Expected Family Contribution (EFC). Here's our guide to completing the FAFSA, plus common mistakes.

Financial Aid: this doesn't refer only to scholarships. Rather, in an award letter from a school, you'll see all the various federal grants, college scholarships, loans, and work-study programs a school is offering. It can easily be confusing between what a school gives in grants and what it offers in loans, so students should pay close attention.

Letter of Continued Interest: A letter of continued interest is an email a student sends to an admission office, typically after being deferred or placed on their waitlist. It lets the college know they're still interested in attending and why. Here's a guide to writing one.

National Candidates Reply Date: May 1. The deadline for notifying a college you will accept its admission offer, and making a nonrefundable deposit.

“Need blind” vs “need aware”: Some schools consider family finances as a factor in their application review (need aware), while others don’t (need blind). As students build their list, it can be helpful to keep this difference in mind.

Net Price Calculator: should appear on a college’s website, offering a place to enter a few financial variables and estimate what the cost of attendance would roughly be. (Take advantage of these calculators—most students don’t actually pay full tuition price, and for some families, high sticker price private schools can end up being cheaper than moderately priced state schools.)

Personal Insight Questions (PIQs): These are used by the University of California to contextualize a student’s application. A student must write responses for 4 of the 8 possible prompts. Please head here for a complete guide to writing for the PIQs.

PSAT/NMSQT: The Preliminary SAT/National Merit Scholarship Qualifying Test. Typically taken junior year. Used to determine eligibility/qualification for the National Merit Scholarship Program.

Regular Decision (RD): Usually refers to the non-early application deadline. Varies from school to school, but typically in early January

Restrictive Early Action (REA): Often used interchangeably with SCEA (see SCEA for detail). If applying early, be sure to read the details of a school’s policy, as schools can have slight variations on restrictions.

Rolling Admissions: some schools allow students to apply at any time up to a certain date. Students are admitted until the class is filled. For an analysis of pros and cons, you can check out this guide to rolling admissions.

Single-Choice Early Action (SCEA): This option offers a middle ground between early decision and early action. With SCEA, students can only apply early to one private school (but may apply early to public schools). Schools that offer SCEA frequently do so because they believe that early decision is unfair—early decision does not allow students to compare financial aid packages from different schools before agreeing to attend. SCEA generally offers an increase in admission chances over regular decision. If applying early, be sure to read the details of a school’s policy, as schools can have slight variations on restrictions.

Scholarships: For an in-depth walkthrough of private vs local vs institutional scholarships, head here.

"Test-blind": Test scores won't be considered by a school in the evaluation process (even if a student submits them). Here's a list from FairTest of test blind schools.

"Test-optional": a school allows students to decide whether to submit test scores, and if a student chooses not to do so, it won't be counted against them. According to the College Board, about 80% of applicants chose to submit test scores to test-optional colleges.

Wait List: this occurs during the regular decision process (in contrast with deferral, which can occur as part of the early application process). Essentially, the college is saying they are interested in the student, but doesn't currently have an open spot. If enough students who were accepted to the school decide to attend elsewhere, a student may be accepted. It's important to understand that schools won't let students know if they get in off of the waitlist until after the May 1 Reply Day, which means students will need to have committed to another college, and will likely lose any security deposit if they decide to switch schools. (see Letter of Continued Interest)

Work study: a college program that allows students to work part-time while attending the school, typically as part of a financial aid package.

7.1. Further Focused Resources

For further focused/in-depth application resources, please check out our College Application Hub.

(Your School Name Here) School Resources	
Counselor Name:	
Counselor Email:	
Counselor Phone Number:	
School Website:	
(repeat above for large schools - and allow counselors to delete or copy)	
Link to School Profile:	
College Platform Information	Scoir/Naviance/Maia/Etc. link/how to log in
Requesting Letters of Recommendation:	Link to process/timeline/forms
Important Dates:	- Last day to change classes - Last day to drop without penalty - Priority date to request letters of recommendation
School Hosted Events (this could be a place to give a new counselor ideas of what types of events seasoned programs offer):	- College Info Night (12th Grade + Families) - Financial Aid Night (12th Grade + Families) - College Fair (in-person, regional or virtual) - Cash for College Events - Application workshops
Common fields on College apps:	- Graduating Class Size: - Graduation Date: - GPA Scale: - Ranking (yes/no): - Weighting (yes/no):
Transcript/Curriculum Notes:	(also link to or insert grad requirements?)

Sample: Dream High School Resources	
Counselor Name:	Ms. Cinderella Jackson
Counselor Email:	jackson@dreamschool.org
Counselor Phone Number:	888-222-4444
School Website:	www.dreamschool.org
(repeat above for large schools - and allow counselors to delete or copy)	
Link to School Profile:	www.dreamschool.org/profile
College Platform Information	Scoir: Login link is here
Requesting Letters of Recommendation:	Students should request letters of recommendation teachers using this Google form, between April 1 and May 31 Students should request letters of recommendation from Ms. Jackson using this Google form, no later than September 15.

Important Dates:	- Last day to change classes: September 20
	- Last day to drop without penalty: October 10
	- Priority date to request letters of recommendation:
	  - Teachers - May 31
	  - Counselor - September 15

School Hosted Events (this could be a place to give a new counselor ideas of what types of events seasoned programs offer):	- College Info Night (12th Grade + Families) - September 7
	- Financial Aid Night (12th Grade + Families) - September 29
	- College Fair (in-person, regional or virtual) - WACAC Regional College Fair April 15
	- Cash for College Events - October 7 and November 20
	- Application workshops
	  - UC - October 10
	  - CSU - weekly in advisory
	  - Common App October 20

Common fields on College apps:	- Graduating Class Size: 243 - Graduation Date: June 5 2023

	- GPA Scale: 4.0 - Ranking (yes/no): no - Weighting (yes/no): yes
Transcript/Curriculum Notes:	- College Prep - P - Honors College Prep - HP - Advanced Placement - HP - Community service is not required for graduation - All students are required to take a career pathway class in grades 10-12 For full graduation requirements see this link.