Inside Admissions



From Application to Acceptance: What Happens Behind the Scenes

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Agenda

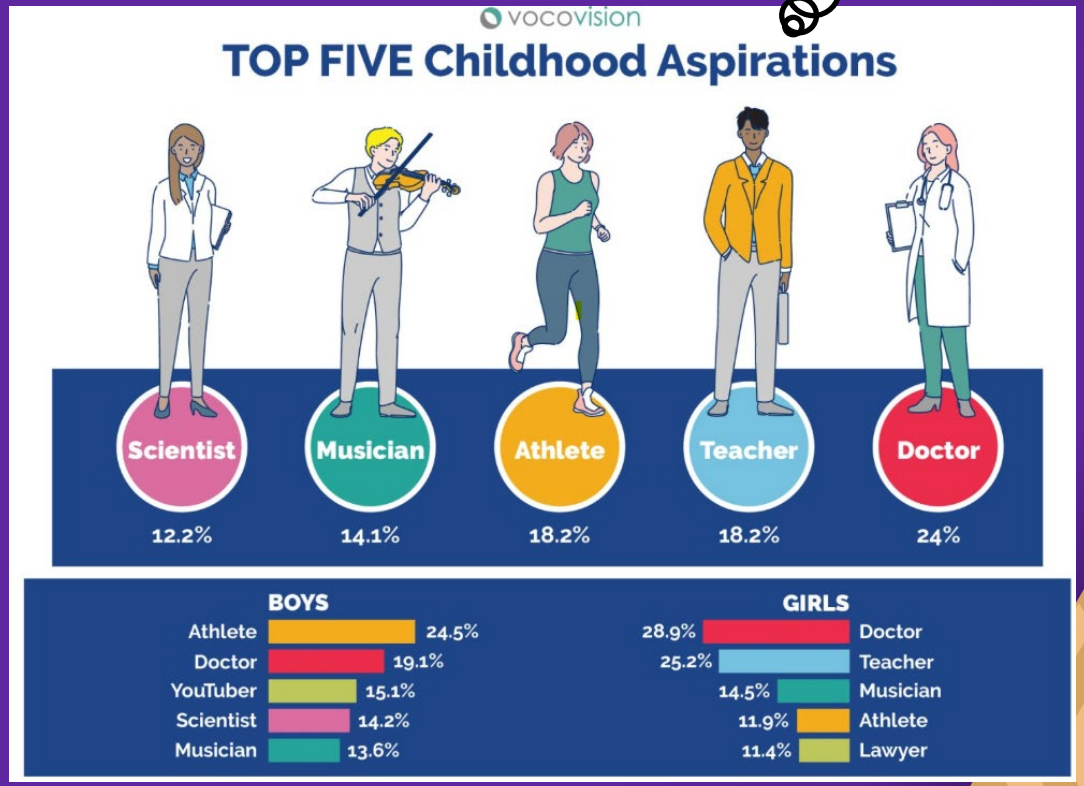
- Who works in a colleges admissions office
- The application process
  - Applications 101
  - Components of an application
  - How are applications reviewed and how can I stand out?
- Student Decision making
- Understanding College Enrollment
- Misconceptions & things you might not know

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Who works in the office?

Admissions Counselor

- Staff have a variety of backgrounds
- Some have higher education experience, some are graduates of that institution
- Often there are operations staff that support recruitment and review
- Different institutions have different structures (i. e. specific readers, those who read for certain majors, those who have special areas, etc.)



Source: VocoVision (2024).

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Admissions 101

Ways to apply

- Common Application
  - Direct Admission Option
- The Coalition Application (116-Scoir)
- Questbridge app (55- Selective)
- Direct Admission (Niche, Appily Match)
- SUNY Applications
- School specific applications
- Transfer & Graduate applications look different (make sure you're applying to the right thing!)

- **Decision types**: Early Decision (I, II)*, Early Action, Regular Decision

Things to be aware of

- Admissions Deadlines
  - Rolling (Apply>Decision rolls)
  - Dates based on decision types (I.e. Apply by Nov 1, hear back by January)
  - Deadlines for scholarship

- Apply for Financial Aid, opens Oct 1
  - FAFSA, CSS, TAP, sometimes additional items may be requested
  - Scholarships & Grants available

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How do I know which way to apply?

- Early Decision vs. Early Action
  - ED = Your number one choice, if it works financially, you'll attend and withdraw from other institutions
  - EA = Apply earlier, find out earlier. You can apply to multiple schools EA
  - Be aware of other deadlines and descriptions (i.e. Scholarships)
- Larger application vs. Direct Admission options
  - Direct Admission cuts out a lot of the details
  - Common App/Detailed application provides more opportunities to showcase yourself. Apply this way if you're not sure you'll get in, if you're applying for specialty programs (i.e. HEOP), if you're applying to a lot of schools anyway!
- When in doubt- ask the institution!

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Components of an application

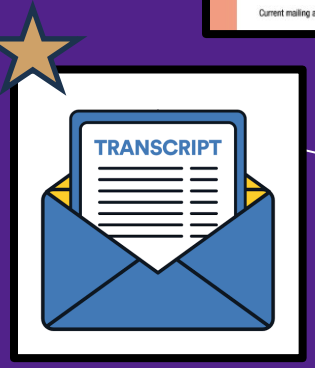
- **Application** (sometimes includes essay)
- Transcript
- Letter(s) of Recommendation*
- Test Scores (many are optional)*
- Supplemental questions or essays*
- Actitvities/Resume*
- Videos (optional at some schools)*
- Audition or portfolio review*
- Interview*





-Activities
-Essay

LOR
1-3



-GPA
-College credits
-Regents

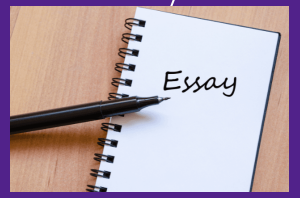
Your Application





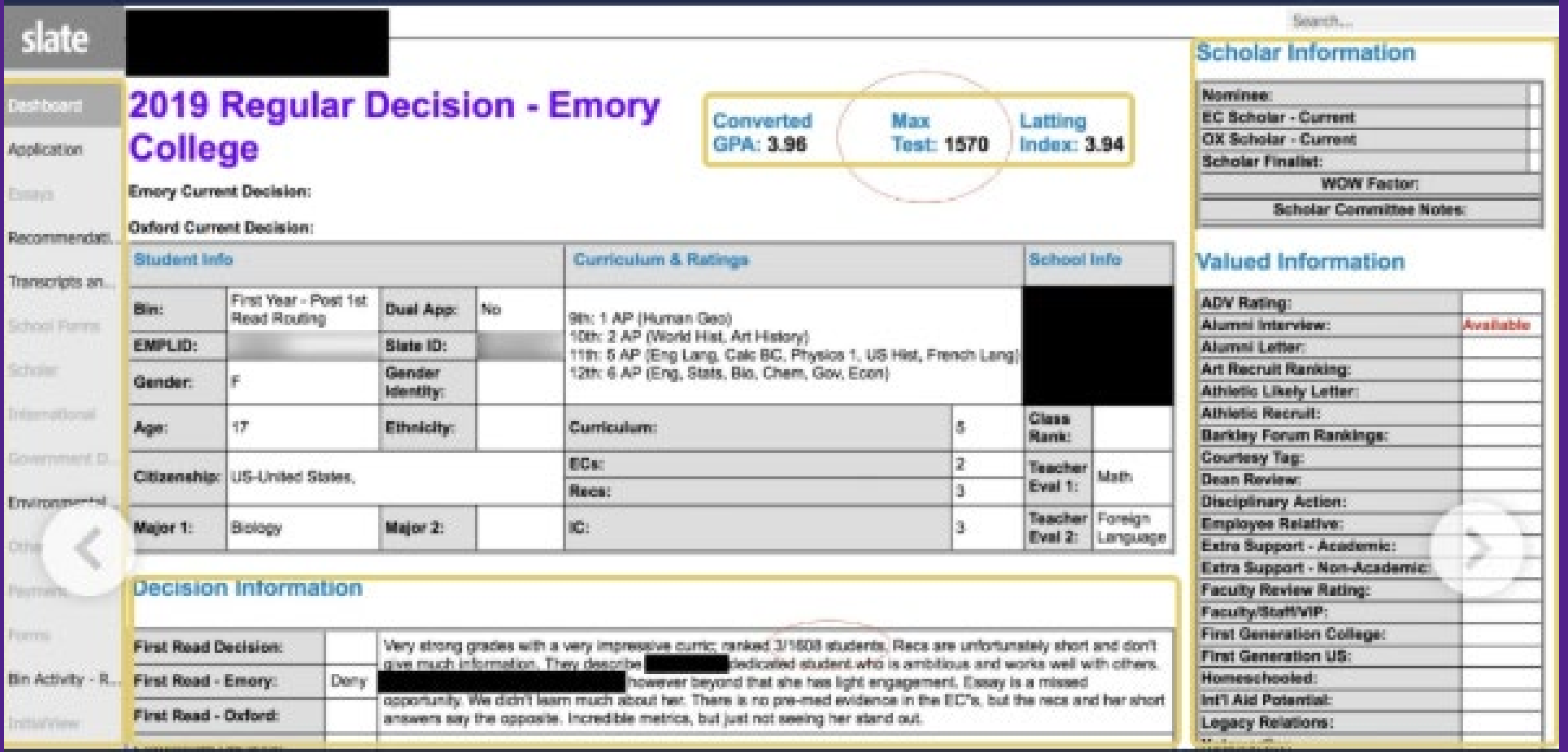






INSIDE THE FILE AT EMORY

The first screen reads like the back of a baseball card.



From my reporting for *Who Gets In and Why*. Emory, 2019 cycle. IDs removed.

LEFT

A tab for every piece of the application.

BOTTOM

The reader's notes and first-read decision.

TOP

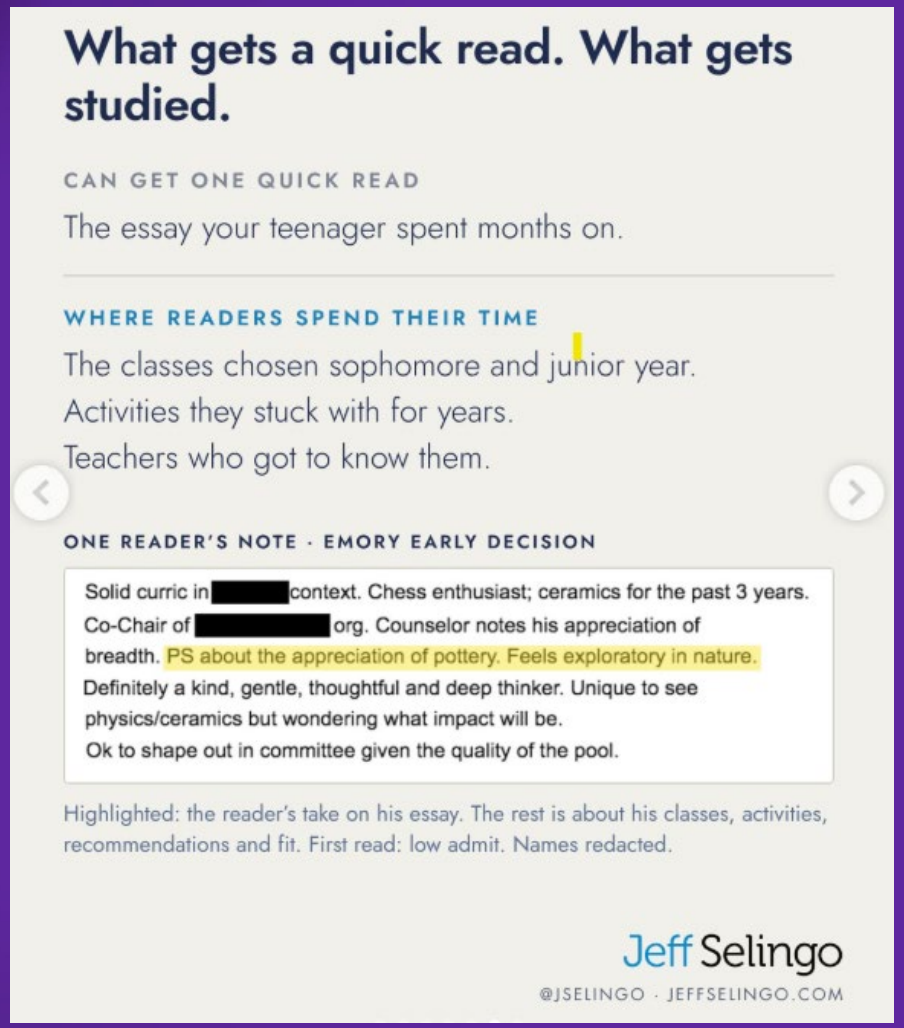
Grades and scores, boiled down to three numbers.

RIGHT

Tags like legacy, athlete and first-gen.

Jeff Selingo, Instagram (@Jselingo), 2026.

How are applications reviewed?



What gets a quick read. What gets studied.

CAN GET ONE QUICK READ

The essay your teenager spent months on.

WHERE READERS SPEND THEIR TIME

The classes chosen sophomore and junior year.
Activities they stuck with for years.
Teachers who got to know them.

ONE READER'S NOTE · EMORY EARLY DECISION

Solid curric in [redacted] context. Chess enthusiast; ceramics for the past 3 years. Co-Chair of [redacted] org. Counselor notes his appreciation of breadth. PS about the appreciation of pottery. Feels exploratory in nature. Definitely a kind, gentle, thoughtful and deep thinker. Unique to see physics/ceramics but wondering what impact will be.
Ok to shape out in committee given the quality of the pool.

Highlighted: the reader's take on his essay. The rest is about his classes, activities, recommendations and fit. First read: low admit. Names redacted.

Jeff Selingo
@JSELINGO · JEFFSELINGO.COM

- Depending on where you're applying and when you're applying, your application may get reviewed differently (i.e. highly selective schools, smaller schools, state schools)
- Consideration based on college priorities
- Certain parts may be weighed differently
- Holistic review of applications

Jeff Selingo, Instagram (@Jselingo), 2026.

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What's considered outside the app

- Demonstrated interest
  - Visits
  - Emails
  - Online interaction
- Personal conversations virtually or in person
- Interactions with counselors
  - Positive & negative, i.e. texting
  - Remember we can monitor a lot through technology now!
- Retention & success of students
- Specific major consideration (i.e. Nursing, Musical Theatre, etc.)
- Relationship with those on campus

How do I stand out?

- Always ask questions about how you'll be perceived, and what the college is looking for
  - how do you look at GPA's, is it important I take AP's, etc.
- If you can visit- it will benefit both you and the institution
- Explain any blemishes on your application
- Ask recommenders you're confident can talk about you!
- Be as honest as you can

How do I prepare?

- Create a list of the institutions you're interested in, and what their requirements are
  - Deadlines (including for scholarship)
  - Specific requirements vs Optional items (Test Scores, Letters of Recommendation, Interview)
  - Supplemental applications or essays
  - Application costs and any waiver options, free application opportunities
- Visit virtually or in person
- Learn about what the institutions you're interested in are interested in
- Be clear in your activities
  - Don't assume we know what unique clubs or activities are
  - Include family responsibilities, community service, sports, etc.
- Try to do research on financial aid and what scholarships are available, how you might afford that institution
- If you're a parent or supporter, do your best to give the student autonomy over the process and inquire about how you can stay involved

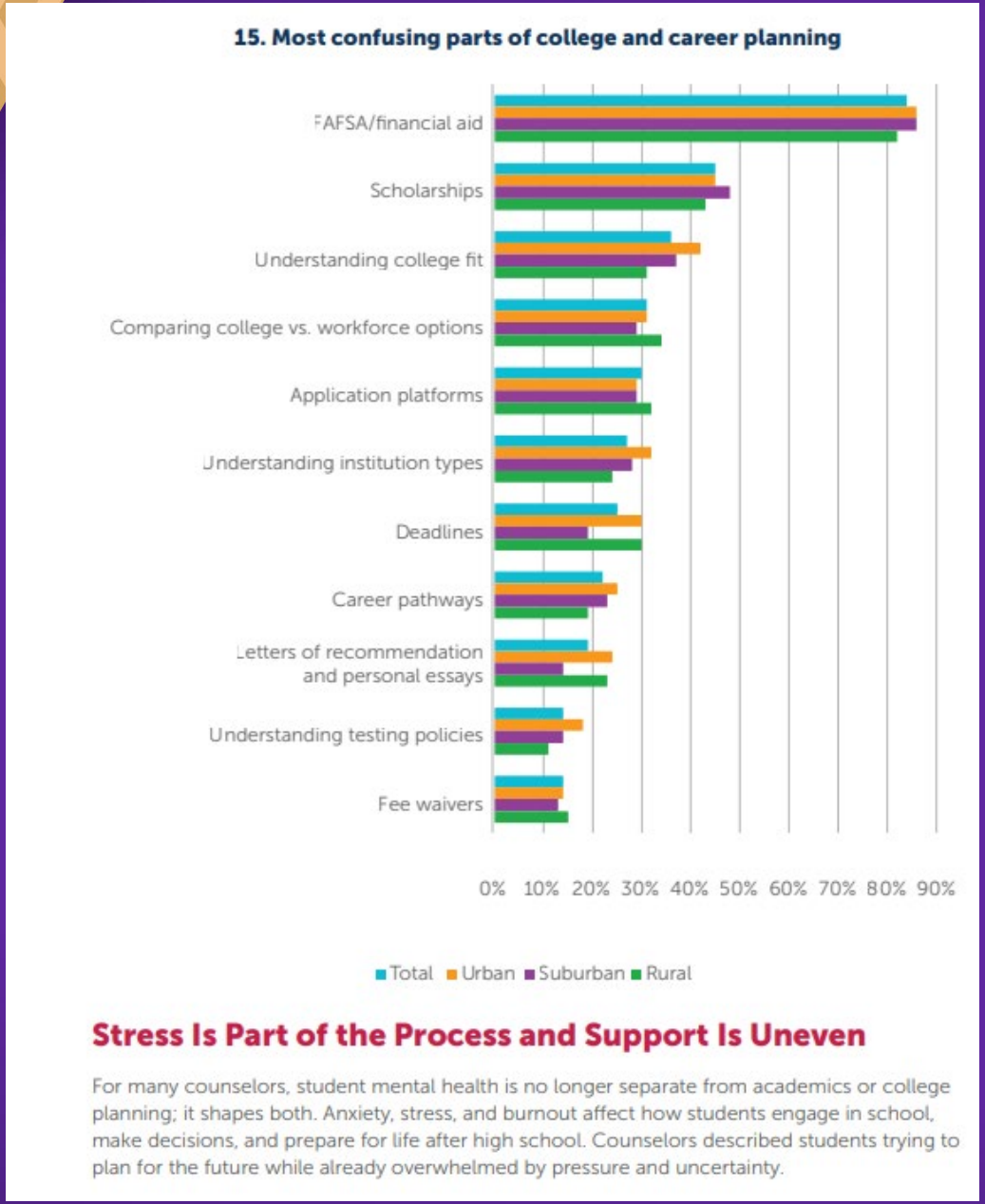
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How do I make the best decision?

- Decisions – virtual throughout portals
- Understand deposit process, deadlines, cost of deposit
  - If you're stressed about a deadline, it doesn't hurt to ask for an extension
- ED: Typically, an earlier deposit deadline
- Take a critical look at your financial aid offers, and reach out to institutions you have questions about
  - Understand if they have any form of an appeals process
- Before you get decisions, understand what is going to be critical for you to decide
- When you can- visit the institution!

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Confusion in the application process



- When in doubt, ask questions!
- Know you are not alone, this process while intending to make it more streamlined can become confusing.

Encoura, Encourage, High School Counselor Marketing & NextGrad (2026). 2026 High School Counselor Report. Encoura.

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Understanding College Enrollment

- Different colleges are looking for different things that may impact your decision
  - I.e., New programs with low enrollment, students from certain areas or partnerships, important initiatives to the institution
- Institutions may have different requirements for different majors
  - I.e., Musical Theatre, Engineering, Nursing, Etc.
- Some schools don’t require you to declare a major
- Athletic Divisions and what can be offered
- If you’re able, understand more about an institution's future

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Misconceptions & Things you might not know

MYTH	REALITY
1. Texts from a college aren't monitored by humans	1. They often are read by real people
2. This counselor knows me, but they sent me an email like we haven't talked. Did they forget me?	2. Although someone reads your responses, there is a lot of automation
3. Once I'm into a college- I don't have to try anymore	3. We do check final transcripts and can revoke admission for other reasons
4. If you get into the most prestigious college you applied to, that's where you should go	4. You should always base your decision on *you* and not others or rankings.

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Misconceptions & Things you might not know

MYTH	REALITY
5. Your essay should be something that made you sad or was hard to deal with.	5. Generally, avoid things that are taboo: sports (victories/making the team/injury), family death, mission trips, tragic experiences, something where you are not the “main character” or doesn’t have purpose. Examples here.
6. The sticker price at a college is always what you’ll pay	6. Institutions often discount their price with a variety of scholarships that could vary over the cycle.

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Misconceptions & Things you might not know

MYTH	REALITY
7. Financial aid is only for families with very low income.	7. Different institutions have different types of scholarships and grants, based on different eligibility.
8. Your major cannot change, and will determine your future	8. You can change your career path before, during, and after college!

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Please reach out with any questions about the process, or Nazareth!

***Don't forget to complete the QR code on note catcher**



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Sources

- Slide 2: VocoVision. (2024, November 25). What do kids want to be when they grow up? Uncovering the dream jobs of today's youth. https://www.vocovision.com/blog/what-do-kids-want-to-be-when-they-grow-up-uncovering-the-dream-jobs-of-todays-youth/
- Slide 7-8: Jeff Selingo [@jselingo]. (2026, October 29). A college application tells you a lot about what a school needs. It tells you very little about what you're worth. [Photograph]. Instagram. URL
- Slide 12: Encoura, Encourage, High School Counselor Marketing & NextGrad (2026). 2026 High School Counselor Report. Encoura.
- John Hopkins essays that work: https://apply.jhu.edu/college-planning-guide/essays-that-worked/

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