College Preparation Handbook

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Created: Chanelle Mays, Oct. 2010
I. Choosing your area of study

What are you good at? Where do you see yourself in 10 years? Will you become a nurse? Teacher? Construction foreman? Will you still be in school, working on your Master’s, J.D., or PhD?

These are some questions you should ask yourself as you prepare to enter the college search and application process, because your answers can dictate what you should focus your college studies on.

Before you get to college, you should try to select a major, or your main area of study. This will be the subject in which you take the most classes, and the most in depth classes.

Your major is what your certificate will have on it when you graduate.
According to the Princeton Review, the top ten most popular majors are:

1. Business Administration and Management/Commerce
2. Psychology
3. Nursing
4. Biology/Biological Sciences
5. Education
6. English Language and Literature
7. Economics
8. Communications Studies/Speech Communication and Rhetoric
9. Political Science and Government
10. Computer and Information Sciences

Don’t worry – if you can’t narrow down your interests and choose a major just yet, you have some options:

- Don’t declare a major; enter college as “Undecided” or “Exploratory” and decide once you’ve taken a few courses.

- Choose the major that best fits with your current goals; you can change your major if it turns out not to be a perfect fit.

**TIP:** Majors aren’t set in stone, but because they all have different requirements, switching often can lengthen the time until your graduation.
II. Researching schools

Now that you’ve chosen a major, or narrowed down your interests, you should also put together a list of other criteria that you would like your college to meet. Consider the following:

**Location**: Will you move away from home and live in a residence hall or will you commute? Do you prefer a rural or urban setting? What about the climate?

**Size of student body**: A small college might have a more intimate feel, while a larger college might have more opportunities.

**Selectivity**: What are your chances of being accepted? Are your GPA and test scores similar to the GPA and scores of students generally accepted?

**Religious affiliation**: Do you want to attend a college affiliated with a particular religion?

**Campus activities**: Are sports, performing arts and other activities available? What is the Greek life (fraternities and sororities) like?

**Diversity**: Do you want to attend a college where many races, religions and cultures are represented? Have you considered a women-only or men-only college? Are you interested in historically black colleges?

**Special needs**: Will the college be able to accommodate any special needs you may have (i.e., physical or learning disabilities, special diet)?
With your list of criteria in mind, do a college search using one (or some) of the following sites:

✓ collegesearch.collegeboard.com/search/adv_typeofschool.jsp

✓ princetonreview.com/com.aspx

💡 TIP: It’s okay if you don’t have answers for some questions. However, the more questions you answer, the more precise your results will be.

✓ petersons.com/college-search.aspx

💡 TIP: Click ‘Advanced Search’ under the search box (shown below).

Once you’ve used these sites to pinpoint a few colleges that you are interested in, visit the colleges’ websites.

Check out the future/prospective student area and any information about the city in which the college is located (check the site for a ‘visitors’ section). You might even want to read the Wikipedia article about the city!

If you’re still interested, schedule a campus visit. A visit is the best way to get a feel for a school. The tour guides are usually students, so you should feel free to ask them questions about food, housing, and other topics that a student would know best.
III. Selecting your prospective schools

Now that you’ve researched several schools and visited a few, you should decide which schools you’d like to apply to. Consider using the following criteria, and any others that are important to you:

Did I like the campus when I visited?

💡 TIP: This might sound silly, but you’ll be spending 2-4 years there, so you should like it or at least find it acceptable!

Does this school offer scholarships?

- Based on grades or standardized test scores
- Based on minority status
- For first- or second-generation immigrants
- Based on where I went to high school

Does my major program at this school have a good reputation?

💡 TIP: The fact that a school has a program in your major doesn’t mean it’s comprehensive or well-established.

Does this school have the resources I need?

- Libraries and other quiet study spaces
- Free computer labs
- Tutoring centers

Is the campus safe?

(Your parent or guardian will be concerned about this, even if you aren’t!)

- Is there a campus police squad?
- Are the dorms secure and only accessible by residents?
- Are there emergency phones on campus?
- Is the campus well-lit at night?

Does this school offer transportation?

- If the campus is large, is there a bus system? Student bike rental program?
IV. College applications – what to expect

Application elements – the usual suspects

These days, online applications are generally preferred. You will need stable internet access and an e-mail address, which schools will use to send you updates on your application’s status.

All college applications will contain the same basic questions. You’ll need to provide:

- Contact and personal information
- Education background and grades
  - You will need an official transcript from your high school
- Scores from the SAT or ACT
- Employment history
- Letters of recommendation
  - Usually two or three
  - Written by teachers or counselors who know you well
  - Give the person one month’s notice before the due date
- Essay(s)

Essays

Essays can be a source of stress for many college applicants, but they are actually a wonderful opportunity to show the college admissions board who you are, beyond your grades.

A great college essay reference:

✓ collegeboard.com/student/apply/essay-skills/9405.html
Before you start to write, brainstorm:

- Think of events in your life, positions you’ve held, or roles you’ve taken on that showcase the qualities you listed above.

Now let’s think about some example essay questions, piece by piece:

*Evaluate a significant experience, achievement, risk you have taken, or ethical dilemma you have faced and its impact on you.*

- Choose one of the events/positions/roles you listed while brainstorming.
- How did it challenge you?
- What personal strengths did you use to get through it? How, specifically, did you use those strengths?
- How will your newfound experience and insight make you a successful college student?

*Indicate a person who has had a significant influence on you, and describe that influence.*

- Did this person make you realize hidden potential in yourself? Did they influence what you want to do with your life?
- Describe what you were like before meeting this person, and how you have changed positively since then because of them.
- Consider explaining the situation like a story to catch the admissions board’s attention:

→ See a counselor or English teacher for help writing your essays.
Application fees and waivers

The bottom line: applications cost money (usually $50-80)

The other bottom line: you may be eligible for fee waivers from NACAC (National Association for College Admission Counseling)!

✔ nacacnet.org/studentinfo/feewaiver/pages/default.aspx

You are eligible if:

- Your family receives public assistance.
- You are a ward of the state.
- You reside in a foster home.
- You are homeless.
- You participate in a free or reduced-price lunch program.
- You participate in a federally funded TRIO program (e.g. Upward Bound).
- Your family’s income is at or below the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) Poverty Guides (see below).

See a counselor to discuss fee waivers for your applications.

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The Common Application

The Common Application (commonapp.org) is a single application that is accepted by 415 different universities! It saves you time since you don’t have to complete a separate app for each college.

As on most applications, you’ll provide the following information:
- Personal
- Demographic
- Education (schools you’ve attended)
- Academics (your grades and test scores)
- Extracurriculars and Work Experience
- Writing (your choice of 5 essay questions)

The Common Application is treated fairly by colleges and universities – that is, it is just as good an option as applications provided by schools themselves.

See a counselor to get help submitting your Common Application.

VI. Taking the SAT and ACT

These two tests are standardized tests that colleges use in their admissions process. Your college will require one or the other, but probably not both.

**SAT: Scholastic Aptitude Test**

SAT components:
- **Math**: 54 multiple choice questions
- **Reading**: 67 multiple choice questions
- **Writing**: 49 multiple choice questions + 1 essay
SAT facts:

- The test is offered 7 times a year
- It is **3 hours 45 minutes** long
- You should take the PSAT (Preliminary Scholastic Aptitude Test) the year before you plan to graduate. If you score well, you will be eligible for some great scholarships!
- You will be scored from 200-800 in each section for a total of 2,400 possible points.

**ACT: American College Testing**

ACT components:

- **English**: 75 multiple choice questions
- **Reading**: 40 multiple choice questions
- **Math**: 60 multiple choice questions
- **Science**: 40 multiple choice questions
- Plus **one 30 minute essay** (optional, though many schools may require it)

ACT facts:

- The test is offered in October, December, February, April, and June
- It is **2 hours 55 minutes long** (not including the 30 minute essay)
- You will be scored from 1-36 in each section. Your final score will be the average of all your scores.

You can practice the ACT and SAT for free online at the following sites:

✓ princetonreview.com/free-online-practice-tests.aspx
VII. Filing the FAFSA

FAFSA stands for ‘Free Application for Federal Student Aid’. All college students should file it each year because it offers students the opportunity to receive financial aid to help with tuition costs.

Visit pin.ed.gov to get a federal pin number. You will need it before you begin your FAFSA. When you get to the website, click on ‘Apply Now’ as shown below.

TIP: You will need an e-mail address to sign up for your pin number as well as the FAFSA.
Information you will need when filing the FAFSA:

- W-2 forms from the previous year
- Your social security number
- Your drivers’ license or state issued ID
- Federal Income Tax Return (yours or your parents’)
- Current bank statement
- Records of any untaxed income such as...
  - Social Security
  - Temporary Assistance for Needy Families

You can find a walkthrough on filing the FAFSA at:
  fafsaonline.com/fafsa-form

Good luck with your college applications! Remember that if you need assistance with any of these steps, you can talk to...

Ms. Howard
291-0805 ext. 108