



Preparing for College



**Information for Students
and Parents**





Dear Students and Parents

For college bound students and their families, there is a lot to know about the college process—choosing a college, completing applications, paying for college, and more.

This booklet will give you the information you need the most—from taking the correct courses in high school to making college visits to finding ways to cut college costs!

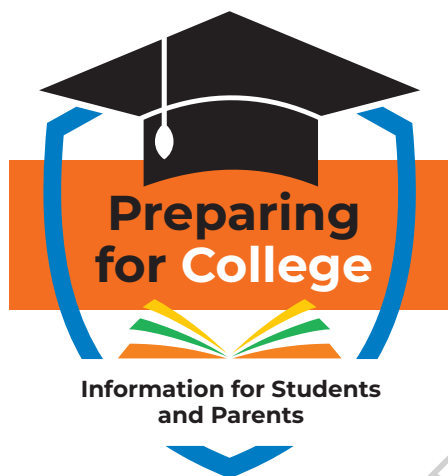


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The High School Academic Record



In the college admissions process, nothing is more important than a student’s high school academic record.

While colleges consider a number of factors when evaluating applicants, they are generally most interested in the following information:

- ▶ grade point average (GPA)
- ▶ college prep courses
- ▶ class rank
- ▶ college admissions test scores (ACT/SAT)

Colleges know that students who do well in high school are more likely to be successful in college. *This is why a student’s high school academic record is so important.*

Grade point average (GPA)

A student’s GPA is included on every transcript, and it’s one of the first things colleges look for.

GPA is the average of a student’s semester (or end-of-term) grades, starting with 9th grade. Although there are variations, most high schools use a 4.0 scale (A=4, B=3, C=2, D=1). Students with all As have a 4.0 GPA, while students with half As and half Bs have a 3.5 GPA.

Some high schools have “weighted grades” for honors, AP (Advanced Placement), and/or IB (International Baccalaureate) courses. If a school has weighted grades, then a grade in a weighted course is worth more than it is in a non-weighted course. For example, an A in an honors course might be worth 5 points instead of the usual 4 points.

A variety of methods are used to calculate GPAs. Regardless of the method used, the higher the grades, the higher the GPA—and the higher a student’s GPA, the greater the college opportunities.

College prep courses

Four-year colleges generally recommend that students take the following courses in high school:

- 4 years of English
- 3–4 years of math (including Algebra I, Geometry, and Algebra II)
- 3–4 years of science
- 2–3 years of one world language
- 3 years of social studies
- 1 year of fine or performing arts

Students who haven't taken all of the above courses may be required to take remedial and/or additional courses once they're in college. Students who haven't taken several of these courses may want to consider starting at a community college or at a college's branch campus.

Competitive schools and programs consider the above to be the minimum requirements. They recommend that students challenge themselves by taking advanced, honors, AP, and IB courses whenever possible. As a general rule, high school students should take as many college preparatory math, science, English, social studies, and world language courses as they can handle.

While colleges differ in how they weigh admissions criteria, almost all colleges consider the grades earned in college prep courses to be the most important criteria for college admissions.

Class rank

Approximately half the high schools in the U.S. rank their students.

Class rank shows where students stand in relation to the other members of their graduating class. The student with the highest GPA is number one, the student with the second-highest GPA is number two, and so on.



Because GPAs are used to calculate class rank, a student must have a high GPA in order to have an impressive class rank. Class rank is one of several factors colleges use in the admissions process.

College admission tests

Many four-year colleges use ACT and SAT scores to help them assess a student's readiness for college level work.



While many colleges require that applicants submit ACT or SAT scores, some colleges now have a test-optional policy. This means that they allow some or all applicants to choose whether to submit test scores with their application. *Unless a student is certain that they will not need to submit test scores, they should take the ACT and/or SAT.*

About the ACT

The ACT is offered in September, October, December, February, April, June, and July. Students receive a score (1–36) in English, Reading, Math, and Science, along with a composite (average) score. There's also an optional Writing Test. Students can find information about the ACT, learn about test prep resources, and register for the ACT at act.org.

About the SAT

The SAT is offered in August, October, November, December, March, May, and June. Students receive a total score (400–1600) and two section scores: an Evidence Based Reading and Writing score, and a score in Math. Students can find information about the SAT, learn about test prep resources, and register for the SAT at collegeboard.org.

When should students take the ACT and/or SAT?

Students should take the ACT and/or SAT in the spring of their junior year. This gives students who want to improve their scores time to retake them.

Which test should a student take?

Colleges accept both ACT and SAT scores, so students can take either test. Admissions counselors often recommend that students take a practice test for both, and then prepare for the test they're likely to do better on.

Following a strong college prep program in high school is the best preparation for both the ACT and SAT!

Additional admissions criteria

In addition to GPA, strength of subjects, class rank, and test scores, colleges also consider the following when determining whether or not to accept an applicant:

- ▶ special talents/awards
- ▶ activities
- ▶ essays
- ▶ interviews
- ▶ recommendations
- ▶ demonstrated interest

Colleges are always looking for students who have something that makes them stand out—a noteworthy achievement, unique characteristic, special talent, or something that brings diversity to a campus.

The high school transcript

A transcript is a document detailing a student's academic achievement. Although the information included on a transcript varies from school to school, high school transcripts often include the following information:

- ▶ courses, grades, and credits for each semester completed, beginning with grade 9 (*high school courses taken in middle school are sometimes included*)
- ▶ current cumulative GPA and class rank
- ▶ anticipated graduation date
- ▶ college admissions test scores (ACT, SAT)
- ▶ state graduation test scores (if required)



A transcript provides admissions and scholarship committees with important objective data. All colleges and most scholarship programs request that an *official* transcript be submitted with each application. Unless it's electronically transferred directly from one institution to another, an official transcript must have a signature, stamp, or seal verifying its authenticity. Students can usually obtain an unofficial transcript (to check credits or take on a college visit) from their guidance/counseling office.

For tips on how to build an impressive high school record, watch this short video.



Choosing a College



Students and parents need to work together to determine what they are looking for in a college.

Things to consider

When looking for colleges that will be a good match for you, consider the following:

Size – Do you want to go to a large college with lots of majors and activities, or to a small college with fewer students and smaller classes?

Location – Where do you want to go to college? Close to home? In your home state? In a big city? Close to nature?

Academic programs/other criteria – Is there a specific subject you want to study? If so, you need to find the colleges that offer that major. Are there other things that are important to you, such as a specific sport, study abroad program, or campus diversity?

Cost – How important is cost? In order to save money, many students choose to go to a public college in their home state, or they start at a community college. Remember, financial aid often makes it possible for students to attend colleges that would otherwise be too expensive.

Admissions requirements – Which colleges seem to be a good academic fit for you? Look for colleges that accept students with academic records similar to yours.

Do a college search

Once you've determined what you are looking for, search for the colleges that meet your criteria. To do an online search, visit bigfuture.collegeboard.org.

Making College Visits



Making a college visit is the best way to find out if a college is going to be right for a student. A student's junior year is an excellent time to make college visits.

To plan a formal visit, call the admissions office or visit the college's website to see if they have any visitation days or open houses scheduled. These programs are designed for high school students and their parents, and they're a great way to learn about a college.

If you want to visit a college on a day when there's no specific program planned, contact the admissions office and let them know when you would like to visit. The admissions office can then arrange for a campus tour and schedule appointments.

Things to do on a college visit

- ▶ A group tour is a great way to see a campus. Ask your tour guide questions such as, *What is this college best known for? What are this college's strongest majors?*
- ▶ Schedule appointments with people who can answer your questions—admissions counselors, program directors, and financial aid counselors.
- ▶ Talk to students. Ask them what they like and don't like about the college—and about what they do on weekends.
- ▶ As you explore the campus, make a note of your impressions and what you like and don't like.
- ▶ Does the college feel comfortable? Does it feel like a good fit?
- ▶ Take pictures to help you remember the campus.
- ▶ Check out the nearby city or town.

Choosing a College Major



All four-year college students choose a major—the subject they have chosen to study in-depth. Students should consider their interests and abilities and choose a major that will help them reach their career goals.

Students who know what they want to major in should choose their high school courses accordingly. For example, students who plan to major in engineering should take as many advanced math and science courses in high school as they can.

Students who haven't decided on a major can use their first year of college to take their required general education courses (English, math, science, humanities), visit career services, and talk to their advisor.

These are some of the most popular four-year college majors.

Accounting	Engineering	Music
Biology	Finance	Nursing
Business	Information sciences	Physics
Communications	Journalism	Psychology
Computer science	Marketing	Sports management
Education	Mathematics	Zoology

Two-year college programs

Instead of a major, students at two-year colleges choose the program they want to get their degree in. These programs enable students to begin their careers after two years of college or less.

Students who want a four-year degree sign up for a transfer program. They then take courses they know the four-year college they plan to attend will accept, like English and math.

Applying to College



Students should know which schools they want to apply to by the fall of their senior year.

All colleges have applications for admission on their website. Students may also be able to apply for admissions using the Common App (commonapp.org). Applications for admission require a high school transcript, and most have sections for the student's counselor to complete. *Students need to make sure they follow their school's procedures for submitting applications and requesting transcripts.*

The college admissions process

Step 1 – Submission

Keep a copy of each completed application for your files and note the date each was submitted. Be aware of deadlines.

Step 2 – Review

When all required documents have been received, a student's application will be evaluated by an admissions committee.

Step 3 – Notification

Once a student's application has been evaluated, the college will let them know whether they have been accepted, rejected, or put on a waiting list.

Step 4 – The decision

After comparing all college and financial aid offers, students and parents decide which college the student will attend.

For more information on college admissions, watch this short video.



VIDEO

Paying for College



College can be expensive, but there are things you can do to make college affordable. If you need help paying for college, learn about financial aid, fill out a Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), and explore ways to cut college costs.

Financial aid overview

Financial aid is money that's given, earned, or lent to help students pay for college. The four types of financial aid are grants, scholarships, loans, and work-study. Grants and scholarships are considered "free money." Loans and work-study are considered "self-help" programs. For more information on financial aid, visit studentaid.gov or finaid.org.

The FAFSA – *Completing this form is very important!*

The FAFSA is the application you need to fill out in order to receive any financial aid for college from the federal government. The information from the FAFSA helps the government and colleges determine who is eligible for financial aid.

How will completing a FAFSA help you?

Students who have completed a FAFSA and have a financial need become eligible to receive federal grants (free money), low-interest loans, and work-study. Colleges and states also use information from the FAFSA to determine eligibility for their aid.

When do I fill it out?

The FAFSA is available October 1. Financial aid is often awarded on a first come first serve basis, so students and parents should complete a FAFSA as early as possible in the student's senior year.

For more information on the FAFSA, watch this short video.



Ways to cut college costs

- ▶ **Attend an in-state public college** – Because public colleges are supported by tax dollars, they are generally less expensive than private colleges. Also, attending a public college in your home state usually costs much less than attending a public college in a different state where you must pay the out-of-state tuition.
- ▶ **Live at home and commute** – Students can save a lot of money by living at home and commuting to a local college.
- ▶ **Start at a two-year college** – Attending a two-year public college for one year typically costs less than half of what it costs to attend a four-year public college. Students who want to earn a four-year degree can save a lot of money by starting at a two-year college.
- ▶ **Spend less time in college** – Students can shorten the time they spend in college by taking AP and dual-credit courses in high school, and by taking summer classes while in college.
- ▶ **Take advantage of tax credits and savings programs** 529 Plans, the American Opportunity Credit, and the Lifetime Learning Credit are programs that help taxpayers reduce college costs.
- ▶ **Earn money through a co-op program or internship** Students in these programs often earn enough to cover a good portion of their college expenses. When they graduate, they have a degree, valuable work experience, and less debt.
- ▶ **Take advantage of military programs** – The military has a number of programs to help students pay for college. Under the Montgomery GI Bill, enlistees can receive over \$50,000 for college.

There are people who can help

Figuring out how to pay for college can be confusing, but there are people who can help. School counselors can provide information and advice on financial aid, and colleges have financial aid counselors available to assist parents and students.

College Timeline



9th Grade

- ▶ Get high school off to a good start by working hard in all your classes.
- ▶ Create a four-year high school plan that includes the recommended college prep courses.
- ▶ Develop your interests and skills and get involved in activities.

10th Grade

- ▶ Consider taking a college practice test. Your counselor will let you know which test (PSAT 10, PreACT, or PSAT/NMSQT) is offered at your school.
- ▶ Make informal visits to colleges to get a feel for what different college campuses are like.
- ▶ Start thinking about what you are looking for in a college with regard to size, location, cost, majors, and special interests.

11th Grade

- ▶ Research and evaluate your college options.
 - Visit college websites.
 - Attend college fairs and meet with college representatives.
 - Search online for colleges that meet your needs.
 - Talk to your parents about college costs.
- ▶ Take the PSAT/NMSQT in October.
- ▶ Think of your interests and abilities in terms of possible college majors.
- ▶ Take the ACT and/or SAT in the spring, unless you're certain you won't need to submit test scores.
- ▶ Make college visits in the spring.
- ▶ Narrow your list of college choices.

12th Grade

Fall/Winter

- ▶ Revisit the colleges you're seriously considering.
- ▶ Retake the ACT and/or SAT, if necessary.
- ▶ Complete college applications. Be aware of deadlines.
- ▶ Meet with your school counselor to discuss your college choices, possible majors, and financial aid.
- ▶ If you're applying for financial aid, be sure to complete a FAFSA. This is very important! For information and instructions on how to complete a FAFSA, visit fafsa.gov.

Spring

- ▶ Consider your college options and compare financial aid packages.
- ▶ Decide where you want to go to college and complete the required forms. Notify the other colleges you applied to of your decision. If you plan to live on campus, send in your housing deposit.

Additional Resources



The following websites are excellent college resources. Ask your school counselor for additional recommendations.

College and testing information

act.org

bigfuture.collegeboard.org

nces.ed.gov/collegenavigator

petersons.com

educationplanner.org

collegeboard.org

Financial aid information and scholarship searches

fastweb.com

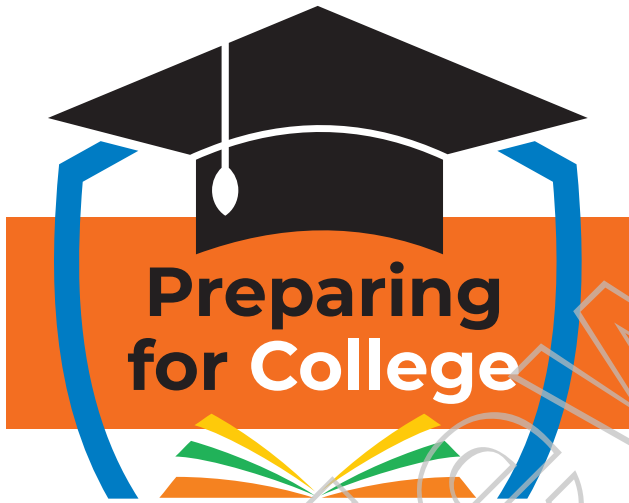
finaid.org

fafsa.gov

studentaid.gov

savingforcollege.com

collegesavings.org



**Information for Students
and Parents**



Information, tips, and step-by-step
instructions on how to plan and
prepare for college

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