

GETTING INTO A SELECTIVE COLLEGE

Planning ahead is particularly important if you want to gain admission to selective colleges, so the earlier you start, the better off you'll be.

Selective colleges are not for everyone. The investment in learning and time spent on rigorous courses is not appropriate for all students; however, if you would love to go to an Ivy, here is information that can help.

What is a selective college or university?

Highly selective colleges and universities are generally defined as those that admit one fourth or fewer of their applicants. Because many more students apply than the number of spots in a class, admissions officers can choose only the most excellent candidates, and many outstanding candidates will not be offered admission.

For a list of benefits of attending a selective college or university, here is an [article](#) on the subject written by an MIT grad. Also check [Understanding College Selectivity](#).

APPLYING TO HIGHLY SELECTIVE COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES

A Reference for High School Students, Parents, Counselors and Advisors
revised 2017

[[Disclaimer and authorship statement](#)] | [[Email comments, questions, and suggestions](#)]

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1. WHY GO TO COLLEGE? | [[Top](#)] | [[Contact](#)]

The following brief list is intended to provide some of the major reasons for going to college. You undoubtedly have additional reasons of your own. Add them onto this list to help you focus on what you really want in a school.

- a. To prepare for a specialized career.
- b. To help select a career.
- c. To develop general problem-solving and intellectual skills.
- d. To enjoy a transition between living at home and complete independence.
- e. To broaden your horizons.
- f. To increase your earning potential in the job market.
- g. To increase the likelihood that you will find challenging and interesting work.
- h. To establish personal work habits and expectation.
- i. To learn the legacy of the past.
- j. To learn the technology of the future.

- k. To develop on your own away from your parents.
- l. To make friends and live with peers in a communal setting.
- m. To mature and develop in your interpersonal relations.
- n. To further develop a field of interest.
- o. To have fun.

2. WHY GO TO A HIGHLY SELECTIVE SCHOOL (INSTEAD OF SOMEWHERE ELSE)? | [[Top](#)] | [[Contact](#)]

- a. Contact with people who are exceptionally bright, motivated, interesting, and who come from diverse backgrounds.
- b. Academic depth and breadth in your selected fields
- c. Academic and administrative flexibility.
- d. Academic challenge and the highest possible standards.
- e. A professional reputation that opens career paths and employment opportunities. Since employers get zillions of applicants for every job, having a degree from a highly selective school makes you stand out in the applicant pool. It tells the employer that you are bright and hard-working.
- f. To learn self-discipline and time management skills from having to apply yourself to your studies.
- g. The self-respect that you will gain from your achievements.
- h. To be challenged and grow to meet these challenges.
- i. The chance to be among other students who regard learning as fun, rather than a chore.
- j. Being taught by professors who actually enjoy teaching.
- k. The cultural and artistic environment on campus.
- l. Prestige.
- m. To get to know another part of the country.
- n. To avoid the problems with housing, class scheduling, and changing majors that are typical of large state schools.

- o. Taking freshman classes from Nobel laureates and well-known authorities in their fields.

3. WHAT IS A HIGHLY SELECTIVE SCHOOL? | [[Top](#)] | [[Contact](#)]

Many people refer to the "Ivy League Schools" without realizing that the Ivy League is strictly an athletic league and has nothing to do with educational quality. Many very respected schools like Stanford and MIT are not members of the Ivy League. What the highly selective schools have in common is that they are in great demand, so they accept less than 10% of the students who apply.

Each school has its own strong and weak points, and they are as different as the cities in which they are located. All are privately run, so the tuition is the same whether you are from out-of-state or local. Most seek geographic diversity to help achieve a balanced mix of students. Thus it is easier to get into Stanford if you don't live in California. Just because a school is highly selective does not mean that it is the right choice for you. Look beyond the ratings, especially in fields of particular interest to you.

UCLA and University of California - Berkeley are sometimes referred to as "public Ivies" because they are very well-respected, highly-selective, and have low tuition because they are public. However, they have many of the problems common to large public universities such as impenetrable bureaucracies, long wait lists for many classes, and severe restrictions on declaring and changing majors. For this reason, they are usually not grouped with the private highly-selective schools.

4. WHO GETS INTO THESE SCHOOLS? | [[Top](#)] | [[Contact](#)]

The vast majority of the students attending highly selective colleges were in the top ten percent of their graduating class, were active in extracurricular activities, demonstrate leadership potential, scored well on the SAT and SAT-II, and are extremely motivated. They typically took many honors or AP classes during high school. More importantly, they are passionate about learning and throw themselves heart and soul into one or two activities.

You don't have to be a genius, or student body president, or have ancestors that came over on the Mayflower to get into the highly-selective colleges. You DO need to be interesting and stand out from the crowd. Nowadays, about half the students at most of the highly selective universities are minorities or international students.

MIT magazine [Technology Review](#) published an article titled "[Who Gets In](#)" that details the way the MIT Admissions Office handles applications. Keep in mind that each college's admissions office has its own unique system for admissions, and it often changes significantly from year to year.

Thirty years ago, it was pretty easy to predict which students would be admitted, since the highly-selective colleges admitted about 1/3 of the applicants. All the bright, interesting kids

were admitted back then. However, nowadays, colleges no longer have room for all the bright, interesting kids since about five times as many kids apply for the same number of slots, so luck plays a huge factor. If you play tuba and the school's marching band's only tuba player is graduating in June, you might get admitted! Or they might be looking for a baritone for the men's a capella group. Or perhaps they need someone from Wyoming so they can boast they have a student from each of the 50 states. Or you juggle and the admissions officer who's reading your application also is a juggler, so he gives you the thumbs-up. If you get in, you aren't "better" than the kids who don't get in - you're just luckier.

Don't forget - the STUDENT is applying to colleges, not the PARENTS. The student needs to take the lead in contacting the school, setting up interviews, etc. Parents are not helping (and can in fact hurt) by trying to do too much. After all, once the student arrives on campus, they're on their own, without mommy and daddy to help them, so they need to practice dealing with this stuff before they leave home. Parents - don't be a "helicopter parent," hovering over your kids and taking control for them. Students - if your parents try to hover, remind them that they've already been to college, and now it's YOUR turn. Check out this hilarious [YouTube satire](#) about helicopter parents.

5. HOW MUCH DOES IT COST? | [[Top](#)] | [[Contact](#)]

The major difference between the cost of a private selective college and that for the state schools is the tuition. The other expenses will be about the same wherever you go. Don't be put off by the (apparently) high cost. Depending on the course of study you pursue, you may come out ahead in the long run by going to the highly selective school. By going to the highest quality undergraduate school, you will receive the best possible education which will enable you to find a higher-paying job with greater potential for promotion, or obtain admission to sought-after graduate and professional schools. In tough economic times, a 'brand-name' diploma may even make the difference between a good job and no job at all. At most highly selective schools, you will be (usually) guaranteed on-campus housing, required courses (usually) are not over-subscribed, you will be treated like a human being, not a number, and you will have more classes taught by English-speaking professors instead of grad students with heavily-accented English. Going to a brand-name school will also make it much easier to get meaningful summer jobs.

It's very stressful being a freshman at a large state school and finding yourself on the waitlist for 5 classes and signed up for 2 you don't even want, because there is no room in the classes you need for your major. You may have to buy the books, attend lectures and do the homework for 7 classes for the first two weeks until you find out where space opens up. At the highly-selective private schools, they do NOT do this to their students. You almost always can sign up for whatever classes you want, or perhaps have to wait list for one class. So that extra tuition money does indeed result in a very tangible benefit.

Before you decide to spend four years and a lot of money getting a college education, think about what type of job you want to have ten years from now, and how your college years will help you prepare for the job. Too often, people major in something like Women's Studies and

then realize the best job they can get with that degree is flipping burgers at McDonalds. Degrees that aren't job-related are fine if your family is wealthy and you don't need to work. But if you will need a job when you graduate to pay off your student loans and support yourself, then major in something that will enable you to get a good job. Or major in something you like, but teach yourself a useful skill. So you could major in Medieval Russian Literature but teach yourself iPhone programming, then work as a programmer, keeping your Russian for a hobby. Or better yet, major in computer science and keep the Russian for a hobby.

6. FINANCIAL AID | [[Top](#)] | [[Contact](#)]

Financial aid for the highly-selected schools is based entirely on need, rather than academic or athletic distinction, with very few exceptions. If you apply for aid and the school determines that you have need, you will receive a financial aid package when you are admitted. It will provide a method for you and your family to meet the total anticipated cost of your education, on a year-by-year basis. The aid package typically will require a parent contribution, earnings from your summer and term-time jobs, scholarships, grants, and loans. Almost all of the highly selective schools practice need-blind admissions, so applying for aid doesn't affect your chances of getting in.

These schools all have similar standards for awarding student aid. While the aid packages that you receive will differ, the parents' expected contribution will be almost the same. Unlike many other schools, the highly selective colleges make their admissions decisions separately from financial aid awards. Therefore, applying for aid, will not hurt your chances of admission.

Parent contribution - The school will calculate what they believe is a fair amount that the parents can pay. They take into account the parents' incomes, number of dependents, total assets, and other expenses (such as other children in college).

Student contribution - You will be expected to contribute a portion of your earnings from summer and term-time jobs, and a portion of cash and other assets.

Government loan -- The U. S. Government offers low interest rate loans to qualifying applicants. Information about these loans is available from your high school guidance counselor or from college financial aid offices. Apply for these loans early since most banks allocate only a small pool of funds for them.

College loan --Some colleges offer their own loans to students or parents which are similar to government loans but carry a higher interest rate. Contact the financial aid offices to determine which colleges that you are applying to offer these loans.

Scholarship grant - Grants are non-taxable gifts. They are not loans and do not have to be repaid. Almost all grants are based strictly on 'need', but a few merit and athletic scholarships are available from various sources, usually outside the university. If you are receiving grant

money, the amount of merit scholarships will be deducted from your grant, so the total amount of aid you receive will remain the same.

If you are not satisfied with the financial aid package than you are offered, write to the school explaining your situation. The highly selective schools hold back funds for this purpose. When assigning a value to your family house for financial aid purposes, don't just use the asking price of other houses in your neighborhood. Many houses sell for much less than the asking price when sold for cash.

If you apply for aid, you will need to fill out the FAFSA form. One often-overlooked source of financial assistance is a Co-op or Work-Study Program. Most technical schools participate in these joint programs with industry where you work and study alternate semesters, and the company pays your tuition and expenses. Needless to say, competition to enter Co-op programs is very stiff. Under certain programs, the companies pay for graduate school only. ROTC also offers many full scholarships, and the military academies provide free quality education.

Keep in mind that you have to pay back student loans. A friend's daughter recently graduated with a BA in English from a prestigious small liberal arts college and needs to start repaying her loans, even though she can't find a job. Her payments are about \$900 per month. Do NOT borrow money unless you have an excellent probability of being able to pay it back. In a good economy, with a marketable major, it's OK to borrow \$80,000 for for years of college, but in a bad economy with a non-marketable major (such as a BA in Medieval Literature), you won't be able to pay back your loans. If you major in something impractical, learn a different skill you can support yourself with. My daughter realized that a BA in Psychology wouldn't get her a decent job, so she made sure to have marketable skills of website design and commercial graphic art.

7. ENTRANCE REQUIREMENTS | [[Top](#)] | [[Contact](#)]

Most of the selective colleges require, as a minimum, four years of English (including ninth grade), math through pre-calculus, and at least three years of science. Several schools require other classes such as foreign language. MIT requires biology, chemistry and physics. Most of the highly selective colleges require that you take the SAT (or ACT) and SAT-II standardized tests. Be sure to review current material from the schools so that you will know their requirements. Each college will require you to complete an online application form, including one or more essays. You must provide transcripts from high school and any colleges that you have attended, in addition to providing recommendations from teachers and school counselors. Many schools also require (or recommend) an interview with a local graduate. You may want to take the TOEFL test if English is not your native language.

Unlike some state schools, none of the highly selective schools have minimum grade point average (GPA) or ACT/SAT score to be considered for admission. Instead, they consider your application as a whole. Weakness in one area often can be offset with strength in another area.

The highly selective schools also consider your socio-economic and geographic background since they are striving for a diverse student body.

8. THE SAT, SAT-II, ACT, AND AP TESTS | [[Top](#)] | [[Contact](#)]

Contact your high school counselor (or www.collegeboard.com) for information, scheduling, and registration for standardized tests. Some colleges no longer require standardized testing, but the majority of four-year colleges still require them. The SAT consists of three parts - verbal, math, and writing - which test basic knowledge of these subjects. The SAT-II tests cover individual classes such as Chemistry or French. The AP tests evaluate your knowledge of college-level subjects you have taken while in high school. Some universities (primarily in the South and Midwest) use the ACT exclusively instead of the SAT, but most allow you to choose between the two.

The SAT, SAT-II, and ACT are administered several times per year. Scores are reported to you, your high school, and directly to colleges that you have designated. You may take them as often as you like, but most people take the SAT-I or ACT twice and the SAT-IIs once or twice. Some people find that they can raise their scores significantly by studying hard for them or taking review classes. Review books are available in larger bookstores and the College Board website has sample questions. Vocabulary lists may also prove helpful, as will doing math without a calculator. Try to take the SAT-II near the end of the corresponding class so you will not forget the material. This way you can study for the final exam and the SAT-II at the same time.

Many colleges require that you take specific SAT-II tests, while others accept any three. Most require one of the Math tests. MIT, for example, requires only two SAT-II tests: one of the Math tests and one of the Science tests. You may have to take four or five tests if you are applying to several schools with different requirements. You can take a maximum of three SAT-II tests on one date.

Almost all the highly selective schools will award you credit toward graduation if you score 5s on AP tests. Some will also give credit for 4s. Occasionally, a score of 3 will enable you to place into a more advanced class but you will not receive credit. Usually you get one semester credit for a year-long AP class. These credits usually won't enable you to graduate early, but will allow you to take a lighter course load for a few semesters. You can take AP tests for classes where you know the material, even if you didn't take an AP class. Ask your high school counselor how to sign up. If they can't help, take it at a nearby high school that is more cooperative. You can take the AP test for anything, even if you don't take the corresponding AP class. Many students self-study and take AP tests - if the college you attend awards AP credit for everything under the sun, you may be able to graduate a semester early and save a LOT of tuition money.

Most of the highly-selective schools have a foreign language requirement which can be satisfied with a minimum score on the foreign language SAT-II or AP test. If you think you will do well on either of these tests, take it in case you need it for foreign language placement or exemption

from foreign language graduation requirements. Some schools like MIT have no foreign language requirement, but suggest that you take one if you are not already proficient. Many college advisors will tell you that it doesn't matter if you take the SAT-II or ACT tests. BUT...no college will allow you to place out of a foreign language requirement with an ACT score, but almost all will accept an SAT-II or AP test score on a foreign language test above their cutoff point. It pays to spend some time studying to get this score, rather than have to spend several semesters taking foreign language in college.

9. COLLEGE ADMISSIONS CALENDAR | [[Top](#)] | [[Contact](#)]

This calendar is meant as a guideline only. Carefully review all material from each school to which you are applying and construct a calendar for each one. Some will have earlier deadlines than are shown here and you wouldn't want to miss one.

These days there is a bewildering array of choices for how to apply: Regular, Early Action, Early Decision, and Single Choice Early Action. Most public schools just offer one type - Regular. A few have rolling admissions, and strong applicants may be admitted within two weeks of sending in their forms. Most selective private schools offer two types - Regular, plus one of the other three types. For Early Action or Early Decision, you complete your application by late October, then very strong applicants are notified of their acceptance in late December. Applicants that are not as strong are usually deferred until the Regular April admissions time for consideration with the rest of the applicant pool. If you are accepted under Early Decision, you are committed to attending the school. Early Action differs in that accepted applicants have no obligation to accept the offer of admission, but are free to wait and see which other schools accept them. Single Choice Early Action does not commit you to attend, but you can only apply early to one school. At most schools who offer Early Decision or Single Choice Early Action, your odds of acceptance are much higher (typically double the normal acceptance rate) than if you apply Regular. Early Action applicants typically receive a smaller edge or no edge at all over Regular applicants.

Spring sophomore year	Take SAT-II and AP tests for classes you won't be taking further (such as chemistry) if it is a strong subject for you. Visit a local college or university during its spring Open House to get an idea of what colleges do. Try to visit a dorm, too. What do you like about it? What don't you like about it?
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Spring junior year	Take SAT or ACT Take SAT-II for spring classes that you won't be pursuing further (history, science, foreign language) Take AP tests Compile a list of honors, awards and extracurriculars for use on application forms. If you don't know what to list, download any highly-selective college application and see what they ask for. Think about which teachers you will ask for recommendation letters. Talk with them to make sure they will write you a letter if you need it. Visit a local college or university during its spring Open House to get an idea of what colleges do. Try to visit a dorm, too. What do you like about it? What don't you like about it?
Summer junior year	Receive SAT or ACT scores Make list of colleges to consider. Receive SAT-II scores. Request catalogs and applications. Download application forms and start planning and writing essays
September senior year	Receive application forms (or download the rest) Make schedule of deadlines. Apply early if you want to
October senior year	Make final selection of colleges. Give recommendation forms to teachers and counselors. Plan and outline essays. Take SAT or ACT again
November senior year	Begin financial aid forms. Write essays. Receive SAT or ACT scores. Schedule interview with local alumni if you have their contact information. Take SAT-II if needed.
December senior year	Rewrite and polish essays. Complete application. Take SAT again if desired.
January senior year	Complete financial aid forms. Take SAT or ACT again if desired. Take SAT-II if necessary.

March senior year Chew fingernails.

April senior year Colleges mail acceptance letters.
Visit colleges if you have time and your budget permits.

May senior year Decide which school is best for you.

If you have any questions about the admission procedure, check the school website, write or telephone the Admissions office or your local alumni representative.

10. DECIDING WHERE TO APPLY | [[Top](#)] | [[Contact](#)]

If you receive a high score on the PSAT, you will be deluged with brochures from various colleges. Some of these schools are excellent, but others are diploma mills that would take your money without giving you a quality education. There are many guides to the colleges available in larger bookstores and on the Internet. Use them to check out schools that sound interesting and browse for other colleges that meet your needs. Don't apply to a college just because it has a stellar reputation - instead see how it matches your needs. For instance, you can't major in nuclear engineering at Harvard, nor major in Swedish at Caltech.

Think about school size, location, and flexibility. The College Board <http://www.collegeboard.com> has a College Search feature which asks you questions and then recommends schools that might suit you.

Some students and their families visit colleges during the spring of their junior year or over the summer between junior and senior years. While some college advisors recommend this practice, I strongly discourage it, unless you are applying Early Decision someplace. Do NOT apply Early Decision to a school unless you have spent at least one whole day and night on campus, attending classes, eating in the dining hall, and spending the night in a dormitory. Every year I see a few students who visit College X, fall in love with it, then are bitterly disappointed when they don't get in. Also every year, I speak with students who apply to college Y Early Decision, go there, and then discover that they either don't like the students or want to major in something they don't offer. I recommend that you visit only colleges to which you have been admitted, to prevent this type of disappointment, except for Early Decision applicants. Generally, the most highly selective schools do NOT give an edge in admissions to students who visit the school or have an on-campus interview, since that would discriminate against poor students who can't afford to travel. However, the schools that are less selective (like Washington University in St. Louis) often will skew their admissions in favor of students who have visited the campus and had an on-campus interview.

Make sure that the schools that you select teach the subjects in which you are interested. Read the catalog and verify that their curriculum meets your needs. Just because a school has an excellent reputation does not mean that it is right for you or your career plans. Few schools offer

majors in ballet, Slavic studies, or nuclear engineering. At some colleges, you apply to a school (like the School of Engineering or the School of Arts) and would need to apply for a transfer (sometimes impossible to get) if you change your mind to a major in a different School. Other colleges are totally flexible about majors. If you aren't 100% sure of your intended field of study, think twice about choosing a very small college or a larger college that restricts your ability to change majors. Also think twice about the large public schools that restrict classes. My daughter applied to the College of Letters and Science at UC Berkeley. She tried to take a class in the business school but was told that it was restricted to students who had applied to the School of Business, and the liberal arts kids were not allowed to take it.

If you think a school might be suitable for you, here are some things I suggest to get more information about it.

- 2) Look at the core curriculum requirements and see what classes you'd have to take to graduate. Do they look interesting? Is this a good fit for you? Look at the requirements for what you need to take in high school to apply. Make sure you've taken the appropriate classes and tests to be eligible for admission.
- 3) Check out the requirements for a major in two or three fields you might be interested in. Does the college even offer the majors that you are considering? Do these required classes sound interesting? Does the program seem too shallow or too intense? Is this a good fit for you? Even if you are sure you know what you want to major in, examine other majors. Almost every college student changes their mind, often several times, about their major and intended career.
- 4) Browse among other classes in their catalog. Look for special interests that you have - such as music, drama, art, etc. Does the college teach the kind of classes that you like? Do you like the emphasis or slant that they put on their classes? If you will be majoring in a social science, do the classes seem overly liberal, overly conservative, or about right? Check out extra-curricular activities. Not every college has a rugby team or a bagpipe marching band.
- 5) Do you apply to an individual major, or to a school, or to the college in general? This is a BIG DEAL if you may change your mind about what you want to major in. At some colleges you can switch from a major in anthropology to one in civil engineering just by filling out a form. At other colleges, you have to apply just as if you were a transfer student from another college - and they often say NO. This information is often not in the catalog, so you may need to call and speak with the Admissions Office to get the answer.

- 6) Is dorm space guaranteed for four years? If it is important to you, find out about substance-free dorms, dorm smoking policy, dorm pet policy, and living in the Greek system.

11. SMALL SCHOOL OR BIG SCHOOL? | [[Top](#)] | [[Contact](#)]

Big schools have the advantage of a vastly larger course offering. You will be able to take specialized graduate-level courses in fields that aren't even taught by small colleges. Since there are more students on campus, there will be a wider variety of student activities. Which small school could support thirty intercollegiate sports? If you are undecided about what you want to study, you may be better off at a large university which offers degrees in many different

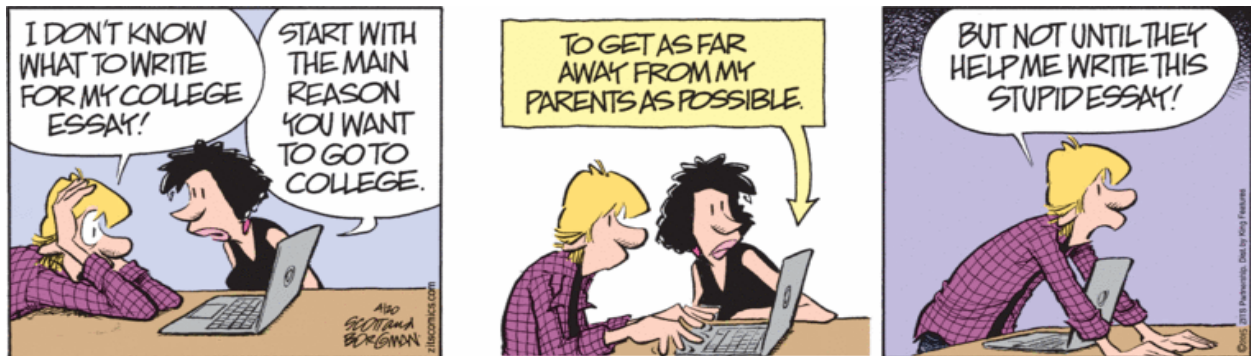
fields than at a small college where your choices will be limited. Many small schools are "boutiques" that specialize in certain subjects. For instance, Caltech specializes in the theoretical sciences, while Vassar focuses on liberal arts.

Compare the size of the college to that of the high school you currently attend. Could you be happy at a college that was much smaller than, or much larger than, your high school? Mentally extrapolate the social life and extra-curricular activities at your high school to a college of the size that you are contemplating attending. Most medium-sized private schools have alumni associations and the contacts can be useful finding a new job, or when moving to a new part of the country.

If you went to a very small, private high school with a lot of personal attention from the staff, would you be able to adjust to a huge school where you won't be coddled? Are you prepared to deal with an unforgiving bureaucracy? The large state schools are usually sink-or-swim and provide little in the way of advising or coddling. The large private schools, however, represent a middle road.

Don't think that all large schools are impersonal. The highly selective schools provide a tremendous amount of individual attention to each student. Some people think that they would rather be a 'star' at a small school than be 'lost' at a big one, but true stars will shine anywhere.

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The transition to college will undoubtedly be easier if you stay close to home. However, if you live at home, you will miss out on the social life of the dorm/frat environment. Since you would not be on campus, many activities would not be as accessible to you. If you go away to school, you will have the opportunity to explore a new part of the country and make new friends. You will also learn to be self-sufficient. Your financial aid package will take into account the extra transportation costs. Most students are much too busy at school with classes, activities, and friends to become lonely, but if you do, you're only a phone call (or instant message, or email) away.

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It's not as bad as you think. Typical winter temperatures in Boston are in the twenties and thirties, which is comparable to typical California ski resorts. While you will need a warm coat, hat and gloves, you probably will not need the long underwear or muffler that your grandma will send. Your college experience will depend on your students, the faculty and administration, the city in which you live, but certainly not on the weather. Having cold weather can also be an advantage -- you can't build snowmen at Berkeley! Dartmouth has its own ski slope.

14. DO I REALLY WANT TO WORK THAT HARD? | [[Top](#)] | [[Contact](#)]

At an easy school, you will probably be able to coast through with good grades without working very hard. You may have more time for extracurriculars and athletics, but you won't develop the self-discipline and stick-to-it-iveness that are characteristic of the highly selective schools. Your prospects for a job or graduate school will be more limited if you go to an easy school since prospective employers know schools' reputations, too. The top-rated schools have excellent placement records for meaningful summer internships, so you'd be learning as well as earning over the summer.

15. WHAT ABOUT ENGINEERING AND TECHNICAL SCHOOLS? | [[Top](#)] | [[Contact](#)]

Don't fall for the popular misconception that liberal arts colleges provide the broadest background. For instance, Amherst doesn't teach civil engineering, but students major in literature and history at MIT, and it is top-ranked in the world for linguistics, economics and political science. In addition to its math/science program, MIT teaches more liberal arts courses than any small liberal arts college. Most technical schools also have cross-registration programs with nearby liberal arts colleges. If you like science and the liberal arts, compare your job prospects with a history major to those you would have with a major in urban planning and a minor (or double-major) in history. (See this [cynical tongue-in-cheek page](#) about liberal arts majors.) If you are thinking about engineering, keep in mind that many college's "engineering" programs are really applied math programs and are NOT accredited. Some colleges have an accredited generic engineering program, but do not offer accredited programs in electrical engineering, mechanical engineering, etc. If you go to an unaccredited program or one that is only accredited in generic engineering, you will find it almost impossible to get a decent job in engineering without spending two (or more) years in grad school making up the deficiencies of your undergrad program. To check which engineering majors are accredited at the colleges you are considering, visit www.abet.org. Year after year, people ask me about the same colleges, so I have put together a [matrix listing the colleges people ask me about most often](#) (Since I live in California, the list is heavy on west-coast schools), showing which ones are accredited for which engineering disciplines. Use this list with a hefty grain of salt - just like test scores don't tell you everything about a person, accreditation doesn't tell you everything about a college. But it will tell you if the school takes the job of teaching engineering seriously or not.

The Wall Street Journal made this [short video clip](#) about one of the MIT dorms.

16. DECISIONS, DECISIONS | [[Top](#)] | [[Contact](#)]

If you are not sure which type of school you would like, apply to a few with a broad spectrum of characteristics so that you will have a choice.

In addition to schools that you want to attend, make sure that you apply to at least one 'safe' school. The safe school will ensure that you will have some place to go other than the local community college just in case you don't get into one of your top choices. Keep a firm limit on the number of schools to which you apply. Filling out forms, especially writing the essays, takes time. By spreading yourself too thinly, you may be unable to do an adequate job on any of them. Budget your time, and then pare down your list accordingly. Using the Common Application can save some time, but most Common Application colleges still require their own essays on their Supplement pages. I recommend applying to one safe school with rolling admissions (last I checked University of Oregon still has rolling admissions) so you will know you are in someplace in October - this really takes the pressure off you senior year.

When you are calculating the cost of college, remember to factor in the cost of a car if you go to a school at which a car is a necessity. At most Eastern colleges, a car is a liability, not an asset since street parking is not allowed when it is snowing. At UC San Diego, however, a car is a necessity since the campus is so isolated.

Some students prefer colleges on the quarter system, since they can take more, shorter classes. But most find the semester system less stressful since there is more time to drop classes you don't like, catch up if you fall behind due to illness, and there are fewer midterm and final exams. Not to mention fewer term papers!

Most colleges have a guide for new students which includes useful items like maps, reviews of restaurants, locations of shopping, cafeteria hours, ATM locations, tips on navigating the bureaucracy, etc. Get a copy of the book for your top three choice colleges and read them. They will help you get a flavor for what it's like to be a student. You can usually get the book from the campus bookstore or the Admissions Office, and increasingly they are being published online. Here are links for the guides for [MIT](#), [Berkeley](#), and [Stanford](#), for example.

17. THE APPLICATION FORMS | [[Top](#)] | [[Contact](#)]

People don't apply to college. Little brown folders do. Your task as the applicant is to make sure that your folder reflects your abilities, personality, background, interests, and past performance. Download the application forms for colleges during the spring of your junior year, so you can see what kinds of information you will need. Gather the information and compile tables of activities and honors. Ask the schools if they will keep the same essay topics for the fall - and write the essays over the summer if they won't change.

Try to mail in your application early. Every admissions officer must read hundreds of applications every year. At the beginning of the season, they read only a handful a day, but as January

approaches, they must read dozens a day. Naturally, they cannot be as enthusiastic with so many forms to read. By sending yours in early, you can catch them before they get burned out or jaded.

Some people think that they have to pad their resumes and have long lists of extracurricular activities in order to get into a highly selective school. Not true. The colleges want to make sure that you are doing something - anything - in your spare time, and that you actually have spare time. Some people are working at capacity in high school just to get A's, while others coast along and still have plenty of spare time. The colleges gauge how hard you are working by seeing how much time you spend on extracurriculars. Don't do something just to impress the colleges - do something you really enjoy. Just being a member of 20 different clubs on campus won't impress anyone. However, if you spend 20 hours a week at one particular activity, and you have become the mainstay of that organization, that's impressive. Colleges particularly like to see students with jobs - any job. A few of the highly-selective colleges are biased toward certain activities and seek out the editor of the school newspaper, the student body president, or the quarterback of the football team, but most of them are just as happy to have a student who works at an auto body shop because he loves cars. The selective colleges all ask you to fill out a list of your activities including the number of hours per week and any leadership positions held. What will your list include?

If you are mailing in paper forms, keep a photocopy of everything. If you apply online, save a copy of your essays on your hard drive, and also a backup copy on CD or other removable drive.

18. THE ESSAY | [[Top](#)] | [[Contact](#)]

There are six cardinal rules for college application essays:

- a. Stick to the assigned subject and length. If a length is not specified, use your judgment. If you can pick a topic, pick one that excites you - your excitement will rub off on the reader.
- b. Use proper grammar, punctuation, and spelling.
- c. Don't try to impress the reader. Write in a manner to which you feel accustomed.
- d. Don't be afraid to use humor or be creative, but don't be silly.
- e. Have family, friends, and teachers critique the drafts.

Most colleges prefer to deal with only the requested information, so please do NOT send art portfolios, videotapes, CDs of your music, or other material unless it is requested. The primary purpose of the essays is to determine if you can write acceptable English. They will look for grammar, spelling, and proper word usage. The secondary purpose is to find out something about you as a person - such as what you find interesting or humorous, a life-shaping experience, or how you overcame an adverse background. Most colleges will read an extra essay if you mail it in - but ask before mailing. [The Boston Globe published an article about essays](#) that might be helpful.

19. TEACHER RECOMMENDATIONS | [[Top](#)] | [[Contact](#)]

Some teachers are too overworked to have time for recommendation letters, or don't know you very well, so they would write things like "Johnny is a good boy. He will do fine." Give your forms to teachers who know you well and will spend time writing the reports. They don't have to be teachers that gave you A's. The colleges are looking for insights into your personality, not just your school record. You can assist the teachers by giving them all of the forms for all the colleges together so they only have to compose one recommendation for you. Do this as early as possible. Most colleges want letters from teachers you have had during your senior or junior years.

Feel free to suggest to the teacher what you want him or her to write about you. The colleges prefer to have anecdotes or concrete examples of things that you have done, or get insights into your personality. Narratives describing a project that you worked on with the teacher are excellent.

The highly selective schools do not have space to admit all of the applicants who are qualified, so they often make the decision based on 'personality'. The teacher recommendations and your essays serve to give an insight into yourself. Use them wisely.

Some schools require that one recommendation be submitted from someone who is not a teacher, such as a Scout leader, religious advisor, or job supervisor. If you are applying to one of these schools, be sure to cultivate such a reference. Many schools require recommendations from teachers in specific classes - such as English, social studies or math, while others just want a letter from any teacher.

20. THE INTERVIEW | [[Top](#)] | [[Contact](#)]

Interviews are often conducted by local alumni who volunteer for the job. They are not paid. Read about the school before the interview, be courteous, arrive on time, and be organized. These interviews will provide you with more information about the school, answer your questions, and allow the interviewer to get to know you as a person. He or she will write a report on the interview, which will be added to your file at the Admissions Office. A few colleges do on-campus interviews, but most do not interview at all. If a college offers an on-campus interview and you will be visiting the college, schedule an on-campus interview ahead of time, since it will be a big help to your odds of admission, because it shows you cared enough about the college to visit it, and planned ahead to schedule the interview. After an interview by an alumni volunteer, it is polite to send a thank-you email and mention things you found especially helpful that they told you. This is not necessary for an on-campus interview.

The deadlines for interviews vary greatly. At MIT, for instance, you must contact local alumni by early December to arrange for an interview, while most other colleges do interviews in January or February.

Be prepared to talk about your extracurricular activities, job, and motivations for going to college. You might want to prepare a list of questions since this is your golden opportunity to find out more about the school. For more detailed information about interviews, [click here](#).

21. APPLICATION DEADLINES | [[Top](#)] | [[Contact](#)]

Try to anticipate deadlines. If you miss one through no fault of your own, it may be worthwhile to call to see if the school will still consider your application.

22. AFTER YOU ARE ACCEPTED - DECIDING WHERE TO GO | [[Top](#)] | [[Contact](#)]

The best source of information about a college is spending a day or two on campus. You wouldn't buy a car without driving it, so you certainly shouldn't spend four years and thousands of dollars going to a school you haven't visited. Go during the normal school year, so you can go to classes, eat in the dining halls, and socialize in the dorm lounges. Eating dinner together is a major part of the social life at most schools, so try to be on campus at dinnertime. If you cannot visit the school in person, contact local alumni or students who are attending the school.

Most of the schools will assign you a host for the day and house you for the night if you so request in advance. It makes sense to wait until you are admitted before spending the money (and time) visiting a school. You will be very heavily influenced by the people with whom you will spend four years of your life, so pick a school where you feel comfortable and get along with the other students.

I recommend waiting until you have been admitted before visiting a school. Sometimes students fall in love with a school during a visit, and are bitterly disappointed when they aren't admitted. I also recommend visiting during a normal week, not during midterms, school break, or a special Admitted Students' weekend. You want to see the school as it normally is, not when it is spiffed up to impress you. Avoid visiting over the summer when most schools shut down and all you will see are a bunch of empty buildings.

23. SUMMER PREPARATION | [[Top](#)] | [[Contact](#)]

Find out what you will need to take with you. Some schools provide sheets, blankets and pillows, but most don't.. Ask your interviewer, check the website or blogs to find out what to bring. Common items include: bed linens (twin extra-long size), towels, coat hangers, raincoat, laptop, and desk lamp. Make plane reservations early to take advantage of discount fares. Make sure to check with the college before buying a computer to make sure the operating system is compatible with the school networks and will run all the college software. Most colleges have a list of "recommended computers", and many provide free software for download. Most also have discounts on software such as Microsoft Office and PhotoShop. Install the free program [Skype](#) on your computer and spend \$20 to buy a webcam with integrated audio, if you are not using a laptop with a built-in webcam. Using Skype or Facetime you can make free video

phone calls anywhere on the planet from college, so homesickness will be much less of an issue.

If your bank doesn't operate in their state, see if you can open a local bank account by mail so you'll have a working ATM card (with no fees) and local checks when you arrive. Get a credit card, but make sure to pay it off every month. If you're under 18, either get a debit card that can be used as a Visa card, or have your parents get you a pre-paid Visa card so you can order items (like textbooks) over the Internet. Contact a current student to find out what else you'll need. If you need a non-smoking dorm for medical reasons, or a single-sex dorm for religious reasons, have your doctor or clergyperson mail a letter to the school Housing Office as soon as you accept their offer of admission, so the letter arrives long before they assign you to a dorm. If you know other local students who are going, decide if you want to request one as your roommate, or take the luck of the draw when you get there.

24. WHAT IS COLLEGE REALLY LIKE? | [[Top](#)] | [[Contact](#)]

College is a lot of fun and a lot of hard work. You will try things that you have never done before and you will achieve that which you never thought possible. You will make many new friends, stay up until 3 AM studying, and take midnight walks in the snow. You will participate in the myriad of activities on a busy campus including free seminars, movies, parties, clubs, hiking expeditions, tennis tournaments, hockey in the halls, bridge games, pickup basketball, jazz concerts, newspapers and all-night study sessions during final exam week.

You will learn to divide your time among work, study and play. You will learn the lyricism of Dante, the beauty of botany, the wonders of human genetics, new dimensions of photographic technique, and the workings of the unconscious mind. You will learn to live with a diverse group of people in a dormitory environment, respecting and tolerating their eccentricities and learning from them.

You will learn how to think and will acquire a solid foundation of knowledge that will serve you for the rest of your life, in whatever field you choose to apply it. College isn't just learning and hard work. Take time to enjoy your last few years without too many adult responsibilities - and don't forget to HAVE FUN!!

LUANN



More perspectives:

A dad put together a [list of 100 things he wanted his kids to know before they left for college](#). Most of his suggestions are great!

From and about the former MIT Director of Admissions. These comments apply to most highly-selective schools, not just MIT. Click on both these blogs to view newspaper articles and comments about them. [Marilee Jones in the News](#) and [Dean Marilee Jones in the News](#). While her comments are excellent, if you google her, you will notice that she resigned as dean after it was discovered that she lied on her resume when she applied for her job. How ironic!

Very funny [column written by Dave Barry](#), former humor columnist for the [Miami Herald](#).

[Short article from the New York Times](#) that puts applying to highly-selective colleges into perspective

To learn more about what college is really like, I recommend the book [The Naked Roommate: and 107 Other Issues You Might Run Into in College](#) by Harlan Cohen. Full of tips about finances, choosing classes, relationships, shopping, etc. from someone who has "been there and done that." Available from most brick-and-mortar bookstores or online booksellers including <http://www.amazon.com>, Fun and readable, a great gift.

Another book filled with fun one-line snippets is [Once Upon a Campus](#) by Trent Anderson, published by Simon & Schuster, available through most brick-and-mortar bookstores or online

booksellers including <http://www.amazon.com>. It provides vignettes by current college students and recent grads. The book is short, fun, fascinating, inexpensive, and makes a great gift.

The book [Less Stress, More Success: A New Approach to Guiding Your Teen Through College Admissions and Beyond](#) published in 2006, by Marilee Jones, former dean of admissions at MIT.

When you're on your own, you will need to learn certain life skills. The [Huffington Post has a list](#) which you may want to look over. Most are definitely needed. But I'd substitute backing up your computer and getting a library card instead of ironing a shirt and making a bed with hospital corners.

What skills are needed in college? How does parental income factor into college success? Check out this [Vox article](#)

[[Email comments, questions, and suggestions](#)] | [[Top](#)]

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The information in this handout is based on the author's personal experiences and beliefs, and is not endorsed by MIT or by any other college. This handout began 30 years ago with an MIT admissions office handout, and has evolved since then in response to questions and comments from hundreds of students, parents, and school counselors and advisors. Please email me your comments to help make this handout more useful.

2. Getting Started

SELECTIVE COLLEGES: GETTING STARTED

Your school counselor and Career Centers are great places to start. If you have not already done so, get to know your school counselor and let her get to know you. We are not suggesting that you make a pest of yourself, but do let your school counselor know that you are interested in applying to selective colleges. Then, when she receives information about these colleges, she will make sure that you receive it. Many college

applications require a statement from your school counselor, so the better she knows you, the better she will be able to provide information.

Visit your high school's Career Center. In conjunction with school counselors, they offer much valuable information including brochures filled with advice and a schedule of college representatives who will be visiting your school. All Green Bay Area Public School students in grades 6-12 have a [Xello](#) account that can be accessed from school or home. **Xello** is a website designed to guide you in the process of planning your future such as courses of study, majors, and career possibilities.

“Know what your high school counselor is and isn't qualified to do before you visit. If you want to retain the services of an independent college counselor, research his credentials and make sure he has a good track record with previous clients.”

– Green Bay School Counselor

Several Green Bay Area Public Schools have **AVID** (Advancement Via Individual Determination), a program designed to help first generation college students prepare to succeed in rigorous courses in high school and gain admission to and be successful in college. Ask your school counselor if AVID is right for you.

SELECTIVE COLLEGES: DECIDING WHERE TO APPLY

Learning about colleges and deciding where to apply

In the United States there are over 3,000 colleges and universities. What are some ways to decide which ones might be good matches for you?

Talk to parents, relatives, teachers and ask them about the colleges they attended.

Talk to college representatives who visit your school. (Check in your school's Career Center for a schedule.)

Attend college fairs in the area. Go to the National Association for College Admission Counseling website for a schedule and many other tips.

Claire (GBAPS grad) used the College Board website to narrow her choices by entering criteria and how much weight they should be given. She also recommends The Princeton Review. Attend regional events. Universities such as Harvard, Princeton, and University of Virginia host free information meetings in Milwaukee and Madison. College websites list these outreach events. Often the colleges waive application fees for students who have shown sincere interest by attending these events.

Go to college websites. Many offer virtual tours.

Visit colleges in person. Consider adding college visits to family trips or ask your school counselor about the many pre-college programs that include college visits. Caitlyn (SW '08 and Barnard '12) said it is important to “get a vibe” to find out if you can “see yourself there.”

Use your resources: ask/email colleges as many questions as you can think of. Initial research online will save a lot of money in gas, wear and tear on the car, and the cost of plane tickets, but contact with real human beings is important. The idea is to develop a relationship: get to know them and let them get to know you. Many colleges start a file on you the first time you contact them. It is OK to ask college admissions personnel, “What can I do to increase my chances of being admitted?”

Log onto individual college blogs.

Get a feel for the kind of classes offered at a college by taking a free lecture online from Yale or MIT. Or go to the Open Courseware Consortium.

Consult college rankings such as U.S. News & World Report’s annual issue. Check the criteria they use to see whether or not they might be a basis for your decision. This issue also includes features such as lists of schools strong in particular areas, detailed descriptions of many universities, web addresses, admission information, popular majors at individual colleges, and tuition costs.

Establish your own criteria. Are you looking for a small college in a large metropolitan area, a large university in a tiny town, a Big Ten school, a liberal arts college with an Honors Program, a major university with a Freshman Med Scholars Program? It’s easier to narrow the list if you know what you want. But if you’re not sure yet, don’t worry: start with what you do know, and as you do research, you’ll probably get a better idea of what’s right for you.

Once you have decided on a possible major, consult books such as Barron’s guides available in your school’s Career Center or a local bookstore.

A word about service academies

The U.S. military academies are post-secondary, government institutions that educate and train

officers for the U.S. military. Very well respected as schools, the service academies are highly selective and extremely rigorous. The physical and mental stamina required by these universities make them unsuitable for many people; however, for those who can rise to these challenges, attending a service academy is an excellent opportunity.

There are five service or military academies, sometimes called collectively “The Five-Pointed Star”:

The United States Military Academy (also called “West Point” or “Army”), established in 1802 in West Point, New York;

The United States Naval Academy (“Annapolis” or “Navy”), created in 1845 in Annapolis, Maryland;

The United States Coast Guard Academy (“Coast Guard”), established in 1876 in New London, Connecticut;

The United States Merchant Marine Academy (“Kings Point” or “Merchant Marine”), founded in 1942 at Kings Point, New York; and

The United States Air Force Academy (“USAFA” or “Air Force”), created in 1954 in Colorado Springs, Colorado.

Upon entering “Army,” “Navy,” “Coast Guard,” or “Air Force,” students are put on active duty in the U.S. military with a minimum commitment of five years. Upon graduation, graduates of all five academies are officers in the U.S. military—which branch depends on which academy, as expected. However, to get into the schools in the first place is a difficult job indeed. Besides physical fitness and academic strength, students applying to any of the service academies are required to be nominated by a U.S. Senator or Representative. (For all academies except the “Merchant Marine,” a nomination by the Vice President or President would also suffice.) The Coast Guard Academy is also the only one without a by-state quota, meaning that it does not have limits on how many students from each state must be admitted.

“Appointment to a military academy is in essence a scholarship worth \$300,000, and you are

guaranteed a job. They are especially looking for students of color and from low income families. Candidates should have a minimum ACT composite of 26 and have taken the most rigorous courses available. Start by going to the website for the service academy and creating your file.”

“Take advantage of informational seminars such as the one each fall at the EAA in Oshkosh.”
– Parent of a Green Bay student who graduated from West Point.

ACADEMIC PREPARATION IN HIGH SCHOOL

Check the websites of the colleges to which you will apply to learn what courses they require or recommend that you take in high school. Do you need to take four years of a foreign language? For the major you are considering, is there a particular foreign language preferred?

Students who want to be admitted to selective colleges should take the most rigorous courses they can handle in high school. While it may not seem necessary to take every AP (Advanced Placement) or advanced course that your school offers, keep in mind that you will be competing against students from all over the country who have AND they have earned As. At the same time, don't overload your schedule with advanced courses: burning out will do you more harm than good.

Enroll in and do well in AP and CEP (Concurrent Enrollment Program) courses. Taking these courses shows colleges that you are willing to challenge yourself academically, and doing well in them shows that you have the ability to succeed in rigorous settings. AP courses are college courses taught by high school teachers using College Board approved syllabi and materials. Visit the College Board website for a list of all recognized AP courses. In May of each year, students may choose to take AP exams (about \$86 each). Scores range from one to five where five is the highest. Depending on the exam score and the policies of individual colleges and universities, students receive credit or advanced standing. All UW system colleges must grant credit for scores of three or higher. Go to [The College Board](https://collegeboard.org/apcentral) to check AP credit policies for colleges to which you plan to apply. Students who do well on AP exams may also win AP Scholar Awards .

SW '08 grad Caitlyn recommends taking the AP exam even if you don't think you'll do that well:
"I found out after I got to Barnard that a three in AP Chem would have counted for credit."

Preble '08 grad Amanda says, "Take AP courses! College credits are expensive, so these can be a great savings. I wish I had taken more AP courses!"

Ann (West '08) says, "Working hard in high school makes life easier in college."

CEP courses are UWGB, St. Norbert College, or NWTC courses taught by our teachers in our high schools. Remember that you are competing against students who have taken much more than the minimum requirements. See the chart below from the University of Wisconsin – Madison.

English

Minimum Requirement: 4

Typical Freshman Preparation: 4+

Mathematics

Minimum Requirement: 3

Typical Freshman Preparation: 4+

Algebra

Minimum Requirement: 1

Typical Freshman Preparation: 1

Geometry

Minimum Requirement: 1

Typical Freshman Requirement: 1

Third Year Math

Minimum Requirement: 1

Typical Freshman Preparation: (Advanced Math), 2+

Social Science

Minimum Requirement: 3

Typical Freshman Preparation: (Including Geography), 4+

Natural Science

Minimum Requirement: 3

Typical Freshman Preparation: (Science Units), 4

Single Foreign Language

Minimum Requirement: 2

Typical Freshman Preparation: 4+

Fine Arts

Minimum Requirement: 2

Typical Freshman Preparation: 2+

Total Units

Minimum Requirement: 17

Typical Freshman Preparation: 21+

Other suggestions:

Talk with your school counselor about distance learning for courses that might not be offered at your school or investigate academy courses in engineering, healthcare, international business, or education.

Take courses through Youth Options. This program allows students who have exhausted the regular course offerings in a particular subject to take the next logical course at a college or university. Contact the Director of Student Services (920-448-2000) for more information.

Take more challenging courses online through Stanford University's Education Program for Gifted Youth (EPGY) or another such institution.

Summer is a good time to gain additional experience. Summer courses at a local college or university or through the Wisconsin Center for Academically Talented youth (WCATY) can free up time during the school year to take courses that would not otherwise fit into your schedule. Summer can also provide time for Community Service and other volunteer projects.

Create your own course of study through a Gifted and Talented Independent Study (GTIS). For example, a West High student studied war-themed short stories; a Southwest student co-wrote a journal article with a science teacher.

If you have an area of passionate interest, seek a mentor. A West High student met weekly with a professor from UWGB to study economics.

Take an accelerated summer class at the college through a talent search program such as the Center for Talent Development at Northwestern .

The road to UW-Madison is rarely lined with cupcakes. Nearly nine of ten students who enrolled as freshmen took Advanced Placement (AP) classes in high school. Admissions counselors are barely looking at students who don't have ambitious transcripts these days, and simply to stay in the mix a student should have completed at least four years of English, math, science, and foreign languages "We don't tell students to take difficult classes to torture them," says Kelly Olson, an assistant director of freshman recruitment. "We want them to take those classes so that they're better prepared for what they'll face when they come here."

– "Getting In: The Not-So-Secret Admissions Process," On Wisconsin

Reading List for College-Bound Students

Plan to read some of the classics recommended for college bound students: familiarity with these is valued particularly highly by old school highly selective colleges. Incorporating comparisons in an application essay between your efforts to plough through the county bureaucracy to start a new summer program for preschoolers to Odysseus's quest for home will not go unnoticed. Not to mention the classics are great stories well told! For a list of classics, go to College Board's 101 Recommended Books .

High school preparation beyond academics

“We are academic institutions so of course the number one thing we look at is academics, but extracurriculars and community involvement (community, school, church...) are also important.”

- Harvard Admissions Officer

Preparation for acceptance into a selective college or university goes beyond taking the most rigorous courses and doing well in them, but students should take into consideration the relative weight of high school activities. Again, it is important to start your planning early.

Note the results of a survey of college admissions officers by former college admissions officer Paul Weeks. The question was “What element is most important when considering an applicant?”

84% - grades in AP courses

54% - ACT/SAT scores

42% - class rank

32% - grades in all classes

19% - essay

18% - counselor recommendation

11% - interview

8% - community service

5% - work/co-curriculars

These results mirror closely comments made by Keith White, UW-Madison admissions officer, in a talk to parents and students in Green Bay. The top elements on White's list were #1 the courses you take in high school, #2 the grades you earn, #3 your rank in class, #4 your ACT/SAT scores. Both co-curricular activities and community service were lower on the list. One might reasonably conclude that if students are stressed and feeling overwhelmed, cutting back

on time spent on co-curriculars and community service and focusing more on academics is probably a good choice.

This, by no means, means that students should spend ALL of their time studying. Colleges are looking for students who are leaders and engaged in the world around them. Selective colleges know that students who are active in their communities in high school will also be active in their college communities and consequently will also be good alumni donors!

Students should select co-curricular and community service activities that they enjoy and can stick with because commitment is more impressive than a long list. Remember: it is quality not quantity. Involvement in sports, music, academic teams, dance, or volunteer activities can prove that students can budget their time, can work towards mastery in an area of passionate interest, and have a heart. These activities also provide opportunities for students to demonstrate leadership, and experiences leading a soccer team to defeat in the playoffs or raising the roof on a Habitat for Humanity house often make great subjects for application essays. Coaches and advisors can write powerful letters of recommendation for college and scholarship applications. Honors and awards for non-academic activities such as the President's Award for Community Service also set you apart from other applicants.

"Harvard looks for well rounded students, but we also look for well lopsided students: students who have focused on one area of passionate interest." - Harvard Admissions Officer (11-19-08)

"We are not looking for perfection. Follow your passion, and let us know about it." - UVA Admissions Officer

"It's not about quantity [of activities] but passion and commitment. We are looking for something that jumps off the page and says that this student will bring something interesting to our college community." - Princeton Admissions Officer

COLLEGE ENTRANCE EXAMS

Students who will be applying to selective colleges must find out what entrance tests are required. Most colleges will accept either the ACT or SAT, but many also require SAT IIs, also known as subject tests. Find out what will be necessary in your application processes. Different universities have different preferences. If you're not sure yet where you want to apply, you will probably want to plan to take some combination of the following.

The Preliminary SAT (PSAT) is made by the same people who write the SAT, and it's formatted in the same way; therefore, taking the PSAT in your junior year is excellent preparation for the real SAT. But that is not its only advantage. Unlike with the SAT and ACT, your test booklet is returned to you with your scores, and you are told which problems you answered incorrectly and how to get the right answer. Your weaknesses are pointed out, so you know in which areas you need to focus your studies before taking the SAT. Also, a high enough score on the PSAT will qualify you for the National Merit Scholarship Competition. The official information on the PSAT can be found online.

The SAT reasoning test is a standardized examination of your general reading, writing, and math abilities. The test begins with a 25-minute essay section, continues with eight 25- or 20-minute sections, and ends with a 10-minute multiple-choice writing section. With the exception of the essay and a few grid-in answers on a math section, test questions are multiple choice. Your score for each topic—critical reading, writing, and mathematics—will be between 200 and 800, and a perfect score on the SAT (don't count on it) is a 2400. Information on the reasoning test can be found online.

The SAT IIs (SAT subject tests) are standardized tests intended to gauge your knowledge and abilities in specific subjects. Many colleges do not require SAT IIs; however, a growing number of selective universities do. Check with the universities at which you desire to apply for the number of SAT IIs you need to take (if any) and for any recommendations or requirements they may have regarding which to take. A list of subjects available and other information is found online .

Like the SAT, the ACT is intended to gauge your ability to reason and apply knowledge. Unlike the SAT, however, the ACT also tests your scientific reasoning skills. There are four parts to the ACT: an English section, 75 questions based on five reading selections in 45 minutes; a math section, 60 questions in 60 minutes; a reading section, 40 questions on four reading selections in 35 minutes; and a scientific reasoning section with 40 questions based on 7 different passages in 35 minutes. If you decide to take the writing section, this will be administered last, and you are given 30 minutes in which to write the essay. More information can be found on the ACT website.

Students may take any of these exams virtually any time. (Ask for registration materials in your guidance office or register online.) While most students take the ACT during their junior year, gifted students often take the ACT or SAT in middle school as part of a talent search and/or as freshmen and sophomores. While test scores do not often increase dramatically over multiple testings, practice does reduce stress. One student who chose to take the ACT a second time concentrating on the English portion scored a perfect 36 on that part. Many colleges will now accept the highest subscores from all test dates once a student enters high school.

The best preparation for any standardized test is good, hard day-to-day studying (and learning) in core subjects. Both ACT and College Board (SAT) studies confirm that students who take the most rigorous courses in the core areas of math, science, social studies, and English do best on college entrance exams. Some students benefit from taking free practice tests provided either with paper registration materials (available in high school guidance offices) or online. Students who take a practice test well in advance of the test date have time to review the math they've forgotten or ask their favorite English teacher for help with the kinds of questions on the test. Free test prep sites include the Test Prep Review and KnowHow2GO Wisconsin. As you are studying, remember that although your test results are most likely important, they may not be the most important factor in your application, and they are most certainly not the only factor in your application.

Applying to Selective Colleges or Universities

The website of the college or university will contain information about applying for admission including any special requirements. Many colleges now use the Common Application, but most also require additional documents. Whatever is required, remember to follow all directions carefully. For example, if a college asks that teachers send letters of recommendation directly to the college and the student sends the letters with the application instead, it may delay the process or jeopardize the student's chance of being accepted.

Also on college/university websites is contact information for the admissions office. Establishing a relationship with a school by contacting them early—maybe even as early as your freshman year—can only help you. Not only do they know you before the actual application process begins, but you know more about the institution before you

start applying. Questions that you may want to ask admissions officials include: “What can I do to make myself stand out in the admissions process?” or “Can you put me in contact with a local alumnus?”

The Common Application site not only lists all colleges that accept the Common Application but also lots of other important information including application deadlines, fees, and required standardized tests.

Letters of Recommendation

Letters of recommendation may be written by anyone, but most colleges require at least two from teachers and many put a limit on the number they will read. This means that it is important for teachers to know you well enough to write a strong letter of support.

Good letters are not just based on grades but also on who you are as a person. Just sitting in class and doing well on homework and tests is probably not enough to inspire a great letter. Additional letters from coaches or community members may be allowed; having the winner of a local election whose campaign you worked for write in support of your application could be a powerful addition to your application.

In order to allow a teacher, counselor, or coach to write your letter of recommendation to the best of his ability, give him time. By giving the person at least two weeks, you have done what you can in this respect. Also, when a person agrees to write you a letter of recommendation, you should give him a copy of your profile/resume.

The Application Essay

The application essay (or essays) can be one of the most important elements of your application because it is through the essay that admissions officers find out not only whether or not you can write but also what makes you unique: why their college should

offer you a spot over all of the other excellent applicants. This is your chance to tell them who you are with specific, concrete examples—beyond what is on your transcript and resume. If you are having trouble articulating who you are, try asking your friends and relatives what they see as your strengths and what words they would use to describe you. What stories could they tell, if asked, about the essential you? As the mother of a West grad who was admitted to Yale points out, “Some students really struggle with ‘marketing’ themselves. They may need to ask other people what makes them special or stand out.”

Your ideas are not the only important parts of the essay. Organization and conventions are also significant. Considering the access that high schoolers have to English teachers, you have no excuse for bad grammar or spelling. Adults can help you improve the arrangement of your ideas as well, but remember that you must write the essay yourself.

Of all the aspects of your application, the essay is what you can most control. By fall of your senior year, your GPA is pretty much set, the difficulty of your high school courses has been determined, and you don’t really have the time or energy to expend on extravagant last minute gestures for your school or community. The essay, however, is very flexible: it will depend entirely on the effort you put into it while you’re writing it.

Keeping that in mind, here are some tips for creating a great essay.

Choose your topic wisely. Whether you can choose between prompts or you have no specific prompt, you need to respond to the question that gives you the greatest opportunity for controlled expression.

Plan ahead. Don’t wait until you’ve finished all the other parts of your application. Procrastinating will not result in your greatest essay. Put some serious time and effort into the endeavor.

Be yourself. Don’t try to imitate Jonathon Swift or Douglas Adams. You are not Jonathon Swift or Douglas Adams; you are You. And to be honest, the college to which

you're applying doesn't want to read Jonathon Swift or Douglas Adams (that's what the library is for)—admissions officers want to read You.

Organize your thoughts. Sometimes it's hard to shape your thoughts into a coherent pattern on paper, but if your essay is a mess, then you will seem like a mess.

Digressions waste words. Remember to be clear and concise as well as unique.

Write. The words will not put themselves down. You will need to do the work, but you can make it easier on yourself by preparing and starting early.

Let it stew. Once you've written something, you will probably love it or hate it. Set it aside for a few days or a few weeks, so that you can revise it with much less bias.

When you reread your essay after not looking at it for awhile, you may find that a turn of phrase you thought particularly poetic just seems lame or that another sentence wasn't off-topic at all but in fact added to your point.

Proofread. Do not let your essay be read and critiqued by people who are evaluating your high school career without you proofreading it carefully first. Spelling and punctuation errors can be silly and embarrassing. You deserve to create a better impression, and nothing can ruin a person's respect for you like a series of small, dumb mistakes. To make yourself read every single word, instead of unconsciously skimming over words you know so well, read it backwards. Start from the end of your conclusion to the beginning of your introduction.

Share it. No matter how much time you spend away from your essay, you still wrote it, so you will be biased. Let friends and family read your essay: they will find weaknesses that never occurred to you. Better yet—before letting them read it, read it to them. By saying the words aloud, you may discover errors that you missed while reading it silently.

Several highly recommended books on how to write a winning college application essay are listed under Recommended Links & Books .

Above all, don't freak out about the essay. It is not the only part of your application, and you are not expected to write something that will be read in high schools across the globe for the next twenty years.

A Green Bay school counselor recalls a rep from a selective college reading an example of a good essay. It painted a visual picture of what the student's family was like and a clear explanation of what made that student unique. It also demonstrated a knowledge of the college campus beyond the information posted on the school website, and it showed why the student was a good match for that particular college environment.

"A great essay will not save an otherwise mediocre application."

- Harvard Admissions Officer

"Admissions officers, even at the most selective institutions, really aren't looking for perfection in 17- and 18-year-olds. We are looking for the human being behind the roster of activities and grades. We are looking for those who can let down their guard just a bit to allow others in. We are looking for people whose egos won't get in the way of learning, students whose investment in ideas and words tell us – in the context of their records – that they are aware of a world beyond their own homes, schools, grades, and scores. A picture, they say, is worth a thousand words. To us, an essay that reveals a student's unaltered voice is worth much, much more."

- Pomona Dean of Admissions Bruce Poch – Newsweek

Sample essays

[Spencer Guo \(Preble 2016 graduate, Stanford University\)](#)

Ryan Tincher (Southwest '08, Dartmouth '12)

Humble Pie

Top ten finisher at DECA Nationals, congressional campaign intern, elementary school mentor, and People to People Student Ambassador are just a few of the many titles I've received throughout my seventeen years of life. Although I pride myself in these myriad achievements and the relentless determination I had to make them a reality, I'll be the first to admit that it took a lot of hard work. It wasn't easy to become this five foot seven inch, one hundred and twenty pound fine specimen of man that I am today. There was quite a strict diet. And in my journey, I've discovered that the single most conducive thing to achieving such excellence is a regular dose of humble pie.

While taking a break from volunteering at the Children's Hospital of Wisconsin, I watched some old home movies with my parents, and we ran across one of those "naked baby in a tub" types of videos. In this certainly embarrassing tape of my 14-month-old body in its birthday suit, I was reciting my ABC's and counting to one hundred. I remember way back then I thought I was Mensa material, but that was all before my first helping of humble pie.

My academic journey of excellence began early in life. Whether it was during Preschool and the surfacing of my supreme toy organizational skills or Kindergarten with my perfect naptime record I'm not sure, but I knew very early on that I was destined for greatness. It was during the first grade that I received my first taste of humility. Being the exceptionally gifted youth that I considered myself to be, I was naturally selected to represent my class in the school spelling bee (something initially very terrifying for a youngster who was, and still is, aghast at anything "B" related, including those found on papers or tests and those which fly through the air). Once I got over my initial trepidation, I was certain I would come out on top. A spelling bee should be nothing for a baby genius who was reciting the ABC's at the tender age of 14 months. Prior to the competition, the participants received a list of words to study, and study I did. I knew each of those 500 words forwards and backwards, inside and out, like the back of my hand – or so I thought. I started off amazingly, spelling my first two words correctly. With my head held high and my confidence even higher, I was given my next word. That word was a doozy, one that was certainly way out of reach, even for the likes of a

literary genius like Charles Dickens. My word was “AS.” I stood proudly on the intellectual field of battle, but instead of “Remember The Alamo,” I bellowed A-S-S. It was at that moment that I painfully stomachached my first dose of humble pie.

After a little first grade indigestion, my bottle of Tums remained sealed for the next five years. The remainder of my elementary school career was graced with nothing but flawlessly perfect grades, and I was certain that middle school was just the next step down my road to perfection. Little did I know that in sixth grade the grim reaper would stop in for a visit and I would be facing an untimely “death” of sorts. It was the second semester Tuesday, oh-1400 hours. I entered my seventh hour reading class same as usual, but it wasn’t long until I realized that today was not just any day. After the final bell rang, my teacher appeared before us draped in a sea of black. Slowly she moved towards the front of the room, stopping every so often to wipe a stray tear from her face. Once she stood in front of the class, she mournfully began to read a eulogy. Within seconds I knew this funeral was for me. It appeared that my perfect streak had ended: I received a B- in art class. After the eulogy was complete, I was handed a sympathy card signed by all of my classmates. It was time once again to choke down another piece of that humble pie.

My greatness was once again recognized later that year when I was selected to try out for Kid’s Jeopardy. My family took me to the luxurious Blake Hotel where I took on 180 kids to earn the title of Jeopardy Contestant. My confidence was high once again as I realized that, after the testing process, I was one of only 17 left who performed well enough to make the show. Now it was a waiting game. We were sent home with little information but were told we would be informed via FedEx by the first week in August if we had made the show. I have no shame in telling you that I was seen that summer chasing down every Federal Express truck that dared drive into my neighborhood! I even had the company number on my speed dial; needless to say, I was obsessed. If I was older, I could have probably been cited for stalking. Ironically, it was after a short run through the neighborhood (just to check with one of the drivers to make sure he hadn’t accidentally forgotten to stop at my house), that I returned home and turned on

the TV to discover my fate. I experienced slight cardiac arrest (and not from the stress of this asthmatic kid running trucks down through the neighborhood) as I looked at my television screen and realized that the Kid's tournament had started that day. I was not one of the lucky ones chosen, and after a long summer of hassling FedEx drivers for a letter I was certain would arrive, I realized it was time to head for that pie once more.

Reality hit me over the head once again at the end of my junior year. Now, I have always been under the opinion that, despite my devotion to such non-athletic fields as FBLA and IBA, volunteering with a Congressional Campaign, and maintaining a flawless 4.0 GPA, I was amazingly athletic. I put that theory to the test when I took part in Badger Boys State. Within three hours of my arrival, I lost my pride, as well as any notion of would-be athleticism, in the presence of the 799 best young men that Wisconsin has to offer. In my defense, Ultimate Frisbee is a very intense sport. A surgery, one broken ankle and four months on crutches later, it seemed only fitting that I indulge in an extremely large piece of that humble pie.

Well, there you have it. After pouring out some of the most intimate and humbling experiences of my life, I think you have gotten to know this fine specimen of man a little better. While I have and always will strive to succeed (actually I have been referred to as the Alex P. Keaton of my generation, but we won't go there.), I have come to realize that life has a way of handing you humbling experiences. It is these events that have kept me grounded but even more focused on achieving my future dreams. Believe me, I do know that I have not tasted my last piece of humble pie; I am saving more than one slice for the college admissions process and the many college days ahead. Despite enduring such hardships that would cause a lesser man to fall and admit defeat, with pie in one hand and Tums in the other, I will be an alumni of Georgetown University.

*The stories you have just been party to are true. The names, dates, locations, and events, have not been changed to protect my identity. (After reading this paper, if you are unsure of the validity of the information, I can guarantee you that all of these events have happened to me).

SELECTIVE COLLEGES: APPLICATION PROCESS

The Resume/Profile

Start creating your resume TODAY! Whether you do this in an electronic file or an old fashioned manila folder, get started as soon as possible. Most colleges only allow you to report on your activities starting in grade 9, but it doesn't hurt to keep your own records before that. Include sections for awards and honors, co-curriculars, and leadership roles. Keep track by years and include the first and last names of coaches or advisors. When you are a senior filling out applications it may be hard to remember what year you began dance or who your lacrosse coach was in 8th grade, so you need to record the information while it is current.

When actually creating your résumé, however, be selective. It isn't necessary to list everything you have ever done or award you've received. Maybe list your top five honors or awards. If you can get those awards, then your inferior honors are not so surprising.

With résumés, you may go through several drafts, so to speak. You may want to create a good "first copy" in your junior year and then add to that as you get involved in more things.

The Interview

Some selective colleges require or recommend an interview with an alumnus who lives in your area or at the institution itself. This is an opportunity for the college to learn more about you and for you to learn more about the college. Be on time and be prepared with good questions that reveal that you are well informed about the university and that you have given the opportunity a great deal of thought. Asking generic questions that could have been answered by viewing the website is probably not going to impress anyone. Also keep in mind that the interviewer most likely loves his or her alma mater, so saying that it is actually your fourth choice will not win you any points.

It is important to be comfortable at these interviews in order to leave a good impression. In order to be comfortable, you need to feel prepared and you need to be yourself. Going out of your way to impress someone usually backfires, and being ill-equipped to answer questions or pose questions of your own will not cast you in a positive light.

Ana (East '08) says, "Be on time to the interview and practice ahead of time: your handshake has to be perfect!"

Additional Application Materials

If applying to a music school, you may need to supply an audition DVD or to audition in person at the institution. Check with the college to find out which method is preferred or required. And check with your parents to find out which method is possible.

If you go to the school, you may have a theory test in addition to the audition. This may include tests on sight-singing or -playing, aural skills, pitch-making, and rhythm exercises. If you audition by DVD, you may be mailed a skills test which must be taken in the presence of a music teacher.

If applying to an art school, you may need to include a portfolio with your application. Check with the colleges themselves to find out when the portfolio needs to be submitted (in some cases, portfolios are not necessary for first-year entry) and if they have any guidelines for what or how much should be in it. In general, there are few.

Videos, CDs, creative writing pieces—while there are certain things that must be included in an application, admissions officials are generally not opposed to receiving additional information on students. Here is an [article](#) describing how some students sent in videos of themselves with their college applications.

PAYING FOR A SELECTIVE COLLEGE

Although tuition at selective colleges and universities can be staggeringly high, these institutions often have much more aid to give to students than less expensive colleges and universities.

Recently, Harvard, Princeton, and other institutions announced that if you are smart enough to get in, they will make sure that you can afford to go there. For example, students whose family income is less than \$75,000 (Princeton) or \$60,000 (Harvard) are eligible for full tuition and room and board grants.

Need blind admission is a recent trend among universities, intended to eliminate socioeconomic discrimination in the selection process. Basically, this means that your ability to pay tuition costs is not considered by admissions officials; in fact, those who are considering your application will weigh your ability to pay as much as they might consider the color of your socks.

Unless you are directly related to Queen Elizabeth II, Bill Gates, J.K. Rowling, or similarly deep pockets, you will most likely receive some amount of financial aid if you apply for it. There are several types of aid that you may receive, such as scholarships, grants, and loans.

Scholarships are, as you well know, sums of money given to students as a result of their financial situations or athletic or academic abilities for the sake of pursuing their higher education. Scholarships do not have to be paid back. Grants are gifts of money bestowed on students, and, whereas scholarships are most often based on merit, grants are most often based on need. Student loans are loans to students. The money makes a higher education possible, but eventually, loans must be repaid.

Scholarships can provide substantial help in paying for college. Check out lists of scholarships in your guidance office or Career Center or from Scholarships Inc. —a local consortium of donors providing scholarships for students in Brown and Door counties. Also, the Greater Green Bay Community Foundation has a scholarship designed especially to encourage students to apply to selective colleges and universities. It is called the Great Expectations Scholarship. Contact martha@ggbcf.org for details.

Keep your eyes open for scholarship opportunities. One SW grad won a \$10,000 scholarship from Tylenol because her grandmother happened to see an application while she was standing in line at the service desk at Kmart.

Also, remember that an advanced education is an amazing thing to have, but for your sake and the sake of the economy, don't get yourself so far in debt that you won't ever be able to repay the loan. Claire (SW '09 and Oberlin '12) suggests some basic analysis when deciding which

college to attend and how much debt to take on: Are you likely to earn enough in the career you have chosen to be able to pay off comfortably the loans from attending a certain college?

The Free Application for Student Aid (FAFSA) is a required step in the process of getting financial aid. Basically, it is a list of questions about your family's financial situation, and the answers you provide are used to determine how much money your family will need to contribute toward your higher education. Taxes play a large role in filling out the FAFSA, so you may not be able to do much until after your taxes have been completed.

The FAFSA must be filled out and sent in every year throughout your undergraduate and graduate education. If you don't like forms, the FAFSA is not much fun to fill out, but step-by-step instructions are provided and help is always available in the form of parents, guidance counselors, district officials, and older students.

To learn more about how to pay for college, ask your guidance counselor about information sessions at your school or attend sessions sponsored by the Green Bay Area Chamber of Commerce Partners in Education. Once you have been admitted, contact the financial aid office at the college.

Preble '08 grad Amanda says, "Take your ACT seriously! A good ACT score = \$. Apply for scholarships like it is your job. If you invest the time, you can earn much more money in scholarships than you would at a part-time job."

TIMELINE FOR APPLYING TO A SELECTIVE COLLEGE

Middle School

It is never too early to start laying the foundation for the rigorous college prep coursework which may in turn lead to admission to the college of your choice. In middle school learn all you can in your core academic courses – especially math and language arts. Although middle school grades will not appear on your transcript, the knowledge you gain and the study habits you develop here will stand you in good stead in AP courses in high school.

This is also the time to draft a six-year plan of the courses you want to take to prepare you to get into and be successful in college. Consider taking required high school courses (such as health) in eighth grade or phy.ed. in summer school to free up time to take other courses in high school.

Deborah (Southwest '10) compiled the following timeline from various sources.

9th Grade

Decide if a selective college/university is the kind of institution that you want.

Think ahead: choose pathways of classes that are rigorous but that you can perform well in.

Meet with your school counselor to discuss college options and plan which courses to take.

Get involved: try out some clubs and find one or two that you can stick with for all four years of high school, and start volunteering in your community.

Start a resume/portfolio: keep track of all your activities (extracurriculars, awards, community service, etc).

Use your summer wisely: maybe take a class, attend a summer program at a university, or otherwise continue your education through those three months.

READ!

10th Grade

Improve your time management skill: classes will only get more difficult, and good time management skills will keep you above water.

Think about careers that may interest you.

Take the ACT PLAN exam, if offered in your area.

Take the PSAT. Yes, tenth and even ninth graders may take this for practice.

If you're working (during the school year or the summer), start saving for college.

Keep up the good work: keep your grades up, stick with your extracurriculars if you still enjoy them or find new ones if you don't, keep adding to your resume, volunteer more, etc.

In May, take AP exams if possible.

Again, use your summer wisely: take a class, attend a summer program, or get a job. Deborah attended a three-week program at the College of William and Mary – one of her top two college picks. When it comes time to apply, the fact that she showed sincere interest early on by attending a summer program there is sure to help.

11th Grade

Take the PSAT: this is the test that qualifies you for the National Merit Scholarship if you do well enough.

Meet with your counselor: plan for senior year and the college application process.

Attend college fairs, if you can, or contact colleges you're interested in.

Visit colleges you're interested in over breaks.

Keep up the good work: maintain grades, stick with extracurriculars, continue resume, volunteer, keep taking challenging classes, etc.

In May, take AP exams in your strongest courses.

Take the SAT and/or ACT. (check with the colleges you're interested in for their preferences.)

Many students take the ACT in April and again in June.

Before school lets out, ask for a few letters of recommendation (maybe two or three).

Use your summer wisely: take a class, get a job, attend a summer program, visit colleges, write application essays, etc. You'll have a lot more time now than when your senior year starts.

12th Grade

If all goes well from the end of your last year, you should have a few letters of recommendation ready for you; if not, you need to give gentle reminders (and accept it if one or more back out on their commitment, which is unlikely) or ask for letters from other teachers.

Take the SAT and/or ACT if you haven't already.

Meet with your guidance counselor: make sure that colleges that are appropriate for your academic/personal record are included in your list.

Winnow out some colleges from your list: applications can be expensive, so applying to a lot of colleges is probably unwise; you might want to set yourself a budget for application fees.

Visit any colleges you haven't already.

Prepare and submit applications.

Keep up your grades, extracurricular activities, volunteer work, etc. Don't succumb to senioritis! Nolan (West '06, Yale '10) offers this summary of things students should do in each year of high school to become an ideal candidate for admission to a selective college:

Freshman Year: This is a time for getting used to a new environment and a perfect time to explore passions and academic interests. Check out at least a couple of extra curriculars and figure out what sort of activities interest you. Another piece of advice is to challenge yourself. Take advanced courses and really push yourself while saving time to enjoy high school. Work hard to excel in your courses. There is a rumor that colleges will ignore a poor freshman year, but why take the chance? Unless a student has extraneous circumstances, a student with a 3.9 throughout all four years looks better than one with a 3.9 during just the last three years.

Freshman Summer: Take advantage of summer opportunities. At a minimum find a job (any sort) and do some community service. It doesn't have to be anything major, but colleges look for a commitment in community service and jobs as well as academics. If there are any academic summer programs, even if it's just for a week or two, take advantage of them as well.

Sophomore Year: Continue to challenge yourself in your academics. This is probably the first year that you are allowed to take AP courses: TAKE AS MANY AS POSSIBLE, but only take as many as you can handle. If you aren't ready for that AP Stats course, get another year of math preparation before taking on the endeavor.

As far as extracurriculars are concerned, continue exploring but try to find something you are truly passionate about. If there is no such club, START ONE! The high schools in Green Bay are extremely open to allowing students to advance their interests, and starting a club will help you mature as a leader, create an activity that you love partaking in, and will look good to colleges. You will want to find a few activities that you will be consistently involved in to show colleges that you are a committed student: the same is true for community service.

Also in your sophomore year, I would stress beginning preparation for the ACT, SAT, and SAT IIs. The perfect way to start is to take the PSAT in the fall. You can take this both your sophomore and junior years, and it is great way to get your feet wet, so to speak. I would also advise taking the ACT and SAT at least once this year. It will show you areas where you can improve and allow you to determine which test you would like to focus on as most selective colleges require only one. Also, if any of your current courses (such as AP U.S. History) coincide with any of the SAT II subject tests, I would advise giving the test a shot. It never hurts to try and you don't have to send the colleges your scores; you can just send them your best. Study hard for and take the exams for your AP courses. Scoring a 4 or 5 on AP exams is another factor in your favor.

Sophomore Summer: If you were lazy and relaxed during your freshman summer, I would STRONGLY advise getting involved this summer. Community service and a job should be pursued, but relax as well. Taking rigorous courses and activities during the school year is extremely draining, and it is important to enjoy your friends and have some fun, too.

There are many academic programs at universities for sophomores. Many are national programs that will allow you to meet kids from across the country and make friendships that last far beyond sophomore year. They also give you a chance to get used to living on a college campus. The program that I attended was one of the best experiences of my high school years.

In your downtime, or even when you have a spare moment before bed, make sure to do some test prep. Especially if you have narrowed down your weaknesses, this is a great time to make progress.

Junior Year: This is often regarded as the most important year of high school for applications to selective schools as it is the last one that will concretely show up on your application. (Your grades senior year will not show up on your applications, but colleges will require you to submit them upon completion so you cannot slack off.) If you have not done so before, challenge yourself with rigorous courses this year and continue to excel.

Remain consistent with your activities as well and grab all the leadership opportunities that you can. If your newspaper needs students to be editors, STEP UP. Leadership is crucial for selective colleges. The students from all over the country that you will be competing with for spots in selective colleges will be grabbing all the opportunities available to them, and you should do the same. If you have not participated in many activities, do not join as many as possible to try to impress colleges. Admission counselors see this all the time and realize what students are trying to do. Instead I would recommend continuing with activities you have been involved with and join a couple of new ones if they appeal to you. And if you don't have much community service or work history, try to get some this year. Even if it's part time, I would advise doing both in some fashion.

Also, try to improve your ACT and SAT scores this year! DO NOT WAIT UNTIL FALL OF YOUR SENIOR YEAR! I waited to take my SAT IIs until fall of my senior year, and my appendix ruptured the week before I had to take them. My scores suffered because of this, and my problem could have easily have been avoided if I taken these tests earlier in my high school career.

Finally, take your AP tests and do well. Colleges want you to excel your junior year and AP scores are a great way to prove that you have.

Junior Summer: Colleges want to see you utilize this summer. If you do not work, do no service, and do not attend any academic programs, THIS WILL HURT YOU. Universities across the country (including highly selective schools) have programs during the summer for you to take courses and live on campus. This will get you used to college life and often these programs help tell schools how committed you are to attending their institution.

Other good ideas for summer: I would also continue doing community service and having a job. Again, consistency is the key. If you are interested in science, try to get involved in some kind of research. This type of experience allows colleges to see your commitment and interest in a course of study. If your standardized test scores are not what you'd like them to be, keep studying and take them again. Time wise, you will have one more shot once your senior year starts, but do not rely on this.

Senior Year: You know the drill: By now you should be accustomed to what you need to do. In the fall step into leadership roles and continue involvement in activities, community service, jobs, and research projects.

By this time you should have narrowed your list of colleges to which to apply. Many have visitation programs that help cover the cost of airfare and other expenses to visit their campuses. If not, arrange visits on your own. If one college has emerged as your favorite, apply early. Some colleges have early application policies that let students know their admission decision results in mid-December instead of in late March. Applying early does several things: it lets the school know how committed you are and makes your application look more appealing; it lets you know earlier whether or not you have been admitted; and it allows you to find out what financial aid is being offered. (If you are accepted, the college will send you a financial aid estimate.)

Also, keep working hard! Although schools will not see your senior grades on your application, they require you to send them in and they can rescind their offer of admission if your grades fall.

Did I do everything that I suggested? No. Do I advise doing so? Not entirely. Each student must be involved to the point where he is not always stressed. You should enjoy high school but push

yourself to your level of comfort. If your goal is to attend a selective college, there will be stress, but it will all be worth it come admission time.

Recommended Books and Resources

Check local libraries and bookstores for books that may be helpful in your college search. Here are some suggestions.

Bauld, H.(1987). On Writing the College Application. NY: Harper Collins.

Berger, S. (2006).College Planning for Gifted Students. 3rd Edition. Waco, TX: Prufrock.

Cohen, K. (2003).Rock Hard Apps: How to Write a Killer College Application. NY: Hyperion.

Cohen, K. (2003).The Truth about Getting In. NY:Hyperion.

Curry, B. & Kasbar, B. (Eds.) (1990).Essays That Worked: 50 Essays from Successful Applications to the Nation's Top Colleges. NY: Random House.

Hernandez, M. (1999).A is for Admission: The Insider's Guide to Getting Into the Ivy League an Other Top Colleges. NY: Random House.

Hernandez, M. (2002).Acing the College Application. NY: Random House.

Hughes, C. (2003).What It Really takes to Get Into the Ivy League and Other Highly Selective Colleges. Columbus, OH: McGraw Hill.

Light, R. J. (2001).Making the Most of College: Students Speak Their Minds. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Montauk, R. D. & Klein, K. (2006).How to Get Into Top Colleges. NY: Prentice Hall.

Pope, Loren, (2006).Colleges that Change Lives. NY:Penguin.

Tanner (Preble '12) reviewed the following books:

50 Successful Harvard Application Essays: What Worked for Them Can Help You Get into the College of Your Choice, with Analysis by the Staff of the Harvard Crimson. (2005). NY: St. Martin's Press.

Chiarolanzio, S. (2004). Head Start to College Planning: Get a Jump on College Admissions. Barron's.

College Essays that Made a Difference. (2005). The Staff of The Princeton Review. NY: St. Martin's Press.

Dunbar, D. (2007). What You Don't Know Can Keep You Out of College. NY: Penguin.

Gelb, A. (2008). Conquering the College Admissions Essay in Ten Steps. NY: Ten Speed Press.

Greenfield, B. C. & Weinstein, R. A. (2005). The Kids' College Almanac: A First Look at College. JIST Publishing.

Metcalf, L. (2007). How to Say it to Get Into the College of Your Choice. NY: Penguin.

Shanley, M. K. & Johnston, J. (2004). Best Answers to the 201 Most Frequently Asked Questions about Getting Into College. Columbus, OH: McGraw-Hill.

Toor, R. (2002). Admissions Confidential: An Insider's Account of the Elite College Selection Process. NY: St. Martin's Press.

Wissner-Gross, E. (2007). What Colleges Don't Tell You (And Other Parents Don't Want You To Know): 272 Secrets For Getting Your Kid into the Top Schools. NY: Penguin.