



Rider Guide

Navigating the College Planning Process

Arcola High School

Class of 2026

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Senior Year Timeline

Senior Year Timeline for College Readiness

Class of 2026

September

- ❖ Make a personal email account. You will use it A LOT and you won't be able to access your Arcola email after you graduate. Make your email address professional!
- ❖ Take the ACT/SAT again if needed. Sign up ASAP.
 - ACT: actstudent.org
 - SAT: collegeboard.org
 - If you qualify for F/R lunch, see counselors for ACT/SAT fee waivers.
- ❖ College Visits
 - Schedule a visit online with each college
 - Complete a "Pre-Approved College Visit Form"
- ❖ College Applications -- Get Started. For help:
 - Schedule time with Mrs. Phillips, Ms. Voss, or Mrs. Vandever for help
 - Use the checklist in this packet for each college.
 - Most priority deadlines are November 1st.
- ❖ Make your FSA ID and set up a Common App Account
- ❖ Scholarships -- Start looking!!
 - See list of websites in packet.
 - Check Google Classroom regularly for an updated list of scholarships

October - December

- ❖ College Applications
 - All seniors will complete the Parkland College application.
 - Use "College Application Checklist" to see what you will need for applications.
 - Ask Mrs. Vandever to send a transcript to all the colleges you apply to.
 - Most priority deadlines are November 1st.
- ❖ Financial Aid
 - There were many updates to the FAFSA form over the last few years.
 - 2026-2027 FAFSA is expected to open on October 1st.
 - Attend the Financial Aid Presentation: October 1st at 6pm in the High School Library.
 - Attend the FAFSA Completion Night: Date and time to follow.

January

- ❖ College Applications & FAFSA -- finish up!
 - Send in any additional materials requested.
 - Check your mail and email regularly!
- ❖ Scholarships -- Continue working. You will have lots of work to complete in the spring for local scholarships -- so get others done during the winter months.
 - See list of sites in packet & check Google Classroom regularly.

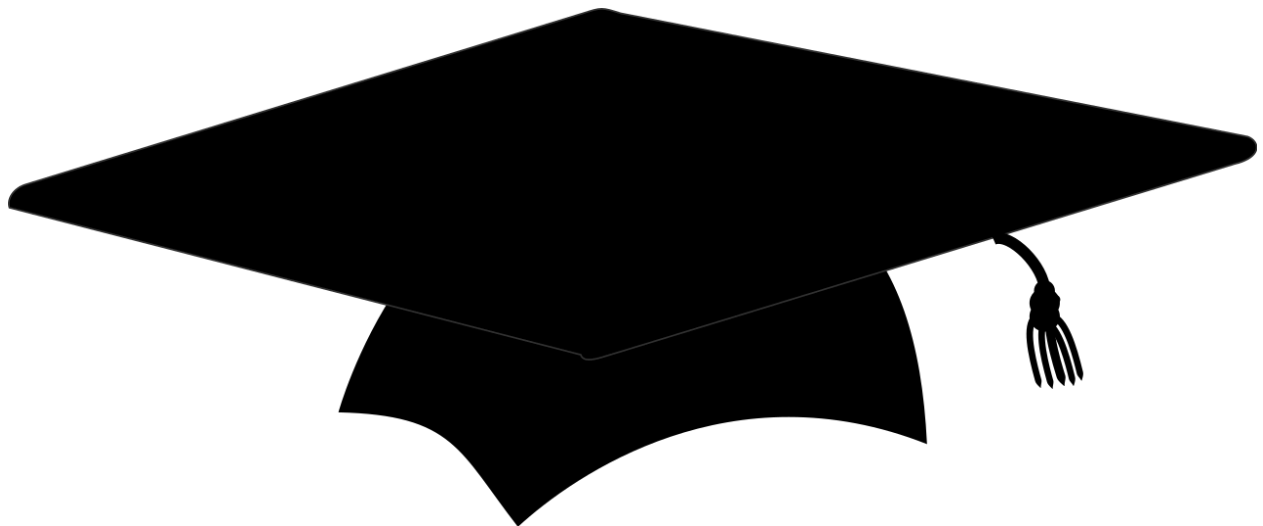
February - March

- ❖ Senior Meeting
 - We will hand out local scholarships and talk a little about Graduation and Honors Night.
 - These applications will be due in March.

April - May

- ❖ Other outside scholarships -- finish applications.
- ❖ Commit to your college/university.
 - Pay your enrollment fee, accept your financial aid package, schedule placement testing, orientation & meet with your advisor.
- ❖ Honors Night
- ❖ Graduation Practice
- ❖ Graduation!!

Congratulations to the Arcola Class of 2026 from the Counseling Office!



Choosing A College

Small Sample of Illinois Colleges/ Universities

School	City	Website
Chicago State University	Chicago	csu.edu, Admissions > Undergraduate
Eastern Illinois University	Charleston	eiu.edu, Visit > Freshman Visit Opportunities
Illinois State University	Normal	ilstu.edu, Admissions > Schedule a Visit
Northeastern Illinois University	Chicago	neiu.edu, "Visit" link on homepage
Northern Illinois University	Dekalb	niu.edu, "Visit" link on homepage
Southern Illinois University	Carbondale	siu.edu, Admissions > Campus Visit/Open House
Southern Illinois University-E	Edwardsville	siue.edu, Admissions > Visit/Tour SIUE
University of Illinois	Urbana-Champaign	illinois.edu, Admissions > Visit
University of Illinois Chicago	Chicago	uic.edu, "Book a Visit" link on homepage
University of Illinois Springfield	Springfield	uis.edu, Future Students > Schedule a Visit
Western Illinois University	Macomb	wiu.edu, Academics > Visit Campus
Western Illinois University	Quad Cities	wiu.edu, Academics > Visit Campus
Augustana College	Rock Island	augustana.edu, "Visit" link on homepage
Bradley University	Peoria	bradley.edu, "Visit Campus" link on homepage
Columbia College-Chicago	Chicago	colum.edu, "Visit" link on homepage
Eureka College	Eureka	eureka.edu, Future Students > Visit Eureka
Greenville University	Greenville	greenville.edu, "Visit Greenville" link on homepage
Illinois College	Jacksonville	ic.edu, "Visit" link on homepage
Illinois Wesleyan University	Bloomington	iwu.edu, Visit > Arrange a Visit
Lake Land College	Mattoon	lakelandcollege.edu, "Plan a visit" link on homepage
Lakeview College of Nursing	Charleston, Danville	lakeviewcol.edu, "Visit" link on homepage
Lincoln Technical Institute	Chicago area	lincolntech.edu
MacMurray College	Jacksonville	mac.edu, "Visit Campus" on homepage
McKendree University	Lebanon	mckendree.edu, Admission > Visit Campus
Millikin University	Decatur	millikin.edu, "Visit" link on homepage
Northwestern University	Evanston	northwestern.edu, Admissions > Visiting Campus
Olivet Nazarene University	Bourbonnais	olivet.edu, "Schedule a visit" link on homepage
Parkland College	Champaign	parkland.edu, Admissions > First time college student > Visit Us
Quincy University	Quincy	quincy.edu, Admissions > (scroll down) Visit QU
University of St. Francis	Joliet	stfrancis.edu

Questions to keep in mind while looking at a College:

Academic Factors:

1. Does the college specify one type of degree?
2. What types of degrees are offered?
3. Is there any option to obtain a minor?
4. Are there strong programs in my potential major or minor?
5. What is the student population? a. Freshman class?
6. Do I want to go to a public or private college?
7. What are the typical class sizes? The student-faculty ratio?
 - a. Keep in mind that freshman classes are usually the largest, while to further your college education, the class sizes will decrease.
8. Who teaches the class? Professors or teaching assistants?
9. Are there study abroad programs offered? Do they interest me? Does my major offer study abroad options?
10. What are the requirements for incoming freshmen?

Academic Costs (TUTION):

1. How much does the College University cost?
 - a. In state vs out of state. Keep in mind that some out of state colleges/universities offer in state tuition.
 - b. How much for books? Meal plans? Living on campus vs off campus? -
 - i. Keep in mind that some colleges expect you to live on campus for 1 to 2 years.
2. Do they offer scholarships? Am I eligible to apply for them?
3. Do they offer FAFSA?
4. Could I afford going to college there?
5. Can I work and go to college at the same time?

Location:

1. What is the location like?
 - a. Urban setting? Rural setting? Warm climate? Cold climate?
2. Is the community and campus safe?
3. How far away from home is it?
4. Do I like the surrounding areas?
5. Are their transportation options?
 - a. Busses? Trains? Bikes? Walking?
6. How will I get to class?
7. What does the community offer me?
8. Are there jobs offered to college students?

Campus Life:

1. What resources can the campus offer me? Libraries? Tutoring? Gym? Technology? Medical facilities? Career counseling? Academic advising?
2. What are the benefits that the campus offers the student?
 - a. Assistantships? Medical insurance? Work study?
3. What are the housing options?
 - a. Will I enjoy living in the dorms? Will I enjoy living off campus?
4. Can the residence halls accommodate my special dietary needs?
5. What is the student body like?
 - a. Diverse? Gender ratios? Will I fit in? Are the students academically successful?
What's the social life like?
6. Does the university/college have a religious influence?
 - a. Will I enjoy it? Do I have to be that religion to attend?
7. Are student clubs offered?
8. What is Greek life like?
 - a. Is Greek life offered? Is this important to me? How many fraternities and Sororities exist?
9. Is the campus safe?
10. Are there campus police?

Career Development Factors:

1. What programs and internships are available in my potential career path?
2. Do they offer my major or minor?
3. Are there scholarships specifically offered for my major or minor?
4. How would my future career benefit from going to this college/university?
5. What are the job placement rates after graduation?
 - a. Does the school help graduates find jobs?
6. Is there a strong alumni influence?
7. What outside connections can I gain from this college/university?

Rankings & Statistics

1. What is the graduation rate?
2. How do the professors rate?
3. What is the college known for?
 - a. Academically? Socially?
4. What is the college ranking compared to the rest of the United States?
5. What is the median GPA?
6. Where will I fall in my own class ranking?
7. Based on my current GPA, ACT &/or SAT, is this college admission realistic?

Questions to ask on a College Tour

According to U.S. News (2017) these are the questions you should be asking your college tour guide:

Learn more: <https://www.usnews.com/education/blogs/the-college-solution/2010/10/19/36-questions-to-ask-on-a-college-visit>

Academics

1. How much time do students typically spend on homework?
2. How much writing and reading are expected?
3. What is the average class size of introductory classes?
4. How widely used are teaching assistants on your campus?
5. What is the average class size of upper-division courses?

Academic Perks

1. What opportunities are there for undergraduate research?
2. How many students participate in undergraduate research?
3. Is there a culminating senior year experience?
4. Do you have an honors college?
5. Do you have a learning community or other freshman experience?

Financial Aid

1. What is your average financial aid package?
2. What is the typical breakdown of loans versus grants?
3. What percentage of financial need does the school typically meet?
4. What is the average merit award?
5. What percentage of students receive college grants?
6. What is the average college debt that students leave with?
7. What work-study opportunities are there?
8. How much does it cost to study abroad?

Graduation Track Record

1. What is your four-year graduation rate?
2. What is your five-year graduation rate?
3. What does it take to graduate in four years?
4. What percentage of freshmen return for sophomore year?

Academic Support

1. What type of tutoring program do you have?
2. How do you provide academic advice to students?
3. Do you have a writing center and how do I access it?
4. What kind of learning disability resources do you have?

Outside Opportunities

1. How many students at the college get internships?
2. What percentage of students study abroad?
 - a. What are the study abroad options?
3. What type of career services do you have?

Student Life

1. What kind of dorm choices are there?
2. What percentage of students live on campus?
3. How long are dorm accommodations guaranteed?
4. How many students live on campus?
5. Do most students go home on the weekend?
6. What percentage of the study body belongs to a sorority or fraternity?
7. What activities are offered to students?
8. What clubs do you have on campus?

Other Questions to ask current students at the University College:

1. How would you rate your overall experience at this college?
2. What do you enjoy most/least about this school?
3. How would you rate your experiences with faculty?
 - a. Do the professors genuinely care about their students?
 - B. Who is their favorite professor so far?
4. How would you rate the food on campus?
5. How would you rate the campus facilities?
6. How would you rate the residence halls?
7. Do you enjoy aspects of student life on campus? If so, which?
8. Is the campus easy to navigate?
9. How far do you typically have to walk/bike/etc. to get to your classes?
10. How would you rate X major/department program?
11. Is it difficult to get into preferred courses?
12. What do you wish you had known that you feel an incoming student can benefit from?

Applying to Colleges

College Application Checklist

College Name: _____

Need to Complete:	Date Completed:
Get the application	
Make a note of the early application deadline	
Make a note of the regular application deadline	
Request high school transcript sent	
Request recommendation letters	
Send thank-you notes to recommendation writers	
Draft essay, proofread essay, and revise your essay	
Ask someone to read your essay, make necessary changes	
Find out if an admission test is required	
Complete college application	
Make copies of all application materials	
Pay application fee	
Sign and send application	
Confirm receipt of application materials	
Tell school counselor that you applied	
Make a note of the priority financial aid deadline	
Make a note of the regular financial aid deadline	
Submit FAFSA	
Find out if a placement test is required	
Take a placement test, if required	
Receive financial aid award letter	
Meet deadline to accept admission and send deposit	
Accept financial aid offer	
Notify the colleges you will not attend	
Figure out first semester payment deadline	

Paying for College

Federal Student Aid

FAFSA website: <https://fafsa.ed.gov/>

Federal Pell Grants

The amount of aid you can receive depends on your financial need, the cost of attendance at your school, and more. A Federal Pell Grant, unlike a loan, does not have to be repaid. Federal Pell Grants usually are awarded only to undergraduate students who have not earned a bachelor's or a professional degree. (In some cases, however, a student enrolled in a **post-baccalaureate teacher certification** program might receive a Federal Pell Grant.) You are not eligible to receive a Federal Pell Grant if you are incarcerated in a federal or state penal institution or are subject to an involuntary civil commitment upon completion of a period of incarceration for a forcible or non-forcible sexual offense.

How much money can I get?

Amounts can change yearly. The amount you get, though, will depend on

- your **financial need**,
- your cost of attendance,
- your status as a full-time or part-time student, and
- your plans to attend school for a full **academic year** or less.

You may not receive Federal Pell Grant funds from more than one school at a time.

Website link: <https://studentaid.ed.gov/sa/types/grants-scholarships/pell>

Monetary Award Program (MAP)

The Monetary Award Program (MAP) provides grants, which do not need to be repaid, to Illinois residents who attend approved Illinois colleges and demonstrate financial need, based on the information provided on the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). You are not required to submit high school grades or test scores when applying for a MAP grant. The MAP grants do run out, so it is important to complete your FAFSA as soon as you can in order to be eligible.

Award Amount

The Monetary Award Program (MAP) grants can be applied only toward tuition and mandatory fees. MAP grants cannot be used for items such as books, travel or housing. All MAP awards will be paid directly to your college. Your college certifies that you are enrolled and that you meet all other eligibility requirements. You may be required to provide proof of Illinois residency.

Each academic year, the amount of your maximum annual award will be the least of (1) the eligible amount as determined by an analysis of financial circumstances, (2) the maximum amount which ISAC allows for tuition and fees at the college, or (3) \$5,340. The total amount of MAP assistance awarded to you in a given academic year, when added to the other financial aid available to you for that year, cannot exceed the cost of attendance at your college.

Website link:

<https://www.isac.org/students/during-college/types-of-financial-aid/grants/monetary-award-program/>

Scholarship Information

Local Scholarships

- Arcola Foundation Scholarships and other local scholarships will be handed out at the Senior Meeting in February, and are due in March.

Sites to browse:

- www.college-scholarships.com
- www.petersons.com
- www.scholarships.com
- www.fastweb.com
- www.finaid.org
- www.cappex.com

Parkland College Scholarship Info:

[https://www.parkland.edu/Main/About-Parkland/Department-Office-Directory/Financial Aid-and-Veteran Services/Types-of-Aid/Scholarships](https://www.parkland.edu/Main/About-Parkland/Department-Office-Directory/Financial-Aid-and-Veteran-Services/Types-of-Aid/Scholarships) OR Parkland.edu > Tuition & Aid > Types of Aid > Scholarships

OR

Sign into your MyParkland account and go to Scholarship Search.

Scholarships for Students of Hispanic Ethnicity: <https://www.hsf.net/>

For ALL SCHOLARSHIPS:

- See the guidance office for help, for your transcript, GPA, etc.
- Tell Mrs. Vandever at any point if you win a scholarship and we will include it in Honors Night!

Scholarship Websites (You are not limited to this list of resources)

Free Internet Scholarship Searches:

www.college-scholarships.com

www.petersons.com

www.scholarships.com

www.collegeboard.com

www.fastweb.com

www.finaid.org

www.cappex.com

Parkland College Scholarship Information:

<http://www.parkland.edu/studentservices/financialaid/scholarships.aspx>

Scholarships for Students of Hispanic Ethnicity

<http://hispanicheritagescholarshipfund.org/>

Scholarships for Students who Immigrated

www.iciro.org

Stay tuned during the second semester for local scholarship applications!

Recommendation Letters

How to Get a Great Letter of Recommendation

Colleges often ask for two or three recommendation letters from people who know you well. These letters should be written by someone who can describe your skills, accomplishments, and personality.

Colleges value recommendations because they:

- Reveal things about you that grades and test scores cannot
- Prove personal opinions of your character
- Show who is willing to speak on your behalf

Letters of recommendation work for you when they present you in the best possible light, showcasing your skills and abilities.

When to Ask for Recommendations:

Make sure to give your references at least two weeks before your earliest deadline to complete and send your letters. The earlier you ask, the better. Many teachers like to write recommendations during the summer. If you apply under early decisions or early action plans, you'll definitely need to ask for recommendations by the start of your senior year.

Remember that some teachers will be writing whole stacks of letters, which takes time. Your teachers will do a better job on your letter if they do not have to rush.

Whom to Ask:

It's your job to find people to write letters of recommendation. Follow these steps to start the process:

- Read each college application carefully. Some schools ask for a letter of recommendation from an academic teacher or school counselor or sometimes both.
- Ask a counselor, teacher, or family member who they think would make a good reference.
- Choose at least one current teacher who knows because colleges want a current perspective on you.
- Consider a teacher who knows you outside of the classroom (For example, coach or club sponsor).
- Pick someone who will be enthusiastic about writing the letter for you.
- If you are unsure about asking someone in particular, politely ask if he/she feels comfortable recommending you.

How to Get the Best Recommendations:

Some teachers write many recommendation letters each year. Even if they know you well, it is a good idea to take some time to speak with them. Make it easy for them to give positive, detailed information about your achievements and your potential by refreshing their memory.

Talk to them about your class participation

Remind them of specific work or projects you are proud of

Tell them what you learned in class

Mention any challenges you overcame

Give them the information they need to provide specific examples of your work

If you need a recommendation letter from a counselor or school administrator:

- Make an appointment ahead of time
- Talk about your accomplishments, hobbies, and plans for college and the future
- If discussing part of your transcript- low grades- explain why you had difficulty and what improvements you have made since then

Whether approaching teachers, a counselor, or another reference, you may want to provide them with a resume that briefly outlines your activities, both in and outside of the classroom, and your grades.

Final Tips:

- Waive your right to view recommendation letters on your application forms. Admission offices will trust them more if you have not seen them.
- Give your references addressed and stamped envelopes for each college that requested a recommendation.
- Make sure your references know the deadlines for each college.
- Once you have decided which college to attend, write thank-you notes. Tell your references where you are going and let them know you appreciate their support.

Teacher/Coach Recommendation Letter Request

To be completed by the student for the teacher

Student Name: _____

Teacher's Name: _____

Today's Date: _____ Date Needed By (2 week notice): _____

Letter is Needed for: ☐ College ☐ _____ ☐ Scholarship

Employment

List all colleges letters of recommendation are needed for:

Intended Major: _____ Desired Career: _____

What are your academic/career goals?

Activities/sports in high school. Include grade levels, awards, leaderships, etc.

Volunteer/community service projects. Include your role, participation, leadership position.

Work experiences. Include company, job position, length of employment, hours per week

Other hobbies or interests.

Specific skills, characteristics, attributes, or experiences that you would like mentioned in your letter of recommendation.

Counselor Recommendation Letter Request

As a supplement to your counselor recommendation letter request, please complete all of the following information. In order to allow your counselor a reasonable amount of time to complete the recommendation letter, this request should be submitted no fewer than 10 school days in advance of the necessary postmark date.

Please be aware that your counselor will only send a recommendation letter directly to a college/ organization so that it is sealed and official. She will not give a letter to a student or parent for submission.

Student Name: _____

Family Background:

Parents' Marital Status: ☐ Married to Each Other ☐ Divorced ☐ Deceased Parent(s)

Did your parents attend college?

- ☐ Neither of my parents attended college.
- ☐ One of my parents attended college (Complete the information for that parent below)
- ☐ Both of my parents attended college (Complete the information for both parents below)

Parent Name and Relationship: _____

College Attended: _____ Degree Earned: _____

Parent Name and Relationship: _____

College Attended: _____ Degree Earned: _____

What are your parents' occupations?

Parent: _____ Occupation: _____

Parent: _____ Occupation: _____

Your College Information:

Intended Major: _____ **Desired Career:** _____

List all colleges to which you are applying:

_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

What is the most important factor to choosing a college?_____

Self-Rating

What are your academic strengths?_____

Does your transcript accurately reflect your ability? (please circle one) Yes No

If it does not, what factors/circumstances have interfered with your academic performance?_____

What are your personal strengths?_____

Rate yourself on the following scale: (please mark on box in every row)

	Below Average	Average	Excellent
Academic Achievement			
Intellectual Promise			
Quality of Writing			
Creative Thought			
Productive Class Discussion			
Respect Accorded by Faculty			
Disciplined Work Habits			
Maturity			
Motivation			
Leadership			
Integrity			
Reaction to Setbacks			
Concern for Others			
Self-Confidence			
Initiative, Independence			

List three faculty members who could give you a positive recommendation:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Notes or Questions

[illegible]