PHS Class of 2026: Guide to the College Application Process

This guide serves as a timeline and resource for our students and their families as you journey through the college application process. Regardless of where you start, (almost) all the information you need to search and prepare can be found within this document. Please note that there are live links to videos and resources to help with different components of the application process. The counselors' letter to the Class of 2026 with links to virtual summer appointments and our College Application Boot Camp can be found at 2025 Summer Counselor Letter.

Links to College Application Bootcamp 2025 slides: June College Application Boot Camp and recording: 25-26 College Application Boot Camp.mp4

Timeline

Adapted from NACAC

Summer

- ⇒ **Create a college email address or use another personal email address that you check on a regular basis.** You will be applying to multiple schools and registering for several scholarships, financial aid websites, and school-specific information. You CANNOT use your RTMSD account as it blocks outside senders.
- ⇒ **Continue to research and visit prospective colleges**. Virtual tours are excellent previews if you are unable to visit in person. Engage with your potential schools and show your interest!
- ⇒ **Register to take the SAT/ACT.** Spots for summer and fall dates fill up quickly! Do not wait until August to register. PHS will host the October 4th and December 6th SAT and the December 13th ACT. Study & Prepare
- ⇒ **Start reviewing college application requirements**. Each school will have a checklist for what is necessary for an application to be considered complete. Additionally, colleges may have specific academic requirements for entry, including world language, number of core credits and types of classes (e.g., precalculus for business or physics for engineering).
- ⇒ **Create your Common App account**. If you are applying to multiple schools, this platform is easiest to use so that you do not have to duplicate information. Most schools use the Common App, but a few require their own institutional app (e.g., Georgetown). Note: you can create your account now, but it will rollover for 25-26 on August 1st. Save your essays in a separate location so you do not lose them.
- ⇒ **Work on your essay(s).** The Common App essay prompts are available now, but review each of your schools to see if they have college-specific supplemental essays. Need inspiration? Check out Essays That Worked | Johns Hopkins University Admissions and University of Pittsburgh - College Application Essays. Authenticity and voice matter. If you enjoy writing it, they will enjoy reading it!

⇒ **Register with the NCAA Eligibility Center** if you plan to play sports in college.

Ready to Apply?

There are several components that students can prepare over the summer prior to returning to school to ease the stress of the application process. As a quick reminder, there are certain parts that students are responsible for sending and other portions that PHS is responsible for submitting in order for the application to be considered complete. This chart provides an overview, with detailed links and subsections following.

Student Responsibilities	Penncrest Responsibilities
o Submitting the application o Matching Common App and Naviance o Sending SAT/ACT scores (if required) o Properly requesting letters of recommendation (if required) o Completing the Self-Reported Academic Record/SRAR (STARS) (if required) o Any supplements, portfolios, etc. o All financial aid forms (if applicable)	o Sending the official transcript - upon request o Counselor/Teacher letters of recommendation and school forms - upon request o Fee Waivers (if eligible)

Penncrest will start sending official documents in September, including transcripts, letters of recommendation, and school forms. Official documents are not available until the school year begins and require 10 school days processing time. For students applying to SRAR schools prior to the start of the school year, no school documents are required to submit your application (e.g., Pitt and PSU).

All the Important Details

GET ORGANIZED

Create a spreadsheet to track application requirements, deadlines, passwords, and requests A sample is available here: College Application Tracker - Template, but feel free to design one that best suits you.

THE APPLICATION

Most applications for the 25-26 cycle will be released on August 1st. Seniors may work on the applications and submit when they are ready. For a step-by-step guide to the Common Application sections, please refer to this document: Common Application Instructions Class of 2026. If you are applying using the institution's own application, still refer to the link to see information regarding class size, GPA, and rank (PHS does not rank).

NAVIANCE

Naviance is a powerful postsecondary planning resource. In addition to housing data regarding college size, locations, academic requirements, and offerings, it provides scattergrams regarding admissions data for Penncrest students. This useful tool can provide insight about academic fit for a student. Once a

student's college application list is developed, the following steps must be completed through Naviance (Access). Please watch the following short video tutorials:

- Add schools to "Colleges I'm Applying to" list
- How to match Naviance & Common App accounts (if applying with Common App)
- Updating Your College List in Naviance

LETTERS OF RECOMMENDATION & FERPA

Some colleges may require letters of recommendation as part of their application, whereas other universities may not accept them. Please check the websites for confirmation and stipulations on who can write the letter (e.g., a core subject area teacher or a recent teacher).

TEACHER LETTERS

Ask your teachers in person if they would be willing to write you a letter when required by your college. You can provide them with the Student Brag Sheet for Teacher Letter of Recommendation and complete any requested items. ***Starting August 25th, you can follow these steps***: Requesting Teacher LOR video or Requesting LOR instructions to make an official request in Naviance. You must repeat this step if you add additional colleges, as the requests are college specific.

COUNSELOR LETTERS

If your college requires a counselor letter of recommendation, you must schedule an in-person interview with your counselor *beginning in September*. You will complete the Brag sheet for Counselor Letter of Recommendation and Parent/Family Brag Sheet for Counselor Letter of Recommendation. You will not request your counselor letter through Naviance.

OUTSIDE RECOMMENDERS

If you are sending a letter from a recommender outside of RTMSD, for example a coach, mentor, supervisor, etc., you must make your request directly through Common App or follow the directions listed on the college's website. PHS cannot send these letters to colleges directly.

FERPA

Part of your college application may contain confidential information, including letters of recommendation. Through the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act, you may obtain the rights to access some of this information. However, these rights only apply to documents retained by the institution where you enroll. Therefore, it is unlikely you will desire to see them once attending. Colleges and high school teachers tend to prefer that your application file remain confidential, which is why most students 'waive' their rights to accessing this information. Though this is not required, some teachers may decline to write a letter if you do not sign the waiver. What is the FERPA Waiver? provide more details about your rights. Completing the Common App FERPA Waiver must be done before any documents can be sent through Naviance. ***Of note, Naviance and Common have a "One and done" submission process, meaning that once forms are completed, such as the school report and mid-year report, they will be available to all subsequent schools which you apply to.*** This is not true for teacher requests, as you must make college-specific LOR requests.

TRANSCRIPTS & RELEASE FORM

Prior to Penncrest sending your official transcript, each parent/guardian must complete a Class of 2026: PHS Parent/Guardian Permission to Release Official Records Form. This electronic document is available

now, though no official materials are sent by PHS until we return to school. ***Additionally, students will complete the*** 25-26 Transcript Release and College Application Form ***to request that their official materials be sent (multiple schools can be listed on one form)***. If your college only requires an unofficial transcript, you may upload it to your application from HAC.

SELF-REPORTED ACADEMIC RECORD (SRAR)/SELF-REPORTED TRANSCRIPT AND ACADEMIC RECORD SYSTEM (STARS)

Several large public universities have moved away from requiring the official transcript for admission to having students self-report their transcript electronically. Which colleges/universities accept the STARS? lists all schools accepting the SRAR/STARS. Check regularly for colleges that may move to the SRAR for 24-25. To complete the SRAR, students must Create a SRAR/STARS account and manually transcribe all of the classes listed on their transcript into the platform. List all courses, levels, and grades exactly how they appear on your transcript. Unofficial transcripts with senior year courses will be available in HAC in August. Check each school's admissions page to ensure you are linking and completing the form correctly. Your application is not considered complete until you finish the SRAR for schools that require it. Penn State, Pitt, and Delaware all use the SRAR.

DEADLINES

Pay careful attention to deadlines. Rolling admissions schools (e.g., Pitt, PA State Schools) review applications on an ongoing basis. Once you have submitted the application and all required components, you will usually have a decision in a few weeks. They may have a priority deadline even if they are rolling admissions, and popular majors may fill quickly, even before the new year. Early Action and Early Decision deadlines are typically Oct 15th, Nov 1st or 15th. Penncrest requires 10 school days to process official documents. Please be mindful of when requests are made and allow appropriate time for sending!

SAT/ACT

Testing policies vary by college and are changing regularly. Many of the large public schools in the south have reinstated requiring test scores for admissions, as have several Ivy League institutions. Colleges accept either the SAT or ACT. Most colleges will 'superscore' or use the highest score from each section regardless of test date. Some colleges may require you to send all scores. If official scores are needed, they must be sent directly through College Board Score Send or ACT Student Score Send. If you are sending your scores to all schools, you should self-report in the testing question in the Common App. Do not list your scores in the Common App if you are applying test-optional to any of your schools. Test-blind colleges will not factor scores into admissions decisions even if they are sent. Research individual colleges and their reported average scores from the last admissions cycle when deciding about whether to send scores.

FINANCIAL AID

The Free Application for Federal Student Aid, or FAFSA, is set to open October 1st, 2025 for the 2026-27 School Year. Penncrest will host a Financial Aid Night on September 9th and a FAFSA Completion Night on October 8th. Some institutions require the CSS profile, an additional private financial form, when applying for financial aid: CSS Profile Participating Institutions. Remember that all colleges are required to have a Net Price Calculator to allow families to estimate costs before applying. Additionally, some schools use MyinTuition to help you calculate the cost of college.

SCHOLARSHIPS

It's never too early to start searching for scholarships, though many open in the late fall/winter for seniors. National scholarships can be found at popular sites such as: Going Merry, Fastweb, Scholarship America, RaiseMe and BigFuture Scholarships. Schoology and Naviance will be updated regularly in the fall to include local and regional scholarships. Read the College & Career Corner Newsletter weekly for new postings! Check out the Archived PHS College & Career Corner Newsletters for additional resources and information. Penncrest has its own scholarships offered in the spring. Finally, many colleges will automatically consider students for merit-based aid upon applying but review the website in case there are separated applications.

This document should include most information required for planning and preparing your college applications. As an additional resource, our PHS Counseling Website includes recorded videos and linked documents to presentations we hosted throughout the 24-25 school year. This comprehensive collection includes accessing accommodations in the postsecondary setting and slide decks for college essay writing!