

Tab 1

Your College Search: A To-Do List

by Ned Johnson

Prepare for a great high school experience. You'll have opportunities to grow inside and outside the classroom, while making sure that you're well prepared to apply to college in three short years. Use this calendar to guide your experience. Careful planning and good choices over time make for strong options later. Ready, set, go!

Freshman Year

☐ **Listen and observe.** Faced with more challenging high school classwork, you'll want to pay attention to what your new teachers expect from you and look for ways to work harder and smarter. Grades are important in ninth grade, but seek balance so that you are challenged but not overwhelmed. Ask for help if you run into trouble and treat a low grade as constructive feedback to help you become a better learner.

☐ **Get involved.** High school is not simply a four-year audition for college but a critical period to develop yourself. Grades are important, but so, too, are your social connections and extracurriculars. Use part-time jobs, clubs, community service, arts and music, photography, cheer squad, robotics club, and so on to pursue your passions. It

will also give you an energy boost to push you through the less exciting parts of school life.

☐ **Read voraciously.** Dive into books, newspapers, magazines and blogs. Explore subjects that engage you. Additionally, check out TED Talks, YouTube videos and other free learning opportunities such as the massive open online courses known as MOOCs.

☐ **Find mentors.** Look for knowledgeable people who can offer helpful advice over time: teachers, coaches, counselors and friends. These relationships can pay off in other ways, too: People like to help students they know!

☐ **Schedule downtime.** That means turning off electronic devices. No phones. No screens. We all need time to daydream and think about ourselves and our place in the world.

Sophomore Year

Focus on evolving as a learner while developing your understanding of your strengths and passions.

☐ **Challenge yourself (wisely).** Strive for strong grades and take on new challenges, but ask for help when needed and avoid overtaxing yourself. Balance is your goal.

☐ **Speak up in class.** Share and discuss your ideas with others. Colleges look for students who contribute and elevate class discussions. Additionally, down the road, you'll request letters of recommendation, and teachers won't know you without hearing your thoughts.

☐ **Sleep.** The typical 15-year-old brain needs eight to 10 hours of sleep to function at 100 percent, so that should be your goal.

☐ **Refine your route.** Look ahead to the 11th- and 12th-grade courses you might be interested in taking and plan to work into



your schedule any prerequisites. Take advantage of special courses, particularly rigorous ones that are in line with your academic interests.

☐ **Learn from the masters.**

As you take inventory of your own interests, find people who work in related areas. Listen to their stories and consider opportunities for gaining firsthand experience of your own. A 20-minute conversation with a professional could even turn into a fruitful internship opportunity.

☐ **Put together an activities list.**

Start jotting down your hobbies, jobs and extracurricular activities to keep track of what you have accomplished. This document will form the basis of your résumé and will be essential in preparing for college interviews and applications, in addition to possible jobs, internships and summer programs.

☐ **Make your summer matter.**

Work, volunteer, play sports, travel or take a class. Research summer programs and internships to give yourself the chance to move beyond the scope of your regular high school courses. Plunge into an activity that excites you or one that builds on a special interest.

☐ **Settle on a testing strategy.**

Use your PSAT scores and other practice tests to help you identify the right test for you (i.e., SAT vs. ACT). Set up a test-prep plan.

Junior Year

Essays and testing and APs. Oh my!
Your grades, test scores and activities this year form a large part of what colleges consider for admission, so prepare for your exams and do your best in class.

☐ **Plot out your calendar.** Talk with your parents and guidance counselor about which exams to take and when. If your 10th-grade PSAT scores put you in reach of a National Merit Scholarship, concentrated prep time might be worth it. Then, take the SAT or ACT in winter or early spring. In May or June, the SAT Subject Tests (required by some colleges) are also an option in areas where you shine or in subjects you covered this year. If you're enrolled in an AP or honors course now, consider taking one of the College Board's practice AP tests.

☐ **Immerse yourself in activities.** Look for extracurriculars, both in and out of school, that you enjoy and that show you are dedicated, play well with others and can assume leadership



roles. High school is not simply a four-year audition for college. Rather, it's a time to discover what you like, to develop, and to sharpen skills you'll use after high school.

☐ **Build your college list in the spring.** Once you get your test scores, talk to a counselor and put together a list of target, reach and likely schools. Use apps to aid your research. Explore college websites and resources such as ed.gov/finaid and usnews.com/bestcolleges. And clean up your social media (e.g., Instagram, Facebook, Twitter) since college admissions folks may see them.

☐ **Visit schools.** Spring break and summer vacation are ideal times to check out a few campuses. Attend college fairs and talk with the people behind the tables who can provide information and may serve as future contacts.

☐ **Get recommendations.** Right after spring break, ask two teachers with different perspectives on your performance if they will write letters for you. Choose teachers with whom you have a good relationship and who will effectively communicate your academic and personal qualities.

☐ **Write.** Reflect on your experiences and highlight your strengths. Procrastination causes stress, so aim to have first drafts done by Labor Day of senior year. Share them with an English teacher, parent or counselor.

Senior Year

☐ **Don't slack off.** Colleges look at senior-year transcripts, so keep working hard in your classes.

☐ **Finish testing.** If necessary, you can retake the SAT, ACT or SAT Subject Tests. The early fall test dates give you time to apply early. Check deadlines and the admissions testing

policies of your schools. Are they test optional or do they require the SAT or ACT? If so, do you also need the optional written essays for either test? What about the SAT Subject Tests?

☐ **Know your deadlines.** Many colleges have multiple deadline options. Consider the implications of early decision, early action, rolling, regular and other deadlines and plan accordingly (related story, Page 128).

☐ **Apply.** Craft your essays with a well-thought-out narrative. Fill out applications carefully. Review a copy of your transcript. Have you displayed an upward trend that should be discussed? Does an anomaly need context? Discuss with your counselor. Leave yourself time to reread essays to clean up any errors.

☐ **Follow up.** Check that your colleges have received records and recs from your high school and your SAT or ACT scores from the testing organization. A month after you submit your application, call the college and confirm that your file is complete.

☐ **Confirm aid rules.** Check with each college for specific financial aid application requirements. Dates and forms may vary.



☐ **Make a choice.** Try to visit or even revisit the colleges where you've been accepted before committing. Talk with alumni; attend an accepted-student reception. Then, make your college choice official by sending in your deposit. Congrats! ♦

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Ned Johnson is founder of and tutor-geek at PrepMatters (prepmatters.com) where, along with colleagues, he torments teens with test prep, educational counseling and general attempts to help them thrive. He is also co-author of the 2018 book *"The Self-Driven Child: The Science and Sense of Giving Your Kids More Control Over Their Lives."*

Students and admissions pros share their tips for standing out from the pack

by Margaret Loftus



Ever since Jack Maloney played the Artful Dodger in a local children's theater production of the musical "Oliver!" when he was 6, he knew he wanted to be a professional actor. The theater program at his school, Oxbridge Academy in West Palm Beach, Florida, was still finding its footing during his early years there, so Maloney took it upon himself to create and stage productions, including a concert of songs from the musical "Rent" and a full production of "Urinetown" that he developed out of an honors performance class. He also helped get the course into the curriculum by writing a proposal in collaboration with his theater teacher and lobbying administrators.

Now a freshman at Pennsylvania State University studying musical theater, Maloney believes that his resourcefulness – and highlighting that in his college essays – was a big factor in getting into his three top choices. (The others were Northwestern in Illinois and the University of Michigan.) He also elaborated on his experiences in interviews whenever he got the chance. "I wrote my own story," he says, "and it was much more compelling in the end."

College counselors have long urged high school students to find and focus on their passion. But developing it to create new opportunities for yourself and others can really grab the attention of admissions officers. For many of them, there's a certain sameness to the applications they read, so when prospective students carve out their own opportunities, colleges notice, says Maria Laskaris, former dean of admissions and financial aid at Dartmouth College and now a senior private counselor at Top Tier Admissions, a company focused on helping applicants navigate the admissions process. "We tell students to push beyond what the school offers," Laskaris says.

These days, with the sheer volume of applications growing, aspiring college students need to use every edge they can muster. According to the latest State of College Admission report from the National Association for College Admission Counseling, the overall number of applications from first-time freshmen inched up 7 percent between fall 2015 and fall 2016. Distinguishing yourself from the crowd has become more important than ever. But remember, even though many coveted schools are growing more and more selective, overall colleges accept an average of two-thirds of first-time freshman applicants, according to NACAC. U.S. News talked to experts to find out how to make your application stand out.

Build on your academic strengths. While the weight that admissions officers give each component of your application varies from school to school, academics is always the heaviest. After all, schools are looking for students who have not only done well but who have also challenged themselves, as they are

more likely to succeed in college-level courses.

**JACK MALONEY (RIGHT)
IN REHEARSAL AT
OXBRIDGE ACADEMY**

Of course, reviewers also take into account the level of rigor available at a particular school. The key is to plan ahead and start in eighth or ninth

grade to build a foundation that will open doors to advanced coursework later on. For instance, being ready to get advanced algebra out of the way sophomore year puts you on track to take calculus before earning that high school diploma, which might set you up better should you apply to a program that requires it, such as engineering. The bottom line: "Position yourself to keep your options open," Laskaris says.

Tackling honors, Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate classes (if they're available) shows that you're up for the rigors of college, even if you don't ace them. "We'd prefer to see students challenge themselves to get a B in AP or honors

courses rather than an A in a standard-level course," says David Kaiser, the director of undergraduate enrollment management at Temple University's Fox School of Business in Philadelphia. This shows someone who "isn't afraid of hard work," Kaiser says, and "it's a better indicator of the student's ability to perform." That

Two Essays That Worked

What makes a college admissions essay successful? Below are two submissions that helped students get into **Johns Hopkins University** in Baltimore, plus commentary from **Ellen Kim**, dean of undergraduate admissions, about what these applicants did right. Remember, Kim advises, that "what works in these essays works because of who the student is" and how it fits into the rest of the application. In other words, you'll want to apply these principles to a topic that reveals something intriguing about you.

"This title is interesting," Kim says. "But it's up to students to decide whether they want to title an essay." If nothing brilliant comes to mind, then you can skip.

More Than Thick Eyebrows

By Caroline

The author takes a straightforward approach to starting, Kim says. "But you can tell you are going to get to know her."

Many personal statements include short scenes, Kim notes. But the strongest essays are the ones that put those anecdotes toward a larger purpose, as the author does here. "She is helping us understand where she is in her journey with Italian," Kim says. "It's not just being descriptive for the sake of being descriptive."

The author chose to write about something very accessible and approachable, Kim notes. "Everyone can relate to family heritage," she says. "It would have been very easy to talk about the members of the family, but she does a good job of making it say something about herself," which is the goal.

In this paragraph, Kim says, "We learn not just about her intellectual appetite for something, but also about what she does when she is passionate."

Rarely have I studied a topic that flows from my ears to my brain to my tongue as easily as the Italian language. The Italian blood that runs through me is more than the genetics that gave me my dark hair and thick eyebrows. It is the work of the generation that traveled from Istria in the north and Sicilia in the south, meeting through friends in Chicago, and encouraging their children to study hard and make a living for their future families. In time, that influence would be passed on to me; finding my grandfather's meticulously-written electricity notes circa 1935 - filled with drawings and words I did not yet understand - inspired me to take Italian at my own high school.

The moment I realized that my Italian heritage was wholly a part of me was a rather insignificant one, yet to me is one of the most remarkable realizations of my life. The summer after my second year of Italian study, I was driving in my car, listening to a young trio of Italian teenagers, *Il Volo*, meaning "The Flight." As one of the tenors sang a solo, *Ti voglio tanto bene*, I realized that I could understand every word he was singing. Though it was a simple declaration of love and devotion in a beautiful tune, what mattered was that I was not just listening to three cute teenagers sing a song. I was fully engaged with the words and could finally sing along.

After that moment, I sought out all the Italian I could get my hands on: watching *Cinema Paradiso* and *La Dolce Vita*, absorbing phrases of the language I felt I could now call my own. Even better, was that I felt confident enough in my skill that I could use it with my closest living Italian relative, my father's mother, *la mia nonna*. More than speaking the language, I discovered my family's past. In conversing with her and my father, I discovered that I will be only the third person in my paternal grandparents' family to attend college, that my grandmother had only a sixth-grade education, that my grandfather, despite never holding a degree in mathematics or physics, worked for three decades on CTA train cars as an electrician. The marriage of my grandparents in 1932 represented a synthesis of the culture of northern and southern Italy and America.

Having now studied three full years of this language, I only want to consume more of it. I want to read Dante's *Divina Commedia* in its original vernacular, to watch my favorite Italian films without the subtitles, to sing every Italian refrain with fluid understanding of what the melody means, and to finally - finally! - visit my grandparents' childhood homes: the town of Trapani in Sicilia and the Istrian peninsula on the Adriatic coast. To me, the Italian language holds an essential connection to my past, but also a constant goal for the future. It is likely that I will never fully master the vernacular and colloquialisms, yet learning this language will stimulate me intellectually and culturally for life. I believe I can claim Italian as mine now, but there is still so much more to learn. Italian is a gift that I will hold dear forever, and I am glad that I received it so early in life.

"This is a good way to close the essay, by describing why this matters to who she is as a person," Kim says.

said, it's also important to consider carefully which advanced courses will build on your strengths – and don't overdo it. Taking every AP option available may backfire for those who don't excel in a particular subject, for instance, and they could see their overall GPA drop as a result.

Remember: Once you've been accepted, don't slack on your studies. "Grades throughout the senior year are critical to demonstrate continued growth," says Laskaris. "The worst students can do is take their foot off the gas."

Get a handle on the tests. Of course, colleges have long relied on standardized tests to help them differentiate between students in a way that grades alone cannot. Increasingly, applicants are choosing to take both the SAT and the ACT. Christoph Guttentag, dean of undergraduate admissions at Duke University in North Carolina, suggests doing just that to

String Theory

By Joanna

If string theory is really true, then the entire world is made up of strings, and I cannot tie a single one. This past summer, I applied for my very first job at a small, busy bakery and café in my neighborhood. I knew that if I were hired there, I would learn how to use a cash register, prepare sandwiches, and take cake orders. I imagined that my biggest struggle would be catering to demanding New Yorkers, but I never thought that it would be the benign act of tying a box that would become both my biggest obstacle and greatest teacher.

On my first day of work in late August, one of the bakery's employees hastily explained the procedure. It seemed simple: wrap the string around your hand, then wrap it three times around the box both ways, and knot it. I recited the anthem in my head, "three times, turn it, three times, knot" until it became my mantra. After observing multiple employees, it was clear that anyone tying the box could complete it in a matter of seconds. For weeks, I labored endlessly, only to watch the strong and small pieces of my pride unravel each time I tried.

As I rushed to discreetly shove half-tied cake boxes into plastic bags, I could not help but wonder what was wrong with me. I have learned Mozart arias, memorized the functional groups in organic chemistry, and calculated the anti-derivatives of functions that I will probably never use in real life – all with a modest amount of energy. For some reason though, after a month's effort, tying string around a cake box still left me in a quandary.

As the weeks progressed, my skills slowly began to improve. Of course there were days when I just wanted to throw all of the string in the trash and use Scotch tape; this sense of defeat was neither welcome nor wanted, but remarks like "Oh, you must be new" from snarky customers catapulted my determination to greater heights.

It should be more difficult to develop an internal pulse and sense of legato in a piece of music than it is to find the necessary rhythm required to tie a box, but this seemingly trivial task has clearly proven not to be trivial at all. The difficulties that I encountered trying to keep a single knot intact are proof of this. The lack of cooperation between my coordination and my understanding left me frazzled, but the satisfaction I felt when I successfully tied my first box was almost as great as any I had felt before.

Scientists developing string theory say that string can exist in a straight line, but it can also bend, scintillate, or break apart. I am thankful that the string I work with is not quite as temperamental, but still cringe when someone asks for a chocolate mandel bread. Supposedly, the string suggested in string theory is responsible for unifying general relativity with quantum physics. The only thing I am possible for when I use string is delivering someone's pie to them without the box falling apart. Tying a cake box may not be quantum physics, but it is just as crucial to holding together what matters.

beginning to realize that I should not be ashamed if it takes me longer to learn. I persist, continue to tie boxes every weekend at work. Even though I occasionally backslide into feelings of desperation, I always rewrap the string around my hand and start over because I have learned the most gratifying victories come from tenacity. If the universe really is comprised of strings, I am confident that I will be able to tie them together, even if I do have to keep my fingers crossed that they hold up.

Personal statements are called "personal" for a reason, Kim observes. They should tell the admissions committee something about the student. This essay does a good job of wrapping up the piece on a personal note.

Students should try to grab the reader's attention at the first sentence. "Her opening paragraph is interesting," says Kim. "You read it, and you aren't sure what the essay is going to be about. It makes you curious about what she is going to tell you."

"A lot of times students feel like they need to write an essay about a life accomplishment or a life-changing event or something really extraordinary," Kim says. "But it's also possible to write a very effective personal statement about an ordinary thing. It's not the topic that has to be unique. It's what you say that has to be unique."

The author does a good job of providing a window into her thought process, Kim notes. "You also see how she responds to a challenge in a very approachable way."

In this instance, dropping in some academic references works with the theme of the essay, but students shouldn't think they have to follow suit, Kim cautions. It only works if it reinforces your central point.

This essay, like all strong essays, was well-written, clear and error-free, Kim notes. The writing felt natural – not as though the author was reaching for a thesaurus. "This should sound like you," she says.

determine which test better suits your test-taking style. You might opt to sit for your preferred test again, but twice should be the limit, he says. Duke, for example, accepts scores for both tests, but check with your prospective schools on their policies and whether you should submit scores for both tests. At Duke, admissions officers consider scores of individual sections from both tests, but they'll use the highest composite score in their admissions rubric. And what about the optional SAT essay section? While many places don't require it, some do, and that may change year to year. Again, it's best to consult a school's individual policies.

More and more schools – including Bennington College in Vermont, Ohio Wesleyan University, Arizona State University and, as of this summer, the University of Chicago – are going test-optional, meaning certain applicants can choose not to submit standardized-test scores for review in admissions decisions. You can find a comprehensive list of test-optional schools at fairtest.org, operated by the National Center for Fair and Open Testing. When in doubt, check with the school's admissions office.

Laskaris cautions students and parents to take "test-optional" with a grain of salt. "Just because those colleges are not requiring [scores] from everyone doesn't mean 80 percent of them don't take them," she says. "It still does matter for many top institutions."

Think outside your school's extracurriculars. While Santa Monica, California, native Brendan Terry's interest in environmental and social justice issues was first sparked in middle school, he found most of the opportunities to nurture his activist spirit off campus. Terry interned at an educational nonprofit as a summer camp counselor for local children from low-income families and Chinese exchange students, volunteered at a community health clinic, and served as the "educational ambassador" for the 5 Gyres Institute, a Los Angeles-based nonprofit that focuses on reducing global plastic pollution, among other activities.

Now a junior majoring in chemistry at Pomona College in California, Terry is well aware of the impact of his community work on his college apps. "It was huge," he says. "Schools always brought it



up." Terry wrote about his activism in the majority of his essays, as well as the "activities" and "additional information" sections of the Common Application. "I used part of it to provide background on each organization that I worked with, and to provide links for clippings about activist work I had done," he says. "His recommendations – one from a teacher and the other from one of the directors at 5 Gyres – reinforced his work as an activist."

No matter what your interests are, find ways to use them to make a contribution to your school or local community. If math is your thing, for example, think about how you can tap your skills to get other kids interested in the subject. Arianna Hilliard, a classmate of Maloney's at Oxbridge Academy who is now in her first year at Vassar College in New York, was vice president of a club at her school called Race Alliance in which members met weekly to discuss the topic of race in popular culture.

Whatever you do, use your time outside of schoolwork wisely. For instance, three-season athletes who know they're not going to be recruited for sports might consider skipping one or two seasons to focus on other interests. Think depth instead of

**ARIANNA
HILLIARD
ENJOYED SOCCER
IN HIGH SCHOOL
AND WILL PLAY
ON AT VASSAR.**

breadth, says Seth Allen, vice president and dean of admissions and financial aid at Pomona. "We're looking for students who have decided to go down a particular path with as much enthusiasm as they can muster," he says.

To be sure, some students are too busy with a part-time job or, say, babysitting younger siblings to devote themselves to even one season of sports, much less an activity or a cause. But employment and child care are responsibilities that you can learn from, too. "Colleges look at extracurriculars in the context of a student's environment," says Craig Meister, director of college counseling at Oxbridge Academy and founder of college consulting firm Admissions Intel. He urges his students to list those experiences on their apps. "It's a combination of what you can afford and what you're passionate about," he says.

Consider recommendations carefully. "Always give great consideration to the people you ask to write a recommendation," says Susan Schaurer, associate vice president for strategic enrollment management and marketing at Miami University in Ohio. Colleges vary on their preferences and typically spell that out in their application instructions. For instance, Miami asks for letters from a high school counselor or academic teacher, Schaurer says. "Preferably someone who's had close academic encounters with you," she says. "Ask someone who can really provide insight."

The ideal scenario is when you can ask an instructor who taught you more than once – such as during freshman year and again later on – because then they can speak to your growth and how you might have overcome any particular challenges. Duke, meanwhile, prefers letters from two teachers and a guidance counselor. "We find counselor recommendations so valuable in understanding the student as a member of a community," says Guttentag.

Do a social media check. Meister implores his ninth and 10th graders to not put anything on social media or online that could be questionable. Nonetheless, he says, when looking at their info, "nine times out of 10 I find something they should take down." And while it's true admissions officers don't have time to scroll through your entire Instagram feed, they may stumble upon social media info if

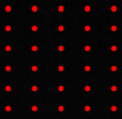
searching online to verify a part of your app. What's more, it's not unusual for schools to be alerted by alumni, community members or others to social media that paints a student in an unflattering light. "We can't ignore what may be brought to our attention," says Schaurer, even after acceptance. "Most institutions put a disclaimer in acceptance letters that stipulates good behavior," she says, or they reserve the right to withdraw the offer of admission.

Meister advises students to always use appropriate language online and to scrub their social media to the extent they can of anything that doesn't reflect the image projected in their applications. "Admission officers are savvier than ever in comparing your application persona versus your recommender's impression of your persona versus your online persona to see if they all match up," he says. A good rule of thumb: "I tell them that if they wouldn't want an admissions officer to see it, nobody else should see it online either," Meister adds.

Show up (to the extent you're able). Time was, if you had your heart set on a particular school, counselors advised you to visit the campus to show the admissions office that you'd be likely to attend if accepted (which is music to their ears). Showing up is still a great way to reveal what schools refer to as "demonstrated interest," a factor that some 70 percent of colleges say plays at least some role in their admissions decisions, according to NACAC. At the same time, "most schools are attuned to resources," Schaurer says, and "they don't want to put students at risk who can't afford to come for a visit."

Indeed, making a trip to campus isn't the only way to let your interest be known, especially in the digital age. "We count any way students engage with us," she notes, which includes opening a college's emails or clicking on a link in a particular message, participating in a webinar or Facebook Live event, and more. Schaurer encourages applicants to ask colleges if they consider demonstrated interest – and how. And be sure to introduce yourself to recruiters during visits to your high school or at local college fairs, Schaurer advises. "You can show interest without leaving home." ♦

Tab 2

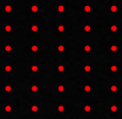


Dee-Mack High School

College & Career Guide

Planning for Your
Future: It is Never Too
Early

Tab 3



Dee-Mack High School

College Guide

Planning for Your
Future: It is Never Too
Early

College Planning: How to Get Started

STEP 1: GET STARTED

Assess your strengths, weaknesses, goals, passions, learning style, and social skills. What is most important to you in the college-search process? What do you hope to learn from the process?

STEP 2: MAKE SOME BASIC DECISIONS

- Where do you want to live?
 - Will you go to college full time? Part time?
 - Do you want to attend a single-sex school, a technical college, a public or private college, a large university, a small liberal arts college, or a religiously affiliated college?
 - How important is the cultural/ideological diversity of the student body?
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STEP 3: ENLIST HELP

Who do you want to assist you in this process (family, teachers, siblings, relatives, friends)?

STEP 4: CONSULT REFERENCES AND WEBSITES

Look at college directories and use college searches. Visit the websites of the colleges that interest you.

STEP 5: TALK

Discuss your goals and plans with your family, teachers, and school counselor. They can provide helpful advice.

STEP 6: MEET WITH COLLEGE REPRESENTATIVES

Visit with college representatives when they come to your high school. Make a list of your important questions to ask the representatives. Also meet college personnel at area college fairs.

STEP 7: VISIT CAMPUSES

Try to go to the college campus and take a tour, meet with admission and financial aid representatives, and ask students what they think about the college. Can't make the trip? Many colleges provide virtual tours on their websites.

College Planning: 11th Grade

Junior year marks a turning point. This is because for most students and families, it's when college planning activities kick into high gear. Here are some things you can do this year to stay on track for college.

FALL

- **Start with you:** Make lists of your abilities, social/cultural preferences, and personal qualities. List things you may want to study and do in college.
 - **Learn about colleges.** Look at their websites and find colleges. Talk to friends, family members, teachers, and recent grads of your school now in college. List the college features that interest you.
 - **Resource check:** Visit the counseling office and meet the counselors there. Is there a college night for students and families? When will college representatives visit your school? Examine catalogs and guides.
 - **Make a file to manage your college search, testing, and application data.**
 - **Estimate your financial aid need.** Financial aid can help you afford college.
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WINTER

- **Prepare to take the ACT.**
 - **Begin a search for financial aid sources.**
 - **With your family, make an appointment with your counselor** to discuss ways to improve your college-preparation and selection processes.
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SPRING

- **Contact your counselor** before leaving school for the summer if you are considering military academies or ROTC scholarships. If you want a four-year ROTC scholarship, you should begin the application process the summer before your senior year.
- **Develop a list of 15 to 20 colleges that are of interest to you.** You can find many colleges at which you'll be happy and get a great education. The college search is about exploring who you are and what you want and then finding colleges that will meet your goals.
- **Stay open to all the possibilities—don't limit your search.** To find the best college for you, you should apply to colleges of varying selectivity. Selective colleges admit a portion of students who apply. Make sure to apply to public, private, in-state, and out-of-state schools so that you have plenty of options from which to choose.
- **Take the ACT.**

- **Start to gather documents for financial aid:** Be sure to keep a copy of your tax returns handy. You'll use these to complete the FAFSA.
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SUMMER

- **Register with the NCAA eligibility center** if you are an athlete planning to continue playing a sport in college. (eligibilitycenter.org)
- **Get your FSA ID:** Before you can fill out your FAFSA, you and your guardian need to get a username and password
- **Find a full-time or part-time job,** or participate in a summer camp or summer college program.
- **Visit colleges.** When planning your campus visits, make sure to allow time to explore each college. While you're there, talk to as many people as possible.
- **Create a resume**—a record of your academic accomplishments, extracurricular activities, and work experiences since you started high school.
- **Download applications.** Go to the website of each college's admission office and either complete the application online or request a paper application from colleges to which you'll apply.
- **Visit some local colleges**—large, small, public, and private. A visit to a college campus can help you decide if that college is good for you.

College Planning: 12th Grade

Want to know if you're on track in the college application process? This checklist shows you what you should be doing, and when.

FALL

- **Narrow your list of colleges to between 5 and 10.** Meet with a counselor about your college choices and, if you've not done so, download college applications and financial aid forms. Plan to visit as many of these colleges as possible.
 - **Create a master list or calendar that includes:**
 - Tests you'll take and their fees, dates, and registration deadlines
 - College application due dates
 - Required financial aid forms and their deadlines
 - Other materials you'll need like recommendations and transcripts
 - **Ask a counselor** to help you request a fee waiver if you can't afford application or test fees.
 - **Be sure to have your ACT scores** sent to the colleges to which you are applying.
 - **Complete the FAFSA.**
 - **Prepare early decision/early action** or rolling admission applications as soon as possible.
 - **Ask a counselor or teacher** for recommendations if you need them. Give each teacher or counselor an outline of your academic record and your extracurricular activities.
 - **Write first drafts** and ask teachers and others to read them if you're submitting essays.
 - **Complete at least one college application by Thanksgiving.**
 - **Ask counselors** to send transcripts to colleges.
-

WINTER

- **Keep photocopies** as you finish and send your applications and essays.
 - **Have your high school send a transcript**—it is sent separately to colleges if you apply online.
-

SPRING

- **Keep active in school.** If you are waitlisted, the college will want to know what you have accomplished between the time you applied and the time you learned of its decision.

- **Visit your final college before accepting.** You should receive acceptance letters and financial aid offers by mid-April. Notify your counselor of your choice. If you have questions about housing offers, talk to your counselor or call the college.
- **Inform every college** of your acceptance or rejection of the offer of admission and/or financial aid by May 1. Colleges cannot require your deposit or your commitment to attend before May 1.
- **Send your deposit to one college only.**
- **Take any AP Exams.**
- **Waitlisted by a college?** If you intend to enroll if you are accepted, tell the admission director your intent and ask how to strengthen your application.
- **Work with a counselor** to resolve any admission or financial aid problems.
- **Ask your high school** to send a final transcript to your college.
- **Review your financial aid awards:** Not all financial aid awards are the same, so it's important to choose the aid package that's best for you and your family. Be sure to note what you have to do to continue receiving financial aid from year to year, and how your aid might change in future years.

Your College Search: A To-Do List

by Ned Johnson

Prepare for a great high school experience. You'll have opportunities to grow inside and outside the classroom, while making sure that you're well prepared to apply to college in three short years. Use this calendar to guide your experience. Careful planning and good choices over time make for strong options later. Ready, set, go!

Freshman Year

☐ **Listen and observe.** Faced with more challenging high school classwork, you'll want to pay attention to what your new teachers expect from you and look for ways to work harder and smarter. Grades are important in ninth grade, but seek balance so that you are challenged but not overwhelmed. Ask for help if you run into trouble and treat a low grade as constructive feedback to help you become a better learner.

☐ **Get involved.** High school is not simply a four-year audition for college but a critical period to develop yourself. Grades are important, but so, too, are your social connections and extracurriculars. Use part-time jobs, clubs, community service, arts and music, photography, cheer squad, robotics club, and so on to pursue your passions. It

will also give you an energy boost to push you through the less exciting parts of school life.

☐ **Read voraciously.** Dive into books, newspapers, magazines and blogs. Explore subjects that engage you. Additionally, check out TED Talks, YouTube videos and other free learning opportunities such as the massive open online courses known as MOOCs.

☐ **Find mentors.** Look for knowledgeable people who can offer helpful advice over time: teachers, coaches, counselors and friends. These relationships can pay off in other ways, too: People like to help students they know!

☐ **Schedule downtime.** That means turning off electronic devices. No phones. No screens. We all need time to daydream and think about ourselves and our place in the world.

Sophomore Year

Focus on evolving as a learner while developing your understanding of your strengths and passions.

☐ **Challenge yourself (wisely).** Strive for strong grades and take on new challenges, but ask for help when needed and avoid overtaxing yourself. Balance is your goal.

☐ **Speak up in class.** Share and discuss your ideas with others. Colleges look for students who contribute and elevate class discussions. Additionally, down the road, you'll request letters of recommendation, and teachers won't know you without hearing your thoughts.

☐ **Sleep.** The typical 15-year-old brain needs eight to 10 hours of sleep to function at 100 percent, so that should be your goal.

☐ **Refine your route.** Look ahead to the 11th- and 12th-grade courses you might be interested in taking and plan to work into



your schedule any prerequisites. Take advantage of special courses, particularly rigorous ones that are in line with your academic interests.

☐ **Learn from the masters.**

As you take inventory of your own interests, find people who work in related areas. Listen to their stories and consider opportunities for gaining firsthand experience of your own. A 20-minute conversation with a professional could even turn into a fruitful internship opportunity.

☐ **Put together an activities list.**

Start jotting down your hobbies, jobs and extracurricular activities to keep track of what you have accomplished. This document will form the basis of your résumé and will be essential in preparing for college interviews and applications, in addition to possible jobs, internships and summer programs.

☐ **Make your summer matter.**

Work, volunteer, play sports, travel or take a class. Research summer programs and internships to give yourself the chance to move beyond the scope of your regular high school courses. Plunge into an activity that excites you or one that builds on a special interest.

☐ **Settle on a testing strategy.**

Use your PSAT scores and other practice tests to help you identify the right test for you (i.e., SAT vs. ACT). Set up a test-prep plan.

Junior Year

Essays and testing and APs. Oh my!
Your grades, test scores and activities this year form a large part of what colleges consider for admission, so prepare for your exams and do your best in class.

☐ **Plot out your calendar.** Talk with your parents and guidance counselor about which exams to take and when. If your 10th-grade PSAT scores put you in reach of a National Merit Scholarship, concentrated prep time might be worth it. Then, take the SAT or ACT in winter or early spring. In May or June, the SAT Subject Tests (required by some colleges) are also an option in areas where you shine or in subjects you covered this year. If you're enrolled in an AP or honors course now, consider taking one of the College Board's practice AP tests.

☐ **Immerse yourself in activities.** Look for extracurriculars, both in and out of school, that you enjoy and that show you are dedicated, play well with others and can assume leadership



roles. High school is not simply a four-year audition for college. Rather, it's a time to discover what you like, to develop, and to sharpen skills you'll use after high school.

☐ **Build your college list in the spring.** Once you get your test scores, talk to a counselor and put together a list of target, reach and likely schools. Use apps to aid your research. Explore college websites and resources such as ed.gov/finaid and usnews.com/bestcolleges. And clean up your social media (e.g., Instagram, Facebook, Twitter) since college admissions folks may see them.

☐ **Visit schools.** Spring break and summer vacation are ideal times to check out a few campuses. Attend college fairs and talk with the people behind the tables who can provide information and may serve as future contacts.

☐ **Get recommendations.** Right after spring break, ask two teachers with different perspectives on your performance if they will write letters for you. Choose teachers with whom you have a good relationship and who will effectively communicate your academic and personal qualities.

☐ **Write.** Reflect on your experiences and highlight your strengths. Procrastination causes stress, so aim to have first drafts done by Labor Day of senior year. Share them with an English teacher, parent or counselor.

Senior Year

☐ **Don't slack off.** Colleges look at senior-year transcripts, so keep working hard in your classes.

☐ **Finish testing.** If necessary, you can retake the SAT, ACT or SAT Subject Tests. The early fall test dates give you time to apply early. Check deadlines and the admissions testing

policies of your schools. Are they test optional or do they require the SAT or ACT? If so, do you also need the optional written essays for either test? What about the SAT Subject Tests?

☐ **Know your deadlines.** Many colleges have multiple deadline options. Consider the implications of early decision, early action, rolling, regular and other deadlines and plan accordingly (related story, Page 128).

☐ **Apply.** Craft your essays with a well-thought-out narrative. Fill out applications carefully. Review a copy of your transcript. Have you displayed an upward trend that should be discussed? Does an anomaly need context? Discuss with your counselor. Leave yourself time to reread essays to clean up any errors.

☐ **Follow up.** Check that your colleges have received records and recs from your high school and your SAT or ACT scores from the testing organization. A month after you submit your application, call the college and confirm that your file is complete.

☐ **Confirm aid rules.** Check with each college for specific financial aid application requirements. Dates and forms may vary.



☐ **Make a choice.** Try to visit or even revisit the colleges where you've been accepted before committing. Talk with alumni; attend an accepted-student reception. Then, make your college choice official by sending in your deposit. Congrats! ♦

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Ned Johnson is founder of and tutor-geek at PrepMatters (prepmatters.com) where, along with colleagues, he torments teens with test prep, educational counseling and general attempts to help them thrive. He is also co-author of the 2018 book "The Self-Driven Child: The Science and Sense of Giving Your Kids More Control Over Their Lives."

Finding the Perfect College

Most students want to find the “perfect” college. The truth is, there’s no such thing. You can find many colleges where you can be happy and get a great education. The college search is about exploring who you are and what you want and then finding colleges that will meet your goals.

Before searching, consider these 8 Factors		Here are the steps you can take to find colleges where you will thrive.
*Size *Available Majors & Classes *Distance from home *Housing Options	*Location *Available extracurricular activities	KEEP AN OPEN MIND
	*Makeup of the student body *Campus Atmosphere	TALK TO PEOPLE WHO KNOW YOU
Questions to Consider: Which of these aspects are things you feel must have to be comfortable at college? On which factors are you flexible? What do you want to accomplish in college? Do you want to train for a specific job or get a wide-ranging education? If you have a major in mind, do the college you are considering specialize in that major?		DON'T LIMIT YOUR SEARCH
		DO YOUR HOMEWORK
		Once you have a list of schools, it's time to do some research. Jot down your questions and get answers by: • Talking to your school counselor or teachers • Checking out colleges' student blogs • Contacting college admission officials • Asking admission officials to recommend current students or recent graduates with whom you can have conversations • Visiting college campuses or viewing virtual college tours

College Application Tips

Here are some tips to keep in mind as you start your college application process.

STAY COOL

College applications can be stressful to complete, but this is also an exciting time. Work with your counselor, your family, and others to get through it all.

SUBMIT AND SAVE

Print and save the completed application before you send it and keep a copy for your files. And remember: only submit it once—either online or via mail.

PLAN AHEAD

Review each part of the applications before you get to work. Some applications will require some basic information and others will have unique requests.

USE A FEE WAIVER

If you used a fee waiver for the SAT or ACT, you are automatically eligible for application fee waivers to over 2,000 colleges.

GET ORGANIZED

Keep track of the materials and many parts for each application. Make a folder for each application to keep all materials together. Tell your counselor or other appropriate school personnel which materials your school needs to send to the college.

ASK FOR HELP

Ask your counselor, teachers, or family to review your application, essays, and other materials before you submit them. Request a letter of recommendation at least two weeks before your deadline and provide supporting material to help them write the best one.

BE ACCURATE

Ensure that you put together an organized and accurate application. Review for grammar and typos. Make sure your name is the same on all elements of your application. Double-check that all documents you're submitting are correct.

SET A SCHEDULE

All for time to get your requirements together, get input from your counselor or other adults, review them as a whole, and revise as needed. Keep a close eye on the application deadline, along with other deadlines.

BE CAREFUL NOT TO:

- Procrastinate! There is a lot to do, especially if you have several applications to complete and essays to write. You may not do the application justice if you leave it until the last minute.
- Type your essay directly into the application. Draft it separately, and then upload the final proofread version.
- Send a photocopy of your own test score report unless requested to do so. Ask the testing organization to send your official test scores directly to the colleges.
- Take on the application process alone. Your school counselor is your best resource in the college application process. Teachers and family can also help provide advice and support.

The College Essay

The college essay is your chance to use your voice to add to your college application. Many colleges require the essay as a way to hear from the student directly and get a sense of who you are in your own words. It's a great opportunity to personalize your application beyond the grades, scores, and other information you've provided and can make a difference at decision time.

8 KEY POINTS THAT ADMISSION OFFICERS LOOK FOR:

- A command of the basics of good writing
- A direct answer to the essay question
- A strong opening paragraph that captures the reader's interest
- A comprehensive argument or narrative—make your point and stick to it
- A style that is comfortable for you and that is appropriate for the subject matter
- Correct grammar, punctuation, and spelling
- Correct data—check your facts, dates, and names
- Succinctness—pay attention to the recommended length

WHAT THE ESSAY CAN DO FOR YOUR APPLICATION:

- Demonstrate your writing ability, a key component of success in college.
- Show that you have thought carefully about where you are applying and why you are a good match for the college.
- Explain your commitment to learning and that you are willing and able to be a contributing member to the college community.
- Draw distinctions between you and other applicants, something that selective colleges especially rely on.

An essay will rarely take an applicant out of consideration at a college, but it certainly can elevate an applicant.

MAKE IT PERSONAL:

- Often you will be asked to write about a personal experience, an achievement, or a person who has been significant to you. Go beyond the what or the who and dig into the how and the why.
- If you write about a trip or event, describe how this experience affected you and is meaningful to you.
- If you are writing about a person in your life, be personal and specific, not just sentimental. Explain how or what this person did for you that is important to you.

THINGS TO KEEP IN MIND

- **Revise, revise, revise.** Take the time to reread and revise. This process will help you develop a strong opening and a solid direction, and refine what you are trying to express.
- **Show, don't tell.** Give readers such convincing evidence that they will come to the conclusion that you want. Provide detailed examples instead of providing a list of things.
- **Be authentic.** Don't stress trying to write what you think they are looking for – just showcase who you are!
- **Just get started!** Writing something meaningful can be a long process, so get started right away to allow for time to draft and revise. Be sure to write your essay long before the deadline.

Students and admissions pros share their tips for standing out from the pack

by Margaret Loftus



Ever since Jack Maloney played the Artful Dodger in a local children's theater production of the musical "Oliver!" when he was 6, he knew he wanted to be a professional actor. The theater program at his school, Oxbridge Academy in West Palm Beach, Florida, was still finding its footing during his early years there, so Maloney took it upon himself to create and stage productions, including a concert of songs from the musical "Rent" and a full production of "Urinetown" that he developed out of an honors performance class. He also helped get the course into the curriculum by writing a proposal in collaboration with his theater teacher and lobbying administrators.

Now a freshman at Pennsylvania State University studying musical theater, Maloney believes that his resourcefulness – and highlighting that in his college essays – was a big factor in getting into his three top choices. (The others were Northwestern in Illinois and the University of Michigan.) He also elaborated on his experiences in interviews whenever he got the chance. "I wrote my own story," he says, "and it was much more compelling in the end."

College counselors have long urged high school students to find and focus on their passion. But developing it to create new opportunities for yourself and others can really grab the attention of admissions officers. For many of them, there's a certain sameness to the applications they read, so when prospective students carve out their own opportunities, colleges notice, says Maria Laskaris, former dean of admissions and financial aid at Dartmouth College and now a senior private counselor at Top Tier Admissions, a company focused on helping applicants navigate the admissions process. "We tell students to push beyond what the school offers," Laskaris says.

These days, with the sheer volume of applications growing, aspiring college students need to use every edge they can muster. According to the latest State of College Admission report from the National Association for College Admission Counseling, the overall number of applications from first-time freshmen inched up 7 percent between fall 2015 and fall 2016. Distinguishing yourself from the crowd has become more important than ever. But remember, even though many coveted schools are growing more and more selective, overall colleges accept an average of two-thirds of first-time freshman applicants, according to NACAC. U.S. News talked to experts to find out how to make your application stand out.

Build on your academic strengths. While the weight that admissions officers give each component of your application varies from school to school, academics is always the heaviest. After all, schools are looking for students who have not only done well but who have also challenged themselves, as they are

more likely to succeed in college-level courses.

**JACK MALONEY (RIGHT)
IN REHEARSAL AT
OXBRIDGE ACADEMY**

Of course, reviewers also take into account the level of rigor available at a particular school. The key is to plan ahead and start in eighth or ninth

grade to build a foundation that will open doors to advanced coursework later on. For instance, being ready to get advanced algebra out of the way sophomore year puts you on track to take calculus before earning that high school diploma, which might set you up better should you apply to a program that requires it, such as engineering. The bottom line: "Position yourself to keep your options open," Laskaris says.

Tackling honors, Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate classes (if they're available) shows that you're up for the rigors of college, even if you don't ace them. "We'd prefer to see students challenge themselves to get a B in AP or honors

courses rather than an A in a standard-level course," says David Kaiser, the director of undergraduate enrollment management at Temple University's Fox School of Business in Philadelphia. This shows someone who "isn't afraid of hard work," Kaiser says, and "it's a better indicator of the student's ability to perform." That

Two Essays That Worked

What makes a college admissions essay successful? Below are two submissions that helped students get into **Johns Hopkins University** in Baltimore, plus commentary from **Ellen Kim**, dean of undergraduate admissions, about what these applicants did right. Remember, Kim advises, that "what works in these essays works because of who the student is" and how it fits into the rest of the application. In other words, you'll want to apply these principles to a topic that reveals something intriguing about you.

"This title is interesting," Kim says. "But it's up to students to decide whether they want to title an essay." If nothing brilliant comes to mind, then you can skip.

The author takes a straightforward approach to starting, Kim says. "But you can tell you are going to get to know her."

Many personal statements include short scenes, Kim notes. But the strongest essays are the ones that put those anecdotes toward a larger purpose, as the author does here. "She is helping us understand where she is in her journey with Italian," Kim says. "It's not just being descriptive for the sake of being descriptive."

The author chose to write about something very accessible and approachable, Kim notes. "Everyone can relate to family heritage," she says. "It would have been very easy to talk about the members of the family, but she does a good job of making it say something about herself," which is the goal.

In this paragraph, Kim says, "We learn not just about her intellectual appetite for something, but also about what she does when she is passionate."

More Than Thick Eyebrows

By Caroline

Rarely have I studied a topic that flows from my ears to my brain to my tongue as easily as the Italian language. The Italian blood that runs through me is more than the genetics that gave me my dark hair and thick eyebrows. It is the work of the generation that traveled from Istria in the north and Sicilia in the south, meeting through friends in Chicago, and encouraging their children to study hard and make a living for their future families. In time, that influence would be passed on to me; finding my grandfather's meticulously-written electricity notes circa 1935 - filled with drawings and words I did not yet understand - inspired me to take Italian at my own high school.

The moment I realized that my Italian heritage was wholly a part of me was a rather insignificant one, yet to me is one of the most remarkable realizations of my life. The summer after my second year of Italian study, I was driving in my car, listening to a young trio of Italian teenagers, *Il Volo*, meaning "The Flight." As one of the tenors sang a solo, *Ti voglio tanto bene*, I realized that I could understand every word he was singing. Though it was a simple declaration of love and devotion in a beautiful tune, what mattered was that I was not just listening to three cute teenagers sing a song. I was fully engaged with the words and could finally sing along.

After that moment, I sought out all the Italian I could get my hands on: watching *Cinema Paradiso* and *La Dolce Vita*, absorbing phrases of the language I felt I could now call my own. Even better, was that I felt confident enough in my skill that I could use it with my closest living Italian relative, my father's mother, *la mia nonna*. More than speaking the language, I discovered my family's past. In conversing with her and my father, I discovered that I will be only the third person in my paternal grandparents' family to attend college, that my grandmother had only a sixth-grade education, that my grandfather, despite never holding a degree in mathematics or physics, worked for three decades on CTA train cars as an electrician. The marriage of my grandparents in 1932 represented a synthesis of the culture of northern and southern Italy and America.

Having now studied three full years of this language, I only want to consume more of it. I want to read Dante's *Divina Commedia* in its original vernacular, to watch my favorite Italian films without the subtitles, to sing every Italian refrain with fluid understanding of what the melody means, and to finally - finally! - visit my grandparents' childhood homes: the town of Trapani in Sicilia and the Istrian peninsula on the Adriatic coast. To me, the Italian language holds an essential connection to my past, but also a constant goal for the future. It is likely that I will never fully master the vernacular and colloquialisms, yet learning this language will stimulate me intellectually and culturally for life. I believe I can claim Italian as mine now, but there is still so much more to learn. Italian is a gift that I will hold dear forever, and I am glad that I received it so early in life.

"This is a good way to close the essay, by describing why this matters to who she is as a person," Kim says.

said, it's also important to consider carefully which advanced courses will build on your strengths – and don't overdo it. Taking every AP option available may backfire for those who don't excel in a particular subject, for instance, and they could see their overall GPA drop as a result.

Remember: Once you've been accepted, don't slack on your studies. "Grades throughout the senior year are critical to demonstrate continued growth," says Laskaris. "The worst students can do is take their foot off the gas."

Get a handle on the tests. Of course, colleges have long relied on standardized tests to help them differentiate between students in a way that grades alone cannot. Increasingly, applicants are choosing to take both the SAT and the ACT. Christoph Guttentag, dean of undergraduate admissions at Duke University in North Carolina, suggests doing just that to

String Theory

By Joanna

If string theory is really true, then the entire world is made up of strings, and I cannot tie a single one. This past summer, I applied for my very first job at a small, busy bakery and café in my neighborhood. I knew that if I were hired there, I would learn how to use a cash register, prepare sandwiches, and take cake orders. I imagined that my biggest struggle would be catering to demanding New Yorkers, but I never thought that it would be the benign act of tying a box that would become both my biggest obstacle and greatest teacher.

On my first day of work in late August, one of the bakery's employees hastily explained the procedure. It seemed simple: wrap the string around your hand, then wrap it three times around the box both ways, and knot it. I recited the anthem in my head, "three times, turn it, three times, knot" until it became my mantra. After observing multiple employees, it was clear that anyone tying the box could complete it in a matter of seconds. For weeks, I labored endlessly, only to watch the strong and small pieces of my pride unravel each time I tried.

As I rushed to discreetly shove half-tied cake boxes into plastic bags, I could not help but wonder what was wrong with me. I have learned Mozart arias, memorized the functional groups in organic chemistry, and calculated the anti-derivatives of functions that I will probably never use in real life – all with a modest amount of energy. For some reason though, after a month's effort, tying string around a cake box still left me in a quandary.

As the weeks progressed, my skills slowly began to improve. Of course there were days when I just wanted to throw all of the string in the trash and use Scotch tape; this sense of defeat was neither welcome nor wanted, but remarks like "Oh, you must be new" from snarky customers catapulted my determination to greater heights.

It should be more difficult to develop an internal pulse and sense of legato in a piece of music than it is to find the necessary rhythm required to tie a box, but this seemingly trivial task has clearly proven not to be trivial at all. The difficulties that I encountered trying to keep a single knot intact are proof of this. The lack of cooperation between my coordination and my understanding left me frazzled, but the satisfaction I felt when I successfully tied my first box was almost as great as any I had felt before.

Scientists developing string theory say that string can exist in a straight line, but it can also bend, scintillate, or break apart. I am thankful that the string I work with is not quite as temperamental, but still cringe when someone asks for a chocolate mandel bread. Supposedly, the string suggested in string theory is responsible for unifying general relativity with quantum physics. The only thing I am possible for when I use string is delivering someone's pie to them without the box falling apart. Tying a cake box may not be quantum physics, but it is just as crucial to holding together what matters.

beginning to realize that I should not be ashamed if it takes me longer to learn. I persist, continue to tie boxes every weekend at work. Even though I occasionally backslide into feelings of desperation, I always rewrap the string around my hand and start over because I have learned the most gratifying victories come from tenacity. If the universe really is comprised of strings, I am confident that I will be able to tie them together, even if I do have to keep my fingers crossed that they hold up.

Personal statements are called "personal" for a reason, Kim observes. They should tell the admissions committee something about the student. This essay does a good job of wrapping up the piece on a personal note.

Students should try to grab the reader's attention at the first sentence. "Her opening paragraph is interesting," says Kim. "You read it, and you aren't sure what the essay is going to be about. It makes you curious about what she is going to tell you."

"A lot of times students feel like they need to write an essay about a life accomplishment or a life-changing event or something really extraordinary," Kim says. "But it's also possible to write a very effective personal statement about an ordinary thing. It's not the topic that has to be unique. It's what you say that has to be unique."

The author does a good job of providing a window into her thought process, Kim notes. "You also see how she responds to a challenge in a very approachable way."

In this instance, dropping in some academic references works with the theme of the essay, but students shouldn't think they have to follow suit, Kim cautions. It only works if it reinforces your central point.

This essay, like all strong essays, was well-written, clear and error-free, Kim notes. The writing felt natural – not as though the author was reaching for a thesaurus. "This should sound like you," she says.

determine which test better suits your test-taking style. You might opt to sit for your preferred test again, but twice should be the limit, he says. Duke, for example, accepts scores for both tests, but check with your prospective schools on their policies and whether you should submit scores for both tests. At Duke, admissions officers consider scores of individual sections from both tests, but they'll use the highest composite score in their admissions rubric. And what about the optional SAT essay section? While many places don't require it, some do, and that may change year to year. Again, it's best to consult a school's individual policies.

More and more schools – including Bennington College in Vermont, Ohio Wesleyan University, Arizona State University and, as of this summer, the University of Chicago – are going test-optional, meaning certain applicants can choose not to submit standardized-test scores for review in admissions decisions. You can find a comprehensive list of test-optional schools at fairtest.org, operated by the National Center for Fair and Open Testing. When in doubt, check with the school's admissions office.

Laskaris cautions students and parents to take "test-optional" with a grain of salt. "Just because those colleges are not requiring [scores] from everyone doesn't mean 80 percent of them don't take them," she says. "It still does matter for many top institutions."

Think outside your school's extracurriculars. While Santa Monica, California, native Brendan Terry's interest in environmental and social justice issues was first sparked in middle school, he found most of the opportunities to nurture his activist spirit off campus. Terry interned at an educational nonprofit as a summer camp counselor for local children from low-income families and Chinese exchange students, volunteered at a community health clinic, and served as the "educational ambassador" for the 5 Gyres Institute, a Los Angeles-based nonprofit that focuses on reducing global plastic pollution, among other activities.

Now a junior majoring in chemistry at Pomona College in California, Terry is well aware of the impact of his community work on his college apps. "It was huge," he says. "Schools always brought it



up." Terry wrote about his activism in the majority of his essays, as well as the "activities" and "additional information" sections of the Common Application. "I used part of it to provide background on each organization that I worked with, and to provide links for clippings about activist work I had done," he says. "His recommendations – one from a teacher and the other from one of the directors at 5 Gyres – reinforced his work as an activist."

No matter what your interests are, find ways to use them to make a contribution to your school or local community. If math is your thing, for example, think about how you can tap your skills to get other kids interested in the subject. Arianna Hilliard, a classmate of Maloney's at Oxbridge Academy who is now in her first year at Vassar College in New York, was vice president of a club at her school called Race Alliance in which members met weekly to discuss the topic of race in popular culture.

Whatever you do, use your time outside of schoolwork wisely. For instance, three-season athletes who know they're not going to be recruited for sports might consider skipping one or two seasons to focus on other interests. Think depth instead of

**ARIANNA
HILLIARD
ENJOYED SOCCER
IN HIGH SCHOOL
AND WILL PLAY
ON AT VASSAR.**

breadth, says Seth Allen, vice president and dean of admissions and financial aid at Pomona. "We're looking for students who have decided to go down a particular path with as much enthusiasm as they can muster," he says.

To be sure, some students are too busy with a part-time job or, say, babysitting younger siblings to devote themselves to even one season of sports, much less an activity or a cause. But employment and child care are responsibilities that you can learn from, too. "Colleges look at extracurriculars in the context of a student's environment," says Craig Meister, director of college counseling at Oxbridge Academy and founder of college consulting firm Admissions Intel. He urges his students to list those experiences on their apps. "It's a combination of what you can afford and what you're passionate about," he says.

Consider recommendations carefully. "Always give great consideration to the people you ask to write a recommendation," says Susan Schaurer, associate vice president for strategic enrollment management and marketing at Miami University in Ohio. Colleges vary on their preferences and typically spell that out in their application instructions. For instance, Miami asks for letters from a high school counselor or academic teacher, Schaurer says. "Preferably someone who's had close academic encounters with you," she says. "Ask someone who can really provide insight."

The ideal scenario is when you can ask an instructor who taught you more than once – such as during freshman year and again later on – because then they can speak to your growth and how you might have overcome any particular challenges. Duke, meanwhile, prefers letters from two teachers and a guidance counselor. "We find counselor recommendations so valuable in understanding the student as a member of a community," says Guttentag.

Do a social media check. Meister implores his ninth and 10th graders to not put anything on social media or online that could be questionable. Nonetheless, he says, when looking at their info, "nine times out of 10 I find something they should take down." And while it's true admissions officers don't have time to scroll through your entire Instagram feed, they may stumble upon social media info if

searching online to verify a part of your app. What's more, it's not unusual for schools to be alerted by alumni, community members or others to social media that paints a student in an unflattering light. "We can't ignore what may be brought to our attention," says Schaurer, even after acceptance. "Most institutions put a disclaimer in acceptance letters that stipulates good behavior," she says, or they reserve the right to withdraw the offer of admission.

Meister advises students to always use appropriate language online and to scrub their social media to the extent they can of anything that doesn't reflect the image projected in their applications. "Admission officers are savvier than ever in comparing your application persona versus your recommender's impression of your persona versus your online persona to see if they all match up," he says. A good rule of thumb: "I tell them that if they wouldn't want an admissions officer to see it, nobody else should see it online either," Meister adds.

Show up (to the extent you're able). Time was, if you had your heart set on a particular school, counselors advised you to visit the campus to show the admissions office that you'd be likely to attend if accepted (which is music to their ears). Showing up is still a great way to reveal what schools refer to as "demonstrated interest," a factor that some 70 percent of colleges say plays at least some role in their admissions decisions, according to NACAC. At the same time, "most schools are attuned to resources," Schaurer says, and "they don't want to put students at risk who can't afford to come for a visit."

Indeed, making a trip to campus isn't the only way to let your interest be known, especially in the digital age. "We count any way students engage with us," she notes, which includes opening a college's emails or clicking on a link in a particular message, participating in a webinar or Facebook Live event, and more. Schaurer encourages applicants to ask colleges if they consider demonstrated interest – and how. And be sure to introduce yourself to recruiters during visits to your high school or at local college fairs, Schaurer advises. "You can show interest without leaving home." ♦

GET THE MOST OUT OF A CAMPUS VISIT IN 6 STEPS

1 DECIDE WHERE AND HOW

*See if your school arranges group trips to college or if you get a group of friends together and visit the campus. A family trip is another option and allows you to involve your family in the process.

2 PREPARE FOR YOUR VISIT

*Before you set out, get a map of the college campus and pick out places of interest. Call the college's admission office to schedule a guided tour of the campus.

3 TAKE YOUR OWN TOUR

*Just wandering around the campus on your own with friends can be the best way to get a feel for what a college is like.

4 EXPLORE THE FACILITIES

*Finding the spots on campus where students gather or asking a student where the best place to eat is can give you a feel for the character of the college. Visit the library and check out the gym or theater. Ask an admission officer if you can tour a dorm and a classroom.

5 MAKE CONNECTIONS

*Talk to current students. Ask the students at the next table or sitting nearby what they like best about the college.

6 TAKE NOTES

*During your visit, make notes about your experience. What did you see that excited you? Are there aspects of the college that you don't like? If so, what are they?

Questions to Ask During Your Visit:

ASK TOUR GUIDES/STUDENTS

- What are the best reasons to go to this college?
- What's it like to go from high school to college?
- What do you do in your free time? On weekends?
- What do you love about this college?
- What do you wish you could change about this college?
- Why did you choose this college?
- What is it like to live here?
- What does the college do to promote student involvement in campus groups, extracurricular activities, or volunteerism?

ASK PROFESSORS

- What are the best reasons to go to this college?
- Can a student be mentored by professors, graduate students, or upperclassmen?
- How are professors rated by the college?
- How does the college help students have access to professors outside class?
- How many students do research or other kinds of projects for a semester or more?

ASK FINANCIAL AID OFFICE

- How much has your total college cost for each student risen in the past year?
- How much do your students usually owe in loans when they graduate?
- What is the average income of graduates who have the same major that interests me?
- Will my costs go up when your tuition goes up, or can we use the same tuition rate I started with so I'll know costs for four years? What should I expect in terms of increases in living expenses?
- How many students usually graduate in the major that interests me? How long do these students usually take to get their degrees? In what ways does the college help students graduate in four years?

20 Questions to Ask College Representatives

Whether you meet them at a college fair or on a campus visit, college representatives genuinely enjoy talking to high school students and answering questions about their college. The following questions will help start a good dialogue.

1. What makes your college unique?
2. For what academic programs is your college known?
3. How would you describe the students at your college? Where are most of them from?
4. Where do students hang out on campus?
5. What happens on weekends—are there things to do on campus or in town, or do most students go home?
6. Are fraternities and sororities a big part of campus life?
7. What are the housing options for freshmen?
8. Do many students live off campus?
9. Is there a sports complex or fitness center?
10. What are the most popular clubs and activities?
11. What's the security like on campus?
12. What is the surrounding area like? Is it easy to get around?
13. What are the most popular majors?
14. How would you describe the academic pressure and workload?
15. What support services are available?
16. Do I need to bring my own computer?
17. What are the faculty like? Are they accessible outside of class?
18. Are there opportunities for internships?
19. Is there job placement help for graduates?
20. Are there any big changes in the works that I should know about?

NCAA Eligibility Center

The NCAA Eligibility Center is responsible for certifying the academic and amateur status of all Division I and II incoming student-athletes. College-bound student-athletes can create an account with the Eligibility Center by visiting eligibilitycenter.org. We recommend that students register during their sophomore year of high school to ensure they have adequate time to confirm they are on track for meeting initial eligibility requirements.

Academic requirements for each college-bound student-athlete are based on the student's core-course grade point average and their coursework.

WHAT IS A CORE COURSE?

Core courses are those that are academic in nature, taught at or above your high school's regular academic level, receive credit toward high school graduation, and are four-year college preparatory courses. To be used in an academic certification, the courses need to be listed on the student's transcript with their grades and credits. Core courses must be in one of the following academic areas:

*English *Math (Algebra 1 or higher) *Natural/physical science *Social Science
*Foreign language *Comparative religion or philosophy

DIVISION I ELIGIBILITY REQUIREMENTS

- Graduate from high school
- Complete 16 core courses in the following areas:
 - English - 4 years
 - Math (Algebra 1 or higher) - 3 years
 - Natural/physical science (one year of lab if offered) - 2 years
 - Additional English, math, or natural/physical science - 1 year
 - Social science - 2 years
 - Additional courses (in any of the above subject areas) - 4 years
- Complete 10 of 16 core courses prior to the start of the seventh semester
- Complete the 16 NCAA-approved core courses in 8 academic semesters

DIVISION II ELIGIBILITY REQUIREMENTS

- Complete 16 core courses in the following areas:
 - English - 3 years
 - Math (Algebra 1 or higher) - 2 years
 - Natural/physical science (one year of lab if offered) - 2 years

- Social science - 2 years
 - Additional English, math, or natural/physical science - 3 years
 - Additional courses - 4 years
 - Graduate from high school
-

COLLEGE-BOUND STUDENT-ATHLETES TIMELINE

Grade 9: PLAN

- Start planning now! Take challenging courses and earn the best grades you can.
- Ask your counselor for a list of your high school's NCAA core courses to make sure you take the required courses.

Grade 10: REGISTER

- Register for a Certification Account or Profile Page with the NCAA Eligibility Center.
- If you fall behind on courses, don't take shortcuts to catch up. Ask your counselor for help with finding approved courses or programs you can take.

Grade 11: STUDY

- Check with your counselor to make sure you are on track to graduate on time.
- At the end of the year, ask your counselor to upload your official transcript.

Grade 12: GRADUATE

- Request your final amateurism certification after April 1.
- After you graduate, ask your counselor to upload your final official transcript with proof of graduation.

Considerations for Students with Disabilities

It's not just about testing accommodations! Preparing for college transition encompasses many issues, such as college readiness, admission, and fit. Needs and concerns differ depending upon age, setting, and demands, as well as how the accommodation is provided. Remember that issues may differ in high school, in testing, and in college settings.

DIFFERENCES BETWEEN HIGH SCHOOL AND COLLEGE

- Different settings require specific considerations
 - Some items on the 504/IEP may not be appropriate for college
 - Some additional accommodations may be needed
 - Accommodations on IEP/504 don't necessarily carry over to college.
 - Students must request accommodations for college.
 - It's not only academics. Considerations include dorms, cafeteria, and access.
 - Students need to advocate for themselves, as they are no adults. Families need to remove themselves from the process.
 - Different legal requirements.
 - High School: FAPE - the responsibility is on the school
 - College: Reasonable accommodations
-

BEFORE THE SENIOR YEAR

- Make sure documentation is current and complete.
 - Help the student and family understand the meaning of the accommodation.
 - Request appropriate accommodations for standardized tests.
 - Foster students advocating for themselves, including understanding their needs and limitations.
-

KEY CONSIDERATIONS FOR SSD STUDENTS WHEN APPLYING

- Students must be mindful of researching colleges that would meet their needs, including accommodations, services, or special programs.
- Students should research what services are offered, contact the disability office early, and plan to meet with the disability office personnel.
- Students will need to decide how/when to address the issue of their disability with the college.
- Students must think of the functional impact of their disability in various settings:

- Housing
- Meals
- Counseling
- Tutoring

SUPPORTING STUDENTS DURING THE ADMISSION PROCESS

- Help students to understand the impact of their disability in new situations, and to determine which accommodations are needed as their skills develop.
- Assist students with researching various school settings.
- Discuss and compare your student's expectations for support and what the college may expect of the student.
- Assist with generating a list of possible questions that students can ask the disability personnel of the university/college.
- Discuss how the students will address their disability in applications and interviews, and how they will respond to questions.

FAFSA and Scholarships

Paying for college is an overwhelming part of the process. Let's take a deeper look into how to get the most out of your education. Remember that filling out FAFSA is a graduation requirement. Here are 8 easy steps to filling out the FAFSA.

Step 1: Create a [StudentAid.gov](https://studentaid.gov) account (FSA ID).

- Every contributor—anyone (you, your spouse, a biological or adoptive parent, or your parent's spouse) who's required to provide information on the FAFSA form—needs a StudentAid.gov account before accessing and completing their section of the online form. We strongly recommend you and your contributor(s) [create StudentAid.gov accounts](https://studentaid.gov) before starting your FAFSA form.

Step 2: Start the FAFSA at [StudentAid.gov](https://studentaid.gov).

- Remember that you are doing your FAFSA for the upcoming school year (i.e. if it is 2025, you are doing it for the 26-27 school year). Make sure to pick the correct year.
- FAFSA typically opens on October 1st of the year before you would attend college.

Step 3: Fill out the student demographic section.

- This is information such as your name, date of birth, etc. If you have completed the FAFSA form in the past or if you log into the FAFSA form with your FSA ID, a lot of your personal information will be prepopulated to save you time. Make sure you enter your personal information exactly as it appears on your Social Security card. (That is right, no nicknames.)
- Contributors: Remember that the FAFSA form is the student's application, not yours. When the FAFSA form says "you" or "your," it is referring to the student. Pay attention to whether you are being asked for student or parent/spouse information.

Step 4: List the schools to which you want your FAFSA information sent.

Step 5: Answer the dependency status questions.

- The FAFSA form asks a series of questions that determine whether you are a dependent or independent student for purposes of applying for federal student aid. If you are a dependent student, you must report parent information, as well as your own information, on your application.
- The dependency guidelines are set by Congress and are different from those used by the Internal Revenue Service (IRS). Even if you live on your own, support yourself, and

file taxes on your own, you may still be considered a dependent student for federal student aid purposes. If you are determined to be a dependent student, you will be required to report information about your parent(s). If you are determined to be an independent student, you will not have to provide parent information and you can skip the next step.

Step 6: Fill out the parent demographic section.

Step 7: Supply your financial information.

- Your contributor's federal tax information will be transferred from the IRS into your FAFSA form.
- All contributors must provide consent and approval for the U.S. Department of Education to
 - disclose their personally identifiable information provided on the FAFSA form to the IRS to match their information with their tax information;
 - obtain their federal tax information from the IRS and include with the FAFSA form;
 - use their federal tax information to determine your Student Aid Index and Pell Grant eligibility
 - share their federal tax information with colleges, career/trade schools, and state higher education agencies for use in awarding and administering financial aid; and
 - reuse their federal tax information on another FAFSA applicant's form (e.g., if a parent has multiple dependent students or for a parent's own FAFSA form as an aid applicant).

IMPORTANT: If a required contributor doesn't provide consent and approval to have their federal tax information transferred into the FAFSA form, you (the student) will not be eligible for federal student aid—even if the contributor manually enters tax information into the FAFSA form.

Step 8: Sign and submit your FAFSA form.

- After you complete your required section of the FAFSA form online, you'll acknowledge the terms and conditions of the form and electronically sign your section. You can then submit your section of the FAFSA form. However, your FAFSA form won't be considered complete until all required contributors provide their information on the FAFSA form, give their consent and approval to transfer federal tax information into the form, and provide their signatures.

- After you and your parent (and/or any other required contributor) sign and submit the FAFSA form, the form will be considered complete and will be submitted for processing.
- If you submit the FAFSA form, you'll see a confirmation page that displays your completion date, data release number, and next steps. You'll also see your estimated Student Aid Index (a number used by college and career/trade schools to determine your eligibility for federal student aid), estimated Federal Pell Grant eligibility, and information about other federal student aid for which you may be eligible. This confirmation page is emailed automatically to you for your records.

Local Scholarship Opportunities

Listed below are the local scholarships offered to seniors for the 2025-2026 school year. Once they are available the links will become active. **They usually become available towards the end of January.** Watch for future announcements.

Clyde Aeschliman Memorial Scholarship (Deer Creek American Legion) – sponsored by Deer Creek American Legion Post #1276. One \$1,000 scholarship will be given to the senior based on his/her desire to continue education, ability to succeed, and the 'best judged' answer to the question "What is your philosophy concerning the responsibilities of youth to the future of America?". The decision of the committee, composed of members of the Education and Scholarship Committee, will be final.

Deer Creek-Mackinaw Education Foundation Scholarship – sponsored by DCMEF. Two \$1,000 scholarships, one male and one female, who are enrolled as freshman in an accredited two year or four year college/university.

Deer Creek Sons of the American Legion Scholarship (Deer Creek American Legion) – two \$500 scholarships.

Deer Creek Legion Auxiliary #1276 Scholarship – two \$500 scholarship given to a senior female that is a descendant of a veteran.

Gladys Garst Memorial Scholarship (Deer Creek-Mackinaw Education Association) – one \$1,000 scholarship will be awarded on the basis of scholarship, extracurricular activities, civic and church activities, and educational goals.

Hammer Memorial Scholarship – one \$500 scholarship will be awarded on the basis of need, scholarship, citizenship, and leadership.

High School Teacher's Scholarship – one \$500 scholarship will be awarded on the basis of school leadership, academic achievement, need and essay answer.

Hunkler-Stagen Teaching Scholarship - one \$3,000 scholarship will be awarded to a senior pursuing a degree in the teaching field.

Mack-Ca-Fest Scholarship - one \$1,500 scholarship will be awarded to a senior with the best essay.

Mackinaw American Legion Scholarship - one \$500 will be awarded on the basis of having a 2.0 GPA or higher and has demonstrated exceptional hard work, exhibited a desire to continue his/her education, and has exhibited financial need.

Morton Masonic Lodge Scholarship(for DeeMack Students) - one \$500 is awarded to a senior that is in the top 15 of the class with high moral value.

Mackinaw Police Department Scholarship - up to \$1,000 scholarship awarded to a senior who meet the qualifications outlined in the form.

Mark A. Wiegand Memorial Agricultural Scholarship - one \$500 scholarship awarded to a senior pursuing a degree in Ag Engineering, Ag Business, Crop Science, Ag Career Training, Ag Technical Training, Ag Mechanics, Animal Science, or Horticulture.

National Honor Society Scholarship - one \$500 scholarship awarded to the senior in National Honor Society who can best answer the essay questions on the application.

The Good to be a Chief Scholarship - two \$250 scholarships awarded to a boy and a girl in the senior class who can answer with the best essay.

Summer Stahl Scholarship