In today’s world, higher education is not only a luxury, it is becoming a necessity. Those who wish to pursue almost any type of career will require at least a two-year or four-year degree. Entrance into college is very competitive, especially when considering the top schools in the country. Preparing for college often begins early, as early as middle school. Getting into a good school requires planning and effort so that you can be fulfilling the requirements of college admission while you are in high school. Colleges review your application for admission based on a variety of factors, including your GPA, the scores you received on standardized tests, and possibly an essay.

High School Coursework

One of the most important statistics that colleges will look at when choosing applicants is the student’s grade point average, or GPA. GPA, along with standardized test scores and the application are the basis for getting into the school you want. High school coursework is taken seriously, and those with the best GPAs at graduation will be the recipients of scholarships and grants. Some in-state colleges offer special scholarships for students who live within their state. For example, for Arizona students, Northern Arizona University offers the Lumberjack scholarship. They require a 3.5 unweighted GPA with nothing less than a “B” grade.

AP (Advanced Placement) classes are college-level courses typically available in the core studies of English, mathematics, science, history and foreign languages, and offer a way to boost your weighted GPA. For example, getting a grade of 95% in an AP English course is worth 5.0 rather than the typical 4.0 for an A in a standard class. You may earn college credit if you take an AP class in high school and pass the AP test, and the college you select accepts AP credits. This may allow you to complete your college degree in less time after high school. In addition to coursework, colleges are also very interested in those who are highly skilled in a competitive sport. While football is the most well-known of the sports-related scholarships, many other sports also offer different levels of scholarships. A scholarship may be for all expenses (known as a full-ride scholarship), or may be for a set figure.

Standardized Tests

High school students across the country participate in taking standardized tests, typically in their senior year. There are two main tests; the ACT and the SAT. Both tests measure reasoning skills and the scores are used as one of the top determining factors for scholarships and a factor for getting into college. The higher your test scores, the
better. You can take the tests multiple times, starting as early as the 7th grade, and then give the college your best score.

The standardized test scores are so important that proper preparation is essential. Study guides are available for each of these tests for free online. Additionally, preparation courses are available through a number of different learning centers or tutors. These courses are particularly helpful for students who have difficulty taking tests or have already received a low score and wish to further prepare for a retake. Sample questions and practice tests are also available. Students may take a scored practice test to identify areas of weakness.

- ACT (American College Testing)
- SAT (Scholastic Aptitude Test)

The ACT test is often administered at high schools; however, the exam is offered at a variety of locations. The information is located on their website at http://www.act.org/. There is a fee for the test and registration that is typically made at least several months in advance of the test date. The ACT is a timed exam consisting of tests in English, mathematics, reading, science, and writing. You will receive your composite score as well as the individual scores for each section. ACT scores for each section range from 1 to 36. The average ACT score is between 20 and 21, and there are benchmarks for college readiness for each section. You can find these on the ACT website. If you feel you have not scored your best, you are allowed to retake the ACT. Schools look for a high ACT score and will not accept those with scores lower than the minimum required by the school. Each school has its own minimum standard.

The SAT exam may be given in high school instead of the ACT. Like the ACT, the SAT is a timed test that includes three major sections – critical reading, mathematics, and writing. The test is offered at various times throughout the year at local locations across the country. Information regarding the SAT can be found online at https://collegereadiness.collegeboard.org/sat. In 2016, changes were made to the SAT scoring system and the highest score possible is now 1600. The testing service now also offers a suite of specialized tests that may help some students more accurately showcase their abilities. In general, most colleges consider applicants from those who score above 1100. However, some schools will accept applicants with scores in the 900 range, while selective colleges require higher scores. The minimum scores vary as they are set by each individual college.

Research Colleges

There are several thousand colleges and universities to choose from across the United States. When considering colleges, you will need to do some research to find out which ones are a good fit. Some of the top considerations include:

- Major or Career Choice
- Type of Degree
- Size
- Location
- Cost
• Scholarships offered based on GPA or Merit
• Grants based on need

One of the best ways to begin thinking about college choices is to look at them online. There are also a number of online and print publications that are useful in comparing and contrasting colleges. The most important function of the school you choose is to provide you with the best possible education in the area of study that you have chosen. Some colleges are known for being particularly good in certain areas of study, such as nursing.

It is helpful to check your GPA and ACT or SAT scores against the composite averages of enrollment at various schools. Those who fall significantly below these averages have a less likely chance of getting accepted. These figures can be found on the enrollment pages of each school’s website and www.collegeboard.org. Speak with an enrollment advisor if you have any questions regarding admission.

Community colleges are often a good choice because they are often located near a student’s hometown or within it and they offer a variety of career options. Tuition is typically less expensive than a university. The two-year degree is called an Associate’s Degree, and is obtained after successful completion of a community college program. A community college also allows students to take the first two years of courses, called general education courses, and then transfer to a four-year college or university for the last two years.

It might be more cost effective to attend a college within your state. In-state universities often offer scholarship opportunities for students who obtain a high GPA. Tuition is also less expensive than an out-of-state university. You can often learn more about the potential savings by visiting the websites of your in-state colleges, and comparing what each has to offer.

Keep in mind that while the Cost of Attendance (COA) may be higher for an out-of-state college than an in-state college, it may end up costing less overall after scholarships. The net cost is what must be compared to truly determine which college is less expensive.

College Visits

Once you’ve narrowed down your list of potential colleges, review all of the information you have gathered and create a short list of schools. Then, prioritize your options based on your own preferences. Once you have condensed your list, you are ready to schedule college tours. A college tour is a visit to the college that allows you and your parents view the campus, talk to counselors, and ask questions about the school. You can schedule appointments ahead of time to have personal attention when you tour. The college will provide you with a great deal of information that you can take home and review.

It is important to schedule visits as early as possible in the decision-making process. This gives you a chance to look at all of your choices so you can make the best decision. There are a few things to be sure to do during each school visit:

• Walk the campus
• Visit the specific department of your major
Thanks to the internet, students are now able to learn more than ever about each particular school before their visit. Make a list of questions before your visit and make sure that you get the answers you need before you leave. For example, most four year colleges require freshmen to live on campus while other schools may not. Also, those colleges require freshman to purchase a meal plan. It is important to choose a school that best fits your needs so that you have the greatest opportunity for success.

Applications

Once you have narrowed your choices to the top few, it is time to submit the applications. The application process may be slightly different for each school you choose, so you will need to review the college’s website or speak with a representative from the school’s admission office to learn the exact requirements, such as:

- Application
- Non-Refundable Processing Fee
- Essay
- Transcripts
- Interview

The application will usually ask you for your major area of study. Do not worry if you have not yet decided on a major. Many underclassmen do not have a major and many others change majors as they progress through college. Remember that you can change your major later if you decide that it is no longer your preference. However, changing majors can create a situation that requires additional classes in order to graduate. You may end up graduating in five or six years rather than the typical four years, so you should research as many occupations as possible during high school. It is important to note that you must submit your application within the school’s open enrollment dates or you will have to wait until the next open enrollment period.

College Essay

Many colleges today require applicants to submit an essay. The institution will have specific guidelines that must be followed when writing your college essay. The essay is another way to assist colleges in making important admission decisions. It may be helpful to seek guidance from a tutor or educational facility prior to writing your essay. The essay is quite important and not only must it be concise, but it must also conform to all of the college writing standards.
College can be expensive! The costs for tuition may be based on credit hours or may be charged by the semester. For example, one college may charge $300 per credit hour. If a typical course is 3 semester hours, the total cost for the course is $900. In addition to tuition, books, and fees, you will also need to consider living expenses. Dormitory costs typically include room and board and some schools require freshmen and sophomores to live on campus. Off-campus housing usually consists of apartments located nearby. Many students share apartments to reduce expenses.

The cost of college can be offset through scholarships, grants, and financial aid that doesn’t have to be repaid. You should speak with your high school guidance counselor to obtain all of the information possible to help you search for scholarships you can apply for, as well as grants and other types of financial aid. There are many scholarships available, and you should apply for as many as possible. Keep in mind that the largest scholarships are typically given by the universities as a way to recruit you (if you have a good GPA and test scores).

Once these options have been exhausted, and you still don’t have enough money to cover costs, it may be necessary to take out a student loan. A student loan is a specialized loan that offers deferred payments as long as you are enrolled in college as a part-time or full-time student. Student loans are typically designed to be deferred for 4.5 years, with the thought that you will graduate in 4 years and find a job within 6 months of graduating. More detailed information can be found in our guide “Financing Higher Education”.

Acceptance Letter

Colleges may take several weeks or even months to review applicants and make decisions on entrance. When a decision is made you will receive a letter in the mail. You will also receive an award letter from each school that you applied to, which will let you know what they are willing to offer in scholarships, grants, work-study, loans and parent loans. You should apply to several schools and to wait to see which schools have accepted you and review what they are offering you in their award letters before you make a final decision. Once you have decided on which college to attend, you must agree to the acceptance by sending in a deposit (if required) and letting the college know that you have accepted a spot on the freshman roster by no later than May 1st of your senior year. You can then start planning your college experience.

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