Planning for College: 4-Year Plan

Planning for college should begin once you enter high school. Here are things to do each year as you progress through high school.

**Ninth Grade.** At this stage, you are laying the foundation for getting admitted into college. This is the time to show that you have the ability to succeed academically and that you pursue other interests when not doing schoolwork. This is your game plan for ninth grade:

- Follow a college preparatory program to earn the credits you will need for college admission. Make sure you take the key core requirements, such as English, math, science, history, and a foreign language.
- Work hard to achieve high grades. Your GPA (which determines your class rank) will be an important factor in the college admission process.
- Get involved in extracurricular and volunteer activities. This could mean community-related work, a hobby, or school clubs and sport teams. These activities make you a well-rounded student, which is why college admission officials value this participation heavily.
- Meet with your college/career counselor as soon as you can to talk about your college plan.
- Explore careers. This will determine what elective classes you will take later.
- Make summer count. Volunteer. Sign up for summer school or an enrichment program.

**Tenth Grade.** In your sophomore year, stay on track with your high school classes and activities.

- Meet with your guidance counselor; ask about Advance Placement (AP) courses.
- Stay on track with your college preparatory program. Do well in your classes, as your grades affect your GPA and class rank—two factors that colleges consider in the admission process.
- Take the PLAN (pre-ACT) and/or the PSAT (preliminary SAT). This will help you identify areas in need of improvement so you can better prepare to take the real thing next year. This will release your name to colleges so you can start receiving brochures from them.
- Review PLAN and/or PSAT results with your parents and school counselor.
- Continue your extracurricular and volunteer activities. Work toward leadership positions in student government or activities you like best. College admission officials regard holding office as an indicator of leadership potential.
- Explore potential careers. Think about what kind of education and training different careers require, and learn about the tasks for each occupation.
- Begin exploring colleges. Identify those that are recognized for strong programs in your areas of career interest.
- Consider taking SAT Subject Tests while the material is still fresh in your mind.
- Stay active during the summer, as this will look good to prospective colleges.

**Eleventh Grade.** This is an important year in the college planning process because you will be taking standardized tests and finalizing your college list. In addition, you will need to get your best grades in high school this year and continue to stay involved in your extracurricular activities.

- Meet with your guidance counselor to see what you still need to take.
- Check on your GPA. Even if your grades have not been exceptional thus far, this is the year to show improvement. Colleges like to see an upward trend.
- If you have not yet taken the PSAT, take it. It is a good way to practice for the SAT.
- Take Advanced Placement (AP) classes in your areas of strength.
- Take the ACT and/or SAT. Consider your strengths and weaknesses when making this decision. Study for these tests on your own. Take test preparation classes if you can.
Stay involved with extracurricular and volunteer activities. Colleges look for consistency and depth in the non-academic activities you pursue. Taking on leadership roles and making a commitment to the same groups are more important than trying out new activities each year.

Talk with your parents and high school counselor about colleges that interest you. Visit college campuses that interest you, especially in the summer. Talk with students attending these colleges and ask about their experiences as students there. Go to college fairs, attend college nights, and speak with representatives who visit your high school.

In the spring/summer, contact your recommendation writers and start working on your application essays. Ask your teachers and/or guidance counselors early to write you a letter of recommendation before tons of students do in the fall. Start your rough drafts of your college application essays. Starting early will give you time to revise and proofread them.

Colleges consider your senior year courses and grades, and want to see that you are continuing to challenge yourself academically. Meet with your counselor to prepare a challenging class schedule for your senior year.

Twelfth Grade. Senior year is often an extremely busy time, with schoolwork, extracurricular activities, and college applications. Stay on track with the college admissions process. Get organized, be aware of deadlines, and do not procrastinate.

Summer: August
- Retake the SAT and/or ACT to improve your scores. Especially if you have learned a lot since you last took either test. Focus on the areas in which you scored the lowest.
- Review your SAT and/or ACT tests results and retest if necessary.

Fall: August-December
- Meet with your college/career counselor to make sure you are on track to complete college admission requirements.
- Attend a college fair and talk with admissions representatives who come to your high school.
- Keep working hard all year on your grades and extracurricular activities. This year matters, so do well in your classes and maintain your commitment to extracurricular activities.
- If you have not already done so, ask for letters of recommendation early in the school year or at least two weeks before application deadlines. Discuss your dreams and ambitions with them so they will be more prepared to write about you. Ask the writers to address why you would be a successful college student and what you can bring to the college.
- Begin to finalize your college essays. Continually revise and proofread them.
- Create resumes highlighting your accomplishments, including academic and extracurricular awards and honors, community service achievements, and anything else you participated in.
- Apply to more than three colleges. That way, you have a better chance of being accepted to at least one college of your choice. Do not miss the application deadlines for admission; find out when everything has to be submitted (college essays, SAT/ACT test scores, official high school transcript). Make sure to proofread all your application materials.

Winter-Spring: January-May
- Complete the FAFSA (financial aid form) before the deadline. Also, apply for scholarships; see if you qualify for scholarships at the college you will attend.
- In January, ask your school to send first semester transcripts to colleges where you applied. In May, they will need to send your final transcripts to the college you will attend.
- Prepare for any last standardized tests. Take AP tests to earn college credit.