

College Planning and Preparation

by Linda E. Brody, Ed.D.

The High School Years

Competition for coveted spots at selective colleges can cause much stress among high school students and their parents. But a little careful planning and preparation can minimize any anxiety and position you to be a stronger candidate. Following are some year-by-year guidelines to help.

9th grade

Develop a four-year academic plan. Be sure to account for prerequisites you will need for courses you will want to take later. Include AP courses or the equivalent, but don't feel that you must take them in 9th grade unless they are right for you.

Take SAT subject tests and AP exams for relevant courses you're taking this year. Postpone those for which you'll be better prepared after additional coursework, such as English.

Begin to identify activities outside of the classroom that you want to devote time to. Serious engagement in them will help you stand out among other college applicants.

Begin to explore college options. Review websites, attend a college fair, or tour colleges while on vacation. Identify attributes that appeal to you, but hold off making any decisions about which colleges you might want to attend.

Use your summer to deepen your learning. Enroll in a summer program, travel, or volunteer in your community; read widely to expand your knowledge.

10th grade

Take challenging courses. Include some AP or equivalent courses this year if you plan to apply to highly selective colleges. Evaluate your school's offerings and whether you should look outside of school for opportunities (e.g., college or online courses or internships).

Take the PSAT in the fall as a practice test. In the spring, take SAT subject tests and AP exams for which you are prepared.



Commit to one or more extracurricular activities. Work toward distinction such as attaining a leadership position, winning awards, or getting published.

Continue to explore college options. As you learn more about your needs and goals, identify colleges that will meet them. This can also be a good time to combine college visits with a vacation without the pressure of having to make final decisions.

11th grade

Work hard in your courses. This may be the most important year for obtaining a strong academic record to show to colleges. Take some AP or equivalent courses, and, if necessary, supplement with coursework from outside of your high school.

Take standardized tests. PSAT scores will determine eligibility for the National Merit Scholarship Program. Also take the SAT and/or ACT, and any SAT subject tests and AP exams for which you are prepared.

Assume a leadership role or gain recognition in your extracurricular activities. If STEM is a strong interest, consider finding a mentor to help with a project that could be submitted to a competition.

Identify the colleges you plan to apply to. Discuss options with your parents and counselor. Evaluate your need for financial aid. Arrange college visits, and schedule interviews, tours, and possibly overnight stays.

Plan a great summer with meaningful activities. Also work on essays for your college application, and consider whom you might ask to write recommendation letters.

12th grade

Continue to excel academically. Colleges may rescind an offer of admission if your grades drop significantly senior year.

Demonstrate leadership, initiative, and excellence through your extracurricular activities. Again, this is an opportunity to stand out from other applicants.

Take any standardized tests you still need. Retake the SAT or ACT if you believe your scores will improve. Take SAT subject tests in time for application deadlines and AP tests in the spring.

Finalize the list of colleges you will apply to. Be sure it includes at least one or two colleges where you are confident you will be accepted and where you will be happy.

Mark your calendar with admission deadlines and be sure to meet them. Finalize your essays after getting feedback on whether they truly reflect who you are. Complete and submit the Common Application and other required documents. Request test scores and recommendations. Check to be sure that all parts of your application—including transcripts, test scores, recommendations, and requests for financial aid—are received. Schedule college interviews.

After acceptances come, make your final selection. Attend events for accepted students. Send thank-you notes to your guidance counselor, teachers, and anyone else who helped you in the admissions process.