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The College Application Process: An Overview

You've narrowed down the massive list of school choices to a select few to which you want to apply. But there's a lot of work to be done so that you can plead your best case.

Getting Organized

The first step is to gather the information required for your application. Entrance requirements can differ for every school, so pay close attention to the application forms to make sure you provide everything they need. The earlier you determine the requirements of each school, the better.

Start by printing off a copy of each application form. Create a file folder for each school to store copies of all materials you send to that school. Put the date on everything so you know when it went out.

Jot down all the admissions deadlines on a calendar or in a date book -- and check it often. You may want to record the deadline dates on the outside of each folder as well.

Doing the Work

In general, schools will look at the following factors: high school courses, grade point average (GPA), class ranking, SAT/ACT test scores, personal essays, extracurricular activities, other personal or special skills and letters of recommendation. Sometimes a school will conduct an entrance interview.

Application Form

Read the instructions **carefully** and fill in all the information. Double-check spelling, grammar, the name of the school and any numbers you had to enter.

Transcripts

If there's no formal time period for students to fill out transcript release forms at your school, talk to your career or guidance counselor about getting one completed. Do it early -- at least a few weeks before the college needs the transcript -- to give the office enough time to fulfill your request.

Most of the time, your transcript will be sent directly to the college, so you don't have to worry about sending it yourself unless you're directed to do so. Make sure you know what the school prefers.

Recommendations

Some schools don't need letters of recommendation. Some only require the letters for scholarship applications.

Check how many you need and who they should be from. (For example, are they looking for any teacher or a particular subject teacher?) Once you know exactly what you need, make a list of possible names. Ask yourself who knows you best -- as a student and as a person -- and would be willing to write a unique and positive assessment of your abilities and attributes.

Approach the person early in Grade 12 so they have lots of time to compose a thoughtful letter. Make an appointment to detail what it is you need, establish deadlines and follow up to collect your letters on time.

Finally, include the letters in sealed envelopes with your application materials, or arrange to have them sent directly to the college if that's what the school wants.

The Essay

Not all schools require an essay. But if you do have to write one, consider it a blessing. Think of it this way: an essay offers a chance for the real you to shine through to the admissions board.

Contrary to popular belief, schools aren't looking for studying machines -- they're looking for bright, well-rounded people. Here are some tips to help you:

1. Give yourself a deadline and stick to it.
2. Since most topics will ask you to talk about yourself (your interests, goals, accomplishments), start by doing some self-analysis. List all your activities, travels, significant life events, hobbies, dreams, heroes, embarrassing moments, anecdotal stories and personality traits.
3. Write what you know, not what you think you should write to make a good impression.
4. Let your first draft sit for a few days before you read it again. Then read it out loud or have other people read it to you so you can see what sounds awkward.
5. Make sure your work is fresh and original. Don't copy someone else's essay, or have someone else write it for you. Don't rework a school essay you've already written.
6. Be simple, concise and forward -- don't wander all over the map. Have a central theme. But remember: being direct and clear doesn't mean being boring. You can be creative and original without gimmicks.
7. Don't be vulgar or tasteless.
8. Proofread, proofread, proofread! Spelling, punctuation and grammar should be correct.
9. Relax, be yourself and have fun!

The Interview

Not many undergraduate programs require an interview, except some selective programs such as engineering or nursing. For private, independent colleges, however, interviews are often necessary. If one is required, be yourself and do your best. Here are some tips:

1. If possible, schedule the interviews with your least favorite schools first. That'll give you some valuable interviewing practice.
2. Look professional. Be sure to check on the dress code.

3. Research the school ahead of time so you can ask intelligent questions.
4. Keep your answers short, but don't limit them to a one-word response.
5. Send a thank-you note afterwards.

Submitting Your Applications

Be sure to print copies of all your applications and prepare any additional packages that need to go out. It's time to send everything off!

While you're waiting for the school to respond with its decision letter, make sure you keep working hard at school. A sudden decline in grades at the end of the year -- which happens all too often -- may mean a closed door where there could have been a welcome mat.

You'll also want to update the schools of any new events. If you receive any awards, for example, send the new information along.

Getting the Reply

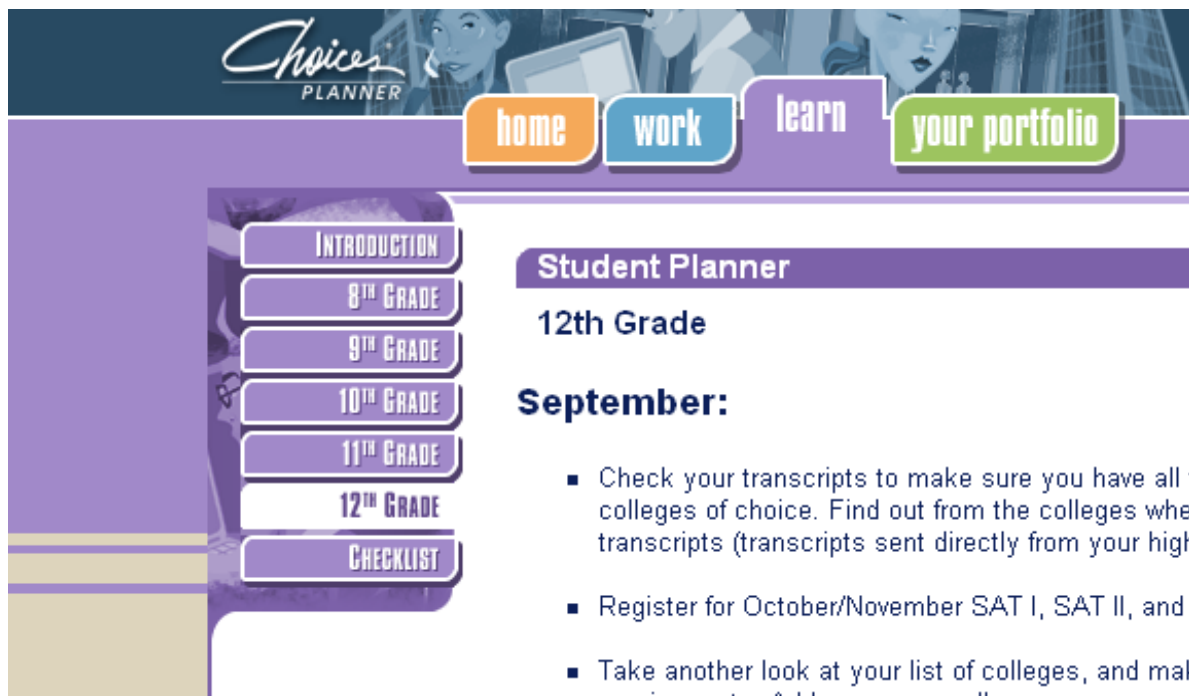
If you get accepted to your first choice, great!

If you're stuck in the happy dilemma of having to choose between two or more schools, try (1) making a pros and cons list, (2) following your instinct, or (3) visiting the schools again.

When your decision is made, be sure to tell the other schools that accepted you so they can offer your spot to someone else.

In the event that you're not accepted or put on a waiting list, talk to your counselor about your options. Try to find out why you weren't accepted. Maybe it was a minor reason, like something missing from your application package or a misunderstanding about your academic information that you can correct.

If it goes beyond that, however, talk to someone at the admissions office and see if they will tell you how to increase your chances of acceptance the next time around.



12th Grade

September:

- Check your transcripts to make sure you have all the credits you need to get into your colleges of choice. Find out from the colleges whether or not they need official copies of your transcripts (transcripts sent directly from your high school) sent at the time of application.
- Register for October/November SAT I, SAT II, and ACT tests.
- Take another look at your list of colleges, and make sure that they still satisfy your requirements. Add or remove colleges as necessary.
- Make sure you meet the requirements (including any transcript requirements) for all the colleges to which you want to apply. Double-check the deadlines, and apply.
- Give any recommendation forms to the appropriate teachers or counselors with stamped, college-addressed envelopes, making certain that your portions of the forms are filled out completely and accurately.
- Most early decision and early action applications are due between October 1 and November 1. Keep this in mind if you intend to take advantage of these options and remember to request that your high school send your official transcripts to the college to which you are applying.

October:

- Make a final list of schools that interest you and keep a file of deadlines and required admission items for each school.
- Take SAT or ACT tests. Have the official scores sent by the testing agency to the colleges or universities that have made your final list of schools. Register for December or January SAT I or SAT II tests, if necessary.
- Continue thinking about and beginning to write (if you have not already started) any essays to be included with your applications.

November:

- Submit your college admission applications.

December:

- Early decision replies usually arrive between December 1 and 31.
- If you haven't already done so, make sure your official test scores are being sent to the colleges to which you are applying.
- Schedule any remaining required interviews.

January:

- Complete and submit your college financial aid application and the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) between January 1 and February 15, and check for other financial aid options. In order to be considered for financial aid, you will need to submit these forms even if you have not yet been notified of your acceptance to the colleges to which you applied.
- Go to the FAFSA on the Web form at www.fafsa.ed.gov .
- Investigate purchasing a computer for college. You or your parents can subsidize the cost of a computer for college in your student loans.
- Request that your high school send your official transcripts to the colleges to which you are applying.
- Make sure your parents have completed their income tax forms in anticipation of the financial aid applications.

- Contact the admissions office of the colleges to which you have applied to make sure that your information has been received, and that they have everything they need from you.

February:

- If you completed the FAFSA, you should receive your Student Aid Report (SAR) within four weeks. Make the necessary corrections and return it to the FAFSA processor.
- Complete your scholarship applications.
- Contact the financial aid office of the colleges to which you have applied to make sure that your information has been received, and that they have everything they need from you.

March-April:

- You will probably hear from the colleges as to whether or not you are accepted by April 15.
- Compare your acceptance letters, financial aid and scholarship offers.
- When you choose a college that has accepted you, you will be required to pay a non-refundable deposit for freshman tuition (this should ensure your place in the entering freshman class).

May:

- Take AP exams for any AP subjects you studied in high school.
- You should make a decision by May 1 as to which college you will be attending and notify the school by mailing your commitment deposit check. Many schools require that your notification letter be postmarked by this date.
- If you were placed on a waiting list for a particular college, and have decided to wait for an opening, contact that college and let them know you are still very interested.

June:

- Have your school send your final transcripts to the college you will be attending.
- Contact your college to determine when fees for tuition, room and board are due and how much they will be.

Summer After Senior Year

- Participate in any summer orientation programs for incoming freshmen.
- Now that you know you will be attending college in the fall, it is a good idea to get student health insurance in case of any unforeseen emergencies.