



Getting To The Quad

Your Guide for the College Experience

Created by Michael Bergman

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Getting To The Quad Introduction

You're ready for liftoff into a completely new life at college. You're likely to find your life is changing in many respects — from living at home and having set schedules to freedom and all-you-can-eat buffets. These new experiences and the resulting questions are why this book exists.

Student Lending Works®, a non-profit student lender, is introducing ***Getting To The Quad*** to help high school graduates manage the transition from high school into college. ***Getting To The Quad*** was created as a collaborative effort. College and high school faculty, staff, and alumni helped with ideas, tips and suggestions for making the college process as simple as possible.

With this guide, we look forward to helping you kick start your future at college. If you have questions or suggestions, desire more resources, or just have some free time on the Internet, check us out on the web.

www.GettingToTheQuad.com



GOING TO COLLEGE — THAT WHOLE APPLICATION AND CHOOSING THING

the college admissions process

**high school course load
& standardized tests**

college applications

college essay writing tips

interviewing for college

college visits

tips for choosing a school

section

01

The College Admissions Process

Want to go to college? Want to expand your mind? Want to grow your online group of friends? Want to stay up until all hours of the night working on those freshman 15? Well, then you'll need to get into college, and for that you'll need to apply. Here are some tips for helping you understand and succeed in the admissions process.

Types of Admissions Deadlines

In years past, there were just a few types of admission plans, and just a few deadlines to watch. Things have really changed! Now there are many variations of the main types of admission plans, and the deadlines vary greatly. Once you've narrowed down your list to a comfortable number of reach (a little bit of a long shot), target (feeling pretty safe), and safety (feeling really safe) schools, you will need to familiarize yourself with the dates and deadlines for each school. Here are the common admission plans you're likely to find:

Early Action (EA) – EA is a student-friendly deadline. Students are invited to apply by a certain early date (usually October through December 1), and they are notified early (usually November through December). Students are under no obligation to attend if offered admission, yet students enjoy hearing the admission decision early. It relieves a little pressure and gives students encouragement to think there's a college that wants them!

Early Decision (ED) – ED is a plan where you submit your admission application by a certain date (often in November or early December); the college notifies you of its decision by mid-December (or early January), and then you are obligated to attend that college. By applying ED, you, your parent and your high school counselor will sign a legal document acknowledging that if you are admitted to the certain school, you will enroll. Students may apply ED at only ONE college. Once offered admission, you must withdraw any applications already submitted to other schools, and you may not submit any more. ED should only be used by a student who is 100% certain that he/she would like to attend a certain school. In a few cases, colleges might admit a higher percentage of their ED applicants, but even so, if the college isn't right for you, an offer of admission isn't right either. This plan is only good for students who have thoroughly researched colleges and have a clear notion of what college experiences they want. In addition students are asked to commit to attending a college without knowing what financial aid they might be awarded.

Regular Decision (RD) – RD applications are typically due in January/February, rather than November/December like early decision/action. If you are admitted you are not obligated to attend the school. By applying to a number of schools RD you will be able to see all of your options before making a final decision. RD is good for

students not ready to make a commitment to one school, eager to apply to a number of reach schools, interested in comparing financial aid packages. Impatience is the real disadvantage of this plan; it's hard for students to wait, as there are several months between the application submission and their admission decision.

- **Priority Deadline** – Some schools offer multiple deadlines for RD. If you complete your application by an early deadline you are not bound to attend the school, but you will receive greater consideration for admission, scholarships, housing, honors programs, etc.

Rolling Admission (RA) – RA is good for students, as colleges make decisions as the applications come in; students are notified within a few weeks, regardless of when they submit their application. Obviously the earlier your application is reviewed, the greater your odds of being admitted. Many state institutions use RA.

Others – Recently some colleges have begun using variations of these plans. A few colleges state their plan is Early Action, but that students are only permitted to apply Early Action at one school (Single Choice Early Action). Another set of colleges uses a variation of the Rolling Admission plan. They hold on to a set of applications and send out decisions in waves. This helps them manage the large quantity of applications they process. Other colleges call their “Early Plans” by other names, such as “Early Notification,” or “January Notification.” Make sure you totally understand all aspects of the type of application you are going to submit.

When Should You Apply?

Early Action (EA) / Early Decision (ED) – Applications are typically due around November 1st and November 15th. You must have all materials and, in the case of early decision, the signed affidavit completed by the deadline.

Regular Decision (RD) – Applications are typically due between the end of December and early February.

Rolling Admission (RA) – Usually there is no set date by which applications must be completed. However, it is in your best interest to complete your application as soon as you possibly can — no later than the end of fall.

The College Admissions Process Cont.

When Will You Hear Back?

Early Action (EA) / Early Decision (ED) – You will generally receive an acceptance, a denial or a deferral (moving your application from early to regular) about a month after the deadline.

Regular Decision (RD) – Your admission decision will arrive sometime in late March or early April. Don't be surprised if you hear that you've been admitted earlier than these dates.

Rolling Admission (RA) – Generally your decision will arrive around 6-8 weeks after your application has been submitted. Your application can be deferred and a final decision will arrive a few weeks or months later.



HELPFUL WEB SITES

- www.nacacnet.org/MemberPortal/ForStudents/CollegePrep
- www.collegeview.com/articles/CV/application/understanding_early.html
- www.aie.org/HighSchool/index.cfm

High School Course Load & Standardized Tests

So, you can't decide if advanced basket weaving or a third study hall will help on your college applications? Want some tips on class scheduling and what colleges look at it for admissions? We thought so.

What Do Admissions Officers Look At?

Bottom line, admission officers want to see that you've challenged yourself throughout your four years of high school within the context of your high school. That last phrase is important. Admission counselors obviously can't expect you to take classes that your high school doesn't offer. The classes you've taken, your grades, and class rank, if available, will also be considered.

Doing Well In Classes v. Challenging Yourself – This is a delicate balance. Admission counselors want to see good grades and tough courses; if it can only be one or the other, it is always better to take the more challenging course and have slightly lower grades than getting all A's in easy classes.

Relevant Coursework – If you are interested in an engineering or a pre-med curriculum, science and math courses should feature prominently on your transcript. If you are interested in painting, an admission counselor would expect to see that you've taken a fine arts course.

Advanced Placement Courses – In a nutshell, Advanced Placement (AP) courses are college level courses taught in the high school by a high school teacher.

- **Credit in College** – Policies vary widely. Usually a certain AP test score is required to receive credit at the college level. Sometimes you are able to receive full credit for the course (as if you took it at the college), while other times you can move into an upper-level course without prerequisites. Carefully examine the policy at each of the schools on your college list, as it may mean saving time and/or money.
- **Scoring** – AP tests are scored on a 1-5 scale, with 5 being the top score. A student generally needs to receive a 3 or above for the college to consider giving credit, placement, etc.

International Baccalaureate – International Baccalaureate (IB) is an international program of study, culminating in a highly respected diploma. IB courses are similar to AP courses, but the IB curriculum is not offered at nearly as many high schools as AP.

- **Credit in College** – This varies widely. Usually a certain IB test score on the upper-level IB exams, not the standard ones, is required to receive credit at the college level. Sometimes you are able to receive full credit for the course (as if you took it at the college), other times you can move into an upper-level course without prerequisites. Carefully examine the policy at each of the schools on your college list.
- **Scoring** – IB tests are scored on a 1-7 scale, with 7 being the top score. A student generally needs to receive a 5 or above for the college to consider giving credit, placement, etc.

Honors/Advanced Courses – The vast majority of high schools offer some sort of honors track in which classes are accelerated, course material is more challenging, and the teachers and students have higher expectations of course work.

- **To Take/Not Take** – Every high school is going to have different policies on which students take honors courses. Sometimes it is self-initiated, while other times a student must “qualify” for these courses. You should stack your schedule with as many honors/advanced/AP courses as you can. The more challenging your courseload (and the higher your grades), the more impressive you will be to the admission committees.

College Courses – These are different from AP courses in that they are taught on college campuses by college professors.

- **Credit in College** – Similar to AP courses, credit is going to vary widely depending upon the type of course taken, your proposed major and the college you choose to attend.
- **To Take/Not Take** – College courses are great if you’ve “maxed-out” your high school offerings, have an interest in a subject not offered by your high school, or want some extra enrichment over the summer. College courses are also a great way to augment an otherwise strong transcript and show seriousness of academic pursuits.

Standardized Testing

Standardized tests are a key component of the college process, so make sure you know about all the types of tests and which tests are used by the colleges where you are applying.

SATs – An exam administered by The College Board that serves as a means for colleges to have a standardized system of comparing high school students from across the country (and the world).

High School Course Load & Standardized Tests Cont.

- **What the test covers** – The SAT has three sections: 1) math, 2) critical reading (verbal), and 3) writing. All three sections are comprised of multiple choice questions; the writing section also includes a short written essay. The SAT is scored on a 200-800 scale for each of the three sections. A perfect score is a 2400.
- **Registration** – The SAT is offered several times throughout the calendar year. To find registration information, including payment options, score reporting, locations, and frequently asked questions, the College Board website is the best resource, www.collegeboard.com.

ACTs – The ACT is comparable to the SAT as a standardized tool for college admission committees to assess the preparedness of applicants. A top score for the ACT is 36.

- **What they cover** – The ACT is a multiple-choice test that covers four skill areas: 1) english, 2) mathematics, 3) reading, and 4) science. There is an optional writing section as well. Should you decide to take the ACT, you should also do the writing section, as many colleges now require this.
- **Registration** – Like the SAT, the ACT is offered several times throughout the year. For information about registration, payment, locations, viewing or sending scores, see the ACT website, www.act.org.

SAT Subject Tests – SAT Subject Tests are administered by the College Board, those same lovely people who brought you the original SAT. The Subject Tests are hour-long exams that test your understanding of a very specific subject area.

- **What they cover** – The SAT Subject Tests fall into five subject areas: 1) english, 2) history and social studies, 3) mathematics, 4) science, and 5) languages. The SAT Subject Tests are scored on a 200-800 scale.
- **Registration** – SAT Subject Tests are offered several times throughout the year. Consult the College Board website, www.collegeboard.com, for all the details.



HELPFUL WEB SITES

- www.collegeboard.com (for SAT, SAT Subject Test, and AP test information)
- www.act.org (for ACT information)
- www.ibo.org (for International Baccalaureate information)
- www.aie.org/HighSchool/Planning/recommendedcourses.cfm
- www.nacacnet.org/MemberPortal/News/StepsNewsletter/Choosing+High+School+Courses+for+College+Success.htm

College Applications

“Applications.” That one word can cause many juniors and seniors in high school to wince at its mere mention. No longer will you, your friends, or anyone else applying to college fear those four syllables. Our trusty tips and suggestions will help you dominate those applications and make those admissions officers be the ones wincing... wincing at the sheer strength of your application.

Filling Out An Application

Typed v. Online v. Handwritten

College applications can be easily submitted online or on paper. While either method is fine, and it would never be a factor in an admission decision, colleges are well-equipped to receive online applications efficiently, and generally they prefer online versions. Many colleges now offer their application exclusively online. Some even waive the application fee when a student applies online. For those that require a fee, a credit card can readily be used to complete the online transaction.

The Common Application

Used by nearly 300 colleges and universities nationwide, this form is all-encompassing. Once you have completed it, you can send it to several colleges. Colleges have agreed to accept the Common Application with equal weight to their own application (colleges sign a legal document guaranteeing this). In fact, more and more colleges are using the Common Application exclusively; you'll find the website to be user friendly, so check out www.commonapp.org. If you are applying to several schools that accept the Common Application, use it. It will save you time and effort, which is crucial to managing the application process.

- **Supplements** – When you use the Common Application, pay attention to supplements that each school may require. Some schools require no additional paperwork, while others require extra essays, recommendations, test scores, etc.

Application Tips

Stay Organized – There are tons of dates, deadlines, essays and recommendations, to keep track of. It is crucial to stay organized throughout this process. It's a shame when students miss dates and deadlines, denying themselves scholarship money, a chance for admission, etc. Keep a calendar of dates and post it in a prominent location; allow Mom and Dad to nag you about getting those apps in on time, as they only want the best for you. The best way to make it through the application process is by staying organized.

Recommendations – If a teacher recommendation is required, be sure you know your high school's policies and procedures about them. Some high schools ask teachers to send recommendations themselves; others prefer the counseling offices coordinate the sending of teacher recommendations. Make sure to give your teachers as much time as possible to complete your recommendations. It's not a bad idea to ask them to start working on your recs the summer before your senior year. Remember, the more time they have to complete the recommendations, the nicer things they'll be able to say about you!

Be Reasonable – No admission counselor is going to want to read a recommendation from every teacher you've ever had. Also, it's not going to go over well if you send in a video begging to be admitted. Don't grovel for admission — it's unseemly.

Test Scores – Pay careful attention to test score requirements. Some schools require SAT Subject Tests, others don't. Test scores should be requested with plenty of lead time. Sometimes it takes the College Board a long time to have official scores sent.

Plan Ahead – Don't leave applications until the night before to complete. A good application will take time to finish. It's obvious to admission counselors when applications are done at the last minute. Don't try to complete the application in one sitting. Write it, then leave it for a while, check it over again later, then re-read everything one more time before you click "submit."

Proofread – Your application should be free of careless errors. Take time to proofread before you submit your application. Let someone else read over it — they might catch something you missed.

Save Money – Most schools require an application fee to process your application, though, some schools waive the fee if the application is submitted electronically. Make sure to ask the admissions department if any fee waivers are offered.

Supplements – If you have visual art or performing art talents, it is not unreasonable to send a CD of your drawings or a DVD of a performance. Generally this information is sent to a member of the faculty in an appropriate area for review.

Don't Be Modest – Tell the admission committee all of the awards, honors, relevant experiences, etc. that you've earned/had. Now is not a time to be modest...within reason, of course.

College Applications Cont.

Transcripts – High School Counseling Offices may set their own deadlines for students to request that transcripts be sent. Counselors have to manage a large quantity of requests, and it is a wise student who takes notice of these local deadlines. Test scores are often accepted from the high school transcript, so check to see what your high school's policy is.

Counselor's Forms – Most colleges have a form that is to be signed and completed by your high school counselor. Print the form out and give it to your counselor. These are labeled by various names such as "School Report," "High School Course Verification," "Counselor Comments," etc. This form often asks for the student's signature and sometimes a list of senior year courses.

Save Time – Essays, short answers, and lists of activities can often be "cut and pasted" from a separate document, so take time to plan, write, edit, and rewrite these parts.

Keep Records – Print a copy of your finalized application for your files as a way to re-check what you've answered and to reuse the information for future applications.

Confirm Electronic Submission – If you submit your application electronically, expect a confirmation to be sent. This could be a follow-up email or an immediate electronic receipt. If you don't get one, follow up to make sure it was received.

Waive Recs? – Some forms ask if students wish to "waive their rights to access the recommendations." The law says you are able to view your recommendations after you enroll at the college. Why would you want to do that after you've enrolled? It's okay to waive your rights to access them. It shows you trust your recommenders. Obviously, you may make your own decision about this.

Scholarship Apps – Learn if the college has a separate scholarship application. Often these college-sponsored scholarships have an early deadline, so make sure to stay on top of this.

Leave Blank? – Don't leave any sections blank on your application. If there are facts you don't know, make sure you get the information you need.

Helpful Parents – Students should complete the application themselves. Parents should NOT do this for students! If you want parents to help, ask them to help you keep track of deadlines.

Stay Focused – Be thorough, stay organized, be patient, and meet deadlines. Then you can sit back and enjoy the rewards of your efforts!



HELPFUL WEBSITES

- www.commonapp.org
- www.collegeview.com/articles/CV/application/understanding_application.html
- www.adventuresineducation.org/HighSchool/Applying/collegeapplications.cfm

College Essay Writing Tips

Debating if your essay about winning the pie eating contest in third grade, where you learned that you can do anything, or the one about fighting a porcupine in your backyard last year, when you overcame your fear of wild animals, should be included in your application? Well, while they both actually sound enthralling, we've got some thoughts on perfecting that essay.

General Essay Pointers

Purpose Of The Essay – While high school students often view the essay as a unique form of torture imposed by admission committees, the essay and the interview are really the only parts of the application when you can truly be yourself. Your test scores, grades and extracurricular activities paint a limited picture of who you are, so, your essay can really bring you to life. If you think about your essay in this way, writing that dreaded personal statement might not be so bad after all.

Brainstorm – Jot down good ideas for essay topics well in advance of sitting down to write your essay. Almost anything can make a good essay topic — it all depends on how you write about it. Keep track of all those good ideas that flow through your head, so when it's time to actually sit down to write, you can look at your brainstorm list and begin working.

Plan – Good writing takes time, patience, and many drafts. Wouldn't it be nice to sit down one evening and complete a stellar essay in one sitting? Odds of that happening are about the same as winning the lottery. The earlier you begin working on your essay, the more time you'll have to mull over multiple drafts and get your essay into the best shape it can be.

Ask For Help – Teachers, parents, friends, siblings, and the postman can all be great sources of guidance as you work on your essay. People who know you well can help suggest topics. They can also read drafts of your essay, and, most importantly, they can best tell you if your essay is a good reflection of who you are.

Know Thyself – Your essay should reflect the unique qualities of your personality. If you are a funny person, by all means write a funny essay. If you are a serious person, write a more serious essay — now is not the time to begin your stand-up career. The worst thing to do is to lack self-awareness and submit an essay which doesn't reflect your personality.

Good Topics – This is a “trick” section. There really aren’t any topics that can be listed as “good topics.” Remember every student is going to have his or her own set of experiences to draw upon. What might be a great topic for one student might be lousy for another.

What Readers Look For

Grasp Of Basic Grammar And Spelling – Bottom line, your essay should demonstrate your understanding of written English. With spell check and grammar check and all that, there is NO excuse for spelling errors, typographical errors and basic grammatical mistakes. There is nothing more painful for an admission counselor than reading an essay, riddled with grammar mistakes, from a student who wants to major in English.

Appropriateness Of Topic – So, you just read that there aren’t really any “good topics,” well, there are certainly some “bad topics.” Think carefully about writing anything sexually explicit, violent, of a criminal nature, or politically offensive. Sounds crazy, right? It happens every year! Remember you don’t know anything about the person reading your essay, so if your entire essay is about how you find left-handedness to be an abomination, you are running a big risk of offending your reader. If you would be uncomfortable having Mom, Dad, your high school principal, or your dear Aunt Sally read your essay, take that as a red flag.

Quality Of Writing – Admission counselors have to read A LOT of essays. Memorable essays are the ones that capture the reader’s attention and hang on to it for two or so pages. Descriptive, evocative, interesting writing is going to hold a reader’s interest.

Active Voice – Don’t litter your essay with passive phrases. Your writing should be in the active voice. This will fully engage your reader.

Concise, Clear Writing – “Brevity is the soul of wit.” - William Shakespeare

Augment Your Application – Your essay should add depth to your application by allowing you to leap off the pages-and-pages of dull paperwork that make up an application. A good essay will give the admission committee more reasons to want you to join their campus. It will give a human face and personality to your application materials.

College Essay Writing Tips Cont.

Do's And Don'ts

- **Do Proofread** – Careless mistakes are inexcusable.
- **Do Allow Your Personality To Come Through** – Let it shine! You know how your friends would describe you; make sure those personal qualities come through in your essay.
- **Do Recycle** – Feel free to re-use your personal statement for multiple applications. Just make sure you change the sentence, "...and that is the reason why I want to attend _____ University," for each essay.
- **Do Add A Title** – A good title engages the reader from the outset and makes your essay more professional.
- **Do Answer The Question** – Not all essays are open-ended personal statements. If there is a question at hand, be sure to answer it. Otherwise you show that you don't know how to follow directions.
- **Don't Try To Frighten The Admission Committee** – Remember what was said about inappropriate topics. The admission committee should be pleasantly shocked by the quality of your essay, not the obscene topic.
- **Don't Submit A Ten Page Essay** – You should be able to say what you want to say in no more than two typed pages, unless the directions specify another length for your essay.
- **Don't Cheat** – Don't have someone else write your essay and don't use an essay that you purchased online. Admission counselors are very good at figuring out when you've plagiarized. If caught, you'll be denied admission on the spot.



HELPFUL WEB SITES

- www.collegeboard.com/student/apply/essay-skills/index.html
- www.nacacnet.org/MemberPortal/News/StepsNewsletter/tips_college_essay.htm
- <http://roadtocollege.com/Shop/EssaySvcInside.aspx>

Interviewing For College

Got your application in. Got your letters of recommendation all taken care of. Now, all you need to do is ace that interview with that alum who bleeds _____ & _____ (insert school colors here). No problem.

Purpose Of Interview

The interview is your opportunity to allow the admission committee to learn things about you that they may not be able to find anywhere else on your application. It is your forum to discuss the topics you care about, convey various aspects of your personality and really “sell yourself” to the admission committee. Honestly, don’t we all come across better in person than on paper?

Informative Or Evaluative? – Interviews are informative, evaluative or a combination of both. The interviewer wants to learn as much as possible about you in the short time you have together. But remember, it is also an opportunity for you to learn about the school from a person who has firsthand experience.

On Or Off Campus? – Interviews are generally held on-campus with an admission counselor, current student or another member of the university community (professor, dean, advisor, staff member). Off-campus interviews are usually performed by university alumni who have received widely varying levels of preparation. Typically both types of interviews “count” the same for the admission process.

Mandatory v. Optional Interviews

Some institutions, especially smaller colleges that draw from a more local population, require interviews. Other schools require interviews for certain majors or fields of study. The vast majority of schools encourage students to have interviews, either on or off-campus. If a school offers interviews, it is in your best interest to take advantage of this opportunity. While you cannot be penalized for not interviewing, you can certainly augment your application by having an interview.

Do’s And Don’ts

Do Come Prepared – Before your interview spend some time researching the school. Learn basic information about the institution so that you don’t need to spend time asking those questions of your interviewer. Formulate several questions that you can ask. Remember, an interview isn’t just about being asked questions, it’s about asking them too.

Do Arrive On Time – It would be a shame to start an otherwise fantastic interview off on the wrong foot. No one likes to be made to wait for someone else, so make sure to get there with time to spare. Know where you’re going and when you need to be there.

Do Dress Appropriately – Think business casual. You are a high school student, after all, so wearing a three-piece suit will look ridiculous. A nice outfit, even a clean pair of jeans and nice top would be appropriate. Something along the lines of what you would wear to the theater (not the movie variety) or a nice dinner would fit the bill.

Do Come Ready To Chat – The whole purpose of an interview is to have a conversation. If you engage the interviewer and dive head first into the questions he/she poses, your interview will be more of a conversation (good) and less of a question-and-answer session (bad).

Do Ask Questions – A good interview will involve a nice give-and-take, a volleying of questions and answers by both the interviewer and the interviewee.

Do Engage The Interviewer – Find some way to connect. An interviewer may interview numerous students in a row, so it is important to find a positive way to stand out. If you are able to connect with your interviewer by finding some sort of common ground, whether it be a love of sports, art or movie, you will best make yourself memorable.

Do Write A Thank You Note – After the interview, write a personal note to the interviewer. This small touch can have big gains for you. Even if the interview is average, at least the interviewer will remember that you have good manners.

Don’t Have An Interview If You Aren’t Interested In The School – If you have no interest in your dad’s alma mater, don’t waste the interviewer’s time by scheduling an interview. Your disinterest will be immediately obvious and the interview will be a bomb.

Don’t Have An Interview If You Are Painfully Shy Or Unbelievably Uncomfortable Around Strangers – You know who you are. If the thought of chatting with a stranger makes you want to run to the hills, do yourself and the interviewer a favor and think twice about having an interview. Remember, at most schools interviews are optional, so a negative interview can be extremely detrimental.

Interviewing for College Cont.

Don't Chew Gum – Even if you are the daintiest gum chewer or a world class bubble blower, when you get nervous, you're going to chew like a farm animal and subconsciously blow bubbles. Spit the gum out before your interview.

Don't Interrupt – No one likes to be interrupted. If you are nervous or get really excited during the interview you might start to interrupt your interviewer. Don't do it — it's rude.

Don't Wear Apparel From Another University – Tsk tsk, how could you wear a Michigan sweatshirt to your Ohio State interview?! Eeek!

Don't Wear Anything Provocative – If you don't want to create an uncomfortable situation, leave that skimpy top, mini-skirt or other risqué clothing at home. You're interviewing for college, not hitting the clubs.



HELPFUL WEB SITES

- <http://collegeapps.about.com/od/admissionsinterviews/a/typesinterviews.htm>
- <http://www.ecampustours.com/collegeplanning/applyingforcollege/yourcollegeinterview.htm>
- www.collegeboard.com/student/apply/the-application/135.html

College Visits

Ready to get out of that Senior Year history test because of a “college visit?” Well, to make your excuse sound legit when you return to class on Monday, and to actually help you determine what campus you’ll be calling home next fall, check out these musts on a college visit.

Prior to Arrival

Research – Before you make hotel reservations and start buying plane tickets, spend time doing some serious research. Visiting colleges takes time, money, enthusiasm and a sense of humor. It would be impossible to visit every college you are remotely considering, so get organized, do your research and visit those schools that will help you reach your ultimate goal — admission to your first choice school.

Where To Visit, Part 1 – If you are considering applying to any school early decision, you must plan a visit to campus. How can you sign on the dotted line that you will attend this school, if admitted, when you’ve never even seen the place?

Where To Visit, Part 2 – If you are undecided and overwhelmed by all of the college options available to you, it can help to visit a few schools to get a sense of what you like/dislike. Visiting a large state school, a small liberal arts college and an urban campus can give you different pictures of what college can be like. Even if you ultimately decide against applying to any of these schools you visited for research purposes, the time will be well spent if the visits help you determine the places you would like to be.

Schedule Your Visit, Part 1 – Contact the admission office, via the phone or web, to schedule your visit. Admission offices want to know that you are coming to visit so they can help you make the most of your visit. It would be a shame to plan an entire visit and not realize the admission office is closed for the day. Plan ahead!

Schedule Your Visit, Part 2 – It is best to visit campus when school is in session and students are not frantically preparing for final exams. Summer is a popular time to visit colleges, but remember that the campus won’t be buzzing with normal activities or current students over the summer months.

Coordinate Multiple Visits – Let’s say you’ve decided to visit Ultimate University, your first choice school. It would be smart while you’re in Ultimate City, or on your way to Ultimate City (if you’re driving), to also visit a couple other schools. Make the most of your travels and try to see as many schools as you can, especially for comparison sake.

The Campus Visit

Information Session – Generally schools offer a group session in which an admission counselor (and sometimes a faculty member and current student) discusses basic information about the school. The presentation is often followed by a question-and-answer session so it's a great opportunity to learn more about the school.

Tour – Typically tours are given by current students. Depending on the size of the campus, the tour can last anywhere from 45 minutes to well over two hours. This is your best opportunity to get a guided tour of the school. You might even have the chance to see residence halls and dining facilities.

Interview – Some schools offer prospective freshmen (that's you) the chance to interview during a campus visit. Determine if you can interview while you are on campus and knock out a couple of birds with one stone.

Observing Classes – You might be thinking why on earth would I want to sit in on a class when I've planned this whole trip to get out of going to class. Point well taken, but don't you want to get a glimpse of what college classes will be like? You don't have to stay for the entire class — sit in the back and try to observe for a short time. Note the interaction between students and faculty and get a feel for college classes.

Food – Explore the different on-campus food options. You'll probably end up visiting over lunch or dinner anyway, so you may as well try out the food while you're there. Some schools will even give you a meal on them. Who can pass up free food?

Staying Overnight – Schools are going to have widely varying policies on the overnight visit. If you know a current student and can stay with a friend while you're visiting, that's always a good idea. Also, you may be able to arrange a visit through the admission office. The overnight visit is one of the best ways to really and truly experience a school. You'll get to see the campus without parents and get a feel for what "real" students do.

Special Visit Days/Weekends – Almost every college and university offers special visit days/weekends. This can be a great time to visit campus. Just think, you'll get to meet tons of potential classmates. Pay attention to your mail and to the school's websites for information about these special open houses.

College Visits Cont.

Ask Questions To...

Students – It's okay to walk up to random students and ask them about their experiences. This is the best way to get candid answers to your toughest questions. Don't you want to know why students chose this school and if they are happy to be there?

Tour Guide – Ask your tour guide questions that are best answered by a current student: What do you do fun? What are classes really like? Why did you choose this school? What would you change, if you could? What are your post-graduation plans? What did you do last Saturday night?

Admissions Office – Ask admission counselors questions about academics, the application process, admission rates, etc. Don't ask admission counselors any questions to which you can easily find the answer on a website or in printed literature. For instance, don't ask if the school offers a marine biology major. You should have researched that yourself before you set foot on campus.

Others – While you're on campus consider meeting with coaches, faculty members, the financial aid office, deans, etc. Depending upon the size of the school and your individual talents, you should try to meet with all the relevant folks. Questions will obviously vary based on who you are able to meet.

Things To Notice On Campus (And Off, Too)

Residence Halls – Where you live is a pretty big part of the college experience. Most schools require freshman to live on campus (unless you're a commuter) so you should get a good sense of your housing options.

Dining Facilities – Do you have lots of choices where you will eat your meals? How does the meal plan work? If you have dietary restrictions (kosher, vegetarian, vegan, etc.) will you eat well or starve?

Library – Chances are you're going to need to do some studying while you're in college, so it's a good idea to check out the library. Is it state-of-the-art and high-tech or is it as ancient and archaic as all those books you're going to read?

Athletic Center – If you’re an athlete, this is a must. If you work out occasionally or just want to root your team on to victory, you’ll still want to see what the athletic center is like.

Student Center – This can be the main center for student activity on campus. Is it vibrant and full of energy or as quiet as the library? The student center can give you a good sense of campus life.

Quadrangles – Check out the quads or other student hang-out spots. If you don’t know where to find them, ask your tour guide.

Surrounding Area – You will probably spend time off-campus as well, so check out the area around the school. You may ultimately move off campus, so consider those housing options, too. Where do students shop? Eat? Play?

Post-Visit

Journal – Jot down some notes after each college visit. Write down your impression of the school, what you liked/disliked, things that stand out in your mind. After you visit several schools you’ll have trouble keeping all those details straight and the more you can remember about each visit, the better, when it comes time to make a final decision about which school to attend.

Thank You Notes – Take the time to write a personal note to anyone you meet on your visit: admission counselors, professors, students, etc.



HELPFUL WEB SITES

- www.collegeconfidential.com/college_search/visits.htm
- <http://talk.collegeconfidential.com/visits>
- www.nacacnet.org/MemberPortal/News/StepsNewsletter/College+Visits.htm
- www.mapquest.com
- www.expedia.com

Tips For Choosing A School

Think that all colleges are the same because they have those fancy seals with Latin and they all boast having all-you-can-eat ice cream bars? Well, behind those chopped nuts and whipped cream are many other attributes that will affect your time on campus. Here are some things to look for when flipping through those glossy catalogs and when making your final decision.

The Big Picture

The first step in choosing a school is perhaps the hardest step — getting to know yourself. Before you can decide if a school is the right place for you, you must first learn what you need and want out of the college experience. This takes a great deal of thought and the answer evolves over time. While you're focusing on self-evaluation, think about the attributes offered by schools such as:

Price – Consider the price of tuition, room, board, books and living expenses. Think about financial assistance.

Public v. Private – Consider the differences in the academic experiences.

Reputation – Will your diploma be worth what you “pay” for it?

Size – Do you want a gigantic student body and campus or a smaller, intimate setting?

Academic Attributes To Consider

Rather than look at commercial rankings that may not measure what you want, think about what will make you successful in the classroom, such as these various elements:

Teaching – Find out things about the faculty. Are they there because they want to teach or because they want to write and do research? Will you have graduate assistants or full-time professors? If you need to discuss something with them, will your faculty be accessible to you?

Class Size & Teacher To Student Interaction – What are your options for courses? Will you only take huge lecture classes or, if you prefer, will you have the opportunity for smaller courses? If it's important to you that your teachers know you and notice how you're doing in the class, try observing a class in session and try to evaluate the faculty/student interaction.

Retention – What is the freshman retention rate? What is the transfer rate, i.e. are students happy to attend this school? What percent return for the second year?

What was the college GPA for last year's freshman class? How many students graduate within 4 years or 5 years? Learn about the career placement office and ask for facts and figures about what students do after they leave the college.

Grading – Ask current students about what kinds of attributes for grading are typically used in the classroom. Are there mostly objective tests or are there ample chances for group collaboration and projects. Will you get experience doing class presentations and is class discussion both encouraged and active? How often will you get feedback on your course progress? How much writing will you be required to do?

Academic Requirements – Known as core requirements, gen-eds (general education), distribution requirements, etc. These are the classes or categories of classes that you will have to take in order to graduate, regardless of your major. Learn about the core course requirements and learn how current students feel about them. Are the selections interesting and worthwhile or are they a drudgery? Check out the math and foreign language requirements, especially as these tend to vary greatly.

Teacher To Student Ratio – This number can be misleading and easily manipulated but you should consider the accessibility and availability of faculty members. Ask your tour guide, friends you know at the school, or even complete strangers the size of his/her largest and smallest classes during the first year and later years. Then think about what environment is best for you.

Academic Services – Find out about academic services. What if you need extra help? Are tutors/help centers available to everyone? If you're undecided about a major, what assistance does the college provide? If you have personal or health problems, are there accessible services for students?

Major/Minor Offerings – If you change your mind about majoring in chemical engineering, will there be other options available to you? Are there numerous areas of academic study? For what is the school well known?

Class Offerings – Read the course listings, often available online. Would you have enough options in course selection?

Lifestyle Attributes To Consider

Colleges can be found in the middle of nowhere or in the middle of a huge city. They can be in suburbia or in rural counties. This is a time for you to think about what resources you actually need and would use during your college days. Think about the activities you have enjoyed in high school and decide whether you'll want

Tips For Choosing A School Cont.

to continue some or all of those; this might help you focus on the lifestyle you're looking for. Consider the following aspects:

Cultural Offerings – What do students do off-campus? What kinds of concert venues, museums, theater, restaurants, etc. are nearby? Colleges are usually very good at providing plenty of social and enrichment activities for students, so look at a student newspaper and look for upcoming events. Stop by the student activities center and read posters on bulletin boards. Ask current students what activities they do on and off campus.

Student Body – Consider geographic, ethnic, racial, religious and academic diversity. Do many or most of the students go home on weekends? If so, you'll find the campus to have a different feel at various times. Are most of the students from your region of the country? If not, decide if you're comfortable being the sole Hawaiian adjusting to your first Boston winter.

Student Support – If you get into trouble while you're in school (physical, emotional, academic, legal), what kind of support system is available to help you out?

Housing – On-campus, off-campus, antiquated, brand-new. What will your housing options be during your freshman year and beyond? If you seek a residential community, evaluate the quality of the residence halls, but don't dwell on them too much. They probably won't be as nice as your home bedroom, but you can decorate and personalize your room, and you'll be surprised at how quickly you can feel good about where you're living.

- **Past Freshman Year** – When all ages of students live on campus, a good sense of community occurs. Find out if you could continue to live on campus in later years if you wished to do so. Also, many colleges offer wonderful older student apartment-style housing, which might be something to look forward to.
- **How Are Roommates Paired Up?** – It is seldom a good idea to room with a high school friend. While it would be comfortable to have someone to hang out with the first few days, college is a time for you to make and enjoy new relationships, and that can be difficult if your high school friend is also your roommate. Besides, best roommates are seldom best friends. If the college invites you to complete a survey about yourself for the purposes of assigning a roommate, you'll want to be honest with yourself and about yourself, or you could end up with a roommate who is totally incompatible with your lifestyle.

Organizations – Can you get involved in many types of activities? What extracurricular activities do students do? If fraternities and sororities exist on campus, are they a big part of campus life? Do you want adventures? What activities, organizations, and opportunities will be available to you? Will there be sufficient chances for you to try new things? Will you be able to practice your leadership skills in extracurricular activities?

Safety – Your safety on campus is always important. Get the real story from current students. Published campus crime statistics can be helpful, but it's best to learn how safe students, themselves, feel on a daily basis.

Sports Attributes To Consider

A key aspect of college life for many students is sports, so make sure to consider the following:

Sports (School and Professional) – What kind of competitive sports does the school compete in? Division I, Division II, or Division III? What is the athletic feel of the campus? Can you attend professional games nearby?

Wanna Play Ball? – Varsity athletics are monitored carefully. If you're an athlete, you'll have to meet certain testing and grade standards before you can be a college player. Coaches use the NCAA Clearinghouse to determine an athlete's initial eligibility, so make sure to research this during your college application process. Remember that while college athletics seem glamorous, and it is flattering to be recruited, playing varsity college athletics takes a huge commitment from students. You had better LOVE your sport before you make the decision to participate in college. Of the many advantages to playing sports in college, an important one is that the coach and athletic department can provide academic support when you need it. First-year athletes are often required to appear for a certain number of hours per week at a "study table;" this ensures the athletes are spending enough time on academics since the team takes so much of their time.

Rec Facilities – Check out the recreation centers on campus. Do they have workout facilities, basketball courts, tennis court, etc? Do they offer exercise or yoga classes? You might as well take advantage of these, as the fees are part of your bill!

Club Sports – Club sports are extremely popular with students. These teams don't get the media and fan attention the varsity sports do, but they are often quite competitive and intense. They get less funding than varsity sports, yet many students feel they are actually more fun than the college teams.

Tips For Choosing A School Cont.

Intramurals – Most colleges offer intramurals of all types, including flag-football, soccer, ping-pong, and every other sport or event you can imagine. Intramurals are often very relaxed and fun, as they just require coming out and having a good time.

Financial Aid Attributes To Consider

Colleges are generally very generous about awarding financial aid to talented and/or needy students. As you're comparing colleges, here are some tips about making good financial decisions:

Debt – Since much of your financial aid might be in the form of loans, ask yourself if you are comfortable taking on debt. The loans are often repayable over 10 years, and are not repayable until you've left school, but they are a long-term commitment, nevertheless. Consider taking out loans as a form of financial management. If you have investments sufficient to cover your college costs, and those investments are earning interest, it might make good financial sense to take low-interest loans and preserve the investment for a longer period of time.

Financial Aid % – Ask your prospective college if they will meet 100% of your financial need, as determined by the FAFSA (Free Application for Federal Student Aid). If not 100%, then what percentage can you expect?

Payment Plans – Does the college have special payment plans? Monthly payments and pre-payment are plans that can make the bills easier to manage.

Scholarships – Apply for every independently-sponsored scholarship you can. Make time for them. They are "gravy" in the full spectrum of college financial aid, but organizations and corporations actively seek qualified applicants for their generous awards.

Alternatives – If the net costs turn out to be too expensive, look at other alternatives to the four-year residential college experience: live at home for a year or so, attend a two-year college first, look into military benefits for college, attend college part-time and work full-time to save money, take a year off to work and earn tuition money, or enroll in a college that offers co-op (a program whereby students alternate work, gaining experience and earning money, with on-campus classes).



HELPFUL WEB SITES

- www.ctcl.com/why/index.htm
- www.educationconservancy.org/we_admit.pdf
- <http://www.usnews.com/sections/education/index.html>
- www.dickinson.edu/tips/planning/
- <http://apps.collegeboard.com/search/index.jsp>
- www.collegeview.com/collegesearch/advSearch.jsp