

College Admissions

Factors to consider when choosing a college

- *Size:* What is the total student population? How big are the typical freshman classes?
- *Location:* How far is the college from home? Is it in a rural, urban, suburban setting? What is the area surrounding the campus like?
- *People:* Who are the students and where do they come from?
- *Academics:* What majors are available? Who teaches the courses? What is the academic reputation of the college?
- *Social Opportunities:* What clubs and teams are available? Are there fraternities and sororities? Is there a SHPE Chapter?
- *Cost:* What is the total cost of attendance, including tuition, room and board, and books? What kind of financial aid is available?

College Admissions

The college admissions process is made up of various components:

- The application
- Personal statement
- High school transcript
- Extracurricular activities
- Test scores
- Letters of recommendation
- Interview

The Application

Over 450 schools take part in the [Common Application^{\[1\]}](#), an online application that allows students to send their information to multiple colleges and universities. Other colleges and universities may have their own online application system.

Note: Some schools also have supplemental components to their application that are specific to the school. This can include additional essay questions, a list of the majors you are interested in, etc. Make sure to check whether that the schools you are applying to have a supplemental component.

ApplyTexas^[2] is an online application similar to the common application but specific to Texas public schools. The goal of the project is to offer a centralized means for both Texas and non-Texas students to apply to the many outstanding postsecondary institutions available in Texas.

Personal Statement

Purpose of the college essay:

- Offer colleges an understanding of students as unique individuals within the context of their families, schools, communities, and the world
- Add clarity, richness, and meaning to the information collected in other parts of the application
- Allow students to make their best case for why they should be admitted
- Clarify the distinctions between applicants whose academic records appear to be quite similar
- Provide the school with information that may not be evident in other parts of the application
- Is a space for students to explain how factors outside of their school environment have enhanced or impeded their ability to maximize available academic and intellectual opportunities

The most compelling personal statements often discuss:

- Academic record, accomplishments, and activities
- Any unusual circumstances, challenges, or hardships students have faced and the ways in which they have overcome or responded to them
- Initiative, motivation, leadership, persistence, service to others, special potential, and/or substantial experience with other cultures
- Achievements in light of the opportunities available to students

Tips:

- Start your personal statement early. Give yourself time to think about your topics and carefully consider the rationale behind each question.
- Be clear, focused, and organized. Make sure your personal statement follows a logical structure. Try to think about how it may seem to an audience who doesn't know you. Input from people you trust—teachers, friends, relatives can help you get different perspectives on how your personal statement affects those who are reading it.

- Be careful with humor and clichés. What might seem funny or bitingly ironic to you might not seem that way to someone who doesn't know you. Remember that the personal statement is an opportunity for you to give the school a complete picture of yourself. Do not allow clichés to speak for you.
- Do NOT manufacture hardship. A personal statement isn't effective simply because it chronicles difficult circumstances. Rather, an effective personal statement gives us a clear sense of your personal qualities and how you have used and developed them in response to your opportunities and challenges.
- Use specific examples to illustrate your ideas. Thousands upon thousands of personal statements discuss initiative. Only hundreds show initiative with concrete examples of demonstrated motivation and leadership. But, examples are only one part of the equation. Colleges also need to see how you have assigned meaning to your experiences and how you have grown from them. Colleges and universities want you to prove with written examples that you have a sense of who you are, where you are going, and how you are going to use your education and your experiences to accomplish your goals. Although some events have long-term or even lifetime ramifications, it is usually better to focus on recent events because they shed more light on who you are right now.

High School Transcript

Each college will usually require multiple copies of official transcripts so that they can review the classes students have taken and the grades they have received. Encourage your mentees to talk to your counselors in September to learn the procedure for getting transcripts at their school. Request copies early – with many students applying to college at the same time, there can often be delays.

Tips:

- Make sure that the envelope is sealed with an official school seal or the signature of your counselor.
- Ensure that they or their school will mail it to their college choices as soon as possible.
- Order extra copies for their personal records.

Extracurricular Activities

Extracurricular activities are very important and reveal a lot to admissions professionals. They are looking for activities that you've been involved with on more than just a superficial level. Focus and duration are the key words when it comes to extracurricular.

Being involved in a few clubs continually and taking leadership roles or reaching certain levels of accomplishment are much more impressive than being a member in 10 clubs or groups.

Activities that cluster around a specific interest also are a plus. For example, a student in the drama club, who also works with a community group that does outreach theater programs for kids and is involved every year with the class play, is someone who has demonstrated a definite interest and dedication.

Students who can't take part in extracurricular activities because of family financial situations aren't out of the running. Some students are working close to full-time schedules as high school students, and those situations are taken into consideration. Work experience is valued. [3]

Test Scores

Make sure to check which standardized tests the schools you are looking at require. Some colleges may require the SAT OR ACT AND SAT II. Do not wait to take them too far in your high school time. Consider taking them your second semester of junior year that way you have some time to retake them if need be. Take practice tests to prepare.

SAT

- out of 2400 (3 sections: Verbal – 800, Math – 800, Writing – 800)
- 3 hours and 45 minutes
- Remember to register in advance, deadlines: <http://sat.collegeboard.org/register/sat-us-dates>
- Points deducted for wrong answers
- can get fee waivers from college counselors

SAT Subject Tests/ SAT II

- Subject Tests – out of 800
- Required by a lot of schools, typically in the fields relevant to what you tell them you're interested in
- Tests and deadlines: <http://sat.collegeboard.org/register/sat-subject-test-dates>
- For engineering, good tests: Math L2, Chemistry, Physics
- Recommended to take them after having taken the same subject for class in high school
- can get fee waivers from college counselors

ACT

- Out of 36 (4 sections: English, Math, Reading, Science)
- There are 2 options: ACT and ACT with writing, for most colleges they will require the ACT with writing
- 3 hours and 45 minutes

- No points deducted for wrong answers
- Remember to register in advance, deadlines: <http://www.actstudent.org/>
- can get fee waivers from college counselors

Letters of Recommendation

Most college applications request two or three recommendation letters.

Whom should you ask?

- Read the application carefully. Often colleges request letters of recommendation from an academic teacher (sometimes a specific discipline), your school counselor, or both. If a non-specified academic teacher is requested, your English or math teachers usually make good candidates. If they don't specify that they would like to hear from a teacher, often a supervisor at work or an advisor from one of your activities can write an excellent letter. Colleges want to know about your academic accomplishments, but they also want to hear about skills in other areas, including leadership, work ethic, and enthusiasm for learning.

When should you ask?

- Make sure to give your recommendation writers plenty of time—at least one month before letters are due—to complete and send your recommendations, but as with anything, the earlier the better. Many teachers like to have the summer to write recommendations, so if you asked during the spring of your junior year, you're doing great. If you apply under early decision or early action plans, you'll need to ask at the start of the school year, if you did not request one last spring.

How can you get the best possible recommendations?

- Talk to your recommendation writers. For teachers, it's important that they focus on your academic talents and accomplishments within their classroom, because that's what colleges are looking for in teacher recommendations. Talk to them about what you remember about their class and your participation in it. Highlight a particular paper, a time you led a group project, or anything else that might help them provide anecdotal information and specific examples of your achievement rather than just vague praise.

Communicate with your recommenders!

- Make sure all recommenders know about your plans, accomplishments, and involvements. You may want to provide them with a brief resume of your activities and goals; a resume can provide the best overview of your high school involvement and

contributions. Also, if there is some aspect of your transcript that needs explaining—perhaps low grades during sophomore year—it’s helpful to talk with your counselors to explain why and how you’ve changed and improved.

Tips:

- Don’t be shy. Teachers and counselors are usually happy to help you, as long as you respect their time constraints.
- Include addressed and stamped envelopes for each school to which you’re applying.
- Provide teachers and counselors with deadlines for each recommendation that you are requesting, especially noting the earliest deadline.
- On the application form, waive your right to view recommendation letters. This gives more credibility to the recommendation in the eyes of the college.
- Typically, you know your teachers well enough to know who can provide favorable reviews of your accomplishments. If in doubt, don’t hesitate to ask if they feel comfortable writing a recommendation. In some cases, you may have no choice as to who to use, but when you do, make the best choice possible.
- Follow up with your recommendation writers a week or so prior to your first deadline, to ensure recommendations have been mailed or to see if they need additional information from you
- Once you have decided which college to attend, write thank-you notes to everyone who provided a recommendation and tell them where you’ve decided to go to college. Be sure to do this before you leave high school.

Interview

Not all colleges will require an interview. Even the interview is optional it is recommended that you have one.

Tips:

- Dress appropriately
- Prepare answers and stories for possible questions
- Research the school beforehand, sometimes they ask why you are interested in their particular school
- Have questions to ask the interviewer

^[1] <https://www.commonapp.org/CommonApp/default.aspx>

^[2] <https://www.applytexas.org/adappc/html/about.html>

^[3] <http://alumni.umich.edu/learning/college-admissions-faq#q10>
