



Guide to 11th Grade



What 11th Graders need to focus on in High School

collegevine

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What 11th Graders need to focus on in High School

It's no secret that when it comes to college applications, 11th grade is of critical importance. For many students—especially those who end up applying early decision or early action—11th grade is their last chance to make an impression, earn grades that count towards the GPA presented on their transcript, and improve standardized test scores.

With so much riding on 11th grade, we often find that families aren't quite sure where to begin. There is certainly a lot to juggle, but how can you prioritize it all appropriately? What should your student be thinking about as he or she chooses classes, pursues extracurriculars, and polishes test scores?

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At CollegeVine, it's our goal to take the questions out of the equation so that you can get straight down to focusing on what really matters. In this guide, we outline different areas of focus for this very important year.



Chapter 1

Academics

Balance is Key

During 11th grade, academics are hugely important. Grades earned during 11th grade are weighed heavily during college admissions, and if your student should choose to apply early decision or early action, the grades that he or she receives as an 11th grader are the last ones that will appear on his or her transcript before an admissions decision is made.

That being said, it isn't just your student's grades that matter. It's also the courses that those grades are earned in. In order to make a really good impression, the classes your student takes during 11th grade should be the most difficult ones yet. Remind your student that admissions officers would generally rather see good grades in challenging classes than perfect grades in an easier course load. This is your teen's chance to show initiative.

This is why selecting a carefully balanced course load is so important. Your student should enroll in classes that are challenging and reflective of his or her peak abilities without being overwhelming. The transcript should ideally show honors, AP, or IB classes, and good grades to match. In short, your student needs to take the most challenging classes that he or she is capable of doing well in.



A TIP FROM THE EXPERTS:

When choosing between two classes, a good rule of thumb is – if a student thinks they are able to maintain a B or better, opt for the more challenging option.

Upward Grade Trends

11th grade is also one of your student's last chances to build an upward grade trend. This is basically a pattern of improvement over time, and it typically applies mostly to students who struggled academically during an earlier period of high school. In these cases, colleges will look more favorably upon an applicant who stumbles early on and then steadily improves afterwards compared to a student whose progress is inconsistent.

Students whose transcript shows some room for improvement during the earlier high school years should kick their academics into overdrive by 11th grade in order to clearly establish this upward grade trend.

How to Choose AP Classes?

Advanced Placement (AP) classes are college level classes that a student can enroll in during high school. The curriculum for these classes is standardized across the country, and most of them culminate in an exam or other assessment piece which is graded on a scale of 1-5. Scores of three or higher typically qualify as proficient and can sometimes help your student earn college credit or place out of introductory level classes in college.



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If your student's school offers a variety of AP classes, students aiming for highly selective colleges should take at least 3-4 of them during 11th grade. Doing so will not only highlight your student's ability to handle a full load of college level classes, but can also help establish specific areas of skill, interest or speciality.

Thinking About Potential College Majors

This brings us to the topic of college majors. First of all, don't panic. It's not really time to stress about this yet. That said, if your teen has some idea of what he or she wants to study in the future, 11th grade is a great time to start exploring that field. This doesn't mean that your aspiring lawyer is taking civil law classes or that your future oncologist is taking human anatomy. It just means that your student is exploring these fields at the most basic level.

How does this look in practice? If your teen is interested in a career in medicine, he or she should be taking AP Chemistry and/or AP Biology. A student interested in politics or law could take AP World History or Macroeconomics.

Exploring these subject areas is important in three ways:

1

It allows your student to experience college level work in an area that he or she might pursue in college. This is an important testing ground and a great opportunity to try out an area of interest before it's decision time.

2

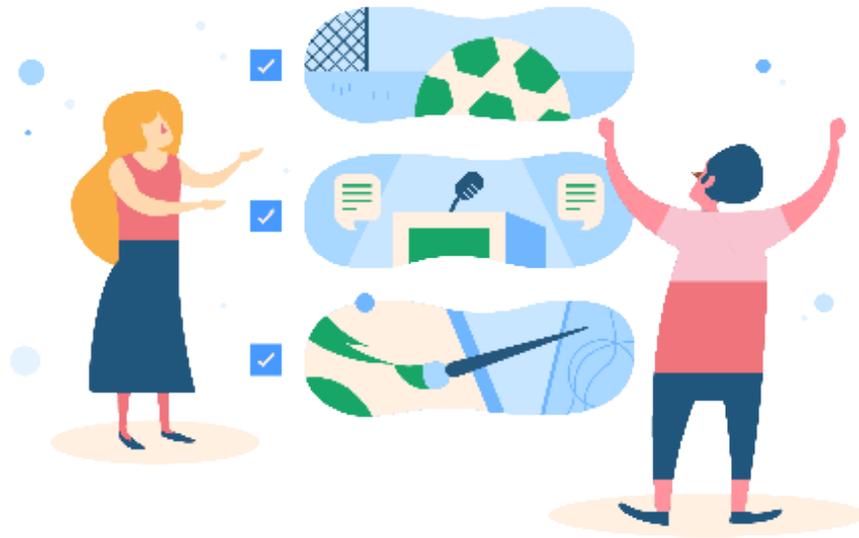
Taking these classes now can give your student a head start in college. A score of three or above on an AP exam could count towards college credit or allow your student to place out of intro level classes when he or she starts college.

3

AP classes in a specific area can show admissions officers that your student is serious about a certain subject area by demonstrating commitment and dedication. Admissions officers usually appreciate seeing that a student has already experienced and been successful in college level classes in his or her intended field of study.

Chapter 2

Extracurriculars



Develop and Deepen Existing Extracurriculars and Skills

Just as 11th grade is the time to really up the game when it comes to academics, the same holds true for extracurriculars. Many awards and honors are granted only once per year, at the end of the school year, so 11th grade is often the last chance your teen will have to earn recognition for his or her accomplishments outside of the classroom.

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11th grade is not the time to experiment with new activities. Instead, it's the time to become more involved with a few select ones. College admissions teams prefer to see specialized applications—applications that show a deep commitment to a few key passions—rather than shallow involvement in a large number of activities. Help your teen to identify key activities, and encourage him or her to prioritize these activities over others in which he or she is only peripherally involved.

11th grade may even be time to drop an activity or two if it's something that doesn't contribute to building your student's overall profile. Activities that he or she isn't deeply connected to and which are unrelated to his or her intended major or career path might need to yield for those that are more important from an admissions perspective. Dropping out of activities that take up time and energy without offering much in return can mean more time and energy for those that do bolster a college application.

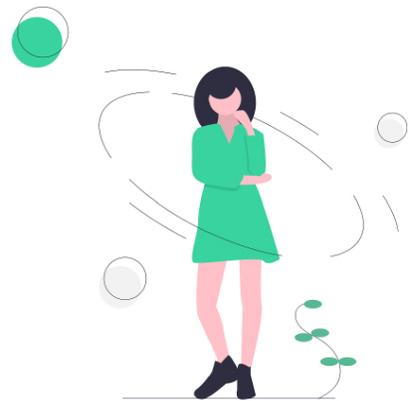
These Questions Can Help You Decide if You Should Drop an Activity:

Is this something that I'm really passionate about?

Is it related to my career goals or a potential college major?

Have I earned recognition and leadership roles in this activity?

Is this one of the only activities I'm involved in?



If the answer to these questions is a resounding NO, you might consider dropping it to make way for other, more worthwhile pursuits.

Demonstrate Leadership

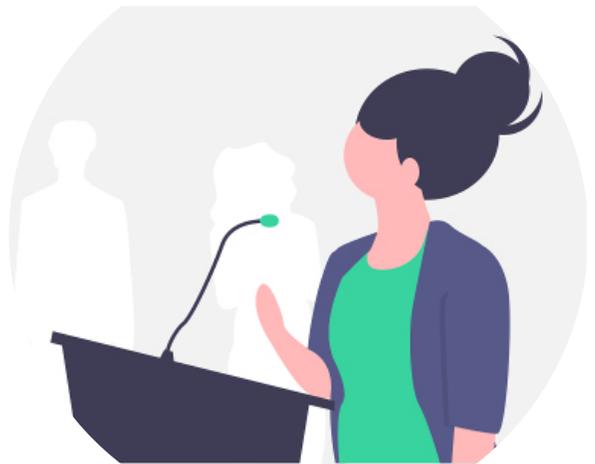
Establishing your leadership skills through extracurricular involvement is a necessity for students who want to get into selective colleges. However, remember that leadership is more than just a title.

Your student should pursue leadership positions in areas that he or she is genuinely interested in. Whether or not these will become career goals or relate to a college major isn't necessarily the most important factor. Instead, your student should show leadership in areas of authentic passion. He or she might not be a professional musician or make the national soccer team, but being lead violinist or captain of varsity soccer demonstrates commitment, dedication, and hard work over time. The hard skills learned through these activities might not become lifelong pursuits, but the soft skills learned through sustained effort and leadership will stay with your student for life.

If there aren't leadership positions inherently built into your student's extracurricular pursuits, there are still opportunities to be a leader. Encourage your student to lead by action, found a new initiative or club, get a job related to the activity, or create his or her own extracurricular. Pushing leadership outside the box shows maturity, creativity, and initiative.

Ways to be a leader beyond becoming captain or club president

- ✓ Start a new fundraiser
- ✓ Start a mentoring program
- ✓ Enter a contest
- ✓ Organize a skill share event
- ✓ Organize an exhibition, performance, or other show
- ✓ Create a service project



Summer Activities



Just like 11th grade is the most important year of school for college applications, the summer before 12th grade is the most important summer for college applications. Many teens are surprised to learn just how early the deadlines are for some prestigious summer programs. Get your teen started thinking about next summer in October. He or she will probably balk at first, but many summer programs have deadlines in November or December.

Internships, community service projects, research programs, or college classes are all great options for the summer. To learn more about planning for the summer before 12th grade, check out our post [11th Graders: 9 Productive Things To Do This Summer Before Senior Year](#).

Chapter 3

Researching Colleges and Building a School List

A college list is the final list of colleges to which your student will submit applications. It is something that should be compiled carefully over an extended period of time, and is arguably the most important step in a successful college application process.

By February of 11th grade, you and your student should be building a preliminary list of schools to try and visit over spring break. If possible, try to visit a variety of campus types, even if your teen doesn't think he or she is interested. Seeing a large university, a small college, an urban campus, a suburban campus, and a rural campus, will all lend insight to future college decisions.

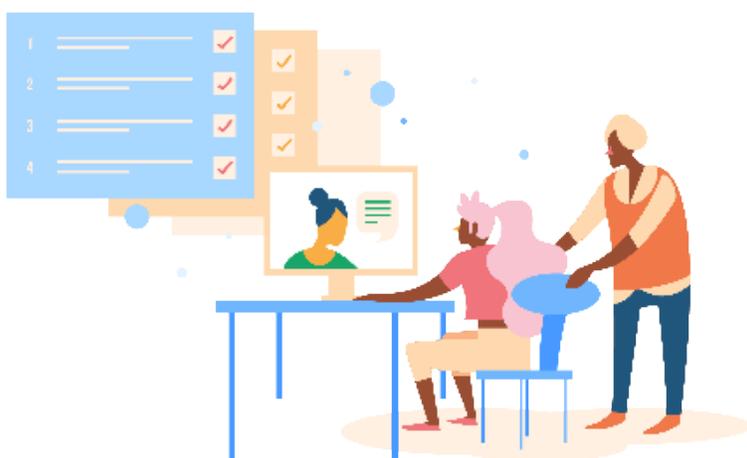
Also, make sure to have conversations about your priorities and your student's priorities in a college search.

These questions might help get the conversation started:

- *Do you learn better in small, discussion-based classes, or in larger, lecture-based settings?*
- *Do you think you want to go to college close to home, or far away? Why?*
- *How important to you are extracurriculars like sports, clubs, or Greek life?*
- *Would you like to go to college in a city, suburban, or rural setting?*
- *Do you have any ideas about what you want to study in college?*

For more tips on creating a college list, don't miss these important CollegeVine posts:

- [Seven Tips For Creating Your College List](#)
- [Five Mistakes to Avoid When Creating a College List](#)
- [10 Considerations For Making Your College List](#)



What Does a Strong College List Look Like?

- ✔ 8-12 schools total
- ✔ Includes 2-3 safety schools, 4-5 target schools, and 2-3 reach schools. To learn more about what each of these is, see our post — [The College List, Decoded: Safety, Target, and Reach Schools](#)
- ✔ Takes into consideration family and student priorities, including financial capacity, location, preferences, educational quality, and potential majors



Strong College Lists Help Avoid College Mismatch

Through our research at CollegeVine, we've come to know that 53% of U.S. high school students are incorrectly matched to their college. What exactly does this mean?

” Some students are overqualified for their college, meaning their profile is significantly stronger than the average student who is accepted there.

This is sometimes a financial decision or occurs when a college list isn't well balanced in terms of selectivity. In that case, a student may be rejected from several highly selective schools, but does not have appropriate target schools to choose from, leaving him or her with few options. A student who is overqualified at a specific college risks leaving a lot of money on the table in terms of career trajectory and opportunity.

” Other students are under-qualified for their colleges, meaning they are applying to colleges where their profile is significantly weaker than the average applicant.

These students might be accepted based on highly unique or exceptional skills, like athletic achievements, or based on a unique background that makes him or her a compelling applicant. For example, a student who attended high school while homeless and overcame significant adversity might be accepted into a school where his or her GPA and test scores place fall in the bottom 10%. This student and others who are under-qualified at any specific college run the risk of the school being too difficult academically, which could make it difficult to graduate on time.

CollegeVine’s Chancing Engine and School List Generator

At CollegeVine, we have estimated that choosing the right colleges early on can increase a student’s earnings by over a million dollars across 20 years. This is no small risk to take, so we’ve created a customized and innovative [Chancing Engine and School List Generator](#). Here, we use a proprietary algorithm backed by over 100,000 data points to develop a school list based on your student’s real admissions chances and preferences.

We’re recognized for our ability to help families understand what colleges may be a great fit, even when they don’t appear on popular college ranking lists. Forbes’ Business Insider even published [our list of the 50 most underrated colleges](#).

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By taking into account a student’s complete profile—including grades, GPA, and extracurriculars—we can understand your student’s chances for the schools that he or she is already considering, and help your student find other schools that are a great fit. We’ve used our Chancing Engine and School List Generator to help over 10,000 students understand and improve their chances. Your family could be next.

Chapter 4

Recommendation Letters



During 11th grade, your student should put a concerted effort into building and maintaining positive relationships with his or her teachers. This is not just for the sake of a great recommendation letter. Teachers are also an invaluable support network and can help with mentorship, advice, and insight.

Who to Ask for a Recommendation Letter?

When it does come time to consider college recommendations, it's easy to focus on teachers in whose classes your student has naturally excelled. Sometimes, though, the best recommendations come from those who can speak to how your child confronts challenges and his or her ability to overcome them. If your student had a shaky start in a class, but was able to overcome it by the end of the year, this teacher might have the best material for a strong recommendation letter.

In addition to thinking about who can best speak to your student's character and skills, your student should also consider who has known him or her for a prolonged period, has worked with him or her closely, and has taught him or her recently. Ideally, your student will select someone who has shown appreciation for his or her work in the past. Don't just choose a teacher because they are a favorite. Instead, consider teachers from different disciplines and those who notice your student's academic progress and contributions.

When to Ask for Recommendation Letters?

Many teachers, especially the more popular ones, will have a long list of students who request recommendations. Sometimes in the midst of writing multiple letters of recommendation, the substance of them will begin to blend together. It's a lot of work with little payoff for the teacher, but your student can set him or herself apart simply by getting an early start.

The earlier a student can request a letter of recommendation, the better. Ideally during winter break of 11th grade, students should begin thinking about which teachers they had the greatest relationships with throughout their high school career. Then, by the end of the year, they should request letters of recommendation. Doing so before the summer break will allow the teacher plenty of time to reflect over the summer, probably before many other students have requested their own letters.

CollegeVine Top Tip For Requesting Letters of Recommendation:

Provide teachers with a "cheat sheet" of relevant information that they may refer to. This should include things like GPA, class rank, transcript, and deadlines for recommendation letters. You can also include some "bragging points", like honors or accomplishments. If there are specific examples that illustrate the traits you want to highlight, don't be shy about sharing them!



DON'T FORGET:

Your child should give the recommender a formal thank you after he or she writes the letter. A handwritten note or a small gift are good ways to show appreciation.

For more tips on recommendation letters, visit our blog post, [9 Rules for Requesting Letters of Recommendation from Teachers](#).

Chapter 5

Standardized Tests



Oh yes, with the arrival of 11th grade, the standardized testing season is definitely upon you. Starting in the fall with the PSAT, your student will be spending significant amounts of energy and time on testing and test prep this year, and this is with good reason.

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Standardized tests are not a measure of your child’s intelligence or aptitude, even if they may attempt to measure these things. More often than not, they are a measure of testing ability and they are used by colleges to gain insight about your student’s knowledge and ability to apply it.

Let’s face it: some students are better test takers than others. This will almost always certainly be the case, but even students who consider themselves “bad test-takers” can improve their scores significantly through prep and practice. That’s why getting a head start is so important.

Why Are Standardized Tests Important?

Standardized tests are still weighed heavily in the college admissions process by many colleges and universities. Even those who don't require standardized test scores will usually still consider them if they are submitted. This means that at the very least, standardized tests are another chance to impress the admissions committee.

At most, the stakes of standardized tests can be much higher. Some colleges and universities use them as an initial screening tool. If you don't meet a certain score cutoff, the rest of your application may not even get reviewed.

Standardized tests scores can also be important if there are other areas of your application that aren't as strong. In some cases, a great SAT score could make up for a weak grade in a class or a less-developed extracurricular profile. Of course, this depends on what schools your student is applying to, but it's a definite possibility.

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Finally, SAT scores play an important role in many scholarship decisions. In fact some scholarships, like the National Merit Scholarship, are based almost entirely on standardized test scores (in this case on the PSAT). Some colleges even offer SAT-based scholarships.

To learn which colleges offer scholarships for high SAT scores, check out our post: [Which Colleges Award Automatic Scholarships Based On SAT Scores?](#)

Plan Your Testing Calendar in Advance

Here is our sample calendar to get you started. You and your teen will need to adapt it to fit your own needs. To decide when to take your SATs or ACTs, be sure to check out our post [When Should I Take the SAT or ACT?](#)

Date	Task
September 15	Confirm PSAT registration with guidance counselor if you plan on taking the PSAT. If none is offered at your school, contact other area schools to arrange a test date.
Mid-September	Mid-September Registration deadline for October ACT, if applicable.
October	Take the PSAT. Three dates are typically available, but the test will only be offered at your school once.
Early-October	Registration deadline for November SAT, if applicable.
Late October	ACT administration.
November	Registration deadline for December SAT and ACT. Preview SAT Subject Test calendar dates and availability. Make a schedule that accommodates the tests you plan to take.

Early November	SAT and ACT administrations.
Early December	SAT administration.
Mid-January	Registration deadline for February ACT. Take your first ACT now if you plan on taking it but have not already.
Mid-February	Take your first ACT if you plan on taking the ACT and have not already. (NOTE: No ACTs available in New York State on this date.)
Mid-February	Registration deadline for March SAT. Take your first SAT if you plan on taking it but have not already.
Early-March	ACT administration date.
Mid-March	SAT administration date. (NOTE: There are no SAT Subject Tests available on this date.)
Early-April and Early-May	Registration Deadlines for May and June SAT administrations. Juniors should plan to take SAT Subject Tests on these dates.

Preparing for Standardized Tests

Standardized tests take a very specific kind of preparation. They aren't the same as preparing for a final exam. Your student will need to learn a specialized set of skills and strategies in order to optimize his or her performance. Professional SAT or ACT tutors can be a wise investment, as the skills specific to each of these tests are typically not taught in a high school classroom.

Our Top Three SAT Tips:

1

Learn the Directions Ahead of Time

One easy way to save yourself a minute or two on each section of the test is to memorize the directions ahead of time. The directions on each section of the SAT are the same every time it's administered. Not only that, but they're also the same directions as those on the official SAT practice tests. You don't need to memorize them verbatim, but knowing what each section of the test is asking you to do will maximize your efficiency on test day.

2

Check Your Pace

There is not a single section of the SAT that allows for more than 90 seconds per question, and much of the test requires you to move at a pace closer to 60 seconds per question. In addition, there are lengthy passages to read, graphics to interpret, and formulas to determine. Simply put, you will need to stay on top of your pace if you're going to finish everything with time to check your work. Be sure to bring a watch and go into the test with an idea of the pacing you need to keep for each section based on your performance on practice tests.

3

Use the Two-Passes Strategy

To apply this strategy, go through each section of the test, completing all the questions with answers that are easily apparent, and making a quick best guess on questions that seem like they will require more time and thought on your part. As you do this, be very careful to mark each of the “guesses” clearly on the answer sheet and in the test booklet. Filling in your best guess means that even if you run out of time before being able to review it, at least you’ve filled in an answer and have a chance of getting it right. Remember, there is no scoring penalty for wrong guesses, so you should never leave a question blank. Once you have gone through every question, return to the ones you marked as guesses, and give each a little more thought.

For more help with test prep, check out our post [10 Tips to Prepare for the SAT](#).



Chapter 6

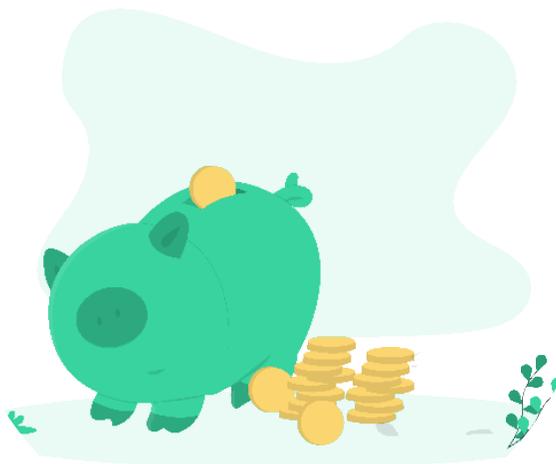
Finances

Paying for college is a serious concern for many families. Not only are college costs significant; they also can be hard to predict. Different families have different financial needs, and the amount of financial assistance that your family will receive relies on a number of factors. These include your family's income level, the list price at the college that your student attends, and how much merit aid or scholarship money your student secures. Because some of these factors don't fall into place until much later in the process, it's extremely hard to accurately estimate college costs in advance.

This is an area in which you, as the parent, can be especially helpful. It's not uncommon for high schoolers to have an unclear image of their family's financial status, or to simply not consider it when thinking about colleges. As the parent, you can put finances into perspective, set clear expectations about how much money is available for college, and do the legwork for applying for financial aid.

Understand Financial Aid

The first thing you can do to really become helpful during this part of the college decision process is to learn as much as possible about financial aid, including what forms of aid are available and the factors that commonly influence each type.



There are three forms of financial assistance:

1 Need-Based Financial Aid

Need-based financial aid is available to most families, and the amount that you receive is based on your family's income. This is the most common type of financial assistance. In 2016, the [National Center for Education Statistics](#) estimated that 85% of full-time college students were receiving financial aid.

In order to be eligible for need-based financial aid, you'll need to fill out the [Free Application for Federal Student Aid \(FAFSA\)](#). This form essentially gathers all the relevant information about your family's income and assets, and then uses it to determine your family's financial need.

The FAFSA isn't just used for federal grants. It is also used by colleges and universities when they award institutional need-based aid or determine eligibility for need-based scholarships. We'll discuss the FAFSA in more depth below.

2 Merit Scholarships

Merit scholarships are financial awards granted based on merit, rather than on financial need. These vary widely. Some are distributed by colleges and institutions themselves; others are awarded by foundations or corporations.

Some merit scholarships recognize achievement in broad areas and draw a wide pool of talent. Others are local in nature, or award specific achievements in niche areas. Some scholarships are limited to students of a specific background or residents of a certain geographic area. Others are open to everyone nationwide.

Merit scholarships are a great way to help augment college funds and they are more widely available than many people realize. To learn more about scholarships, check out these resources:

- [15 College Scholarships for High School Juniors](#)
- [15 College Scholarship Resources for High School Students](#)
- [A Guide to STEM Scholarships](#)
- [Scholarships and Competitions for students in the Performing Arts](#)
- [How to Qualify for the National Merit Scholarship Program](#)

3

Student Loans

Students loans are the final form of financial assistance commonly used by college students. They are also generally the least desirable, as they must be paid back. Student loans are distributed by private lenders or through federal programs.

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It's important to fully understand the ramifications of taking out a student loan. Private lenders might be willing to loan higher amounts, but the interest rates also tend to be more significant. In 2019, the fixed interest rate for a federal student loans for an undergraduate student was 5.05%.

Currently, the average student debt is \$28,400. If this is paid back over 10 years, the average monthly payment would be about \$300 and the total cost of the loan over 10 years, with the 5.05% interest rate, would be \$36,230.

Review Information About College Costs

Another way to help your student while he or she considers college choices is to learn more about the actual costs of attending college. The amount that your family ultimately pays out of pocket for a college degree depends not only on how much merit and financial aid that your student receives, but also on how much the particular college costs to begin with.

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One of the biggest factors in determining college costs is the list price at the college your student ultimately attends. List price, also sometimes referred to as sticker price, is the total cost of attending that college without any financial assistance. It generally includes tuition, room and board, and all necessary fees. Sometimes certain costs are excluded, like room and board at commuter schools, so make sure to confirm what the list price covers when you are comparing list prices from one school to another.

The good news is that most families do not end up paying the entire list price. Instead, they pay a net cost that depends on how much financial assistance they receive. This could be in the form of institutional aid, merit aid, or federal, state, and local aid, and most often comes in a combination of several or all of these. Because these vary from one family and one student to the next, they are hard to predict in advance, but understanding more about them is helpful.

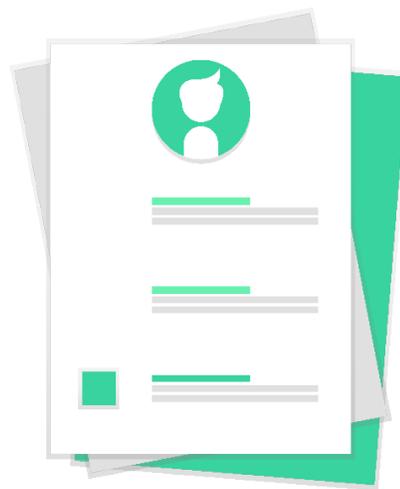
Top resources for learning more about college costs:

- [Federal Student Aid from the Office of the U.S. Department of Education](#)
- [College Costs: FAQs from the CollegeBoard's Big Future](#)
- [CollegeVine's Understand the True Cost Of College – and How to Pay for It](#)

Fill Out the FAFSA

Another way that you can help to simplify the process for your student is by filling out the FAFSA. This can be particularly daunting for a high schooler because the form gathers information that the student will likely have never dealt with in the past. This includes questions about tax returns, citizenship, and family assets. In most cases, the parent is more readily prepared to answer these questions and filling out the FAFSA is one thing that you take off your student's plate.

In order to get started, you'll need to gather documents like tax returns, W-2s, bank statements or records of investment, and other records of income. Start working on this the summer before 12th grade to make sure that you're fully prepared and have a good understanding of your family's financial needs before college applications are due.



Need more help understanding how to pay for college? Register for our [Guide to College Scholarships webinar](#) where we help families better understand how to navigate through all the scholarship options available to them. You will learn about the different types of scholarship programs and how they work, as well as how students should negotiate financial aid rewards.

CollegeVine FAFSA Must Reads:

- ✓ [The Ultimate Guide to Filling Out the FAFSA](#)
- ✓ [What Information Will I Need to Complete the FAFSA?](#)
- ✓ [5 Time-Saving Tips for Completing the FAFSA](#)

Need more help along the way?

CollegeVine provides a full suite of technology and prep tools tailored for students at every step in the college application process. Our services have proven to triple our students' chances of getting into one of their top three schools. Through the use of our proprietary school matching tools and milestone trackers, we are able to find the right schools for every student and ensure that he or she meets the necessary requirements for applying at each step along the way. Check out our post: [Tips For Meeting College Application Deadlines](#) where we detail the steps in the college application process and provide tips on how to make sure you get your applications in on time.

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