

THE ULTIMATE

College Prep Guide

Help your child take the step from high school to college.

If you're the parent of a freshman or sophomore just beginning the college admissions process, the following ten chapters will serve as your roadmap for the exciting years ahead. If you're the parent of a junior or senior currently navigating the admissions process, this guide will shine a light on the aspects of getting into college that aren't so clear.

In both cases, you'll find that the moment your child opens the acceptance letter to his or her dream school isn't made of any secrets or tricks. Rather, helping your child through the college admissions process is simply about support. It's about staying on top of requirements, deadlines, and strategies leading up to the day when your child will send off his or her applications.

Each of these ten chapters breaks down an aspect of college admissions. By the end, you'll have the tools to guide your child through senior year and into college.

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Chapter One

How Admissions Committees Think

Understanding the college admissions process is critical for getting into a dream school. It all comes down to whether your child impresses the admissions committee. But admissions officers see hundreds of applications a day—so how does one stand out?

Before we take a deep dive into each aspect of the college application and college admissions in later chapters, we're going to break down the audience.

In this chapter, we'll talk about what's going through the mind of an admissions officer as they go through all those stacks of applications, what they're looking for, and how your child can highlight the factors that are really going to make an impression.

What matters the most in college admissions?

The single most important piece of your child's college application is his or her grades. That means when admissions committees consider an application, they'll prioritize GPA over other things like extracurricular activities, college essays, recommendations, and yes, even test scores.

SAT and ACT scores are a close second and they combine with GPA to make up the objective portion of your child's college application. Not subject to the attitudes or whims of an admissions committee, standardized test scores help admissions committees compare large pools of applicants. And in most cases, SAT or ACT scores work together with GPA to significantly affect an applicant's chances of getting into college. Here's how:

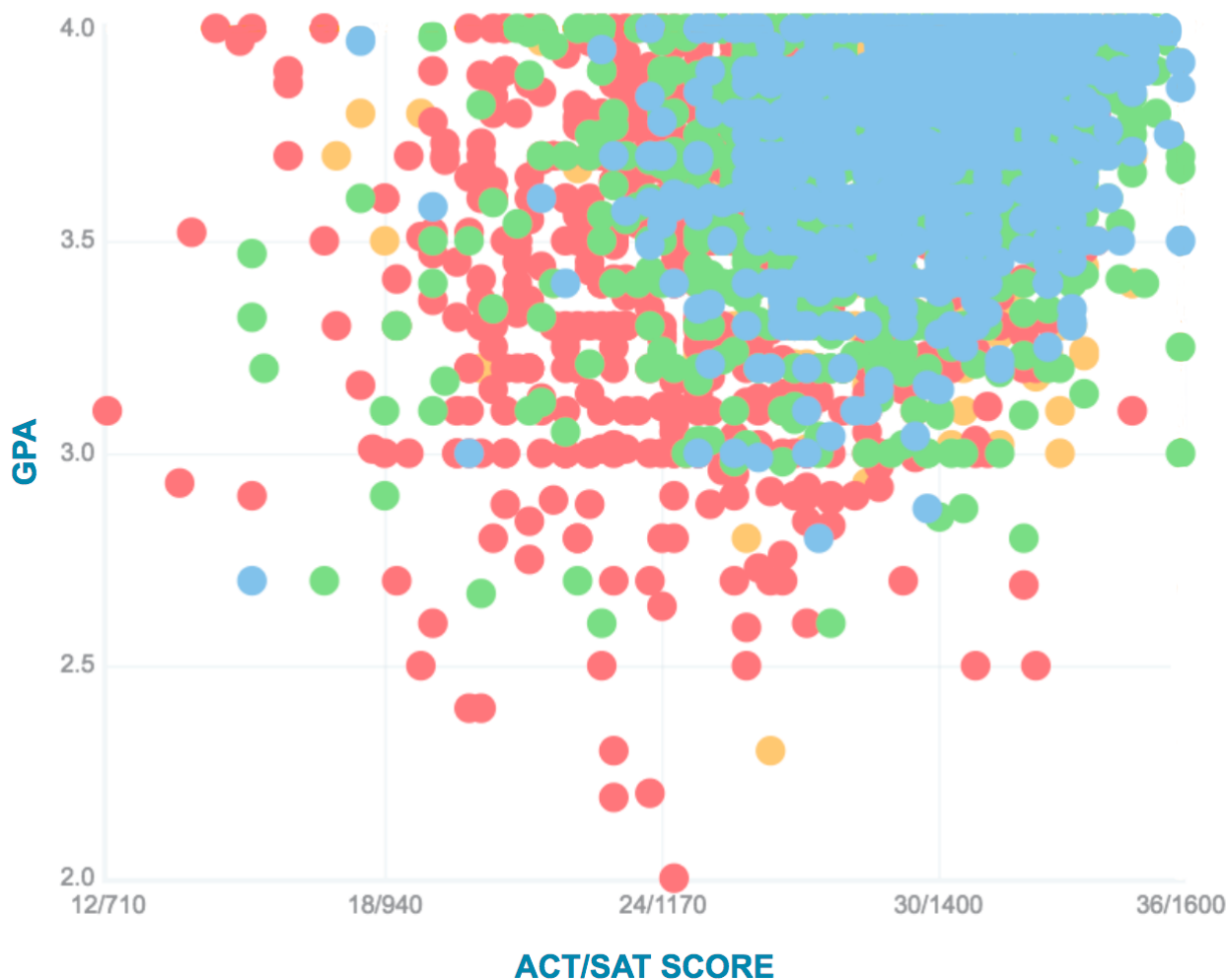
How grades and test scores affect applicants to Boston University

The graph below from [Cappex](#) shows self-reported data of students who applied to Boston University in 2016. The **yellow dots** represent students who were waitlisted, the **red dots** represent students who were denied admission, and the **blue** and **green dots** represent students who were accepted to BU.

The vertical axis shows the GPA of students who applied. The horizontal axis shows the average ACT and equivalent SAT score of students who applied.

Boston University Admissions Scattergram

(BASED ON HISTORICAL SELF-REPORTED STUDENT DATA)

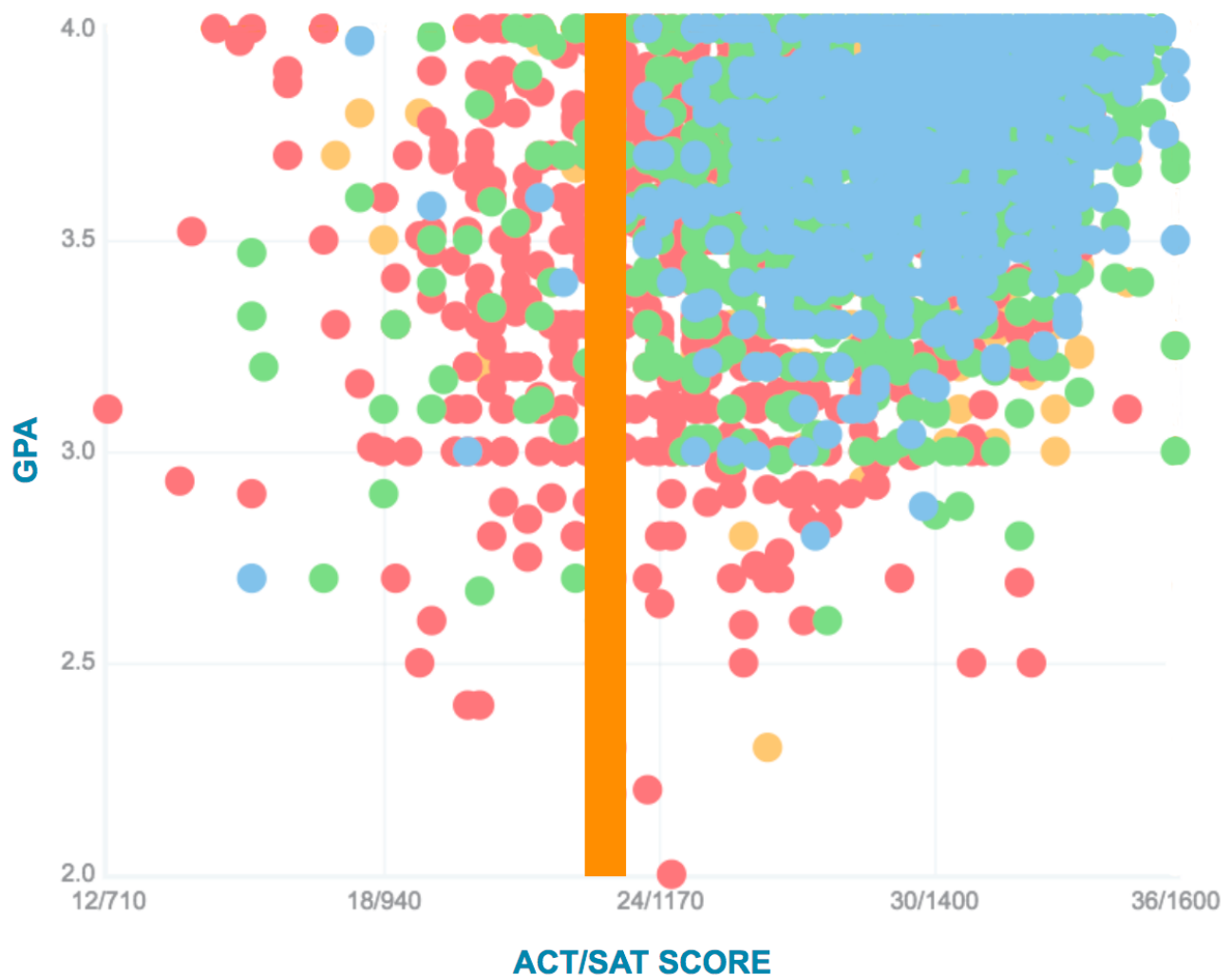


If you look right around the SAT score of 1100, you'll see a general shift from applicants who were accepted to those who were denied. To the right of this orange line, most of the dots are green and blue. To the left of this orange line, most of the dots are red.

1100 represents Boston University's floor for a minimum acceptable test score. Applicants who don't score at least 1100 on the SAT or the equivalent of 23 on the ACT, even with a GPA in the three- to four-point range, are less likely to be accepted to Boston University.

Boston University Admissions Scattergram

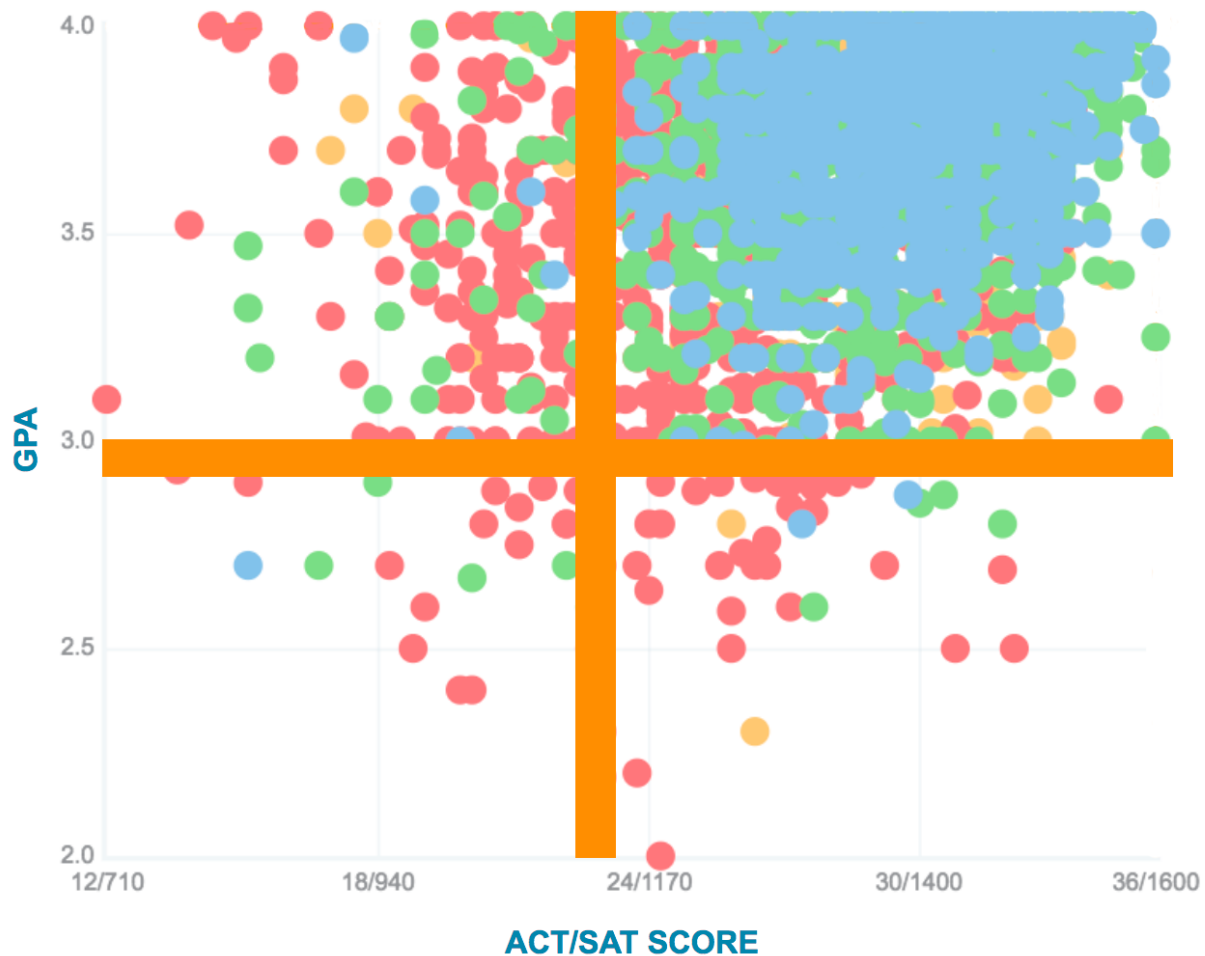
(BASED ON HISTORICAL SELF-REPORTED STUDENT DATA)



If you switch focus to the vertical axis, you'll notice a similar trend at the GPA of 3.0. Applicants with a GPA below 3.0 were, for the most part, denied admission to BU.

Boston University Admissions Scattergram

(BASED ON HISTORICAL SELF-REPORTED STUDENT DATA)



Here's the takeaway: applicants with the best chances of getting into BU fell in the upper-right quadrant of this scattergram, with a GPA above 3.0 and an SAT score above 1100.

This isn't unique to BU. GPA and test scores are the most dominant factors in the decision-making process for most admissions committees.

This isn't to say that your child's chances of getting into college can be pinpointed on a chart. And it certainly isn't to say that your child's candidacy can be appreciated in just two numbers. However, your child's test scores and GPA serve as a rough starting point for what schools are in the ballpark when putting together a college list.

What else do college admissions committees take into consideration?

Test scores are quantitative, standardized, and objective, and college admissions committees take them seriously. But they don't tell the full story.

In [an interview with the NY Times](#), Janet Lavin Rapelye, Dean of Admissions at Princeton University, said Princeton thinks of test scores as a single (yet important) data point:

Standardized test scores help us evaluate a student's likelihood of succeeding at Princeton, but by themselves are not accurate predictors. For all these reasons, we have no cutoffs in test scores, nor do we have cutoffs in grade point averages or class rank.

At Yale, it takes more than good grades to stand out. Patricia Wei, Director of Admissions at Yale University [told Peterson's in an interview](#):

Standardized test scores help us evaluate a student's likelihood of succeeding at Princeton, but by themselves are not accurate predictors. For all these reasons, we have no cutoffs in test scores, nor do we have cutoffs in grade point averages or class rank.

We'll go in-depth on every aspect of the application in further chapters, but as we continue our discussion on how to stand out to the admissions committee, here are some other factors that affect your child's chances of getting into college.

Class rank and transcript

We've touched on the importance of grades, but how your student's transcript is viewed involves more shades of gray than you might think. While for some schools there may be a "minimum requirement," admissions committees have years of experience with transcripts and [value more than](#) just the grades themselves.

For instance, admissions committees would much rather see students taking on challenging classes and doing their best than just taking easy classes and getting good grades. In the [2014 NACAC State of College Admission survey](#), they found that colleges consider achieving and maintaining good grades in challenging classes of considerable importance.

On the flip side, the [importance of class rank is declining](#). In that same survey, the NACAC found that only 15% of colleges rated class rank as of considerable importance, which is down from 31% from 10 years ago.

The importance of taking on challenges applies both to students with lots of opportunities and those without. Colleges [take into consideration](#) where you live and the opportunities you have available to you—the thing they want to see is that students take full advantage of what they have available.

[Naviance](#) is a common tool to learn how colleges take your child's high school into consideration. Ask your child's guidance counselor if you have access to this tool.

Demonstrated interest

While most colleges may rank a student's demonstrated interest in the college as ["moderately" or even of "limited importance"](#), it ultimately serves the school's interest to accept students they know will attend.

Showing interest helps your child stand out because admissions offices want [a high yield](#), or percentage of admitted students who end up enrolling. If they had to choose between two students who were otherwise identical, they would always go for the one who had shown more interest.

Showing interest can mean:

- Attending a college visit
- Reaching out to and keeping in contact with admissions officers
- Emphasizing your interest in your application and personal essay

This is the mentality that makes students who apply early action or early decision appealing to admissions committees, and likely why early admissions acceptance rates tend to be [marginally if not significantly](#) larger than regular admissions rates.

Diversity

Admissions officers aren't just trying to cherry-pick the most successful students—they're trying to [build a cohesive class](#). Because of this, they take diversity very seriously and this may strongly influence some of the admissions decisions they make. Diversity doesn't just mean race or ethnicity, though. It includes a number of different factors you may not realize are important:

- **"Special status,"** which may include certain things like being a legacy or an athlete. Often each class has to have a certain number of students with this status, so this may end up extending a bit of favor to those who fall in those categories.
- **Gender**, particularly in majors with large gender gaps. If admissions officers notice particular majors with gender imbalances, they may accept students showing interest in that major to try to balance it out.
- **Hometown**, so that not all students are from large cities where they likely had access to more opportunities. If a student was able to take advantage of every opportunity they had available, even in a small town, then that shows potential to the committee.
- **International students**, who often bring both an interesting perspective to the class, and are likely willing to pay more to attend the school, which is another plus.
- **Other unique characteristics**, such as being homeschooled or students who spent a gap year abroad. These students often are the most likely to take advantage of all the resources available at the university because of their experiences and willingness to go against the grain.

The essay

The essay is one of the best place for your student to really show their interest in the school and give admissions a peek into who they are as a person. Rather than just advising your student to regurgitate their greatest accomplishments, instead suggest that the essay tell the admissions officers [something they haven't mentioned](#) anywhere else in their application.

Regardless of what they write about, what matters most is that [your student's essay](#) is authentic and that they spend time making sure it puts their best foot forward. [Admissions officers can tell](#) when a student has put in the time to write, edit and

refine their essay and they appreciate that they put in the effort. Writing well also reflects well on the student's work ethic and ability to convey themselves and express their thoughts through writing.

We take a deeper look into how to write a compelling college essay in chapter five.

Interviews and recommendations

Interviews with alumni or admissions officers and teacher recommendations are the committee's chance to see your student through someone else's eyes. The rest of the application is written by your student, but these elements [give a different perspective](#) into who your student is.

But students should still view interviews as a two-way evaluation. It's a chance for students to get their questions answered and gauge the vibe just as much as it is a chance for the interviewer to evaluate your student. This means coming with questions and being engaged in the conversation, which will also demonstrate your student's interest to the admissions committee.

As for asking for recommendations, students shouldn't just pick the classes they did the best in. The teachers who have actually had a chance to get to know your student and can write a recommendation that gives more than just generic superlatives will be the ones that admissions officers really value.

We discuss how to ask the right teacher for a recommendation in chapter four.

Make the best of your opportunities

In the end, impressing an admissions committee means doing two things—hitting the benchmarks, and then making yourself stand out. If you're down to the wire, then test scores are the only part of your application that you're going to be able to move in a short period of time.

In the next chapter, we discuss the importance of choosing the right courseload and how good do your grades really need to be.

Chapter Two

Grades

In the previous chapter of the Ultimate College Prep Guide, we began the discussion on the importance of grades and how there's more to your student's transcript than their GPA. We mentioned that while some schools have a stated "minimum GPA requirement," the reality is that admissions committees have been looking at transcripts for years and value more than just grades themselves.

In this chapter we'll take a closer look at how good grades need to be. We'll cover how exactly GPA is viewed, how that should relate to the rigor of your student's course load, and what high school students should be doing to make their transcript stand out.

How "good" is your GPA?

Parents and students often wonder how their GPA matches up with the average and whether it's "good enough" to earn them a spot in their top choice college. It may seem daunting: counting on GPA to stand out is nearly impossible without a 4.0, seeing as the [average GPA of graduating high school seniors is a 3.0](#). But since the importance of things like class rank [are declining](#), your student can focus on making their transcript stand out in other ways.

So how can your student's transcript stand out? Before we can answer that question, we need to understand how colleges view GPA.

How do you calculate GPA?

There are many variations of [how high schools calculate GPA](#). A number of different factors could be considered when schools decide on a system including:

- Are plus or minus letter grades (A+/-, B+/-, etc.) given?
- Are non-academic courses, such as physical education, included in the GPA calculation?
- Are advanced courses given more weight?

Most of these systems can be boiled down to three main categories:

- **Grade Point Average (weighted or unweighted).** This ranges from the unweighted standard 4.0 grade point system, to weighted systems which give more weight to Honors, IB and [AP classes](#).
- **Percent Grade.** This is usually out on a scale of zero to 100.
- **Letter Grade.** This ranges from A to F and may or may not include plus or minus grades.

Often, colleges [don't prefer one system over another](#) but will convert any GPA to an unweighted system to allow for better comparisons.

To give you an idea of how your student's GPA looks on an unweighted scale, we've put together a conversion chart, adapted from [College Board](#).

Unweighted GPA	Letter Grade	Percent Grade	Weighted GPA (4.3 scale)	Weighted GPA (5.0 scale)	Weighted GPA (6.0 scale)
4	A+	97-100	4.3	5	6
4	A	94-100	4	5	6
3.7	A-	90-93	3.7	4.7	5.7
3.3	B+	87-89	3.3	4.3	5.3
3	B	84-86	3	4	5
2.7	B-	80-83	2.7	3.7	4.7
2.3	C+	77-79	2.3	3.3	4.3
2	C	74-76	2	3	4
1.7	C-	70-73	1.7	2.7	3.7
1.3	D+	67-69	1.3	2.3	3.3
1	D	64-66	1	2	3
0.7	D-	60-63	0.7	1.7	2.7
0	F	0-59	0	0	0

So if colleges are just going to convert your student's GPA anyway, does this mean you shouldn't even bother reporting their weighted GPA? Not necessarily. Having a weighted GPA does show that your student took challenging classes and took advantage of the opportunities available to them.

As we mentioned in the previous chapter, admissions committees would much rather see students challenging themselves than taking easy classes.

So let's answer the question we posed earlier: How can your student's transcript stand out? With a [rigorous course load](#).

What is a “rigorous” course load?

One of the questions that admissions officers are [most commonly asked](#) is “Which is better, a B in an honors course or an A in a regular course?” While the most accurate answer is “An A in an honors course,” in truth a B in an honors course is valued higher than an A in a regular course.

So what qualifies a course as rigorous? While the definition may vary for each school, the [most important thing](#) is that your student is **taking advantage of the opportunities available to them**.

Low Rigor	Low-Medium	Medium Rigor	Medium-High	High Rigor
"Fluff" courses	Non-Core Electives	Standard Core Classes	Honors Level or "Easy" AP Classes	AP/IB or College-Level Classes

Admissions counselors want to see that students are willing to challenge themselves, and that doesn't just mean up until the moment their application is submitted! Admissions counselors are able to see what courses they've selected to take in senior year and will notice if they've chosen to slack off once their applications are submitted. Continuing to challenge themselves throughout senior year will [make their application more competitive](#) and help it stand out.

What should your transcript look like?

Does having a rigorous course load mean your student should only be taking the most advanced classes at the expense of exploring other interests? Not at all. In fact, schools prefer to see students keeping a **balanced “well-rounded” schedule**.

From liberal-arts focused schools like [Yale](#), to technical universities like [MIT](#), balance is valued as part of building a strong academic foundation. This means taking courses spanning the pre-requirements for application, including English, science, math, social science and foreign language, but also exploring challenging courses in other subjects.

[Building electives into your student's schedule](#) gives colleges a peek into their non-academic interests and will show that they know their limits and don't overwhelm themselves. College is going to be challenging, and college admissions officers want to admit students who will help themselves succeed and not burn out. Keeping a balanced schedule will mean they also have time for other commitments and extracurriculars, which demonstrate time-management skills.

How should you answer “is there anything else you want us to know?”

On most college applications, including the Common Application, there will be a question asking “Is there anything else you want us to know?” This is your student's chance to address any potential concerns they may have with their transcript.

Freshman year is a difficult time for most students and college admissions officers understand that. Maybe your student slacked off in freshman year or chose classes that were much harder than they expected—and as a result received grades that were lower than they had hoped. While this will still have an affect on their GPA, this is their opportunity to address these low grades.

Admissions committees value improvement and like to see that a student has worked hard to recover from a rough first semester. By discussing how hard they've worked throughout the rest of their school career and how they've shown a [“rising record,”](#) students can show their work ethic and drive to improve.

Challenge yourself.

It doesn't matter if your school offers all the most advanced AP courses or none at all. Admissions officers value students who take advantage of the opportunities available to them and find every opportunity to succeed. Design a course load that is both rigorous and balanced to show that your student is high-achieving but also values pursuing outside interests. And if they have a rough semester or two don't worry—as long as your student is improving, that's what matters.

In the next chapter of the Ultimate College Prep Guide, we discuss standardized test and why they matter. We also go over the differences between taking the SAT and taking the ACT and which is more suited to your student's learning style, and whether your student should include writing in the test. These tests might seem arbitrary—but we explain why they give colleges a baseline to evaluate candidates.

Chapter Three

The SAT and ACT

In the previous chapter of the Ultimate College Prep Guide, we discussed how course rigor can make your student's transcript stand out. Admissions counselors like to see students take full advantage of the opportunities available to them by taking a variety of challenging classes.

In this chapter we'll dive into one of the oldest parts of the college admissions process: the standardized test. We'll discuss how colleges view the SAT and ACT, how to choose which one to take and whether or not you should be taking the optional essay section.

Then, we'll talk about what makes a SAT or ACT score "good" and what your student can be doing to reach their target score.

Why do the SAT and ACT matter?

Simple answer: **because they're required.** Next!

Ok, so it's not quite that simple, but it's still mostly true. While it's interesting to note that as of early 2017, [925+ colleges and universities](#) in the US don't use ACT and SAT scores to admit students, that is still less than 20% of the [4,724 total colleges and universities](#) in the States. That means if your student is interested in applying for even one of these colleges and universities that make up 80% of the total, including the more prestigious Ivy League schools, they are **required** to take one of these standardized tests.

Decades ago, the [original SAT](#) and [ACT](#) were created to be uniform exams that provided a standard baseline for those applying to college. They have since evolved greatly since their original form, but one thing hasn't changed: **they provide a baseline for colleges to view candidates.**

In the past two chapters, we've discussed how important every factor is to your student's application, and while standardized testing may not be the most exciting part of the process, it is still, in most cases, a required component. Focusing on the tests and picking which one is the best fit for your student will help maximize their chance of presenting the best application possible.

Is your child better suited for the SAT or ACT?

Before we address the question of whether your student should take the SAT or ACT, make sure you're familiar with what [each test covers and what makes them different](#).

The New SAT includes sections on reading, English, math (calculator and no calculator) and an optional essay. The test is three hours long with an additional 50 minutes for the essay.

The ACT includes sections on reading, English, math (calculator), science and an optional essay. The test is two hours and 55 minutes long with an additional 40 minutes for the essay.

	SAT	ACT
Reading	52 questions / 65 min.	40 questions / 35 min.
English	44 questions / 35 min.	75 questions / 45 min.
Math (calculator)	38 q. / 55 min.	60 questions / 60 min.
Math (no calculator)	60 q. / 60 min.	
Science		40 questions / 35 min.
Essay	Optional / 50 min.	Optional / 40 min.

Make the decision based on your unique student.

To determine which test is the best fit, consider these questions about your student:

- **Would your student benefit from more time** per question? When you break down the time per question for each exam, you actually have significantly more time per question on the SAT than the ACT. This is particularly true for the Math sections:

- The ACT is 60 questions in 60 minutes. That's one question every minute.
- The SAT is 20 No Calculator questions in 25 minutes and 38 Calculator questions in 55 minutes. That's 1 minute 15 seconds for each No Calculator question, and a whopping 1 minute and 26 seconds for each Calculator question.

- **Does your student consider Math a strength?** The Math section of the new SAT is noted to be slightly harder than that of the ACT. The Reading and Writing sections of both tests are about the same level of difficulty.

- **Does your student consider Science a strength?** The ACT is the only test with a section dedicated specifically to Science. This can either highlight a strength, or camouflage a weakness, depending on your student.

Sometimes it comes down to [your student's situation](#) to influence your exam choice.

- **Is the SAT or ACT more popular in your area?** Does your state require either test as a statewide exam? Naturally if one exam is required, it makes more sense to spend time studying for one your student will have to take.

- **Has your student already taken one?** How did it go? If it went well, that's great! If not, it's time to consider if maybe trying the other option is a good choice. It all depends on your answer to the next question.

- **Does your child have the appropriate amount of time to prep** for the test they want to take? Studying for a completely new test takes a lot more time than working on weak areas of a test your student already has experience with. Make sure they aren't signing themselves up for something they don't have the time to prepare for.

We realize that test prep is not only time-consuming, but also expensive. Your student should be on the lookout for free [SAT](#) and [ACT](#) resources available to them to help prepare for the exams as well as [test prep services](#) that may have free partnerships with your area.

Make the Decision Based on Experience

The most definitive way to figure out which test is best for you is to **take a practice test of both** and see which you do better on. You can compare scores with an [ACT and SAT conversion chart](#).

If your student does have the chance to take a practice test of both the SAT and ACT, they should think about [these questions](#) to judge how they felt about each test:

- **Which exam felt more intuitive?** Which method of thinking came more naturally to your student? Sometimes one approach just makes more sense based on the way a student normally solves problems.

- **Which exam felt more straightforward?** Similar to the first question, but applies more to questions where the student may have to think a bit more, but overall they still make sense. The logic flows in a way that makes sense and the student is able to make the necessary connections to solve the problem.

- **Which exam do you feel allows you to most efficiently show off what you are capable of** to the colleges you are applying to? Does one exam test skills that your student feels more confident in or values more? You want to make sure they're taking the exam that highlights their strengths.

Keep in mind that if your student does decide to take both exams, make sure they're aware that they are quite different. Because of how they're designed and the aspects they're meant to test, the SAT and ACT require very particular approaches to answering their questions. They should be studying for each test separately and spacing them out. Studying for both at the same time will only lead to mix-ups and confusion.

And don't worry if your student feels like they need to [retake the exam](#) more than once. More colleges will [superscore](#) and only look at your highest scores!

Should You Take the Essay Portion of the Test?

Now that the essay portion of both the ACT and the new SAT are optional, your student has an important decision to make. The first question to ask is: **do the schools your student is planning to apply for require the essay portion?** You can refer to the official [SAT](#) and [ACT](#) sites to answer that question.

Of course, your student should make the decision for themselves. There are a few factors we recommend considering:

- **PRO: It may give a slight competitive advantage.** Particularly if a school “recommends” taking the essay, your student can stand out from the crowd.

- **PRO: It's handy to have if your student decides to apply to more schools.** If your student decides last minute to apply to a school that requires the essay, then this won't be a factor preventing them from applying to a dream school.

- **PRO: If writing is a strength, it can play in your student's favor.** If your student is stronger at writing than other sections, such as math or science, the essay can show off more of your student's strengths.

- **PRO: It may be necessary if your student is considering a transfer in the future.** If your student is interested in transferring to a school that requires the essay in a year or two, having the essay already completed will facilitate that.

- **CON: The essay makes the test longer.** It adds 50 more minutes to the test time for the SAT and 40 more minutes for the ACT.

- **CON: The essay costs more.** It adds an additional \$11.50 fee to the SAT and \$17 to the ACT.

- **CON: Your student's study time will increase.** As with any section of the exam, your student should dedicate some time to prepare for it to make sure they do well.

It all comes down to what factors matter the most to your student. The essay should help your student show an aspect of their skill set that isn't evident on the rest of the exam.

What Is a Good SAT Score? What Is a Good ACT Score?

You need a study plan to hit your best SAT score. But before your student can design that plan, they need to know how to figure out what their ideal score is. The best starting place is to **look up the range of desired scores for the school your student is interested in attending.**

To give a general idea of how students throughout the US perform, the SAT and ACT release official national distributions. These distributions are given in terms of percentiles. These percentiles are a measure of the percentage of students who have a score at or below that number. For example, if your score is at the 75th percentile, that means 75% of students have a score that is the same or below yours.

The [SAT National Score Distribution](#) is given in terms of the Nationally Representative Sample Percentile and SAT User Percentile - National (in parentheses).

Evidence-Based Reading and Writing	Math	Total	
590 (620)	580 (610)	1160 (1220)	75th Percentile
510M (540)	510 (530)	1010 (1080)	Average
430 (470)	440 (470)	880 (950)	25th Percentile

Nationally Representative Sample Percentile

The Nationally Representative Sample Percentile is a weighted representation of a sample of 11th and 12th grade US students that DOES NOT take into account whether students would typically take the SAT or not.

(SAT User Percentile - National)

The SAT User Percentile - National is a weighted representation of a sample of 11th and 12th grade US students that DOES take into account whether students would typically take the SAT last in 11th or 12th grade. This number is higher, but is also a more accurate depiction of how competitive your score is among college applicants.

The [ACT National Score Distribution](#) gives a breakdown of national distributions for each section as well as the total cumulative score. These scores are taken from high school graduates from 2014-2016.

English	Math	Reading	Science	Total	
24	24	25	24	24	75th Percentile
20	19	20	20	20	Average
15	16	16	17	16	25th Percentile

Remember, these are national distributions that just give you a general idea of how all students throughout the US perform. The score your student should be targeting depends on the schools they're interested in attending.

In the next chapter we'll give some examples of score ranges, but for now we cannot stress this enough: your student's score DOES NOT NEED to be in the 99th percentile or higher to get into their dream school (or even a top school). We've provided a conversion chart below for reference if only scores for one test are provided.

[ACT to SAT Conversion Chart](#)

This conversion chart has been adapted from College Board to give you an idea of how the New SAT and ACT scores match up. Some schools may only give a range for one but accept scores from both exams. Having an accurate conversion will make sure your student has an idea of where they stand.

New SAT to ACT Conversion Table

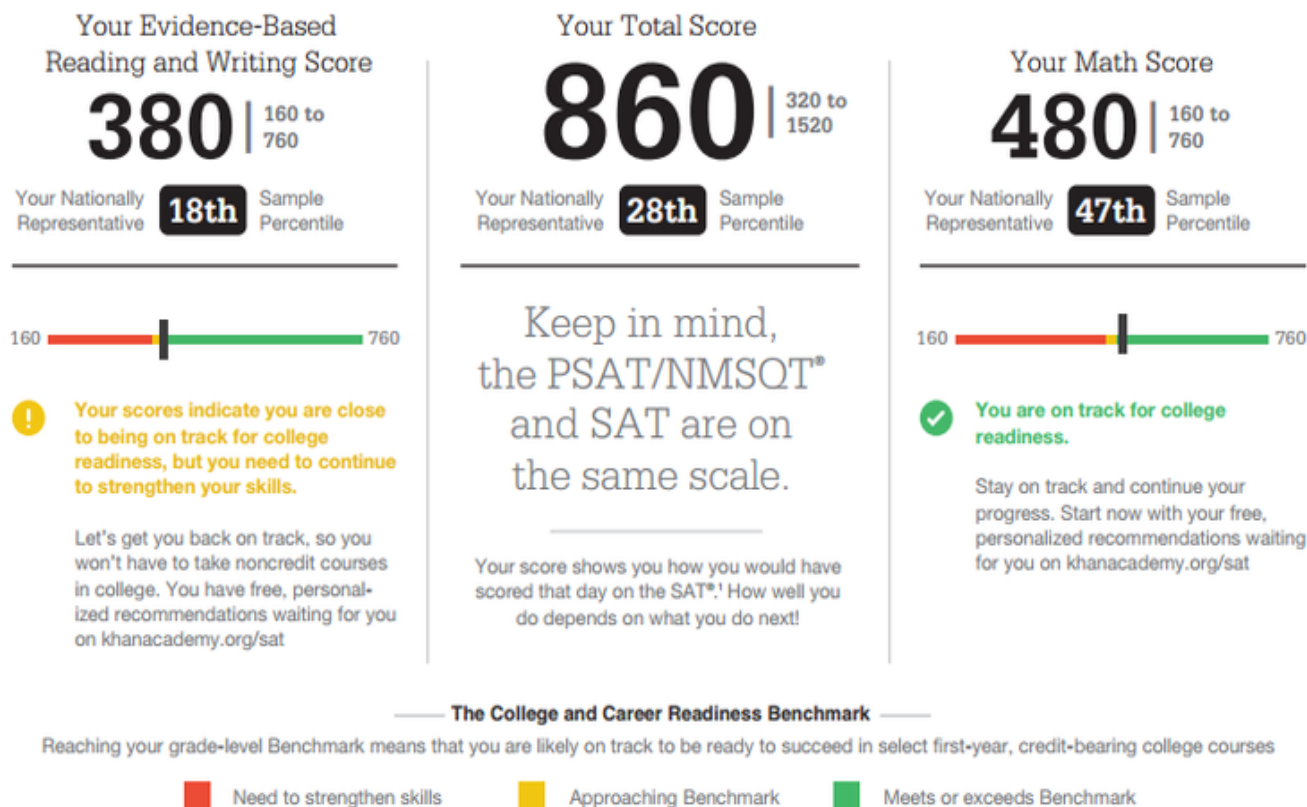
ACT Composite Score	New SAT Total
36	1600
35	1560-1590
34	1520-1550
33	1490-1510
32	1450-1480
31	1420-1440
30	1390-1410
29	1350-1380
28	1310-1340
27	1280-1300
26	1240-1270
25	1200-1230
24	1160-1190
23	1130-1150
22	1100-1120

21	1060-1090
20	1020-1050
19	980-1010
18	940-970
17	900-930
16	860-890
15	810-850
14	760-800
13	720-750
12	630-710
11	560-620

How Do You Get a Good SAT or ACT Score?

Knowing the material is no doubt the best way to do well on an exam, but as with anything in life, there's more to it than just being smart. There are strategies that can help your student ace the SAT and ACT by making sure they don't get caught by time constraints or tricky questions.

We suggest to **first start by taking a practice exam** and finding the topics that need work. If your student has already taken the SAT once, they can refer to the provided [college board readiness benchmarks in their score report](#). They should focus on the topics where their score falls in the yellow or red areas of the graph. These are the areas your student has not yet demonstrated proficiency and has room for improvement.



Once your student knows what topics to focus on, they can start creating their study plan. Here are some strategies to keep in mind while studying for and while taking the exam.

General Test-Taking Strategies

While the SAT and ACT are different in terms of some of the topics covered and strategies of thinking, there are some strategies that can be applied to both. Let's start with strategies to keep in mind while preparing for both exams.

1. Take a real practice test. This means an [official College Board Practice Test](#) or any other practice test released by the official test company. This will ensure that your student's practice materials are high quality, which will greatly increase their chances of doing well on the exam. This will also familiarize them with the structure of the test and how to answer the questions on the answer sheet. For example, some of the SAT Math answer sheet can be a bit unusual for those who aren't familiar with the structure.

Answer: $\frac{7}{12}$

Write answer in boxes. →

7	/	1	2
.	.	.	.
0	0	0	0
1	1	1	1
2	2	2	2
3	3	3	3
4	4	4	4
5	5	5	5
6	6	6	6
7	7	7	7
8	8	8	8
9	9	9	9

Grid in result. →

← Fraction line

Answer: 2.5

2	.	5
.	.	.
0	0	0
1	1	1
2	2	2
3	3	3
4	4	4
5	5	5
6	6	6
7	7	7
8	8	8
9	9	9

← Decimal point

2. Understand the WHY. It isn't enough for your student just to read the answer explanations or memorize the correct answers of questions they got wrong. They need to fully understand the concept that was being tested for that question so that they don't make a similar mistake again. Suggest that they curate a study sheet of concepts to learn based on section, then come back to this study sheet often to make sure they fully understand each topic.

3. Pay attention to all questions your student guessed on, not just those they got wrong. Sometimes a lucky guess will result in a correct answer, but this might not be the case on test day. Your student should ask themselves: Why did I guess that answer? They should be able to confidently say why that answer choice was right before moving on — and not just because the answer sheet said so.

4. Work towards eliminating careless errors. These are often the questions that are most annoying for students to get wrong because they know they could've gotten them right. The best ways to avoid careless errors are:

- Pace yourself. Make sure your student isn't rushing through questions, but that they can recognize when they are spending too long on a question. Advise them to move on first so that they aren't crunched for time later, but to make sure that they mark the question so they can come back to it.

- Understand what the question is actually asking. Particularly for the math sections, the questions can be a little tricky. Make sure your student is reading carefully and pays attention to when a question, for example, asks for the answer in seconds rather than minutes.

5. Have a study plan — and stick to it! The only way to improve is to put in the time and study. Help your student curate a plan that works for them and then help make sure they stick to it.

While taking the actual test, there are a few strategies that can help ease any test anxiety and keep your student from losing time to a difficult question or making a simple mistake.

1. Don't be afraid to guess on answers your student really doesn't know. Both the new SAT and ACT have no penalty for guessing so rather than getting stuck on a problem, just put down a guess first and then come back to it.

2. Manage your time. The worst feeling is running out of time because you spent too long stuck on one question. Make sure your student is keeping track of their time so that they get a chance to answer every question.

3. Read the Writing and Reading passages differently. Each section tests a different skill. Have your student read up on the specific skills tested in each section so that they know what skills to be using in each section to succeed.

4. Double check efficiently but also effectively. When double checking a problem, your student should be solving the question in a different way to make sure they aren't just making the same mistakes over again. When reading a passage, think about it from a different angle to see if that makes more sense within the premise of the question.

Test-Taking Strategies for the New SAT

The New SAT has been [designed to align more closely](#) with what students are likely to see in class. With that comes more definite strategies to help your student ace the SAT.

1. Practice “vocabulary in context”-type questions. Now that “pure vocabulary” questions are gone, the focus will not be on memorization but rather being able to use context clues to determine what a word means. Have your student read more advanced literature and use context clues to define any word they don't understand to help practice for these questions.

2. Understand how to pick apart elements of an essay. For the Essay section of the New SAT, students will be given a fully-written essay and asked to evaluate certain elements of the essay. This may include finding the main argument, identifying the evidence used to support it, and articulating the structure used to organize the essay.

3. Answer every question. We mentioned this before, but as it's a new feature of the New SAT, we figured we should emphasize it. There is no penalty for guessing so make sure to at least guess for each question! Advise your student to mark the ones they aren't sure about and then come back to them once they've worked through the whole section once.

Test-Taking Strategies for the ACT

There are a few aspects in which the ACT differs from the SAT. Here are a few important things to keep in mind while preparing for [one or more of the six ACT test dates](#).

1. Spend time to really study and understand the more advanced math concepts. The ACT requires students to really know and understand topics such as trigonometry, imaginary numbers, advanced geometric shapes and logarithms. Make sure your student isn't waiting until the topic is covered in school to start studying – this may not give them enough time to truly master the topic before the exam.

2. The science section is actually testing how well your student can synthesize given information. It does not actually require any in-depth science knowledge at all. All they want to see is that your student can accurately read a graph or chart, then take the information they're given to determine an answer. Make sure your student practices reading different types of graphs so they're prepared for any example the exam gives.

3. Understand how different perspectives relate to a topic. For the Essay section of the ACT, your student will be given a set of three perspectives and asked to pick one and support their choice. Understanding how each way of thinking relates to the topic will help your student develop a stronger argument supporting their choice and why they didn't choose the other two options.

4. Be aware of the time constraint. There is [less time per question on the ACT than the SAT](#) so it is more likely that your student will be affected by the time constraint. Make sure they find a time-management technique that works for them and put it into practice.

How Can Test Prep Help You Ace the SAT and ACT?

While we won't deny that we think test prep courses or tutoring are the best way for students to prepare for the SAT and ACT, we recognize that not everyone feels that way. But to make our case, here are a few reasons we think test prep is a worthwhile investment to help your student reach their target score.

Test Prep makes the study process all about the student. These services have the resources and expertise to help design a course and study plan that is unique to your student and targets their weaknesses, so that students can focus completely on getting the material down.

Prep services can provide more high quality practice materials. By tailoring practice questions to target areas your student needs more work, your student can spend time on the topics that matter.

Test Prep helps keep your student accountable. Having an instructor who makes sure your student is doing practice tests under real conditions will give them the chance to experience the exam in an atmosphere as close to test day as possible.

Prep services will curate a study plan that fits your student's needs and schedule. On the flip side, they will also keep your student accountable so that they stay on schedule and will be ready for the test when test day rolls around.

Study Hard, but Study Smart

Studying for the SAT and ACT can be both a daunting and seemingly complex task. While [we do believe that 100 hours is the magic number](#) in terms of how long a student should spend studying for the SAT, there is a "smarter" way to study. Rather than just taking practice test after practice test and simply reading the answer explanations, your student should be focusing on the areas that need work to make the most of their time.

By following these test prep strategies, your student can design a study plan that works for them and make sure that they're hitting the topics that matter.

In the next chapter, we'll break down the best way to help your student decide which colleges to apply for. We'll provide examples of factors to consider including type of college, GPA and test score ranges, and financial situation. By curating a list of colleges that fit your criteria and interest your student, you can make sure you're spending your time and money applying to the right places.

Chapter Four

Recommendations

In the previous chapter of the Ultimate College Prep Guide, we discussed how SAT and ACT scores can make your student's application stand out. But test scores and grades can only show so much about your child, which is why admissions counselors turn to **recommendations**.

In this chapter we'll dive deeper into the **importance of college recommendation letters** and why colleges value them. First, we'll understand how your student can secure recommendations that showcase who they are outside of just academics. Then, we'll sketch a timeline that your student can follow to stay ahead of the game and make sure they get their recommendation letters in by the due date.

Are College Recommendation Letters Important?

Recommendation letters help college admissions officers understand your student as a person, beyond the grades and test scores. Admissions officers read recommendations closely and seriously consider what teachers and counselors have to say. But why are these personal—and more subjective—accounts of your student so important?

What admissions officers look for in recommendations

Admissions Dean at Harvard College, William R. Fitzsimmons, stated in [an interview with the New York Times](#) that admissions counselors at Harvard and other colleges consider recommendation letters “extremely important.” He said,

Recommendations... can illuminate such personal qualities as character and leadership as well as intellectual curiosity, creativity, and love of learning.... [and] can offer evidence of an applicant's potential to make a significant difference to a college community and beyond.

When admissions officers read your student's recommendation **they want to understand how your student will contribute to the college community**. Officers want to admit students who will bring a love of learning and enthusiasm for their passions, because these students will thrive and inspire others.

Recommendations also help admissions officers understand **any hardships or difficulties** that your student may have dealt with. These might include:

- Academic challenges, such as a class outside of your student's comfort zone
- Personal challenges, such as a divorce or death in the family

A recommendation letter can give context to lower grades, because admissions officers understand that students sometimes encounter extenuating circumstances.

Recommendation letters will likely confirm what is already in your student's application. But they go beyond your student's self-advocacy and **provide a valuable second perspective.**

Who Should Your Student Ask for a Recommendation?

Most colleges will ask for a letter from your student's counselor and one or two teachers. Your student probably won't have a choice about which college counselor to ask, but it's up to them to ask teachers for recommendations. Your student's choice of teachers could make or break the holistic picture of their application.

We mention in our [2017 College Prep Calendar](#) that your student should ask a teacher who:

- Has had a chance to interact with your student on a 1:1 basis. Your student and the teacher will have had discussions about your student's work and their academic interests.
- Has a good sense of your student's personality and work ethic. The teacher has seen your student work hard in the class and exhibit enthusiasm for their work.
- Has seen your student excel or overcome a challenge in their class. Teachers notice when a student does great work or significantly turns their grade around for the better.

But there's much more to it. When your student thinks about who to ask for a recommendation, consider:

- **What subject did they teach your student?** If your student is applying to a technical college or a STEM program, make sure at least one of their recommendation letters is from a science, math, or technology teacher. For a liberal arts college applications, your student should ask teachers from varied subjects to show mastery in different fields.

- **How well do they know your student?** Teachers that give your students the best grades don't necessarily make for the best recommenders. Larger or lecture-focused classes don't give students and teachers much chance to interact. Aim to ask teachers of smaller, discussion-style classes. In these classes, the teacher can get to know your student and can speak to their contributions as an intellectual and a learner, rather than just a test-taker.

- **Did they see your student excel beyond the classroom?** Some of your student's teachers may also be involved with your student's community service group, sports team, or special interest club. A teacher that sees a student excel in the classroom and foster their passions outside the classroom can speak to a well-rounded student and community member.

If your student doesn't have clear choices yet, **encourage them to get to talk to their teachers more**. The more a teacher knows about your student's goals, motivations, and interests, the better they can write a glowing recommendation. Above all, don't rush the decision. Take the time to figure out **who knows your student well and can speak to many of their strengths**.

How Should Your Student Ask for a Recommendation Letter?

Asking for a recommendation doesn't have to be intimidating—teachers and counselors write recommendation letters every year. But since your student probably isn't the only one asking for a letter, it's important to **make it personal**.

This starts by asking the teacher or counselor in person first. When your student first speaks to their teacher or counselor, they should:

- Express that they believe they've had a **good experience** and grown as a student in the class (when asking a teacher)
- Say **where** they are applying
- Clarify **when** they are applying
- Ask if the teacher or counselor **feels comfortable** writing a strong recommendation

If your teacher or counselor agrees, the next step is to provide them with materials they need to write—and send—a great letter. Your student should prepare some high points to remind the teacher or counselor of your student's best moments—the last thing you want is a generic form letter.

This information is sometimes called a brag sheet because it highlights your student's accomplishments and goals. This can include:

- Copies of your student's college essays
- Short explanations of why your student is applying to particular schools
- Your student's plans for their major and some ideas of future goals
- Notes about your student's participation in any organizations they supervise
- An essay or test where your student excelled
- A resume (optional)

If your student is asking a counselor, schedule a meeting to speak with them. Your student's counselor probably sees them through all four years of high school and may want to learn more about your student's trajectory through an informal conversation.

Your student should **follow up with their teacher or counselor over email** and make sure they receive a written confirmation. We've put together email templates for you to see what samples of what these emails look like:

Asking for a Recommendation

Dear [teacher name],

Thank you so much for an amazing semester, I definitely feel like I learned a lot.

I am writing because I am currently in the process of applying for [SCHOOL NAME] and I was wondering if you would be willing to be one of my recommenders for my application.

I am asking you because your class is one of the reasons I'm interested in pursuing a [INSERT DEGREE] degree. [PERSONAL MESSAGE]

The due date for the recommendation is [DUE DATE]. It can be submitted through [SYSTEM WITH LINK].

I have attached my resume and transcript, as well as my personal statement for [COLLEGE]. Please let me know if there is anything else I can send that will help.

Thank you very much!

Please let me know,

[NAME]

Follow-up Email

Hi [TEACHER NAME],

Just wanted to check in about my recommendation for [COLLEGE]. It's due [DUE DATE] and can be submitted through [SYSTEM NAME WITH LINK]!

Again, thank you so much for all of your help.

Best,

[NAME]

"Thank You" Email

Hi [TEACHER NAME],

I hope you've been well. Thank you so much for your help with the recommendation. [PERSONAL MESSAGE]

I'm looking forward to hearing back about the status of my application and I will keep you updated!

Best,

[NAME]

It's also essential to provide a teacher or counselor with **the information they need to successfully send in the letter on time**. If the letter needs to be sent by mail, provide them with an addressed and stamped envelope. If the letter needs to be uploaded to the Common Application or through Naviance, provide them with these links and instructions. Clearly communicate the recommendation letter deadlines for each school. Always check what each school requires, because the method of sending and the deadline may vary by school.

When Should Your Student Ask for Recommendations?

Making sure recommendation letters are submitted on time can be stressful because the process sometimes doesn't involve the student. Teachers are often required to submit the recommendation by mailing it in or sending through an official website. In either case, the student doesn't send the letter themselves.

Your student's recommendation timeline

Even if your student doesn't send the letter in, they can still help the process along. Here is a recommendation letter timeline to make sure your student gives teachers enough time to write their letters and send them in on time:

1. End of junior year: Your student should start thinking about who to ask for a recommendation letter. If your student already has solid choices in mind for teachers, ask them now. Some teachers only write a certain number of letters so asking early gives your student a better chance of getting their preferred recommenders. The teacher has also just worked with your student and their accomplishments are fresh in their mind. They have the whole summer to write the letter. If the teacher tells your student to ask again in the fall, make a note and follow up.

2. Beginning of senior year: If your student hasn't asked teachers yet, now is the time. Your student should ideally ask teachers they've had junior year, because these teachers have a chance to see your student's work over a whole year. As senior year progresses, you want to make sure that you ask a teacher for a recommendation letter at least one month before the deadline. You should ask a counselor at least two months before the deadline because they might be working with more students. Again, earlier is always better.

3. Two weeks before the deadline: Check to see when recommendation letters are due for each particular school. Recommendation letters are usually due the same time as the application itself, so make sure to [check when your application is due](#). Then set a reminder to follow up with teachers and counselors two weeks before the application is due to check progress. This serves as a polite reminder to make sure the recommendation gets done on time but also gives the teacher enough time to start if they haven't yet.

4. After the recommendation is submitted: Make sure your child thanks each teacher and counselor who advocated for them! They've gone out of their way to help your student succeed, so even a simple thank you will show your appreciation for their hard work.

As your student is completing their college application, they'll be asked if they would like to waive their rights to view their letters of recommendation. Though legally students are permitted to read recommendations submitted on their behalf, we strongly suggest that you waive your rights to read the letters.

Your Recommendations Paint a Holistic Picture

As you've learned from our first few chapters, college admissions officers don't rely on one single factor to make their decisions. Recommendation letters help the admissions officers piece together everything in the application to get a holistic picture of your student.

That's why it's so important that your student chooses the right teachers and takes care to help their teachers and counselors write strong recommendations.

In the next chapter of the Ultimate College Prep Guide, we'll discuss one of the most crucial parts of the application — the essay. We'll first focus on the main Common Application essay because this goes out to all schools that use that application. We'll also discuss how to make sure your secondary applications help you stand out without repeating information from your main personal essay.

Chapter Five

The College Essay

In the previous chapter of the Ultimate College Prep Guide, we discussed the importance of recommendation letters and how they provide a unique perspective on your student. Choosing the right teachers and helping them to write a strong recommendation can really give your student's application the leg up it needs to stand out.

In this chapter, we'll take a closer look at another part of the application — **the college essay**. All college admissions require at least one essay as part of the application, whether or not they accept the common app. The essay is the best place for admissions officers to get a sense of your student's personality, in their own words, and should be taken very seriously.

We'll focus first on the Common Application Personal Statement and discuss how it needs to present the most unique part of your student's application—because it may be the only essay some schools see. Then we'll discuss how secondary/supplemental essays should be very school-specific.

The Common App Personal Statement

The Common App Personal Statement is the one essay that gets sent to every school your student is applying to through the Common Application. That means your student **should not** make this essay school-specific. They wouldn't want an admissions officer at Williams College reading about their love for Boston University's dining halls — can't imagine that going over well.

The essay itself has a word limit of 650 words and your student is given [seven different prompts](#) to choose from.

Picking a Question for Your College Essay

Deciding what to write about can be the most challenging aspect of the essay. Because it is the only essay that colleges without a secondary application will see, it needs to stand on its own. We suggest starting by first taking a look over all of the questions. We've copied them below:

- Some students have a background, identity, interest, or talent that is so meaningful that they believe their application would be incomplete without it. If this sounds like you, then please share your story.
- The lessons we take from obstacles we encounter can be fundamental to later success. Recount a time when you faced a challenge, setback, or failure. How did it affect you, and what did you learn from the experience?
- Reflect on a time when you questioned or challenged a belief or idea. What prompted your thinking? What was the outcome?
- Describe a problem you've solved or a problem you'd like to solve. It can be an intellectual challenge, a research query, an ethical dilemma - anything that is of personal importance, no matter the scale. Explain its significance to you and what steps you took or could be taken to identify a solution.
- Discuss an accomplishment, event, or realization that sparked a period of personal growth and a new understanding of yourself or others.
- Describe a topic, idea, or concept you find so engaging that it makes you lose all track of time. Why does it captivate you? What or who do you turn to when you want to learn more?
- Share an essay on any topic of your choice. It can be one you've already written, one that responds to a different prompt, or one of your own design.

The questions are all fairly broad, meaning your student could write about almost anything. Your student should jot down a couple ideas of things they think they could write a compelling essay about. Next they should narrow down those topics based on how well they fit the question and which topics interest them the most. Then just start writing.

Writing the Actual Essay

Different colleges will give advice on how to write the personal statement. While it's helpful to browse these for ideas, remember that there is no one right way to write the essay. Here are a few examples:

- [UChicago](#): "Keep in mind that whatever you write about should cause you to say 'yes' to the question 'Is this something, and perhaps the only thing, I think a perfect stranger should know about me?'"
- [Columbia](#): "Use the statement to highlight positive aspects about yourself that are not apparent elsewhere in the application. Conversely, do not repeat things that are found in other parts of the application."

- [Cornell](#): "Most personal statements contain four components, which answer the following questions:
 1. Who are you now?
 2. What experiences have been important in your development?
 3. What are your future goals, and what is your larger mission or purpose in pursuing these goals?
 4. Why do you want this particular fellowship opportunity?"
- [City College of New York](#): "Engage readers and clearly demonstrate what makes you an unique candidate. Be clear and concise. Express a vibrant and confident tone. Provide a balanced discussion of your past experience with an explanation of your goals, plans, and aspirations."

We suggest following a [few steps throughout your student's writing process](#) to make sure their finished product is an essay they're proud of:

- **Brainstorm and Outline your essay.** When coming up with a topic, it's really easy to want to write a salesy piece that emphasizes their best attributes. But this ends up coming across as forced and too self-promotional. It's okay to say what they can offer, of course, but stay grounded. Have your student write about themselves in relation to a larger community—after all, they're applying to take part in a community for four years.
- **Get personal.** Admissions officers are more interested in sincere, self-reflective, "slice of life" pieces. Demonstrating that your student knows their strengths and weaknesses, and how these have made them who they are shows readers they have the self-knowledge and discipline to write about these things.
- **Get feedback and edit.** Get an outside opinion from people who know your student well — they can help make sure they're showing a genuine side of themselves. When writing, avoid demonstrating an obnoxious vocabulary range. Admissions officers can tell when a student's language doesn't sound genuine.

The best way for your student to stand out is by being personal and talking about their own unique experiences, rather than trying to be gimmicky.

Supplement / Secondary Application Essays

In addition to the main Common App Personal Statement, many colleges will also ask students to write one or more college-specific supplemental essays. These vary by college in terms of style and word limit. Make sure to check the website of the school your student is interested in attending to find their requirements.

The “Why Us?” Essay

The most common supplemental essay question is some variation of: “**Why do you want to go to our college?**”. Other variations may include: “What do you like best about our college?” or “Why are you a good fit for our college?”. In general each of these questions is asking about three things:

- Why should we accept YOU?
- Why do you want to attend THIS COLLEGE?
- Why do you think you’re a GOOD FIT?

Unlike the common app essay, these essays should be **school-specific**. Your student should spend some time doing research on each school they are applying to and identify unique features that appeal to them. Make sure they highlight these specifics in their essay — show off that they’ve done their homework!

It may be tempting to copy-paste sections from other supplemental essays, especially when the question is so similar. **But don’t**. Advise your student to start every supplemental essay from scratch. This will force them to really think through what they’re writing and not just regurgitate the same story. This will also prevent mentioning the wrong college name in the essay (cringe!).

Tackling “Uncommon” Essay Prompts

Sometimes, the supplemental essay questions will go beyond the standard. These may come in the form of a few short questions that give you a chance to show off your creativity. Here’s an example on [Yale’s supplement](#):

- Who or what is a source of inspiration for you? (35 words or fewer)
- If you could live for a day as another person, past or present, who would it be? Why? (35 words or fewer)
- You are teaching a Yale course. What is it called? (35 words or fewer)
- Most Yale freshmen live in suites of four to six students. What would you contribute to the dynamic of your suite? (35 words or fewer)

Supplemental essay questions may also come in the form of an extended essay (650 words) that gives admissions officers a deeper look into how you think. UChicago is most notoriously known for asking very thought-provoking supplemental essay questions. [This year’s essay questions from UChicago](#) are listed below:

- What is square one, and can you actually go back to it? —Inspired by Maya Shaked, Class of 2018

- Once, renowned physicist Werner Heisenberg said: “There is a fundamental error in separating the parts from the whole, the mistake of atomizing what should not be atomized. Unity and complementarity constitute reality.” Whether it’s Georges Seurat’s pointillism in “A Sunday on La Grande Jatte,” the 1995-96 Chicago Bulls, quantum physics, or any other field of your choosing, when can the parts be separated from the whole and when can they not? —Inspired by Ender Sahin, Class of 2020

- The ball is in your court—a penny for your thoughts, but say it, don’t spray it. So long as you don’t bite off more than you can chew, beat around the bush, or cut corners, writing this essay should be a piece of cake. Create your own idiom, and tell us its origin—you know, the whole nine yards. PS: A picture is worth a thousand words. —Inspired by April Bell, Class of 2017, and Maya Shaked, Class of 2018 (It takes two to tango.)

- Alice falls down the rabbit hole. Milo drives through the tollbooth. Dorothy is swept up in the tornado. Neo takes the red pill. Don’t tell us about another world you’ve imagined, heard about, or created. Rather, tell us about its portal. Sure, some people think of the University of Chicago as a portal to their future, but please choose another portal to write about. —Inspired by Raphael Hallerman, Class of 2020

- Vestigiality refers to genetically determined structures or attributes that have apparently lost most or all of their ancestral function, but have been retained during the process of evolution. In humans, for instance, the appendix is thought to be a vestigial structure. Describe something vestigial (real or imagined) and provide an explanation for its existence. —Inspired by Tiffany Kim, Class of 2020

- In the spirit of adventurous inquiry, pose your own question or choose one of our [past prompts](#). Be original, creative, thought provoking. Draw on your best qualities as a writer, thinker, visionary, social critic, sage, citizen of the world, or future citizen of the University of Chicago; take a little risk, and have fun.

A few important pieces of advice in tackling these types of questions:

- **Don’t try to tie your response back to your life in an unnatural way.** One of UChicago’s most popular essay prompts was “Find X”. Some students approached this question by writing something about “How I found X, this unknown part of myself, at summer camp.” This ended up just sounding contrived and insincere.

- **Show how you think.** Admissions officers aren’t asking “What can you do with a giant jar of mustard” because they’re really looking for uses for the giant jar of mustard they have sitting around. They’re interested in seeing how you think. Answer honestly and specifically so readers can really get a sense of who you are.

- **Don't write what you think admissions officers want to read.** Everyone is going to be writing what they think will make admissions officers happy. Instead let your personality shine through and use your interests and passions to inspire your answer.

Start Your College Essays Early!

As you can probably tell by now, the best essays require a lot of time and thought. Make sure your student gets an early start on the essay so they don't feel rushed or pressured for time. This way they'll have the time to draft and edit their essays to make sure it shows the best side of themselves.

In the next chapter, we'll talk about the many different components that go into building your application and how you can use them to strengthen your application. This will include things like extracurriculars, community service, interviews, the mid-year update and the SAT IIs.

Chapter Six

Other Ways to Bolster an Application

In the previous chapter of the Ultimate College Prep Guide, we talked about the college essay and tackled both the Common App personal statement and the supplementary application essays. We focused on how the personal statement should be personal and focused on what makes your student stand out, while the supplemental essays should be school-specific.

In this chapter, we'll talk about all the other, more discretionary things that can make your student's application even stronger.

These include the SAT Subject Tests, college interviews, extracurricular activities, and the mid-year update. While some of these are longer-term commitments, others can be added during the college application process to help ensure your student stands out.

SAT Subject Tests

The [SAT Subject Tests](#) are one-hour tests that focus on specific subjects like chemistry or English and give your student a chance to demonstrate deeper knowledge and mastery of particular subjects.

Most colleges don't require these tests as part of your student's application, but [most will recommend it](#) as a supplement. Make sure to look up the testing requirements for any school your student is applying for to determine whether they are required to take it.

Taking the SAT Subject Tests is a great way for your student to prove their proficiency in certain subjects and show their commitment to success. We recommend [identifying two or three subjects](#) that your student thinks they can excel in and taking the time to study for and take these exams. There is a total of 20 subjects to choose from.

How to Prepare for the SAT Subject Tests

While the Subject Tests aren't required like the SAT, your student should take these tests just as seriously. Work with your student to set up a study plan to make sure they're prepared for test day.

- **Find study materials.** The Subject Tests are designed to mirror material that your student would learn in their classroom. However, it's possible that they may not have covered a

specific topic before their test date. By doing [practice questions and practice exams](#), your student will get an idea of the type of questions and subjects that will be covered.

- **Develop a study plan, and stick to it!** Just like with the SAT, developing a scheduled study plan will help keep your student on track and make sure they're confident come test day. Even just setting aside 20 minutes a day to study new material or do a few practice questions will help set them up for success.

- **Focus on exam topics your student is least familiar with.** Class textbooks are a great way to get a handle on subjects that haven't been covered in class yet. Your student may even be able to ask their teacher questions about specific topics if they mention that they need to prepare for the SAT Subject Tests.

College Interviews

During the college application process, your student has the option to have an interview with an admissions representative or alumnus as part of the application. While [few colleges actually require an interview](#), many will offer (and recommend!) evaluative or informational interviews to interested students.

The interview is a great opportunity for your student to get their questions about the school answered, while also showing a bit of their personality that may be hard to show on paper. While the interview may not be required, if your student does decide to set up an interview, they need to take it seriously. They should set aside some time to prepare before the interview, so they go in ready to put their best foot forward.

How to Prepare for a College Interview

Going into a college interview unprepared is like going into a presentation without a presentation — they're doomed. Follow these steps to make sure your student makes the best impression:

- **Do your research.** There are [tons of sources](#) out there that provide potential questions they might get asked during the interview. Make sure your student reviews these and is comfortable answering these questions in relation to that college.

- **Prepare questions.** At the end of the interview, the interviewer will likely ask "Do you have any questions?". This is your student's question to get any questions they have about the college or college experience answered. Make sure they prepare at least a few questions and don't go in empty-handed.

- **Practice!** Your student may think they've got their answers down pat, but the experience of actually answering a question out loud versus in their head is very different. Have them practice with you to make sure they're confident with their answers.

- **Be yourself.** Your student wants to show who they are as a person during the interview because going to college is all about finding the "best fit." Of course, they should be sure to remain professional. Dress smart and remember to smile!

- **Follow up with a "Thank You" email.** The interviewer has taken time out of their busy schedule to meet and chat with your student. Your student should show their appreciation by sending a simple "Thank You" email expressing their gratitude. They may not get a response, but this appreciation will not be forgotten!

Extracurriculars

Admissions officers are **looking for students who pursue their passions**. Often, students will join countless activities outside of school because "it will look good on their college apps," but in reality admissions officers would rather see students making a [long-term commitment and showing deep involvement](#) in a few activities to show true interest and engagement.

Extracurricular activities can come in many forms including: student government, [sports](#), [part-time jobs](#), [music and the arts](#), or [volunteering and community service](#). Regardless of what your student chooses, being able to participate in extracurriculars while also maintaining good grades [shows to admissions officers](#):

- Time-management skills
- Ability to prioritize
- Motivation
- Responsibility
- Leadership qualities

When students are involved in just a few activities, it means they also will likely have time to pursue leadership positions within those groups. Holding a leadership position shows more than just passion — it shows a drive to make a change and take on new challenges. Students who make an effort to have an impact in their extracurriculars aren't satisfied with just passively standing by, they want to make an impact in everything they do.

Choosing Your Extracurriculars

When your student is deciding on which extracurriculars to pursue, there's nothing wrong with trying out a couple different ones to see which really sparks their interest.

Ultimately your student should settle on no more than two or three activities with which they can deeply engage.

When making that final decision, we recommend keeping a [few things in mind](#):

- **Choose activities your student is truly passionate about.** This may not necessarily be the activities that line up closest with their professional aspirations, but that's okay. Getting involved in something completely separate from their academic interests gives students a chance to pursue other interests and become more well-rounded.
- **Find a balance.** Pursuing extracurriculars should complement your student's studies, but should not take up so much of their time that they cannot handle both. Doing too much can cause your student to burn out. Make sure you help them find a balance where they feel challenged, but not pushed past their limits.
- **For professionally-related interests, use internships as a trial run.** Internships are a great way for your student to learn more about their professional interests and goals. By gaining work experience in the field they're interested in, they can figure out if that is a field they're truly passionate about and learn about a potential future career.

To give your student a little inspiration in case they're having trouble deciding, we've compiled an [Ultimate List of Extracurricular Activities](#) to get them started.

The Mid-Year Report

The Mid-Year Report (MYR) is often sent to colleges [after first semester/trimester grades](#) are available as a supplement to the original college application and shows the student's continued work and updated achievements. These reports are especially important for students who applied early or received deferred decisions because the information in the report may help improve their chances.

Not every college requires an MYR, but we highly recommend sending one to show the college that your student is still very interested in them. The MYR also shows that your student is continuing to focus on their academics and extracurriculars throughout their senior year. By updating colleges on any additional achievements, scores or distinctions that your student has achieved since their application was submitted, they can make the best case for why they are a great fit for that school.

What to Include in Your Mid-Year Update

[Your student's counselor](#) will most likely be the one sending the MYR, and [by default](#), will

likely be including:

- Class Rank
- GPA
- Transcript

If your student would like to include anything else in the MYR, they should reach out their counselor to pass on the relevant information. We highly recommend taking advantage of this opportunity and [including things like](#):

- **Any recent accomplishments.** This can include things like being appointed to leadership positions, breaking records in sports, raising money for a good cause, or moving forward in science competitions. Anything that shows your student pursuing their interests is worth mentioning.

- **Additional portfolio work.** If your student is creatively inclined and has added any recent work to their portfolio make sure to include that. Make sure this work is professional quality and will really show off your student's talents.

While we recommend including anything that may improve your student's application, it is possible to include too much. You don't want to overwhelm the admissions committee with too much new information that it becomes a lot more work for them. Select the information you want to include carefully and be considerate of the reviewer's time.

Show off Your Strengths

Applying to college is a stressful time for both you and your student. You want to be sure they're putting their best foot forward to maximize their chances of getting into their dream school. Whether it's through SAT Subjects Tests, college interviews, extracurriculars, or the MYR (or all of them!) there are so many ways outside of grades that your student can show off why they're a great candidate.

In the next chapter, we'll break down the best way to help your student decide which colleges to apply for. We'll provide examples of factors to consider including type of college, GPA and test score ranges, and financial situation. By curating a list of colleges that fit your criteria and interest your student, you can make sure you're spending your time and money applying to the right places.

Chapter Seven

Building a College List

In the previous chapter of the Ultimate College Prep Guide, we talked about all of the discretionary things that your student can do to make their application even stronger. In addition to grades and test scores, the SAT Subject Tests, college interviews, extracurricular activities, and the mid-year update are all taken into consideration by admissions officers when reviewing your student's application.

In this chapter, we'll walk through our three step process to help you and your student decide on which colleges to apply for. During this process, we'll give examples of what factors to consider, where to find important information and how best to build your college list to make the most of your time and money.

Step 1: Decide What Type of College Fits Your Academic Interests

The nature of higher education is surprisingly diverse and includes more than just more "traditional" public, private and community colleges. Before nailing down which specific colleges your student wants to apply for, they need to first identify what their interests are and what type of college fits those interests.

Public/Private Universities

The broadest classification of higher education is the four-year public or private university. These are larger institutions that offer a varying range of majors for undergraduates, ranging across the humanities, social sciences, and STEM fields. Students take a range of courses, not necessarily just within their major, to receive a well-rounded education. Universities also offer more than just undergraduate programs, including graduate or professional programs awarding higher degrees.

Many universities also have a focus on research, meaning that faculty will split their time between teaching and pursuing research. Because these universities are also comparatively larger, that may result in an increased reliance on teaching assistance and larger class sizes.

While their structure is largely similar, public and private universities differ most noticeably when it comes to tuition.

- **Public universities** are called such because they're funded by the public, often through state taxes. Because of this, tuition is usually decreased, especially for in-state students.
- **Private universities** tend to have higher tuition rates, but that also means they tend to have higher endowments. This means they can usually provide more financial aid to those who need it.

Liberal Arts Colleges

Most universities have colleges within the institution that are focused on undergraduate education. Examples of this are the Yale College within Yale University or the College of Arts and Sciences within Cornell University. However, there are some Liberal Arts Colleges that stand alone.

Liberal Arts Colleges tend to offer majors that are [one expansive area of study](#), whereas universities may break up these larger majors into two or three different tracks. Classes at Liberal Arts Colleges also tend to be [smaller in size with lower student-teacher ratios](#) since these colleges are usually smaller than universities.

Tuition at Liberal Arts Colleges is higher since they are mostly private. However, they also tend to have large endowments so can provide more need-based financial aid.

Other Types of Colleges

While the two most common types are larger universities and smaller liberal arts colleges, there are some other types of colleges your student might be considering.

- **Community College.** These are typically two-year programs that award students with associate degrees. Some students [choose to start college here](#) because of the lower tuition and higher admission rates. If your student plans to do this and then transfer to a four-year program, [they need to make sure](#) their community college course credits will transfer over and count toward their bachelor's degree.
- **Vocational-Technical Colleges.** These are perfect for students who have more specific skill-based career goals and are interested in gaining the specific skills required to excel in that field. These programs can range from two to four years and focus specifically on career-related courses. Upon completion, students are awarded a certificate of completion of an Associate of Science degree. Vocational-technical colleges tend to be more expensive than community colleges.
- **For-Profit Colleges.** Similar to vocational-technical colleges, for-profit colleges offer career-oriented programs, rather than subject-based majors, targeted to students

interesting a particular line of work. The difference is, [tuition is their main source of revenue](#), so their acceptance rates tend to be higher. While this may be attractive to some, it's important to do some research before sending in an application. Many for-profit colleges have been [receiving backlash](#) for overcharging students while providing low-quality education. Also, make sure to check that the school has [regional accreditation](#). These may be more competitive and expensive, but the degree is more highly regarded (and sometimes required) by employers and other four-year programs your student might transfer to.

Step 2: Build Your College List

Now that your student has decided what type of college they're interested, it's time to start building and narrowing down their college list. There are three categories that are used to refer to colleges relative to your student's admissions criteria:

- Safety: These are schools where your student exceeds the average admissions criteria
- Match: These are schools that are the right fit for your student's admissions criteria
- Reach: These are schools that are particularly selective relative to your student's admissions criteria

We recommend that your student applies to three safety, three match and three reach schools to minimize the risk associated with the college admissions process. To determine which schools fall into which category for your student, there are certain statistics that you should pay particular attention to.

But before we dive into the criteria your student should be looking at to build their list, we want to address this idea of **systemically inflected self-selection**. This is when students in the lower half of the socioeconomic status distribution substantially undermatch, meaning that they attend a college at least two selectivity levels below the level that they actually qualify for.

On the flip side, there is [little evidence](#) that students perform worse at institutions with higher average SAT scores than their own. So rather than only applying to safety schools, we recommend taking a chance and applying to some reach schools as well. You never know what might happen!

Now let's dive into the qualifications and metrics to consider when building your college list. These criteria can fall into two main categories: **academic** and **financial**.

To help you on your search, we've put together this downloadable college list builder worksheet. On it, you can keep track of important criteria and develop a ranking for colleges to apply to.



College List Builder

I'm interested in this type of college or university:

- ☐ Liberal Arts ☐ For-profit ☐ Community
- ☐ Vocational/ Technical ☐ Public ☐ Private

I want my major to be...

My college list:

[illegible]

Academic Criteria

The most important personal academic criteria your student needs to keep in mind are their GPA, Test Scores (ACT/SAT), course rigor, and extracurricular activities. The *institutional* academic criteria to consider when deciding whether a school is a “safety,” “match,” or “reach” include a school’s acceptance rate, retention rate, graduation rate, and student to faculty ratio.

Below are typical examples of admissions criteria among top-tier, mid-tier, and lower-tier schools. These can give you a general sense of the types of schools your student should include in their search based on their admissions criteria.

Very Selective Colleges

University Name	Admittance Rate	GPA	SAT Range	ACT Range	Graduation Rate
University of Chicago	8%	84% of admitted students have GPA over 3.75	1490-1600	32-35	92%
Yale University	7%	97% in top tenth of class	1480-1600	31-35	97%
Grinnell College	25%	81% in top tenth of class	1330-1540	30-33	86%
University of California, Berkeley	15%	98% in top tenth of class	1330-1540	29-34	91%

Selective Colleges

Univesity Name	Admittance Rate	GPA	SAT Range	ACT Range	Graduation Rate
Clark University	55%	48% of admitted students have GPA over 3.75	1200-1410	26-30	83%
SUNY Binghamton	42%	64% of admitted students have GPA over 3.75	1300-1440	27-31	81%
Whitman College	43%	54% in top tenth of class	1280-1470	27-32	87%

Less Selective Colleges

Univesity Name	Admittance Rate	GPA	SAT Range	ACT Range	Graduation Rate
Ursinus College	83%	25% in top tenth of class	1120-1320	23-30	78%
Wagner College	69%	40% of admitted students have GPA over 3.75	1110-1310	22-27	64%
Humboldt State University	75%	13% in top tenth of class	960-1180	18-24	46%

Financial Criteria

In an ideal scenario, every student would have the opportunity to attend the college that is the perfect fit for them. The unfortunate reality is, though, that the steep cost of college is often a limiting factor in what schools a student can attend.

But before you write off a school as way too expensive, it's important to know that the situation is less dire than it seems.

- State schools are subsidized for in-state students
- High-cost colleges are typically much more affordable than their sticker price may suggest
- There are need-blind colleges that do not discriminate admissions standards based on financial health, including some of the top-ranked schools

In fact, there are many financial aid opportunities available to low-income students that many students are unaware of. **Only about [one-third](#) of full-time college students pay full tuition.** It may even be possible that low-income students would pay less at a selective institution where they qualify for more financial aid than at a less selective college with a smaller endowment. Make sure to be aware of how much you would actually need to pay before you decide a college is too expensive to apply for.

Many top colleges recognize that there is a severe education gap correlated with socioeconomic status and are [making an effort to attract and graduate](#) students on the lower end of that scale. Below is a table showing how top colleges rank on a [College Access Index scale](#).

College ↕	Pell (2012-2014) ↕	Pell (2008) ↕	Pell change ↕	Net price, low- to middle-income ↕	College Access Index ▲	Endowment per student ↕
Vassar	23	12	+11	\$5,600	3.1	\$340,000
Grinnell	24	14	+10	\$10,400	2.7	\$880,000
U.N.C.-Chapel Hill	21	13	+8	\$7,600	2.3	n/a
Smith	23	16	+7	\$11,600	2.2	\$440,000
Amherst	20	16	+4	\$8,400	2.0	\$940,000
Harvard	17	13	+4	\$3,000	2.0	\$1,520,000
Pomona	18	12	+6	\$5,200	1.8	\$1,170,000
St. Mary's (Ind.)	24	14	+10	\$15,900	1.8	\$80,000
Susquehanna	25	17	+8	\$18,000	1.7	\$50,000
Columbia	16	12	+4	\$3,500	1.6	\$320,000
Rice	18	15	+3	\$8,100	1.5	\$810,000
Kalamazoo	21	13	+8	\$13,900	1.5	\$190,000
Wesleyan	18	12	+6	\$8,700	1.5	\$200,000
Denison	20	11	+9	\$11,800	1.5	\$330,000
Barnard	19	15	+4	\$11,100	1.4	\$90,000
Brown	17	12	+5	\$7,000	1.4	\$350,000
Williams	18	14	+4	\$9,300	1.4	\$840,000
Stanford	15	12	+3	\$4,300	1.4	\$1,200,000
Wellesley	18	13	+5	\$10,600	1.2	\$640,000
Occidental	20	19	+1	\$14,200	1.2	\$190,000
DePauw	21	16	+5	\$15,200	1.2	\$210,000
M.I.T.	17	14	+3	\$7,900	1.2	\$1,000,000
Haverford	15	12	+3	\$5,600	1.2	\$410,000
Wheaton (Ill.)	21	13	+8	\$14,400	1.2	\$110,000
Brandeis	21	12	+9	\$15,100	1.1	\$120,000
Franklin and Marshall	17	7	+10	\$9,300	1.1	\$120,000
Hamilton	16	9	+7	\$8,700	1.0	\$410,000
Rochester	20	16	+4	\$15,100	0.9	\$190,000
U. Penn.	16	10	+6	\$9,100	0.9	\$230,000

Resources

To help your student in their search for information, we've put together a list of useful resources:

- In 2015, the White House released an initiative intended to introduce more transparency into the college selection process for families, particularly in terms of vetting institutions. They were collected into the [White House Factsheet](#) and center around the [College Scorecard](#) which provides reliable national data on college cost, graduation, debt and post-college earnings.

- [ScholarMatch](#), [StartClass](#) and [College Abacus](#) are three college search resources that implement College Scorecard data to help students put together a list of colleges based on metrics that are important to them

- [PayScale](#) uses College Scorecard data to analyze various colleges' return-on-investment

- [InsideTrack](#) uses College Scorecard data to develop and implement effective student-centered initiatives
- [College Insight](#), [College Board's Big Future](#), [Cappex](#), [College Confidential](#), and [Niche](#) are all useful [college search websites](#) that provide statistics and “matching” capabilities.

Important to note: Rankings such as [US News and World Report](#) are not the most useful metrics to make your decision, for they utilize data such as alumni donation rates, which may not always be particularly useful.

Step 3: Visit Colleges

Once your student has decided on which colleges to apply for, it's time for them to actually get a feel for what it's like to be on campus. As we discussed in the first chapter of the Ultimate College Prep Guide, visiting colleges is a great way to demonstrate your interest in the school, which will only bolster your application. We recommend taking a look at [College Board's Big Future](#), which has a great College Visit finder feature.

Of course, we also know that college visits can get expensive. There are many colleges that will fly out students from underrepresented populations to visit campuses. Keep an eye out for opportunities in your area.

Another alternative is to visit similar “type” colleges in your local area (large university, liberal arts, etc.) to find a good cross-section of experiences. Many colleges will also hold alumni interviews in your local area, so even if your student can't visit the school before they apply, they can show their interest and connect with others to learn about what it's like to be a student at their school of interest.

Build a List That's Perfect for You

Deciding where to apply to college seems like a daunting task if you don't know where to start. By following these steps, you can help your student narrow down their potential list of colleges and find the school that is perfect for them.

In the next chapter, we'll talk about the most important step when applying to college: how to actually apply. We'll break down the different applications your student will need to complete and the multiple rounds of applications they may experience as they continue through the college admissions process.

Chapter Eight

Applying to College

In the previous chapter of the Ultimate College Prep Guide, we laid out our three-step plan to help your student decide where to apply to college. By pinpointing your academic interests, building your college list and visiting schools, your student can get a clear idea of what college is right for them.

In this chapter, we'll give you a comprehensive run-down of the things you need to know about actually applying to college. We'll provide the resources and information about things like filling out applications and deciding when to apply, that you need to make sure your student doesn't miss a step in their college application process.

Start with the Common Application and Secondary Applications

The Common Application is an integrated undergraduate and transfer application shared between [695 colleges and universities](#), ranging from small liberal arts colleges to large public universities.

The Common App asks for information such as:

- Personal information
- [GPA](#) and [standardized test scores](#)
- A choice of essays to respond to
- Extracurricular activities and awards
- Faculty recommendations

The [essay prompt selection for 2017-2018](#) has already been released so your student can start thinking about which topic inspires them the most. We've copied the essay prompts below:

1. Some students have a background, identity, interest, or talent that is so meaningful they believe their application would be incomplete without it. If this sounds like you, then please share your story.
2. The lessons we take from obstacles we encounter can be fundamental to later success. Recount a time when you faced a challenge, setback, or failure. How did it affect you, and what did you learn from the experience?

3. Reflect on a time when you questioned or challenged a belief or idea. What prompted your thinking? What was the outcome?

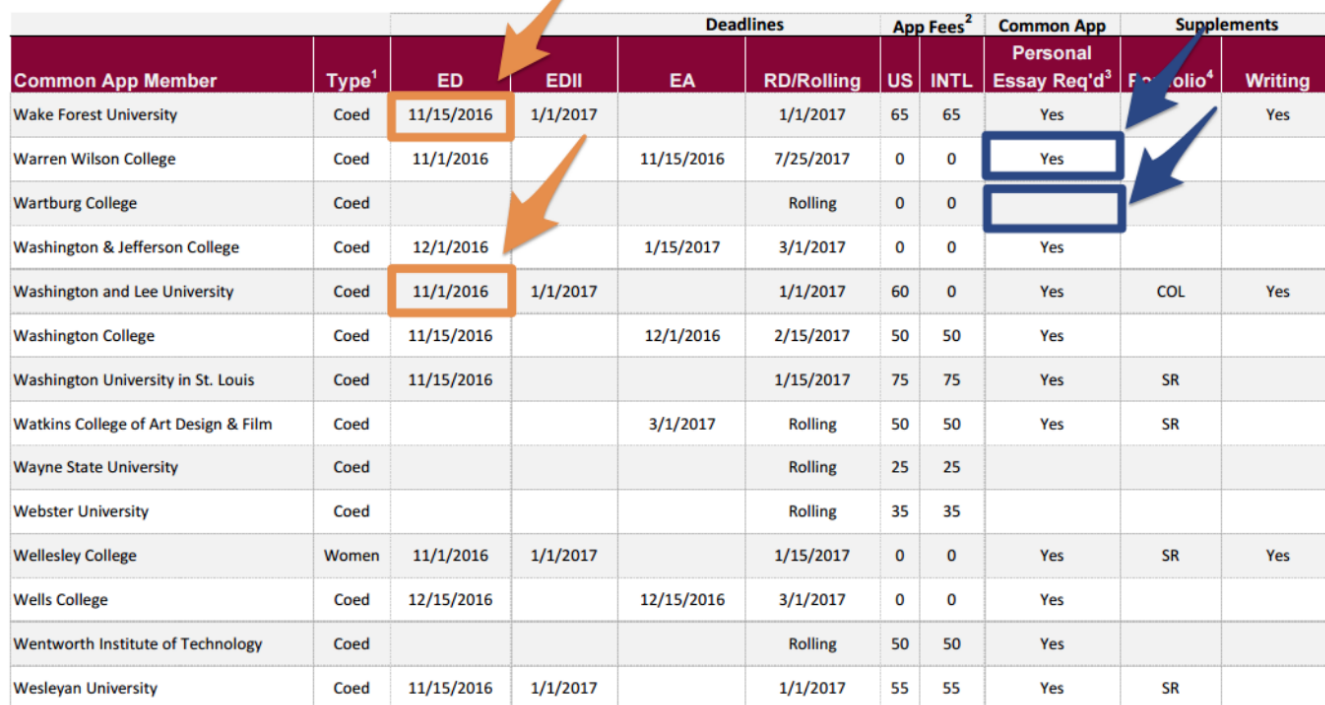
4. Describe a problem you've solved or a problem you'd like to solve. It can be an intellectual challenge, a research query, an ethical dilemma - anything that is of personal importance, no matter the scale. Explain its significance to you and what steps you took or could be taken to identify a solution.

5. Discuss an accomplishment, event, or realization that sparked a period of personal growth and a new understanding of yourself or others.

6. Describe a topic, idea, or concept you find so engaging that it makes you lose all track of time. Why does it captivate you? What or who do you turn to when you want to learn more?

7. Share an essay on any topic of your choice. It can be one you've already written, one that responds to a different prompt, or one of your own design.

Remember that while the Common App is a broad application that is sent to many colleges, there are significant differences in things like due dates (orange) and requirements (blue) for each of these institutions, as this cross section demonstrates:



Common App Member	Type ¹	Deadlines				App Fees ²		Common App	Supplements	
		ED	EDII	EA	RD/Rolling	US	INTL	Personal Essay Req'd ³	Portfolio ⁴	Writing
Wake Forest University	Coed	11/15/2016	1/1/2017		1/1/2017	65	65	Yes		Yes
Warren Wilson College	Coed	11/1/2016		11/15/2016	7/25/2017	0	0	Yes		
Wartburg College	Coed				Rolling	0	0			
Washington & Jefferson College	Coed	12/1/2016		1/15/2017	3/1/2017	0	0	Yes		
Washington and Lee University	Coed	11/1/2016	1/1/2017		1/1/2017	60	0	Yes	COL	Yes
Washington College	Coed	11/15/2016		12/1/2016	2/15/2017	50	50	Yes		
Washington University in St. Louis	Coed	11/15/2016			1/15/2017	75	75	Yes	SR	
Watkins College of Art Design & Film	Coed			3/1/2017	Rolling	50	50	Yes	SR	
Wayne State University	Coed				Rolling	25	25			
Webster University	Coed				Rolling	35	35			
Wellesley College	Women	11/1/2016	1/1/2017		1/15/2017	0	0	Yes	SR	Yes
Wells College	Coed	12/15/2016		12/15/2016	3/1/2017	0	0	Yes		
Wentworth Institute of Technology	Coed				Rolling	50	50	Yes		
Wesleyan University	Coed	11/15/2016	1/1/2017		1/1/2017	55	55	Yes	SR	

Make sure you're aware of the [due dates](#) that correspond to your student's college(s) of choice. The Common App and all other parts of the application must be completed before the earliest due date because once the application has been sent, [it's a hassle to change](#) things.

Note: Submitting the Common Application for some schools requires paying a fee. Fee waivers are available to those who qualify under [certain categories](#).

The main portion of the Common Application, including the personal essay, is shared across all colleges, but each college reserves the right to add their own "supplement" or "secondary application" as an addendum to the shared application.

Supplements / Secondary Applications

Many colleges, particularly the more selective ones, include secondary portions of the application that ask for more information. This is usually in the form of additional essay prompts. For many schools, these are optional but highly encouraged.

Strong supplemental applications can help your student's application stand out. Often when admissions officers are [having a tough time deciding](#) between equally qualified candidates, the student with the better supplement will have the edge. Putting just as much effort into your supplement as the rest of your application could make or break your student's acceptance to a certain school.

To find whether or not a school requires a supplement, you can search for a public listing on the school website. Sometimes supplements will be included on the Common Application. Most supplement essay topics fall under the generic "Why do you want to go to this school?" category, but some (like the notoriously unique [University of Chicago](#)) will be more complicated.

Some examples of supplement essay questions include:

- [Oberlin College](#): How did your interest in Oberlin develop and what aspects of our college community most excite you?
- [Tufts University](#): Artist Bruce Nauman once said: "One of the factors that still keeps me in the studio is that every so often I have to more or less start all over." Everyone deals with failure differently; for most artists failure is an opportunity to start something new. Tell us about a time when you have failed and how that has influenced your art practice.
- [University of Chicago](#): Vestigiality refers to genetically determined structures or attributes that have apparently lost most or all of their ancestral function, but have been retained during the process of evolution. In humans, for instance, the appendix is thought

to be a vestigial structure. Describe something vestigial (real or imagined) and provide an explanation for its existence.

Schools That Don't Accept the Common Application

While many schools do use the Common App, including most of the more selective public and private colleges, not every college in the US is on the Common App. Surprisingly, the vast majority of schools in the US actually do not use the Common Application—there are over 4,000 colleges in the US, and only ~695 schools use the Common App.

The content on the common app and other schools' unique applications does not vary much. Both applications ask for many of the same metrics and personal statements. For example, [MIT](#) does not use the Common App, but still requires test scores, multiple personal statements, letters of recommendation, GPA, and strongly encourages an interview.

There are also several alternative group applications, such as the [Coalition Application](#) which is intended to be more affordable and reduce barriers to entry for lower income students. There are also some state school systems that have integrated applications for their public systems, such as the [University of California system](#).

Decide Whether to Apply Early Action, Early Decision or Regular Decision

Each round of applications has its pros and cons. It's important to decide ahead of time when your student will apply because some deadlines are earlier than others.

Early Action

Early action is a non-binding application that—as the name suggests—a student submits earlier than a regular decision application. Early action applicants receive an earlier admissions decision.

Students **are allowed to apply to more than one college early action** and if they are accepted, they do not have to commit. The final deadline to commit to an early action acceptance is May 1st, which is the national response date for all early and regular college applications.

There are some pros and cons to consider when deciding whether or not to apply early action:

Pros:

- Differing (and smaller) application pools may be [less competitive](#) and increase your student's chances of admission
- Reduces stress because your student will find out admissions decisions sooner
- Earlier financial aid notification may grant you more time to get finances in order and seek out other schools with more aid if your initial package isn't suitable

Cons:

- Some colleges [might want an extra semester of academic info](#) to make their decision, applying EA means you have one less semester to prove your worth
- Some schools might not send financial aid notification until the regular decision time

Early Decision

Similar to early action, early decision applications are submitted earlier than a regular decision application. However, students are **only allowed to apply to one college early decision** and doing so commits them to a binding application process which means they must commit to attend if accepted.

If your student decides to apply early decision, it should be to their top choice school. Students must agree to attend if they are accepted and offered a financial aid package that their family considers adequate. If your student plans to apply to any other colleges, they must do so under regular decision and if they are offered acceptance to their early decision school, they must withdraw all other applications.

There are again, some pros and cons to consider when deciding whether or not to apply early decision:

Pros:

- Smaller application pool, higher acceptance rate
- Demonstrates absolute commitment to attendance
- Less stressful, because if your student commits to ED it means they're already set for the next year
- Less work for other applications

Cons:

- Your student is locked into attending the school, even if they realize later on that it's not a good fit
- You're tied into a financial aid plan which may not be as competitive as other schools
- Some schools may give lower financial aid packages since students are bound to come if accepted
- ED plans may give an unfair advantage to applications with more financial resources since often families with low incomes do not have the opportunity to compare financial aid offers with a binding application

Regular Decision

Your student will likely be submitting the majority of their applications regular decision. These applications are typically due in January, students are notified in March, and a decision is required by May 1.

While there are no limiting factors in terms of how many applications your student can submit, there are still some factors to consider:

Pros:

- Students have more time to apply since deadlines are later
- There are no special commitments or contracts
- Students have more choices in terms of number of colleges to apply for and choose from
- You have a chance to compare financial aid packages

Cons:

- There is more uncertainty, since students aren't notified until March
- Due to this uncertainty, some students may apply to an excess of schools, which can get expensive and time-consuming
- The pool of applicants may be [more crowded](#) and your application may be less competitive

ED vs EA vs RD

Students often wonder if applying ED or EA really increases your chances of admission over RD? The answer is: **yes**.

Generally students will see a 5-20% bump in acceptance rate when applying early. This will vary from school to school, so [look online](#) to see if schools have released early admissions rates to draw a comparison.

Of course, these statistics can change substantially from year to year, based on factors such as applicant pool and changes in admissions policies. Below we've provided a comparison chart based on selectivity to give you an idea how the acceptance rates vary among schools.

Very Selective Colleges

University Name	EA Acceptance Rate	ED Acceptance Rate	RD Acceptance Rate
Yale University	16%	N/A	5%
University of North Carolina - Chapel Hill	32%	N/A	17%
Grinnell College	N/A	53%	25%
Brown University	N/A	18%	8%

Selective Colleges

University Name	EA Acceptance Rate	ED Acceptance Rate	RD Acceptance Rate
Clark University	79%	73%	55%
SUNY Binghamton	47.90%	N/A	42%
Whitman College	N/A	76%	43%
Smith College	N/A	58%	41%

Less Selective Colleges

University Name	EA Acceptance Rate	ED Acceptance Rate	RD Acceptance Rate
Ursinus College	88%	N/A	83%
Iona College	96.30%	N/A	91%
University of Scranton	77.90%	N/A	72%

To help make sure you never miss an important deadline, we've put together this worksheet to help you keep all the important information in one place. On it, you can fill in all of the early and regular application deadlines and keep track of when you should be hearing back from schools so you can follow up if needed.



College Application Deadlines

College Name	Safety, Match, or Reach?	Early Decision or Early Action?	ED / EA Deadline	ED / EA Results	Regular Decision Deadline	RD Results	Result
<i>Boston College</i>	<i>Match</i>	<i>Early Action</i>	<i>11/1/2017</i>	<i>12/25/17</i>	<i>1/1/18</i>	<i>4/1/18</i>	<i>Accepted!</i>

What Should You Do If You've Been Deferred or Waitlisted?

Occasionally, when your student's application was [not competitive enough](#) for the first round of early decision or early action, your final decision will be **deferred** to the regular decision pool. Although disheartening, it's important to remember that your student is still being considered.

It's also possible that your student may be **waitlisted** [after RD results are out](#). This doesn't mean that your student has been completely denied, as colleges use their waitlists to fill the incoming class if not enough accepted students enroll.

There are a few things your student can do if they have been deferred or waitlisted to help push their application towards the top of the pile:

- Contact admissions and reiterate that they will in fact attend if accepted because they feel like this institution is the best fit. Perhaps even say your student is willing to attend regardless of financial aid package, if this is true of your situation.
- Send in additional application materials to bolster their application. These can include additional recommendation letters, updates on academic affairs, or rewards they've received.
- If they do not get off the waitlist, try again next year! Transfer applications can be far less competitive, although this [varies widely](#).
- See if they have any alumni connections, such as family members or college success organizations. Sometimes this little push can bump your student's application to the top.
- Your student can write to a professor that they're particularly interested in working with. While they aren't guaranteed to read it or respond, if they feel particularly inspired, they may speak up on your student's behalf.

There are also a few things your student should make sure **not to do**:

- Do not continually pester admissions officers. Your student is not the only person on the waitlist!
- Overreach and bother professors or connections too much. These people are doing your student a favor by helping them with your application so make sure your student expresses appreciation.

Deferral and waitlist admissions rates vary greatly from school to school because each college fills its acceptance pool and waitlist differently. For example at some colleges, a deferral is issued to give admissions officers more time to make sure a student is a good fit for the college. At other colleges, a deferral is used in place of a rejection.

Usually, deferral and waitlist admission rates do not strongly correlate with how selective the school is. There are resources available online where you can search to see if the school(s) your student is interested in has released [deferral](#) or [waitlist](#) admissions data.

Below we've provided a comparison chart based on selectivity to give you an idea how the acceptance rates vary among schools.

Very Selective Schools

University Name	EA/ED?	EA/ED Admittance Rate	RD Acceptance Rate	Waitlist Acceptance Rate
Yale University	EA	16%	5%	2%
Grinnell College	ED	53%	25%	3.80%
Cornell University	ED	28%	12%	5%

Selective Colleges

University Name	EA/ED?	EA/ED Admittance Rate	RD Acceptance Rate	Waitlist Acceptance Rate
Clark University	EA/ED	79%/73%	55%	4.10%
SUNY Binghamton	EA	47.90%	42%	4.90%
Whitman College	ED	76%	43%	18.10%
Smith College	ED	58%	41%	22%

Less Selective Colleges

University Name	EA/ED?	EA/ED Admittance Rate	RD Acceptance Rate	Waitlist Acceptance Rate
University of Scranton	EA	77.90%	72%	38%

Set Your Schedule

There are many choices to make and lots of deadlines to consider when applying to college, so make sure to sit down with your student early on and decide which schools to apply to and when to apply. Your student will then have enough time to put together a strong application that gives them the best chance of acceptance at their top choice schools.

In the next chapter, we'll cover the second most stressful part of college, aside from the actual application — paying for college. College can be a very expensive experience, but it doesn't have to be. We'll discuss the many different options that can help pay for college including financial aid and scholarship opportunities.

Chapter Nine

Paying for College

In the previous chapter of the Ultimate College Prep Guide, we discussed the process of filling out college applications. We went over all the resources your student will need to complete their applications and gave advice on what to do if your student doesn't get the response they expect the first time around.

In this chapter we'll tackle the part of the college application process that extends past the actual application — how to pay for college. Higher education in the US is undeniably expensive, especially if your student is planning to go to a private institution. But there are quite a few options that you and your student can explore to help pay this cost and get the college experience they want most.

How Do You Know If You Qualify for Financial Aid?

To start the process of applying for need-based financial aid, you will first need to fill out one or two forms: the FAFSA and/or the CSS Profile. Most colleges and universities only require the FAFSA, but [about 200 colleges](#) also require the CSS Profile.

- The [FAFSA \(Free Application for Federal Student Aid\)](#) is the application for obtaining federal loans, grants, and work-study. It is used by schools both public and private in determining how federal aid (and some state aid) is disbursed.
- The [CSS Profile](#) is [usually required by](#) private colleges and universities to determine eligibility for non-government financial aid such as the institution grants, loans, and scholarships.

Once these forms are submitted, they're used to calculate your family's [Expected Family Contribution \(EFC\)](#) towards the cost of college. The EFC is then subtracted from a college's total cost of attendance to determine whether a student qualifies for need-based financial aid.

To estimate your EFC, you can use this [Quick Reference Table](#). The intersection of the number of dependent children you have and your AGI (aggregate gross income) will give you an approximate of your federal EFC based on parental income only.

2017-2018 Federal EFC Quick Reference Table					2017-2018 Federal EFC Quick Reference Table				
AGI	Number of Dependent children				AGI	Number of Dependent Children			
	1	2	3	4		1	2	3	4
\$30,000	\$998	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$125,000	\$25,677	\$24,165	\$22,330	\$20,635
\$32,500	\$1,435	\$582	\$0	\$0	\$130,000	\$27,335	\$25,301	\$23,874	\$22,175
\$35,000	\$1,871	\$1,018	\$0	\$0	\$135,000	\$28,993	\$26,959	\$25,414	\$23,719
\$37,500	\$2,307	\$1,455	\$666	\$0	\$140,000	\$30,651	\$28,617	\$26,954	\$25,259
\$40,000	\$2,733	\$1,891	\$1,103	\$0	\$145,000	\$32,309	\$30,275	\$28,495	\$26,800
\$42,500	\$3,142	\$2,328	\$1,539	\$625	\$150,000	\$33,967	\$31,933	\$30,035	\$28,340
\$45,000	\$3,074	\$2,739	\$1,975	\$1,061	\$155,000	\$35,578	\$33,544	\$31,646	\$29,833
\$47,500	\$3,539	\$3,148	\$2,399	\$1,498	\$160,000	\$37,180	\$35,155	\$33,257	\$31,327
\$50,000	\$4,004	\$3,081	\$2,808	\$1,934	\$165,000	\$38,721	\$36,738	\$34,868	\$32,760
\$52,500	\$4,412	\$3,545	\$3,217	\$2,343	\$170,000	\$40,261	\$38,279	\$36,432	\$34,077
\$55,000	\$4,951	\$4,010	\$3,159	\$2,752	\$175,000	\$41,802	\$39,819	\$37,973	\$35,512
\$57,500	\$5,383	\$4,419	\$3,624	\$3,161	\$180,000	\$43,342	\$41,359	\$39,513	\$36,947
\$60,000	\$6,015	\$4,958	\$3,972	\$3,096	\$185,000	\$44,882	\$42,900	\$40,976	\$38,381
\$62,500	\$6,500	\$5,391	\$4,511	\$3,560	\$190,000	\$46,423	\$44,440	\$42,410	\$39,816
\$65,000	\$7,244	\$6,023	\$5,050	\$4,025	\$195,000	\$48,010	\$46,028	\$43,892	\$41,298
\$67,500	\$7,834	\$6,510	\$5,499	\$4,437	\$200,000	\$49,598	\$47,615	\$45,374	\$42,779
\$70,000	\$8,708	\$7,253	\$6,131	\$4,976	\$205,000	\$51,185	\$49,182	\$46,855	\$44,261
\$72,500	\$9,581	\$7,846	\$6,636	\$5,412	\$210,000	\$52,772	\$50,664	\$48,337	\$45,743
\$75,000	\$10,455	\$8,719	\$7,380	\$6,044	\$215,000	\$54,360	\$52,145	\$49,819	\$47,224
\$80,000	\$12,202	\$10,466	\$8,867	\$7,277	\$220,000	\$55,947	\$53,627	\$51,300	\$48,706
\$85,000	\$13,949	\$12,214	\$10,615	\$8,747	\$225,000	\$57,535	\$55,109	\$52,782	\$50,188
\$90,000	\$15,697	\$13,961	\$12,362	\$10,495	\$230,000	\$59,015	\$56,552	\$54,226	\$51,631
\$95,000	\$17,219	\$15,655	\$14,109	\$12,242	\$235,000	\$60,438	\$57,975	\$55,649	\$53,054
\$100,000	\$18,731	\$17,168	\$15,740	\$13,989	\$240,000	\$61,861	\$59,398	\$57,072	\$54,477
\$105,000	\$20,244	\$18,680	\$17,252	\$15,557	\$245,000	\$63,284	\$60,821	\$58,494	\$55,900
\$110,000	\$21,756	\$20,192	\$18,764	\$17,069	\$250,000	\$64,707	\$62,244	\$59,917	\$57,323
\$115,000	\$23,268	\$21,587	\$20,159	\$18,464	\$275,000	\$71,821	\$69,359	\$67,032	\$64,438
\$120,000	\$24,016	\$22,218	\$20,790	\$19,095	© Copyright 2016. Troy Onink. All rights reserved.				



EFC for a family with aggregate gross income of \$120,000 / year and 3 dependent children

Keep in mind this table doesn't take into account any parent or student assets which may bring up your EFC. Your EFC will also be split equally if you have more than one student in college.

Your EFC will determine one of two possible outcomes:

- **Your child qualifies for need-based financial aid.** This means they are eligible for need-based grants, scholarships, work-study or student loans as part of their financial aid package. You'll have to wait and see exactly what your child is offered by the university.

- **Your child does not qualify for need-based financial aid.** This usually means your EFC is higher than the cost of attendance. But while your EFC may exceed the cost of attendance, you'll never have to pay more than that cost, which varies by school.

Grants

Grants are awarded according to financial need and do not require repayment. Grants can be awarded from a variety of different sources:

- **Federal Government Grants.** These grants are all funded by the federal government. To determine federal grant eligibility, students need only fill out and submit the FAFSA.
- [Federal Pell Grant](#). This is the most widely used grant program in America. It has been helping students fund their college educations since 1972.
- [Federal Supplemental Educational Opportunity Grant \(FSEOG\)](#). This grant is designed to give financial aid to undergraduate students with extreme financial need. Students must apply through their college of choice, and grants are awarded on a first come, first served basis.
- [Federal TEACH Grant](#). This grant is an award-for-service program. The grant provides Federal funding to students who agree to take up a teaching position in a high-need field, or critical shortage facility, following graduation. Recipients must sign a contract agreeing to a predetermined time of service. Students who fail to fulfill their teaching obligations will have their grant revert to a student loan and will be responsible for the full repayment, plus interest, of that loan.
- **State Government Grants.** These grants are regulated by the Department of Higher Education in each state. They are typically funded by state and local taxes, and/or state lottery funds. These grants aim to address financial needs of low-income students, as well as encouraging and supporting women and minority students to pursue higher education. Grant programs vary widely by state, but you can [take a look at what your state might offer](#).
- **College or University Grants.** These grants are funded by the private endowments given to colleges by individuals or businesses. Eligibility requirements are often high and tend to target specific types of students, including women and minorities. Make sure to [do a search](#) and see if the college your student is interested in offers any grants.
- **Professional Association Grants.** These [subject specific grants](#) are sponsored by a variety of sources, including Federal and state governments, corporations and professional associations.

- **Student-Specific Grants.** There a [variety of grants](#) that specifically target specific subsets of students.
- **Minority-Specific.** For example grant programs for [African-American students](#), [Hispanic students](#), [Native American students](#), [Asian-American students](#), and [women](#).
- **Low-income and disadvantaged students.** These can help students who come from [economic or socially disadvantaged backgrounds](#), or students who face a range of [personal disabilities](#).

Loans

There are two general types of loans your student could get: Federal Loans and Private Loans.

Your student can apply for [Federal Loans](#) by submitting the FAFSA. The money is provided by the federal government and students are required to pay back the loan with interest over time. These loans tend to have lower fixed interest rates and come with flexible repayment plans that can be modified based on your needs.

- **Subsidized Federal Loans.** With these loans, the federal government pays the interest on the loan while the student is still in college. Not every student will qualify for a subsidized loan. This amount is determined by the school and will not exceed your financial need.

- **Unsubsidized Federal Loans.** Almost any student can get an unsubsidized loan, but the student will be responsible for repaying any interest that accumulates during their time in college. However, your student will likely be able to defer payments until shortly after they graduate or leave college to give them some time to get on their feet.

The amount of money students are eligible for is dependent on their year in college, whether they are a dependent or independent student, and whether their parents are able to obtain [PLUS Loans](#).

Year	Dependent Students (except students whose parents are unable to obtain PLUS Loans)	Independent Students (and dependent undergraduate students whose parents are unable to obtain PLUS Loans)
First-Year Undergraduate Annual Loan Limit	\$5,500—No more than \$3,500 of this amount may be in subsidized loans.	\$9,500—No more than \$3,500 of this amount may be in subsidized loans.
Second-Year Undergraduate Annual Loan Limit	\$6,500—No more than \$4,500 of this amount may be in subsidized loans.	\$10,500—No more than \$4,500 of this amount may be in subsidized loans.
Third-Year and Beyond Undergraduate Annual Loan Limit	\$7,500—No more than \$5,500 of this amount may be in subsidized loans.	\$12,500—No more than \$5,500 of this amount may be in subsidized loans.
Graduate or Professional Students Annual Loan Limit	Not Applicable (all graduate and professional students are considered independent)	\$20,500 (unsubsidized only)
Subsidized and Unsubsidized Aggregate Loan Limit	\$31,000—No more than \$23,000 of this amount may be in subsidized loans.	<p>\$57,500 for undergraduates—No more than \$23,000 of this amount may be in subsidized loans.</p> <p>\$138,500 for graduate or professional students—No more than \$65,500 of this amount may be in subsidized loans. The graduate aggregate limit includes all federal loans received for undergraduate study.</p>

Students should only consider taking out a [Private Loan](#) if they've maxed out the Federal Loan. Often these loans come with high fees that can significantly increase the cost of the loan. FinAid's [Loan Analyzer Calculator](#) may be used to generate an apples-to-apples comparison of different loan programs.

There are a [number of other loan options](#) that parents or students can take out to help pay for college including mortgage and home equity loans, intra-family loans, and 401k loans. Each comes with different risks and methods of repayment. If possible, we recommend sticking with the safest method of taking out a loan — the Federal Loan.

Scholarships

Scholarships are typically awarded based on academic, athletic or artistic achievement or extracurricular performance. The best way to find which scholarships your student may qualify for is to use [Scholarship Search](#). This allows you to filter your search depending on interests, age, grade level, etc.

To give you a brief look at how many different types of scholarships are available, we've [compiled a list](#). Just a few of the categories scholarships fall into include:

- [Scholarships for high school seniors.](#)
- [Minority scholarships.](#)
- [Scholarships for women and single mothers.](#)
- [Scholarships for "average" students.](#)
- [Scholarships for students who don't want to write an essay.](#)
- [Sports scholarships.](#)
- [Military scholarships.](#)
- [Religious scholarships.](#)
- [Scholarships by college major.](#)
- [Scholarships for college students.](#) Just because you're already in college doesn't mean you shouldn't stop applying. There are plenty of scholarships for current students.

The list goes on and on. Take the time to see what scholarships your student may qualify for — there's likely more than you might think.

Save Some Money

The thought of dishing out thousands of dollars to pay for college is enough to send a shiver down anyone's back. But it doesn't have to be as scary as it might initially seem. Take the time to fill out applications and do your homework on what options are out there to help make paying for college as painless as possible.

The best way to maximize your chances of receiving aid or scholarships is to stay organized and not miss any deadlines. To help with this we've put together this deadline chart for you to record important dates and stay on top of everything your student is applying for:



TESTIVE

Financial Aid Deadline Chart

Aid / Scholarship	Due Date	Received?	Amount?
FAFSA	6/30/17 (for 2016-17 academic year) 6/30/18 (for 2017-18 academic year)		

Chapter Ten

Applying as an International Student

In the previous chapter of the Ultimate College Prep Guide we discussed how to apply for financial aid and the many options available to your student to help pay for college. While college is undeniably expensive, there are ways to make it more affordable for everyone.

This final chapter is directed towards international students planning on applying to college in the US and their parents. [Nearly 4% of all students](#) enrolled in higher-level education in the US are international and that number is continuously growing. It's very likely that the application process will vary greatly depending on what country these students are from. We know the US application process can be confusing. Here we'll talk about what you need to know to make sure no important steps are missed in the process, so you can successfully apply and attend a US university.

The College Board, which is the organization that manages many of the standardized tests within the US, has some [great resources for international students](#). We've modeled our article after their framework to give students a basic timeline of when things should be completed.

Two-Years Before University: Fulfilling Requirements

The application process for university is long even for students from the US. Students applying from other countries should start the process two years before they plan to go to university – if not sooner.

Explore Universities and Build a List

The first step is actually figuring out which universities your student is interested in. This may be difficult because they may not be familiar with any of the cities or available programs. They should take some time to do their research. The College Board's [Big Future](#) website is a great place to start the search for universities.

Make sure students are comparing schools not just by what field they may be interested in, but also the campus size and location. The student body size and city will definitely have an impact on their college experience. If possible, find out if your student can visit or even spend a few days at the college campus for a truly immersive experience.

Other resources:

- The [Times Higher Education World University Rankings](#) which lets students sort top ranked colleges by subject

- [InternationalStudent.com](https://www.internationalstudent.com) which provides searches based on field of study, location, and degree level

Take the SAT/ACT

Most US schools will require some form of standardized academic examination as part of the application. These exams help show to the colleges that students are academically ready for higher education.

The two most widely used forms of college admissions tests are the SAT and ACT. Both exams test reading, math and writing skills but differ slightly in terms of topics covered and skills emphasized. Your student should figure out which exam they think will allow them to better show their abilities before deciding which to take. Make sure they set their test date for a few months away so they have time to [really prepare for it](#) and showcase their strengths to the fullest extent.

Once your student has decided which test to take, they will need to register with [College Board](#) for the SAT or with the [ACT](#) and find somewhere to take the exam. Keep in mind your student may need to travel to the nearest location that offers the exam.

Other Admissions Requirements

There are many factors and requirements that US universities take into consideration when reviewing an application. Make sure your student is aware of any additional requirements (specific to colleges in the US) that they may need to fulfill so that they aren't scrambling at the last minute.

One example of a potential additional requirement is English language proficiency. If your student's first language isn't English or if their education was not in English, they may also be required to take an English language proficiency exam like the [Test of English as a Foreign Language](#) (TOEFL), the [International English Language Testing System](#) (IELTS), the [Michigan English Language Assessment Battery](#) (MELAB), or the [Pearson Test of English](#) (PTE).

These exams are all designed to measure a student's ability to use and understand English at the college and university level. The most common of those is the TOEFL. It's offered on over 50 test dates in a wide range of locations, and students are allowed to retake it as many times as they like.

One-Year Before University: Finalizing Plans

With a year left, it's time to make some final decisions. Hopefully within the year, your student will commit to a college or university and soon be on their way to the States!

Make a Financial Plan

Applying for and going to university in the US is an expensive process. From application and visa fees to the actual tuition fees and living expenses, it's a very financially taxing process.

Take some time to figure out tuition costs and living expenses before applying so that you aren't blind-sided when the bill comes in. Big Future by College Board has some great resources to learn more about [college costs](#).

Assemble And Submit Application Materials

As we mentioned before, applications can be extensive and require that your student compile and submit a wide range of materials. These will likely include:

- [Recommendation letters](#). These will be letters from a few of your student's teachers or mentors. Make sure you follow the timeline we've suggested to give teachers plenty of time to write a strong recommendation.
- [Transcript](#). Of course, universities will want to see your student's academic performance. Your student's high school grades will give admissions committees an idea of how well they'll be able to keep up in their studies.
- [Essays](#). Your student will likely be required to write at least one personal essay as part of their application, if not more. These essays should be very anecdotal and present an interesting side of your student.
- [Others](#). While these may not be required, there are a few more things your student can do to make their application stronger. These include:
 - SAT Subject Tests
 - College Interviews
 - Extracurriculars

Because there are so many elements to the application, it's easy to miss one. Make sure your student takes the time to check that everything is filled out before they submit. Most applications will be submitted through the [Common Application](#), but application deadlines [vary by university](#). It is therefore extremely important that your student is clear on when everything is due.

Commit to a University

Depending on when students decide to apply, decisions should start coming in as early as mid-December and no later than March. The final deadline to commit will be no later than May 1st. As the decisions come in, make sure to keep an open conversation with your students about their preferences. And make sure not to miss any specified final decision deadlines! Remember if your student is accepted by an early decision, they are legally

bound to attend that institution.

Visa and Passport Requirements

To study in the US, students will likely be required to have a [visa](#). There are [three main types of visas](#) for international students in the US:

- **F1 visa for academic studies.** This allows students to be in the US during their time of study, as well as an OPT program that adds an additional 12 months after graduation if they gain employment in their field of study, or for 17 months instead of 12 if the student majored in science, technology, engineering or mathematics.
- **J1 visa for practical training not available in the home country.** This visa is valid for students pursuing specialist programs and projects not available in their home country. These usually only involve practical training, though some may involve university study.
- **M1 visa for vocational studies.** This visa is only available to students attending an accredited trade or technical school. Students aren't allowed to work while on this visa.

Whichever university your student commits to should help your student get the right visa, but the student and their family are responsible for paying for the visa fees and going to the embassy to get the visa itself.

Start the process of getting a visa as soon as you know your student will need it because the process can take a long time. You should build in time for troubleshooting. Learn more about the requirements and how to apply at [U.S. Visa Requirements](#).

Apply for Financial Aid if Necessary

US universities are undeniably expensive, but [there are options available](#) to help make it more affordable. Most universities have financial aid or scholarships that can help students pay for college, but most of this funding is usually reserved for domestic students and is very competitive to international students.

It's [more common](#) for international students to get some university funding after their first year. However it's unlikely that this funding will cover the full cost and may include some portion of student contribution in which the student needs to find a job on campus.

The [EducationUSA](#) financial aid search tool is a good resource to search for any potential financial aid opportunities your student may qualify for.

Going to University

Congratulations, they've made it! Now that your student has started the next chapter of their life, it's time to make sure they can make the most of the next four (or so) years.

Arriving on Campus

Before actually stepping on that plane to the US, your student should have already figured out where they're going to live. On-campus dormitories are the most common and probably the easiest option. In some cases, first-year students may even be required to live in the dorms. The dorms are also a great way to easily meet their peers and start building a sense of community.

Once students have been on campus for a year or two, they may feel more comfortable finding an off-campus housing option. Some US schools don't provide on-campus accommodations for international students. In these cases the off-campus housing office can usually help your student explore other housing options and nail down any logistics.

When your student actually gets on campus, it's a good idea for them to go and check in at the school's international office. This will give them a chance to meet their rep or officer, check over their documents, and make sure they start the year on the right foot.

Setting up Essentials

Because they are moving to an entirely new country, there are a few essentials your student will need to figure out in their first few months in the country:

- **Getting a phone.** Your student will need to either get a US phone or SIM card so that they'll have a means of communication. Some phone companies will have [International Student Programs](#) specifically tailored to international students.
- **Managing money.** Within the first few days of arriving on campus, your student may want to open a checking account with a bank near campus. This will allow them to deposit any traveler's checks they brought from home or receive a wire transfer. Make sure they bring some form of identification. If your student is asked for a **Social Security Number** and doesn't have one, they can fill out an IRS Form W-8 at the bank which will help take care of that. It may also be useful for your student to get a MAC (Money Access Card) or ATM (Automatic Teller Machine) card from the bank so that they can have easy and secure access to their money.
- **Finding a job.** If your student holds an F-1 visa, then they're allowed to work in the US under certain conditions determined by the United States Citizenship and Immigration Service (USCIS). [On-Campus Employment](#) is the most freely available type of employment because it usually doesn't require any approval from the USCIS. But these jobs are usually unrelated to a student's studies and students can't work more than 20 hours a week. Off-campus employment options include [Optional Practical Training \(OPT\)](#), [Curricular Practical Training \(CPT\)](#), [Economic Hardship](#) and [International Institutions](#), each of which your student must meet a certain number of requirements to be able to pursue.

Culture Shock

One likely challenge your student will face while on campus is culture shock. This is

[defined as](#) "the feeling of disorientation experienced by someone who is suddenly subjected to an unfamiliar culture, way of life, or set of attitudes". Culture shock may be due a combination of homesickness and not being familiar with the culture of the US.

Symptoms of culture shock may include:

- Sadness or loneliness
- Insomnia
- Lack of confidence

While culture shock may be hard to avoid, there are lots of ways your student can help make this process a bit easier. Make sure to keep in contact with your student so they know they have a strong support system. Encourage them to keep in touch with friends from home, but also to go out and try to make some new friends on campus. Suggest that they join an extracurricular, religious, or ethnic group on campus that can help them find a community.

Culture shock may be hard for your student, but it won't last forever and it may even help them find a community that they participate in for the rest of their time at the school.