

# Get a Jump-start on College Admission

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My (Kelly) mother used to say in her inspired attempts to wake me, "The early bird catches the worm." My reply would always be, "I don't want any worms" as I rolled over in my bed and burrowed deeper beneath the covers. In the case of college admissions, you definitely want the worm. In fact, you want a whole bucket of worms.

If you are a junior, sophomore or even a freshman reading this, then kudos to you! You are giving yourself an advantage that most seniors only wish that they had. There are so many ways you can prepare for college admission that the earlier you start, the more successful you will be. Before we begin, however, we should warn you that your goal in getting an early start is to accomplish as much as possible in a limited amount of time. But don't feel that you have to do everything all at once—if you did, you would have little time left to enjoy anything else.



## Start talking about college.

Start by asking your parents, teachers, counselors, older siblings and friends to share what they know about going to college. Talk to alumni from your high school about their experiences. Ask them about their courses, activities and social life. Get a college directory with detailed descriptions of colleges and universities. Or, search databases of colleges online. Visit the home pages of colleges that interest you. The goal is to just learn everything that you can about colleges in general. You're not looking for anything specific, just trying to get a feel for the "lay of the land."



## Visit a college.

Flipping through brochures and college guides at the library is a good beginning, but it only tells you so much. To really learn about a college you need to take a field trip. The next time your family goes on a vacation, see if you will be near any of the colleges you might want to attend. If so, why not stop by for a short visit? While you're there, take a campus tour, sit in on a class or just walk around the campus absorbing the ambiance. Speak to students, peek inside the dorms and have a meal in the cafeteria. You can learn a lot from observing: the size and environment of the campus, what surrounds the campus and how happy the students appear. It's still early but by getting an early start on thinking about where you want to apply, you will have a tremendous advantage when the time comes to actually begin the college selection and admissions process.



## Challenge your brain.

One of the most important factors in being admitted to college (as your parents have probably lectured to you more times than you would like to remember) is your *grade point average*—and it needs to be competitive. However, understand that not all grades are considered equal. An "A" in an honors or Advanced Placement course is much better than an

"A" in a non-honors course. After all, it's not fair to compare an "A" in regular physics to an "A" in AP physics, is it? In fact, colleges often recalculate your GPA based on how many courses are honors or Advanced Placement.

Some students make the mistake of trying to get a high GPA by taking the easiest classes offered like "Woodshop: How to Cut Wood." Colleges want to see that you are motivated and willing to challenge yourself academically. If you can handle the work load, sign up for honors, Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate classes. Yes, this means that you will voluntarily ask for more homework, spend more time studying and take more difficult tests, but keep in mind that an acceptance letter into the college of your choice could be your reward.



#### **Practice for the alphabet soup of tests.**

There is no avoiding it. You will, before graduation, spend at least a dozen exciting hours filling in bubbles while taking a battery of standardized tests that have names that sound like they were created in a bowl of alphabet soup. These tests will include the PSAT, APs or IBs, SAT or ACT and SAT Subject Tests. Colleges use standardized tests as an additional measure of your academic promise and as a way to compare students from across the country whose high schools have different ways of grading.

Your most immediate concern is probably the PSAT, which you can take in your sophomore or junior year. It is a practice test designed to prepare you for the SAT, so in a sense, you don't have to stress too much about this one. However, the score from your junior year PSAT will be used to determine if you qualify for scholarships and special programs including National Merit Scholarships, which aside from the honor, come with a cash prize. So, it is worth taking the PSAT seriously and putting in some study time as if it were the SAT.



#### **Get involved with extracurricular activities.**

Even though grades are an important factor in admissions, colleges want to know that you do more than study. They seek students who will not only do well in classes but who will also contribute to the college community through extracurricular programs. Show that you are this kind of student by getting involved during high school. Activities include clubs and organizations, sports, student government and volunteer work.

There is no magic combination of tasks or projects that will guarantee acceptance. Our advice may seem like common sense, but it is true: Get involved in programs and events that you enjoy. If you like writing, think about the newspaper or Quill and Scroll. Don't think that there are certain activities in which you must participate to gain admission. Instead, invest your time in activities that interest you.



#### **Don't be afraid to look for activities outside your school.**

If your school does not offer interesting activities, then you have two options: a) start your own club or organization, or b) look outside your school. Starting your own organization will take work finding an advisor, getting it officially recognized by your school and marketing it

to potential members. However, it is very fulfilling to start an organization based on your interests and to leave a legacy at your high school. Admissions officers will also appreciate your initiative. Your second option is to find an activity in the community. There is a group dedicated to almost every interest imaginable and with a little bit of searching, you should be able to find one or two that fit your passions.



### **Focus on leadership roles and responsibilities.**

Being a leader in extracurricular programs is not a requirement for getting admitted to college, but there is no question that it helps. There is nothing more impressive to admissions officers than students who take initiative. This demonstrates that you are not just a member in name but that you make concrete contributions. In fact, more important than the particular activity in which you choose to be involved is the *quality* of your participation, meaning how much you contribute as a member and leader.

Run for office in clubs or school government. Try to be the captain of your sports team. Volunteer to head a project for your service organization. Start a group or club of your own. This will demonstrate your leadership skills as well as your ability to take initiative. Remember too that to be a leader, you don't have to hold an official elected position. You can take charge of a special project or organize an event. It takes just as much leadership to put together a successful canned food drive as it does to run a student council meeting. Both types of leadership are highly prized by colleges.



### **Compete to stand out.**

It should not be a surprise that colleges like winners. In fact, on the college application form, there is a section for listing all your awards and honors. These include both academic awards like the county-wide spelling bee and non-academic honors like grand prize in a ukulele playoff. So find competitions or contests you have a chance at winning and compete in them!

Luckily, there is an abundance of competitions out there for you to win. These include speech, writing, artistic, musical, scientific, debate, athletic events and more. Keep in mind that winning does not necessarily mean taking first place. Being a runner-up in a state or national competition is just as impressive as winning a local award. Sometimes just being chosen to compete is an honor.



### **Create a time capsule of all your accomplishments.**

You're too young for Alzheimer's, but you'd be surprised at how much you can forget in four years. In your senior year, you will need to recall exactly what you have done since the first day of your freshman year. It might be easy to remember now; but in a few years, it won't be.

Keep a record of everything you do. Include brief descriptions of your activities (especially if you made a significant contribution or were a leader of a project) and write down when you received a specific award or honor, what years you participated in each activity, and

approximately how many hours you volunteered. This list will help you immensely when completing the applications and will insure that you don't leave anything out. Don't forget to store this list in a safe place where you can find it easily.



### **Get to know all your teachers, employers and advisors.**

Now is the time to set your pride aside, dish out all the compliments you are capable of giving without gagging and hone your skills of flattery. Because you will need two or more evaluations from teachers, one from your counselor or principal and possibly one from an employer or advisor, start early to foster your relationships with these key people in your life. By the time you are ready to apply, your goal is to have them adore you as if you were their own child.

Participate actively in class. Yes, this means raising your hand and answering questions, volunteering to erase the board and other such related sycophantic ("sycophantic" means "obsequious" and these words could both be on the ACT or SAT, so look them up!) activity. Put your best effort into all your work. Stay after class or go early to ask questions. Volunteer to help your teachers with projects or try to give them extra help in other areas where they might need it. In short, you are trying to develop a strong, personal relationship with your teachers and advisors. By doing this, they will write the strongest recommendations possible.



### **Final Thoughts ...**

At first glance, college applications appear to be a maze of lists, questions and blanks. No doubt they can be intimidating. However, by following these steps you will be more than ready to answer each question and complete each blank. If you start your preparation early on, the college application and the entire process as a whole will seem much less daunting. More important however is that you will have laid the foundation for the creation of a powerful application that will dramatically improve your chances of getting accepted into your first-choice college.