TOTAL COLLEGE PLANNING

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Juniors – Begin your college search

Juniors—Map out dates and prepare for spring SAT and/ or ACT exams

Seniors – Contact colleges to be sure your applications are complete. Send mid-year grades if required. Update colleges with any new information that might affect admission

7th – ACT and ACT plus Writing (may not be available in NY)

March 2009

Underclassmen—Make plans for a productive summer. Investigate summer programs, jobs, internships, and opportunities to visit college campuses.

Juniors – Create an initial list of colleges

Juniors—Prepare for spring SAT/ACT exams

14th – SAT Reasoning Exam

What Makes a College "Good"?

When students begin to research college options, they would be wise to look beyond rankings in evaluating the schools they're considering. What really determines the quality of a school is not how hard it is to get into but what that college does for students once they are on campus.

One factor to look at is the retention rate. Are students returning after freshman year and do they finish their degrees? Students are more likely to stay at a college where they are actively engaged in learning and part of a community that supports their intellectual, social and emotional development.

A college that emphasizes teaching rather than research attracts professors who enjoy mentoring undergraduates. If a school's mission statement emphasizes a student-centered approach, that's a good sign. Universities may tout their Nobel Prize winning professors, but that doesn't mean much if undergraduates don't have opportunities to study with them. Current students are a great source of information about professors, and you can ask them about their experiences when you visit a campus.

Advising is another important area where some colleges excel. Students who receive ongoing support as they explore majors and careers make better decisions. Advising doesn't get much attention in the college search process, but it becomes very important once you're in college. Ask if each student has an assigned advisor or whether students need to go to advising centers and see whoever is available. Also, how often do students meet with their advisors each semester, and are they required to discuss their course selections before registering for classes? Good advising helps students make smart curriculum choices and enables them to graduate in four years. For students who are planning to go on to law, medical, or graduate school, it's helpful to meet the advisors who help students with these applications, and to ask how many students have applied and been accepted into these programs in recent years.

Starting college is a major life transition, and a strong first year experience is another indicator of quality in a college. While most colleges have a formal orientation program, a comprehensive first year experience continues beyond the first weeks of school and often includes peer mentors as well as seminars with professors who serve as academic advisors during freshman year.

Academic learning has more impact when paired with experiential learning. Colleges that have internships and service learning built into the curriculum provide a rich education that connects what you learn in class to the world. Students develop marketable skills that look great on resumes, and these experiences also enhance graduate and professional school applications. While many college websites mention internships, it's helpful to know where students have done internships and whether they get support from a designated internship advisor or need to find internships on their own.

Some colleges require students to complete a senior capstone project before graduating, and that is an excellent way to synthesize what you've learned in your major, get research experience that prepares you for graduate school and connect your major with potential careers.

Tour guides rarely take families inside a college's career center. However, knowing that a school has a strong career services office that will provide career exploration, resume and interview preparation, alumni mentor programs and on-campus recruiting, is just as important as seeing a well-equipped campus fitness facility.

It takes a little more investigation, but looking for these indicators of *quality* results in a more satisfying and productive college experience.

Focus on Careers: Environmental Science

In the coming years we'll see a real push to a "greener" world. If you're interested in preserving our natural resources for future generations, you can get the credentials you'll need to make a difference through a major in environmental science or environmental studies. Environmental science programs focus on the natural sciences, while environmental studies also considers the political, economic, and social aspects of life as they relate to environmental issues. The major you select will be determined by the path you hope to take in making a difference.

Environmental scientists conduct research to identify and remedy the sources of pollutants that affect people, wildlife, and the environment. Thus, they need a working knowledge of biology, chemistry and physics. Studies in atmospheric science, geology, hydrology, and ecology are supplemented by courses that emphasize the student's primary area of concern. Laboratory research, field experiences, and summer research internships all help to provide the hands-on experiences that are vital for practitioners in this field. Computer skills are essential—environmental scientists are often called on for data analysis or are expected to be able to use digital mapping and geographic information systems (GIS). Because much of the work is collaborative in nature, environmental scientists should perfect their writing and speaking skills.

Environmental science majors often find jobs in areas like environmental protection, natural resource management, or environmental health. The many areas of specialization include air quality management, aquaculture, biodiversity, coastal management, conservation biology, ecotourism, environmental education, fire ecology, hazardous waste management. Still other specializations are hydrology, landscape architecture, meteorology, natural resource management, outdoor education, range management, recreation & parks, soil science, sustainable development, wetlands science, and wildlife science. Many individuals find work in large and small environmental consulting firms, or in governmental agencies, or education. A master's degree is needed for most entry-level research and teaching positions; a Ph.D. for higher level research and college instructors. Learn more about careers in environmental science at www.enviroeducation.com and check out opportunities for paid internships at the website of the Environmental Careers Organization (www.eco.org.)

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Environmental Studies

Environmental studies majors are more focused on the impact of man on the environment. In addition to courses in the natural sciences such as biology, chemistry, and geology, environmental studies majors take about half their coursework in the social sciences and humanities. Environmental studies emphasizes a problem-solving approach, focusing on the economic, political, and social aspects of tackling environmental issues. Environmental studies professionals may be engaged in studying global issues such as the greenhouse effect or acid rain, as well as more local and national problems.

In addition to science courses, environmental studies programs may include courses in environmental health, energy policy, wildlife management, land use planning, environmental politics, and environmental philosophy and ethics. The focus of programs differ from university to university, so look closely at the college's catalogue of courses when choosing a college for this major.

As with environmental science majors, research experiences, field work, and internships greatly enhance student learning. Although entry level careers are available for people holding a bachelor's degree, further graduate training and specialization broadens career options.

Environmental studies majors may find careers in environmental law, fisheries and wildlife management, or community recycling and conservation programs. Others work as park naturalists, environmental educators, in toxic waste disposal, as journalists, or for environmental organizations.

Other related majors include global studies, forestry, urban planning, political science, geography, geology, environmental engineering, oceanography, soil science, or petroleum engineering. More information is available at the Bureau of Labor Statistics website at www.bls.gov, the American Geological Institute at www.agiweb.org, and the National Wildlife Federation at www.nwf.org.

Focus on Finances: Summer Enrichment Doesn't Have to Cost a Lot

Money may be tight, but it's not necessary to give up on finding a cost-effective way to spend a productive summer. Free and low cost summer enrichment programs are out there—you just need to look a bit harder to find them, or think outside the box about what a makes a productive summer.

Begin by considering the student's interests. Our nation's need for engineers and scientists has led to the creation of numerous free and/or low cost programs in these areas. Cal Tech's Young Engineering and Science Scholars program, the MITE program at the University of Texas, the ASM Materials Camp, the Bridge Program in Math & Science at Sewanee, and the Summer Institute for Mathematics at the University of Washington are all provided free of charge to qualified students. Interested in the environment? Check out the American Hiking Society's Volunteer Vacations or the Student Conservation Corps programs. Non-science types might look to the Carleton Liberal Arts Experience for a low-cost enrichment program. Telluride offers free residential programs for students with outstanding qualifications, while individual states often sponsor Governor's programs or honors institutes. Dual enrollment classes taken at the nearest community college are often provided free to high school students.

Many hospitals have outreach programs designed to interest students in the health sciences—check with your local institution for opportunities. Some state attorney's offices allow student interns to shadow their lawyers. Contact your city government—some departments even offer paid internships to high school students.

Look, too, to local businesses. Aspiring veterinarians can volunteer at their local vet's office or work at an animal shelter or rescue organization. Budding artists might help out at an art school program, while future scientists can volunteer to work as research assistants for professors. Use your imagination and work your network (or your parents') of contacts.

For more ideas, click on www.EnrichmentAlley.com.

The SAT vs ACT

Two admissions tests compete for your attention. Although the exams are different in format and scoring, either test is acceptable to all U.S. colleges that require one of these as part of the admissions process. So, which one should you attempt?

To answer that question, you could look first to how you scored on the PLAN and/or the PSAT. The PLAN is a "practice ACT" while the PSAT closely follows the format and scoring of the SAT. Students with higher scores on the verbal test(s) than on the math section are likely to receive higher scores on the ACT. Girls tend to perform better on the ACT than on the SAT, while students who do better in class than on standardized tests also tend to receive higher scores on the ACT. The SAT is often the test of choice for males, especially those whose grades don't live up to the potential indicated on standardized tests. It's also probably a better choice for students whose mathematical abilities outshine their verbal skills.

Students who find themselves agonizing over the "guess or no guess" decision, will find the ACT more to their liking. The ACT does not penalize test-takers for wrong answers; your score is based only on correct responses. The SAT, however, does exact a penalty for poor choices—students lose about one-quarter of a point from their total correct score for every incorrect response. You will need to pace yourself on both exams so you can at least consider every question.

The College Board's new score-choice policy has removed one of the benefits of the ACT. Now, students taking the SAT (as well as those taking the ACT) more than once can choose among test dates and submit only their best day's scores. One caveat, however, some colleges have announced that they will expect to receive all test scores that are taken by the applicant. That pretty much wipes out the score choice benefit for either the SAT or ACT.

Discuss your practice test scores and test-taking skills with your advisor to help you determine which test is best suited to you.

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Spring Break College Visits

Since high school and college spring break times often do not coincide, spring vacation can be a great time for campus visits. Seniors can visit colleges still high on their list to help in making final decisions about where to attend. For juniors, spring break provides a time to see a college while it is still in session. Because colleges tend to get lots of visitors during spring break, make your plans early.

If a senior is using this visit to make a final decision, it is important to do more than just take the campus tour. Call ahead to the admissions office and request an overnight stay in a residence hall and ask to sit in on one or more classes. If you've identified a major, a talk with one of the professors in that department might also be helpful. Spend lots of time talking with current students about their likes and dislikes, and assess how well this college fits you. Be sure to visit the placement office and learn how the college supports students transitioning to the world of work.

Juniors who are just beginning their search for the "perfect college" will be concentrating more on the general feel of each institution. Arrange to go on a campus tour, attend an information session, and speak with current students. Visit the dorms, eat a meal at a dining hall, and check out the recreational facilities. Explore educational options such as majors offered, study abroad, internships, and accessibility of faculty. If you're really interested in one of the colleges you visit, check out the summer opportunities there so you can spend more time on campus.

Website of the Month:IPL's "Teen Space "

The Internet Public Library's "Teen Space" located at www.ipl.org/div/teen/aplus provides links to valuable resources for high school and college students. We especially like their "A+ Research and Writing Guide" that offers a step-by-step guide to researching and writing a paper. The "infosearch" links help you to find information both on the web and at your local library. There are even links to great online resources to help you in your task.

The Internet Public Library began at the University of Michigan and is now maintained by a consortium of colleges.

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