

TOTAL COLLEGE PLANNING

The College Journal

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September 2009

10th and 11th grade students register & prepare for PSAT or PLAN

Seniors – Finalize your college list; work on applications & essays; review your transcript for accuracy; request letters of recommendation from teachers, counselor, and employers

Meet with visiting college reps

12th – ACT and ACT plus Writing – in selected states only

October 2009

Review test materials & take PSAT either 10/14 or 10/17

10th – SAT Reasoning and Subject Tests

24th – ACT and ACT plus Writing

Attend area college fairs and meetings

Meet with college reps visiting high school

Seniors - Continue work on applications; complete Early Decision/Early Action applications; complete CSS Profile if required

Submit "rolling" admissions applications ASAP

The Role of Parents in the College Application Process

If you have a high school senior who is planning to attend college next year, the next ten months could turn out to be an emotional roller coaster. Your teenager is coming face to face with his opportunities and limitations, at a time when his emerging identity is still uncertain. He may feel overwhelmed by the choices and procrastinate, never getting around to narrowing a list of schools or writing an essay.

It may be tough to refrain from reminding him every day to work on college applications, but it may be better to designate a time once a week to discuss how the applications are going. If every dinner becomes an interrogation about why he hasn't started the Common App essay, the next few months will be miserable for everyone, and your kid might shut down and avoid doing anything related to college.

This is where parents can start thinking it would be easier to write the essays themselves than to get their child to do it. But that is not a good idea, for many reasons. In addition to the ethical considerations, when you write an essay that is supposed to be written by the student, it's likely to backfire.

Admissions officers have read thousands of essays and they are pretty good at spotting the writing of a 45-year-old. If the writing in the essay doesn't match the student's grade in English, or is much better than the writing score from the SAT would indicate, admissions officers might decide to download the student's SAT essay and compare the writing samples. Instead of helping your child get into college, by writing his application essay, you could damage his chances of being admitted.

Taking over a child's college application process communicates that you don't think he's capable of doing it, at a time when he needs to develop the confidence to go off to college and manage his life. It also robs him of the opportunity to engage in a thoughtful exploration of his goals and interests, an important task for adolescents.

That doesn't mean parents should be completely removed from the process. There are important ways you can help. By encouraging your child to work closely with an outside advisor who can help with the process, you reduce the possibility of discord in your home. If you still feel a need to be more actively involved, you can help your child with organizing the college application process. Set up a filing system for all the college application forms and brochures. Work with your child to create a schedule. Help him make a chart with each school's requirements and deadlines. Investigate college financial aid policies and outside scholarship resources.

You can even help with the essays. If he thinks he has nothing to write about, that there's nothing interesting about him, you can brainstorm ideas together. Pointing out some of his best qualities and recalling funny or interesting stories about his life can help generate essay ideas and boost his self-esteem.

You can also reassure your child that even though this is a stressful time, things will work out and he will go to college. You can be a valuable sounding board and supporter, but the student needs to complete his own applications. By allowing your child to drive the college application process, you help him feel competent to manage his life.

Colleges For Writers

Although many people write as part of their job, creative writers are a special breed. The creative writer has a need to tell his story, and therefore, should seek out programs that will help him unleash the writer within. There are several ways to go about honing your craft in college, and the types of programs offered by each college should be considered as part of your college search.

At most colleges, creative writing is part of the English department; students major in English with an emphasis in creative writing, ultimately working towards a BA in English. As with all English majors, students will spend much of their time engaged in a study of literature. A few colleges offer a combined BA in English and creative writing, thereby signaling that writing is an equally important part of the English curriculum.

Another option for creative writers is to pursue a Bachelor of Fine Arts (BFA) degree in

creative writing. Although fewer colleges offer this degree, those that do approach the study of literature from the writer's perspective, and use this study to help students become better writers.

Courses in creative writing programs tend to emphasize fiction and poetry, but many colleges also offer courses in creative nonfiction and/or journalism, and in screenwriting. When selecting colleges, you'll want to look carefully at the course catalog to determine departmental emphasis and to determine the breadth as well as the depth of courses available in your area of interest.

At some colleges, applicants must submit a creative writing portfolio for admission to the university; most, however, reserve this requirement for entrance into the creative writing program after acceptance by the institution. Be sure to check specific requirements for each school of interest to you.



Carnegie Mellon
University

The Writer's Experience

At the center of creative writing programs is the writing workshop. Workshops are hands-on classes in which most of the time is spent reading and evaluating each student's writing. Class members bring multiple copies of each assignment to class, offering them to their peers for reading and feedback. Through these workshops, creative writing students become part of a writing community—finding a supportive group is central to a good college writing experience.

You'll want to spend some real time on campus evaluating the writing program at each school you're considering. In addition to evaluating the curriculum, take a look at the make-up of the faculty. Are there well-known

writers among the faculty? Do they employ visiting writers and who do they teach? Will you have opportunities to have your work published in a student literary magazine or newspaper? Does the faculty encourage and help arrange internships for students with local magazines and publishing companies? How many alumni have gone on to successful careers as authors, journalists, editors?

Not all students who pursue a degree in creative writing will go on to careers as writers, but all fields need individuals who can communicate effectively with others. Having good writing skills will serve you well in areas as diverse as law, education, journalism, advertising, and business.

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Focus on Finances: The Forms Needed for College Financial Aid



A myriad of forms are necessary when applying for financial aid—the trick is to keep track of requirements and deadlines for each college on your short list. This is a time when effective organizational skills will make your life easier.

The FAFSA (Free Application for Federal Student Aid) is required by just about every college. You'll find this form at www.fafsa.ed.gov; submit your FAFSA as soon after January 1st of senior year (and before the individual college deadline) as possible. Both student and parent will need a PIN (Personal Identification Number) to electronically submit the FAFSA Form. Apply for your PINs before beginning the FAFSA—a link to the PIN site is on the FAFSA website. Many private colleges require an additional financial

aid form called the CSS Profile. The Profile gathers additional financial information that will allow colleges that have significant amounts of aid to award to make better decisions about how to distribute that money. You can begin completing the Profile in early fall, and will find information about the program on the College Board website at www.CollegeBoard.com.

Individual states have also set up policies to distribute state financial aid. You'll need to check out requirements for your own state by googling the state's name and the words "college financial aid". Keep in mind that state deadlines are often earlier than college deadlines; a good rule of thumb is to submit all financial aid information as soon after January 1st of your child's senior year as possible. Also keep in mind that all of these forms must be submitted each and every year for aid for the following school year.

The Early Application Dilemma

Early plans pose an application dilemma. Early Decision (ED) means that a student applies to one school, usually in November, receives a decision in December, and is then obligated to attend if accepted. Acceptance rates are higher at some schools for Early Decision applicants, and students may feel pressured to apply ED to a college, any college, without considering whether the school is a good match, for fear of missing out on the competitive edge.

For a student who's passionate about one school, applying Early Decision can get the stressful college application process over with and allow him to enjoy his senior year. The risk is that his passion may fade, but he's made a binding commitment. What started as a way to lower stress may end up making a student feel trapped.

Early Action (EA) often also has a November deadline, with December notification, but a student has until May to decide whether to accept the college's offer of admission. This is a have-your-cake-and-eat-it-too option, as a student can secure a place early at one college and hold onto it while going through the regular decision process at other schools.

For students who have done their research early and identified the schools that meet their needs, these early notification programs can reduce the stress of applying to college. But applying early isn't for everyone.

Make sure there really is a strategic advantage to applying early. It doesn't make sense to apply early if a student is not a strong candidate. If it looks like her

grades will improve senior year, or if she's only taken the SAT or ACT once and believes she can increase her score, it may be better to wait.

There's another, more practical consideration in applying Early Decision. If the student is applying for financial aid, you may need to consider the financial aid package in determining which school to attend. Some packages may offer more grant money while others are largely loans. If a student has four or five acceptances, she can compare financial aid packages, but with Early Decision, she has to take what that school offers since that acceptance was binding.

Of course, there's always the possibility that a student will be deferred to the regular admission process, or worse yet, rejected. She may only have a few weeks to apply to other schools. Talk about stressful! Not only is she dealing with a very short timeline, she's just absorbed an ego blow that can make it difficult to sit down and prepare another six or eight impressive applications. Even a kid who understands that thousands of well-qualified students are turned down by selective schools will find it almost impossible to hold onto that perspective when faced with a rejection letter.

Students who are applying Early Decision or Early Action should continue researching other schools, writing essays and preparing applications, as if they haven't applied early. While it may seem like that defeats the purpose of applying early, continuing the process takes the pressure off that one application. There are no guarantees, and students need to be prepared to go on without missing a beat.

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Finalizing Your College List

As summer draws to a close, senior students should be in the process of finalizing their college lists. If you've done your homework in researching colleges, evaluating your own needs and desires, and have visited an assortment of college campuses, you should have a pretty good idea of the type of college you seek. Colleges on your short list should possess as many of the characteristics that you want as possible. Assuming that they do, you now need to make sure that your list is balanced in terms of selectivity.

Students tend to spend a lot of time and effort on "reach" schools—those institutions where their personal academic profile would place them in the bottom quartile of the entering class as well as those institutions that accept fewer than 20 to

25% of applicants. Your final list should include only two or three colleges that are clearly a reach.

The bulk of your list should be composed of colleges at which your academic profile would be similar to that of most students who are accepted. We'll call these colleges "probables." Three to five "probables" should provide you with good options for college.

There is little that is "safe" anymore, but make sure your list also includes several colleges at which your record would place you among the top quarter of accepted students. These are also the colleges most likely to award you with merit aid, possibly making them among the most affordable financially. Be sure, too, that these "safe" schools are colleges you'd be happy to attend.

Website of the Month: NCAAstudent.org

Many of the over 400,000 high school students who are active in athletics dream that they someday will turn "pro". For the overwhelming majority, however, their professional career will be outside of the sports arena. NCAAstudent.org stresses maintaining a balance between academics and athletics as you plan for your

future. Download the *2009-2010 Guide for the College-Bound Student-Athlete* to learn how to establish your eligibility to compete in college sports. You'll also discover the differences between Divisions I, II, and III, and can check out the recruiting regulations for all NCAA-sponsored sports.

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