

# TOTAL COLLEGE PLANNING

The College Journal

January 2010



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## January 2010

Seniors – apply for a pin and then complete and send the FAFSA any time after Jan. 1<sup>st</sup>. Apply online at [www.fafsa.ed.gov](http://www.fafsa.ed.gov)

Seniors – search and apply for scholarships that match your qualifications

Seniors – File any additional college applications

**23rd – SAT Reasoning and Subject Tests**

## February 2010

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

**6<sup>th</sup> – ACT and ACT plus Writing (may not be available in NY)**

## Visiting Colleges Without Leaving Home

Given the current state of the economy, many families can no longer spend thousands of dollars traveling around the country to visit every college on a student's list. While visiting is a great way for a student to demonstrate interest, and that can be a factor in admissions decisions at some schools, admission officers understand that fewer families may be making campus visits now.

Some high school juniors will apply to colleges in the fall and then wait to see where they are admitted before visiting next spring. Since many colleges have special programs for newly admitted students in April, this schedule can work. But if you're not going to visit all of your colleges before applying, it is especially important to make sure you've researched the schools so that you can be sure you will end up with acceptances at schools you would really like to attend.

After you've put together a preliminary list of colleges that have the programs you want and seem to be the right size and meet whatever other criteria you've established, you can start researching the schools. While nothing replaces a real campus visit, you can get more information about colleges by checking out the virtual tours that are available at many college websites. In addition to photographs of the campus, some schools have professionally produced videos featuring interviews with students and faculty.

If you're considering 15 colleges but can only visit five, virtual tours can help you narrow the field. You can get free 8-10 minute videos of over 200 colleges at [www.youniversitytv.com](http://www.youniversitytv.com), while [www.collegeclicktv.com](http://www.collegeclicktv.com) has short interviews with students at many colleges.

Another good website is [www.unigo.com](http://www.unigo.com), which has student reviews and videos of some but not all colleges.

If you want the experience of taking a student-guided campus walking tour without leaving your living room, College Choice Walking Tours, at [www.collegiatechoice.com](http://www.collegiatechoice.com), offers DVD recordings of tours at 350 colleges. The tours are about an hour each, and without slick production values or professional narration, it's like watching someone's home video of a campus tour. The cost is fifteen dollars for each college.

Many college websites have blogs written by admissions officers and students. Of course, you are likely to get only a positive view of the school. You need to evaluate everything you see with a critical eye, and that also applies to student reviews you find on websites, since they are not unbiased either.

Another good source of information is a college newspaper, which can usually be accessed online. You'll learn about the political and social climate on campus, as well as what concerts, lectures, and club meetings are scheduled each week.

If you've already chosen a major, you can go to that department on the school's website and read up on course offerings and professors. You can also see what students are saying about the professors at [www.ratemyprofessors.com](http://www.ratemyprofessors.com). If you are a prospective psychology major and see rave reviews for several psychology professors, that's a good sign.

This kind of research will take time, but by narrowing your college list, you could save thousands of dollars in travel costs.

## Colleges for Actors

Do you see yourself on Broadway, in film, or on TV? Since most U.S. colleges offer a degree in drama, aspiring actors must first consider the type of acting they prefer as well as the degree they desire.

Professional drama conservatory programs usually offer the BFA (Bachelor of Fine Arts) degree. This degree requires intensive study with about two-thirds of all classes taken in drama. The remaining one-third of classes include general education requirements.

Most comprehensive universities offer a Bachelor of Arts (BA) degree in drama. Under this option, students take two-thirds of their classes in general education and electives, and about one-third in drama. Students can often double major in some other subject with a BA degree, allowing more flexibility for the future. Most liberal arts colleges offer the BA in drama, but drama programs that reside in the School of Communications at a comprehensive university often offer a BS degree; these are very similar to the BA programs.

Some students even combine studies at a conservatory with a degree from a four-year university. For example, the New York campus of the American Musical and Dramatic Academy partners with the New School University to allow their students the option of getting a BA degree after completing professional certification from the Academy.

Although drama majors usually concentrate in performance, there are other options too. For example, some drama majors concentrate in production, learning the technical elements of play production such as lighting and directing. Others study theater design which may include stage, set, and/or costume design. Musical theater majors specialize in singing and dancing for stage, while film and TV actors study acting for these media. This brings us back to the question of what kind of actor are

you?

You'll need to look for more specialized programs if acting for film and TV is your goal. Generally larger drama programs offer classes in these more specialized areas. In a similar manner, not all drama programs are suitable for musical theater types. Look for those that offer a minor or concentration in musical theater, and make sure that there are numerous opportunities for performance in musical productions. Musical theater majors also need access to general as well as private classes in voice, dance, and music.

There are a number of things to keep in mind as you evaluate drama programs. These include:

- Number and range of performance opportunities
- Facilities—check for rehearsal spaces, black box theater, number of performance spaces.
- Does the faculty include mainly working professionals with extensive experience? Do they have industry contacts? Are there opportunities for students to meet on campus with casting agents, directors, or other theater professionals?
- If you're interested in teaching or technical theater, check on the range of classes available to you.

An audition is required for application to most drama programs; this audition generally carries the greatest weight in the admissions process. You'll need to research audition requirements early in senior year since audition spots tend to fill quickly and are reserved well before the general application deadline. Make sure you know the type of performances that will be required at each of your schools well before the auditions.

Students seeking a technical theater degree may need to submit a design or production portfolio. This can include photos of sets, props, or costumes you've designed or production notes for shows you've worked on. A resume that describes your theater experiences should also be included.



Carnegie Mellon University (PA) is known for its' fine drama program

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## Focus on Finances: Borrowing for College—How Much is “Too Much”?



With colleges experiencing declines in their endowments that mirrors the general U.S. economy, many members of the class of 2009 were offered financial aid packages that included larger amounts of stu-

dent loans. This year's senior class can expect more of the same. Which brings up the question: How much is “too much” to borrow for college?

Unfortunately, there's no one hard and fast answer; each student's situation is made unique by choice of major, cost of education, additional sources of support, and expected earnings. According to the Project on Student Debt, the average recent college graduate owes \$21,000 in student loans. For most graduates, that should be a manageable amount, but individual circumstances may vary. For example, students may amass still more debt if they plan to attend graduate school, or may choose a career

with very low initial pay. Future musicians or artists probably should take on less debt than engineering or computer science graduates. A general rule of thumb is to cap your student loan debt below the total salary you expect to earn in your first year after graduation. (Check out [www.bls.gov](http://www.bls.gov) for average first year salaries.) Since the average college graduate takes five years to earn her bachelor's degree, she should borrow no more than one-fifth of expected earnings each year of college. Your goal is to spend no more than 10% of your expected gross monthly income on student loan debt once you graduate. Even though your earnings will rise as you progress in your career, so will your obligations. Someday you'll want to use those earnings for a house, car, furniture, retirement savings, and even for college for your future children.

In future columns, we'll look at ways to lower college costs so you can keep the amount you need to borrow to a minimum.

### The Scourge of Senioritis

Many students think that because they have worked so hard throughout high school, they have earned the right to slack off senior year, especially in the last few months. By the end of January, first semester grades will have been submitted to colleges, and some students have already been accepted at their favorite school. Why not kick back and enjoy life?

But an offer of admission is conditional, and students are expected to maintain their academic performance throughout senior year. Every year, colleges around the country rescind admission offers.

You are admitted to a college based on the information in your application, and if there are any changes, you need to let the college know. If you have dropped a class that was listed on the transcript you submitted to colleges, your application has changed. Colleges receive your final transcript during the summer, and you don't want to find out in July that you no longer have a place in the freshman class.

It is much better to be honest and explain why you dropped the class or why your grades have gone down. If the drop in academic performance is severe enough to jeopardize your acceptance, admissions officers may be able to advise you on how to salvage your admission.

There's another reason to keep working hard in school. It makes the transition to college level work easier. That's one of the advantages of taking AP courses, which require a high level of commitment

throughout senior year in order to prepare for AP exams in May. The anti-slacker curriculum built into AP classes will help you more easily adjust to the rigors of college. Procrastinating during senior year, makes it difficult to get back to good study habits when you arrive at college. There will be lots of distractions at college and no parents reminding you to finish your history paper before you go out for pizza with your friends.

While you do need to keep your grades up, making sure you have some fun throughout high school will help you avoid burnout. Just don't go overboard quite yet. Summer is only a few months away, and you will have plenty of time to play before you go off to college.

It's not only lower grades that can torpedo an offer of admission. While spray painting the school gym might seem like a fun prank, a disciplinary issue can also be the end of your college acceptance.

Parents who have suffered through the long college admission process may not be thrilled when their child takes part in “senior ditch day.” But as long as a student is doing her work and keeping her grades up, there's no reason to panic. The last few months of senior year can feel tedious, and it's understandable that students aren't as motivated as they were earlier in their high school career. But you need to hang in there.

Students who keep senioritis under control will get their reward when they embark on the great adventure of college, just around the corner.

## Dealing With Test Anxiety

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Sweaty palms, racing heart; test anxiety, kept under control, can help you to focus on the exam and allow you to do your best. A high level of anxiety, however, can keep you from demonstrating your true potential. Controlling your anxiety will help you to increase your score on high-stakes tests and final exams.

Being prepared helps. Begin to review for college admissions tests eight to ten weeks before each exam. Become familiar with the test format and timing by practicing with actual exams released by the testing company. Material covered can be reviewed either through an organized test prep program or by using a book or online course.

Knowing what to expect on test day also helps. If you haven't been to the test site before, make a practice run so you know where to go and how long it will take to get there. Set out all the materials you'll need the night before – registration form, photo id, calculator, pens and pencils, watch, and snacks. Relax with an early movie and be sure to get a good night's sleep. Leave enough time to eat a well-balanced breakfast in the morning; the new exams are long and you'll need stamina to get through them. Try avoiding caffeine; it's been shown to increase anxiety. If you're feeling nervous, employ

anxiety-reducing techniques. Deep calming breaths and visualizing yourself doing well may help.

Each section of the SAT is generally arranged with the easiest questions at the beginning. Start with these, thinking of your own answer before looking at the choices provided. If necessary, eliminate the answers that you can and make an educated guess from among the remaining choices. (Guess on SAT questions only if you can eliminate at least one of the choices; on the ACT answer all questions.) Clearly mark on the test booklet those questions to which you'll return if time permits.

For essay questions, organize your thoughts in a brief outline. Start with a short summary or topic sentence that clearly states your position, and then make your points, using examples to back up your position. If you begin to feel nervous, close your eyes, take three deep breaths, and then return to complete the exam.

Eat during testing breaks to keep your energy level up, but try a protein bar rather than candy which may increase anxiety. Fruit and vegetables are good choices for break time. Remember, a bit of anxiety will help you to maintain the focus you'll need to do your best.

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