

Tips on Preparing for College

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Before You Proceed

- This is a website for:
 - Students aiming for four-year colleges, either liberal arts or science/engineering-focused (e.g., MIT)
 - **Students aiming for the TOP universities, this website is really designed for you...**
- This is NOT a website for:
 - Students aiming for community colleges without the intention of transferring to four-year colleges
 - Students aiming for art/specialty/vocational schools such as performing arts, design, technical training, etc.

Keys to Preparing for College

- Know what colleges look for in a candidate and work to present yourself as an ideal candidate
- Plan ahead and spread out your academic and extracurricular activities over the four years
- Start early and don't rush -- take time to work on the applications, get recommendations, etc.
- Stand out from among the applicant pool with powerful personal statements and impressive interviews

Ready? The next 13 slides can change your life...

1: Know What They Are Looking For

- The best-kept secret: the *Common Application*
 - <http://commonapp.org> → Download Forms
 - Pages 3 & 4 -- let this be your guide to academic and extracurricular choices
 - What courses and tests to take
 - What activities to pursue (“extracurricular, volunteer, and work activities”)
- Key: there shouldn't be any empty sections by the end of your junior year

2. Qualities They Like to See

- Emphasize these in your personal statements, short answers, and interviews
 - **Passion/commitment** -- the #1 key to success in college and in life
 - **Ability to learn** -- not just the academic stuff, but also how you learn from mistakes, tragedies, etc.
 - **Took full advantage** of what's available to you
 - **Maturity** --nobody wants immature kids
 - **Compatibility with school** -- especially true for schools with religious affiliations, known unique culture, or racial emphasis. BUT you could also get in because of “diversity” concerns...

3: High School Curriculum Planning

- Ask questions! Counselors, teachers, and upperclassmen are there to help
 - UC's a-g requirements is a good minimum to follow
- Honors/AP vs. regular -- take what you can handle and not kill yourself, especially in freshman year
- Foreign language depends on your future plans if you don't have a real preference
- Other options -- community colleges, self-study, etc.
- Additional help: <http://khanacademy.org>
- Tips on studying: "How to Become a Superstar Student" from <http://thegreatcourses.com>
- How to use tutors so they actually help you

4: Standardized Tests

- Timing makes a big difference. Take the tests at the right times and you get better grades.
 - SAT II subject tests -- take in May or June when you are finishing up that class or preparing for AP exams
 - No more than two SAT II tests per day if possible
 - SAT I / ACT -- take at other times, especially when you are less busy. You may be better at one than the other.
- AP/IB – Possible college credit
 - You don't need to take the test just because you take the class. You can take the tests without the classes if you do self-study or take the class at a local college.
 - Still, I recommend repeating the class in college if it's part of your major

5: The Right Extracurricular Activities

- **Your grades need to come first!** These are “extras” after you took care of the fundamentals
- You don't have to be good at everything
- Not all activities are desirable – your choices reflect your judgment, priorities, and values
- Leadership ≠ position. Leadership = your work, organization skills, and how you get others to achieve the objectives
- Work experience -- work to learn, not to earn
 - Work ethic/responsibility, interpersonal skills, conflict resolution, problem-solving, etc.
 - Work because family needs help? Nothing to be embarrassed about. Probably helps you more!

6: Awards & Recognitions

- Easier to get than you think
 - Plenty of competitions with few contestants
 - Enter into many and you'll likely win some
 - Ask your volunteer locations and employers for recognition – any recognition is helpful
 - Ask your parents' employers to sponsor some awards – you don't have to get any money, just a piece of paper
- Showcase your talents on YouTube, Flickr, etc., if applicable
- Blogging about your life? Make sure your content is truly unique, mature, and has a purpose

7: School Selection

- No perfect method -- too many considerations
- You can try <http://cappex.com>
- School reputation is crucial even though you may learn the same exact thing – the “signaling” process
- Public vs. private -- not just money considerations
 - Public -- may take longer to finish if budget problems
 - Private -- cost / quality. Some are not worth it. Some schools have good majors and they are worth it.
- Alumni network – can help you get jobs or future business
- Apply to a few dream schools, but also have a backup

8: The Actual Application

- Start early -- it takes more time than you think
 - Teachers' recommendations -- ask early and make sure they are actually done
- Some schools have “supplements” in addition to the Common App.
 - Some are fairly time-consuming
 - Some have tricky questions that require a lot of thinking and creativity -- not something to be done overnight
- Early decision/early action? If you really want to go there, apply early but only if your application is ready

9: Personal Statements

- While the subject can be something else, the focus needs to be about you, how you are as a person, how something impacted you, what you hope to do in the future, etc.
- Key points to emphasize:
 - You are thinking beyond yourself
 - You have a purpose or goal, and the desire to reach it
 - You learn from your experiences and mistakes, and how that makes you a more mature person
- Don't get overly creative here. They are looking for substance, not reckless creativity

10: Recommendation Letters

- Target the teachers & coaches who know you best, whose classes you excelled in or did special projects for
 - Make sure you submit enough from “academic teachers” before you submit other recommendations
 - Coaches do not count as “academic teachers” but their statements still count – use the “athletic supplement” but emphasize your personal characteristics
 - Yes, it’s OK to have non-teacher recommendations. Just give those people all the info they need so the schools can identify you. Don’t fax in your recommendations.
- Give them a brief résumé or key points to emphasize
- Waive your right to see these recommendations
- Give pre-stamped, pre-addressed envelopes to them

11: Interviews

- Generally required by top private schools only, or by private schools with unique criteria
- They look for specific things – present yourself accordingly
- Relax -- most interviewers are very nice people who do it as volunteers. They watch out for problem applicants but could also be your advocate
- Come prepared
 - Have some ready answers for common questions
 - Show interviewers your achievements
- Be courteous - accommodate their schedule, follow up with a thank-you note, etc.

12: Financial Aid

- Financial aid application -- do it early and push your parents to do their taxes early
- Don't let money deter you from applying -- you can always find money to pay for college
 - College is a good investment so student loans are OK
 - Many schools can help you further if you just ask
 - Seek out other sources on your own
- If family situation changes or what's offered is simply not enough, contact them immediately
 - Don't play the "bargain" game – you need them for four years

13: Rest of the Senior Year

- **Don't blow it!** Schools can rescind their offers if you do really poorly in your senior year
- Prepare for college-level work during summer
 - Learn reading strategies -- in college, you'll have more reading assigned to you than you can read
 - If learning foreign language, start chewing that dictionary!
 - Check out some intro-level textbooks and learn about the different disciplines that interest you
 - Take summer classes at a local college if transferable

Notes to Juniors

- **Get going on your college applications!!!**
- Right now: go download the common app and college-specific supplements (they usually don't change). Start working on filling up empty sections, do things that you can talk about in the essays, etc.
 - These personal statements and short answers should be your summer project for the evenings
- Before end of junior year: identify the teachers you want recommendations from and talk to them about it
- Start hunting for scholarships