

A year-by-year college-prep guide for high schoolers (and their parents)

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My friends and I like to bore our kids with stories about how we applied to college back in the Gen-X heyday: We had to pull forms off the back of college brochures, type all our information and essay responses on an actual typewriter, and mail them at the post office. After that we held our breath and hoped for fat envelopes in April.

Now the high school Class of 2019 is in the thick of the college application season, and one thing is certain: This is not their mothers' process. In many ways it's easier, with online applications, virtual campus tours and email. But it's still tedious. And though the stakes seem higher and the outcomes more uncertain, the reality is that 80 percent of U.S. colleges and universities accept more than half their applicants, according to the National Association for College Admission Counseling's 2017 State of College Admission report.

Those should be reassuring odds. Nonetheless, if you're the parent of a teenager with college aspirations, you've probably wished for a CliffsNotes guide to the application process to help you both survive the experience with minimal emotional scarring. Here's a primer, based on input from parents, college-counseling experts and test-prep gurus:

-Freshman Year

The best goal for college-bound students throughout high school is to choose a course load that will challenge them but not crush them, beginning freshman year.

The rigor of a high school transcript is one of the most important standards in college admissions; too often, however, students believe that means they should take advanced classes, even when such classes are inappropriate for them. Encourage your child to push boundaries, but within reason.

Freshman year is also a great time for students to explore clubs, sports and activities as they figure out what they enjoy most and want to commit to for the next few years. Admissions Revolution's Sara Harberson, an independent college counselor and former college admissions dean, encourages students to think outside the box when it comes to their extracurriculars.

"The vast majority of high school students are all doing very similar activities either at their high school or in their community," Harberson said. "When students have the courage to do something that's a little bit different, they can really chart their own path and create incredible opportunities for themselves."

Teens should feel free to try rock climbing instead of baseball, or take hula lessons instead of ballet. And by starting to explore activities in ninth grade, Harberson said, they'll have plenty of time to "develop that independent interest."

-Sophomore Year

Once students feel they are on stable ground, the real work (and, ideally, fun) of high school begins.

Sophomores will want to narrow down their extracurricular activities to a few meaningful interests that might include a job, team, club or service opportunity. Colleges value true engagement and long-term commitment to whatever students choose to pursue, Harberson said.

Harberson also suggested sophomores begin engaging with teachers more, and start considering them as potential mentors - and, later, recommendation writers. "The best letters of recommendation for college come from core academic teachers who have been able to interact with students beyond the traditional classroom," she said.

Tenth grade is not a bad time to start college visits, even if only casually. College tours can help students determine what they like (or don't) about campuses or programs. Encourage them to think about basic preferences: Do they love big football games, or would they prefer less emphasis on sports? How do they feel about living somewhere with long winters? Are they more comfortable on a rural campus, urban campus or somewhere in between? College is more than just a place to go to school - it will be their home for at least four years.

Most important, check the net price calculator on the financial aid page of colleges' websites to see if the schools will be feasible for your family. You can save everyone heartbreak later by being honest and transparent about the colleges you can afford. Begin having family financial conversations in 10th grade, before your student has a chance to set their hearts on one particular (and potentially \$70,000 a year) college.

One aspect that sophomores do not need to worry about: standardized test prep. "For freshmen and sophomores, 'prep' should consist of paying attention in your classes, developing solid study skills, and reading books and articles of your choosing outside of school," said Jed Applerouth, the founder and president of Applerouth Tutoring. "If you build your reading skills and master the material covered in your high school classes, you will be well-positioned to achieve strong scores on the SAT and ACT."

-Junior Year

In junior year students begin to feel ownership of their high school experience. This is when they can focus on making a personal impact in any area they choose - whether it's by helping plan their school's homecoming week, raising their math grades, volunteering in the community or completing other goals or projects.

It is also the ideal time to start studying for and taking standardized tests. Whether they prep with a tutor or on their own, Applerouth encourages students to take their time. "You cannot rush this," he said. "Students need time to review concepts, to hone their strategy and to practice under controlled, timed conditions."

Whether they take the SAT or ACT, Applerouth advises that students plan to sit for three official test administrations. "The majority of our students peak on the third and final official test," he said.

If your teen's standardized test scores don't accurately represent their academic potential, all is not lost. More than 1,000 schools in the country have test-optional applications, including renowned institutions such as Wake Forest University, the University of Chicago and George Washington University.

This year is also prime college-touring time. Some colleges will plan open houses or preview days specifically for high school juniors - check the admissions section of college websites to register.

-Senior Year

Senior year is go time - in every way.

By the early fall of senior year, students should have a college list that includes "reach" schools, for which admission is unlikely; "targets," where the student's academic profile matches the institution and admission is a good possibility; and "likelies," or colleges where the student is very confident in their chances of admission.

For the most stress-free college application process, include at least one college or university that your teen genuinely loves, that is likely to accept them and that your family can afford.

Once seniors have decided where they are applying, they can determine when and how. They should apply with a binding early-decision option if - and only if - it is their first choice, they are committed to attending and they can afford the costs.

For most students, a nonbinding, early-action application might work better. Both options will have deadlines between mid-October and mid-November.

Otherwise, seniors will need to check the deadlines for regular decision applications, which can vary from November to as late as May for some colleges with rolling admissions. All of these applications might include recommendation letters from counselors and teachers as well as personal essays and supplemental questions from each university.

Parents have a deadline, too: The Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) form becomes available Oct. 1, and parents should complete it as soon as possible for maximum aid possibilities. Even if your family does not qualify for need-based aid, many colleges require a completed FAFSA to consider applicants for merit-based aid.

For many students, the essay can be the most difficult part of the application process; they simply have no idea what to write about.

"I really like to challenge smart, self-aware students to write their essays about something that doesn't show up anywhere else on their application," Harberson said. "It's the little things that all of us do in our everyday life that exemplify who we are when no one is looking and keeping track. If students are willing to be vulnerable and share feelings and emotions when they write about themselves, those admissions officers will melt."

Once the essay is written and the application sent, there's nothing to do but wait - typically for online notifications, not fat envelopes.

Although the process doesn't much resemble what you went through, one thing is still true: The most important result is a child who is healthy emotionally, mentally and physically.

So the CliffsNotes version is this: Encourage your teen to strive to be the best version of themselves throughout high school. They are enough; they don't have to be perfect. They will find the right place. Repeat this early and often, and the rest is details.