

## College planning calendar for seniors

### September

- Narrow your list of colleges to 5 to 10. Meet with a counselor about them and, if you've not yet done so, download college applications and financial aid forms. Plan to visit as many of these colleges as possible.
- Create a master list or calendar that includes:
  - tests you'll take and their fees, dates, and registration deadlines.
  - college application due dates.
  - financial aid application forms required and their deadlines. (Note: Aid applications may be due before college applications.)
  - other materials you'll need (recommendations, transcripts, etc.).
  - your high school's own application processing deadlines.
- If you can't afford application or test fees, a counselor can help you request a fee waiver.
- If you have not had your test scores sent to the college to which you are applying, be sure to contact the College Board or ACT to have your scores sent.

### October

- Try to finalize your college choices.
- Prepare Early Decision, Early Action, or rolling admissions applications as soon as possible.
- Ask for counselor or teacher recommendations if you need them. Give each teacher or counselor an outline of your academic record and your extracurricular activities. For each recommendation, provide a stamped, addressed envelope, and any college forms required.
- If you're submitting essays, write first drafts and ask teachers and others to read them. If you're applying for Early Decision, finish the essays for that application now.
- If you have not had your test scores sent to the college to which you are applying, be sure to contact the College Board or ACT to have them sent.

### November

- November 1–15: For Early Decision admissions, colleges may require test scores and applications between these dates.
- Complete at least one college application by Thanksgiving.
- Counselors send transcripts to colleges. Give counselors the proper forms at least two weeks before colleges require them.

# College planning calendar for seniors (page 2)

## December

- As you finish and send your applications and essays, be sure to keep copies.
- If your college wants to see seventh-semester grades, be sure you give the form to your counselor.

## January

- If you apply to colleges online, be sure to have your high school send a transcript—it goes to colleges separately, and by mail.

## February

- No senioritis, please! Accepting colleges do look at second-semester senior grades.

## March

- Keep active in school. If you are wait-listed, the college will want to know what you have accomplished between the time you applied and learned of its decision.

## April

- You should receive acceptance letters and financial aid offers by mid-April. If you've not done so yet, visit your final college before accepting. As soon as you decide, notify your counselor of your choice.
- If you have questions about housing offers, talk to your counselor or call the college.

## May

- May 1: Colleges cannot require a deposit or commitment to attend before May 1. By that postmarked date, you must inform every college of your acceptance or rejection of the offer of admission and/or financial aid. (Questions? Talk to your counselor.)
- Send your deposit to one college only.
- Wait-listed by a college? If you will enroll if accepted, tell the admissions director your intent and ask how to strengthen your application. Need financial aid? Ask whether funds will be available if you're accepted.
- Work with a counselor to resolve any admissions or financial aid problems.

## June

- Ask your high school to send a final transcript to your college.

*Source: The College Board*

## Questions to ask college representatives

College reps, as well as college students, admissions counselors, and faculty, genuinely enjoy talking to high school students. They like to share their ideas about their college, and they all appreciate students who have thought about the college and want to know more than is in the course catalog, in the viewbook, or on the Web site. They like thoughtful questions, and their answers can help you make a good college match. Ask questions of interest to you in the following categories:

### Students

- How would you characterize the majority of students?
- From what economic background are the majority of students?
- Are there clubs, activities, or housing that are minority related?
- What do students like most about the college? Like least?
- Has the student government made any real contribution to the school? How do you get into student government?
- What political, social, or academic issues concerned students last year? How did the administration react? What was the resolution?

### Social life and campus activities

- What do students do for fun?
- What is the role of fraternities and sororities on campus? If I didn't want to join, could I have a satisfactory social life?
- What are the dominant social groups on campus? Do the groups get along with one another? Have there been any problems?
- What role do team sports play in the social life of the college? What happens on football or basketball weekends? If I didn't want to join in, would I find kindred spirits?
- Is there a good balance of academics, social life, and extracurricular activities?
- What were the social or cultural highlights last year?
- What is the role of the campus newspaper?
- Is there an alcohol problem and, if so, how is the college handling it? What is the incidence of binge drinking? Do students feel safe on campus?

### Campus facilities

#### *Housing and dining*

- Is there something I should know about housing that would help me in my choice?
- What are the types of food plans? All you can eat? Vegetarian? Kosher?

# Questions to ask college representatives (page 2)

## *Activity centers and athletic and recreational facilities*

- What kinds of facilities does the student center have? Is it a magnet for student activities? Are there other hangouts?
- Do you think the college pays attention to its appearance?
- How would you rate the fitness center?

## *Health, career counseling, special student services, and security*

- Is there a doctor, nurse, psychologist, or career counselor on campus? What is the waiting period for appointments?
- Is the office for special services adequate to the demand?
- How good is the security on campus?

## *Library*

- What have been students' experiences with the library? Have there been complaints?
- Is the library well equipped with computers and copy machines?

## **The community off campus**

- What is there to do in town? How would I get there?

## **Academics and faculty**

- What is distinctive about education here? What is the educational philosophy of the college? Has it changed much in recent years?
- Is the honor code working? How widespread is cheating?
- What is the most popular major on campus? Why?
- Do you think that students are generally enthusiastic about their classes? Do people talk about their courses outside of class?
- How would you characterize the academic pressure and workload?
- Are there research possibilities with the faculty? In what areas?
- What are the strengths and weaknesses of the advising system?
- What is the quality of student and faculty relationships? Is the faculty interested in and accessible to students after class? Do faculty members participate in student activities?
- Are curriculum changes in the works? How will that affect my college years?
- Are any departments being cut back or discontinued? If so, why?
- Are any new programs scheduled for the next four years?

**Source:** Adapted from *Campus Visits & College Interviews* by Zola Dincin Schneider (College Board, 2002). This book has many more questions you might ask of college representatives, plus chapters on every aspect of the interview and campus visit.

## How to get the most out of a college fair: Tips for students from the Associated Colleges of the Midwest

### Going to a college fair

- Take along a pen and a small notebook.
- Take a bag to carry the brochures you pick up.
- Print out some address labels with your name, address, phone number, e-mail address, high school, and year of graduation. Spend your time at the college tables asking questions, not filling out contact cards!
- When you arrive, check out the floor plan and find out where the tables for your top-choice colleges are located so you can go directly to them.
- Write your most important questions down in advance so you don't forget them.
- Check on whether any information sessions, such as financial aid, are being offered. Interested? Budget your time accordingly.
- Jot down notes about a college while your memory is fresh, such as right after visiting the table.
- Pick up the business cards of any representatives you talk to, so you can contact them if you have any more questions.

### After you get home

- Make a point of going through the materials and your notes within one week after the fair. You'll probably remember more about your conversations with college representatives while the memories from the fair are still fresh.
- Follow up with any college that interests you by contacting the admissions office to ask further questions, and, if possible, plan a visit to the campus.

**Source:** *Associated Colleges of the Midwest* ([www.acm.edu](http://www.acm.edu))



## How to make the most of a college interview

- The interview is primarily for you to learn about the college and to allow the interviewer to learn about you. Use it as a tool to assist your college selection. The interview can have a positive effect on your admission—rarely a negative one.
- When you schedule an interview, check to see if it is evaluative (used as a factor in admissions decisions) or informational (used in helping an applicant learn more about the college). Knowing the purpose will help you prepare for the interview. In most cases, even if the interview is evaluative, it is not one of the most important criteria used by the college. Relax and be yourself!
- Your interview will usually be with an admissions staff member, but it may be with a student, alumnus, or a professional interviewer. Keep this person's perspective in mind. Don't write off the college just because you think you had a bad interview. Interviewers have bad days, too.
- The interviewer is eager to get to know you and is almost always on your side. An experienced person knows that you may be new at interviewing and will try to put you at ease. The interviewer will answer your questions but will be more interested if you have helpful questions that show you've done some research on the college already.
- An important part of preparation is self-assessment. In what kind of environment do you work best? Would you take advantage of class discussions or would you rather learn by the lecture method? Know your rank, your test scores, your present areas of interest. If you are undecided about your career, feel free to say so (half of college students change their intended major). You should, however, recognize that you are going to college primarily to learn. Think through some areas you would like to explore, competencies you would like to develop, projects or situations that intrigue you.
- Don't go unprepared. Do your homework about the school to get the obvious questions answered. You don't want to be silent when asked, "What would you like to know about our college?" Questions or comments like, "What if I can't decide between two majors?" "What kinds of internships are there, and how often do students take them?" or "I've liked art, but don't wish to major in it" show more maturity in your thinking than asking about the number of books in the college library.
- Interviewers may ask questions about your interests, extracurricular activities/jobs, books you've read, meaningful experiences, reasons for applying to this college, life at school, and similar topics. Be ready to talk about these subjects.
- Be honest. Everyone has strong and weak points. College will help you with some of the latter and promote the former.

# How to make the most of a college interview (page 2)

- Plan to have your interview alone. Most admissions officers prefer to speak with your parents after talking with you, rather than during the interview.
- Dress neatly and comfortably.
- When you return home, write a **thank-you note** to the person who interviewed you.

*Source: Adapted from material prepared by Gloria Mueller, Glenbrook High School, Illinois*



## College questionnaire for students

Name of student: \_\_\_\_\_

1. Do you want to be:
  - able to come home in an hour or so every weekend?
  - able to come home in a half-day's drive?
  - able to come home only on vacations?
  
2. Do you have a geographical preference?
  - Southeast                       Northwest
  - Southwest                       Midwest
  - West Coast                       Northeast
  
3. Do you prefer certain states? If so, list them.
  
4. Which do you prefer?  Large city     Suburb     Small town
  
5. Do you have a sense of what size college/university might suit you best? If so, please indicate below.
  
6. Do you think you know what you want to study in college?  Yes     No  
If you checked "yes," what is your intended area of study?
  
7. Are there any other general preferences you have at this point?  
Fraternities and sororities? No frats or sororities? Colder climate?  
Warmer climate? Other?

# College questionnaire for students (page 2)

## Questions About You

The following questions can help you focus the college selection and admissions process where it belongs—on you! An honest and thoughtful self-evaluation can reveal what you should look for in the colleges. It will also prepare you for statements you will be asked to make about yourself on essays and, perhaps, in interviews when you apply to colleges. Please answer the questions on a separate piece of paper and attach it to the questionnaire. There are, of course, no right or wrong answers.

### **Your Goals and Values**

1. What aspects of your high school years have you enjoyed the most? If you could live them over again, would you do anything differently? If so, what?
2. What values are most important to you? What do you care about most?
3. How do you define success? Are you satisfied with your accomplishments to date? What do you want to accomplish in the years ahead?
4. What kind of person would you like to become? Of your unique gifts and strengths, which would you most like to develop?
5. If you had a year to go anywhere and do whatever you wanted, where would you go and what would you do?

## College questionnaire for students (page 3)

6. What events/experiences have shaped your growth and way of thinking?

### Your Education

1. What are your academic interests? Which courses have you enjoyed the most and which have been the most difficult for you?
2. What do you choose to learn when you can learn on your own? Consider interests pursued beyond class assignments: topics chosen for research papers, independent projects, reading on your own, job or volunteer work, etc.
3. How do you learn best? What methods and styles of teaching engage your interest and effort the most?
4. How would you describe your high school? Has the environment encouraged you to develop your interests, talents, and abilities? What would you preserve and/or change about the school if you had the authority and money to do so?
5. What has been your most stimulating intellectual experience in recent years?

# College questionnaire for students (page 4)

## Your Personality and Relationships with Others

1. How would someone who knows you well describe you? Your finest qualities? Your most conspicuous shortcomings? How have you grown or changed during your high school years thus far?
2. Which relationships are most important to you and why? Describe the people whom you consider your best friends, your best critics, your best advocates.
3. How do you make decisions for yourself? What are the best decisions you have made recently? How much do you rely on direction or advice from others?

**Source:** Susan Stagers, Cary Academy, North Carolina

## Assessing your list of colleges

As you develop a list (mental or otherwise) of colleges that interest you, be sure you can answer these questions about them.

### The basics

- Where is the college? Can you locate it on a map? Is it too close to home? Is it too far? Is it too cold or too hot there?
- Have you taken the course work the college requires for admission?
- What size is the college? How many students are undergraduates?
- What is the college's selectivity ratio (what proportion of applicants were admitted last year)?
- Does the college offer majors that interest you?
- Is the college coed or single sex?
- What percentage of students live off campus?
- How many of the students graduate in four years? Five years? Six years?
- How many first-year students return for their sophomore year?
- How much does the program cost? What is the total per-year expense?
- What type of financial aid is available?

### Where would you fit in?

- What are the college scores for the SAT® or ACT? Where does that place you?
- What were the high school GPAs of most of the freshmen last year?
- Are freshmen guaranteed on-campus housing? If not, where do they live?
- Are there extracurricular activities that interest you?

### Visit the colleges' Web sites, read the guidebooks, and look at their literature

- What are their strong academic programs? (Ask a college representative, students, graduates, and teachers.)
- What courses are required for graduation?
- Are the courses you need/want available each semester? At convenient times?
- Are there special programs that interest you (study abroad, internships, etc.)?
- What is the social life like? What percentage of students join fraternities or sororities?
- Do the pictures and the language the college uses to describe itself attract you?
- What is your general impression of the college?

## Assessing your list of colleges (page 2)

- Is the school accredited?
- If professional certification is required for employment in the field that interests you, how many students enrolled in the school's program pass the certification exam?

### Admissions process

- When are applications due?
- Does the college accept the Common Application? If so, does it require supplemental forms?
- What does the application contain? Are essays required?
- Is an interview suggested or required? Is an interview available from staff or alumni?
- When may you visit the college? What is its policy regarding campus visits?
- What are the financial aid deadlines? What financial aid forms are required?

### Now answer these questions

- Am I a strong candidate for admission to this college?
- If I am not a strong candidate, what are my chances?
- Do I want to visit this college?
- What additional information do I need?

**Source:** Susan Stagers, Cary Academy, North Carolina



# College questionnaire for parents or guardians (page 2)

7. How do you view your child's actual academic progress so far?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
8. What do you believe are your child's strengths in applying for college?
  - a. Academic strengths:
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  - b. Other strengths:
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
9. You are invited to write a letter to the college counselor describing your child, specifically narrating events or anecdotes that characterize or illustrate your child's personality. What would you like us to know about your son or daughter? What experiences have shaped his or her personality? What makes your child special? Are there special circumstances you would like the college adviser to know about that would help with the college search? What do you hope your child will gain from the college experience?

Parent/Guardian Name(s): \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**Source:** *Susan Stagers, Cary Academy, North Carolina*



## Tips for parents on finding a college match

How can your child find colleges that match his or her needs? First, identify priorities. Next, carefully research the characteristics of a range of schools. Finally, match the two. Here are some college characteristics to consider.

### Size of student body

Size will affect many of your child's opportunities and experiences:

- range of academic majors offered
- extracurricular possibilities
- amount of personal attention your child will receive
- number of academic resources (e.g., books in the library)

In considering size, your child should look beyond the raw number of students attending. For example, perhaps she's considering a small department within a large school. She should investigate not just the number of faculty members, but also their accessibility to students.

### Location

Does your child want to visit home frequently, or is this a time to experience a new part of the country? Perhaps he would like an urban environment with access to museums, ethnic food, or major league ball games. Or maybe he hopes for easy access to the outdoors or the serenity of a small town.

### Academic programs

If your child knows what she wants to study, she can research the reputations of academic departments by talking to people in the fields that interest her. If your child is undecided, as many students are, she may want to choose an academically balanced institution that offers a range of majors and programs. Students normally don't pick a major until their sophomore year, and those students who know their major before they go to college are very likely to change their minds. Most colleges offer counseling to help students find a focus.

In considering academic programs, your child should look for special opportunities and pick a school that offers a number of possibilities.

# Tips for parents on finding a college match

## (page 2)

### **Campus life**

Your child should consider what college life will be like beyond the classroom. Students have to maintain a balance between academics, activities, and social life. Before choosing a college, your child should learn the answers to these questions:

- What extracurricular activities, athletics, clubs, and organizations are available?
- Does the community around the college offer interesting outlets for students?
- Are students welcomed by the community?
- Is there an ethnic or religious group in which to take part?
- How do fraternities and sororities influence campus life?
- Is housing guaranteed?
- How are dorms assigned?

### **Cost**

In considering cost, look beyond the price tag. For most students, today's college costs make finances an important consideration. At the same time, most colleges work to ensure that academically qualified students from every economic circumstance can find financial aid that allows them to attend.

### **Diversity**

Your child should explore what she might gain from a diverse student body. The geographic, ethnic, racial, and religious diversity of the students can help students learn more about the world. Investigate which student organizations or other groups with ethnic or religious foundations are active and visible on campus.

### **Retention and graduation rates**

One of the best ways to measure a school's quality and the satisfaction of its students is to learn the percentage of students who return after the first year and the percentage of entering students who go on to graduate. Comparatively good retention and graduation rates indicate that responsible academic, social, and financial support systems exist for most students.

*Source: [www.collegeboard.com](http://www.collegeboard.com)*

## College resources for students and families

### General Web sites

**ACT, Inc.** The Web site for information on the ACT, including registration, test dates, etc. [www.act.org](http://www.act.org).

**Campus Tours: Virtual College Tours.** Virtual tours with still pictures and descriptions, webcams, campus maps, and videos of hundreds of colleges throughout the United States. Provides a first look at colleges. [www.campustours.com](http://www.campustours.com).

**The College Board.** A complete site, with college and scholarship searches, information about the SAT® and SAT Subject Tests™, and other material pertaining to the college search and application process. Easy-to-use college search feature. [www.collegeboard.com](http://www.collegeboard.com).

**Collegiate Choice Walking Tours Videos.** A site run by a group of independent counselors in New Jersey who offer videos of walking tours of more than 350 colleges, providing “an unedited recording of an actual student-guided campus tour offered at that college.” [www.collegiatechoice.com](http://www.collegiatechoice.com).

**eCampusTours.com.** Virtual tours of colleges. Useful for its 360-degree views of dorm rooms and other buildings. [www.ecampustours.com](http://www.ecampustours.com).

**NCAA Clearinghouse Online.** Official NCAA Web site that gives details of student-eligibility requirements to play NCAA sports. Watch this site for changes in eligibility; students can print the “Guide for the College-Bound Student-Athlete.” [www.ncaaclearinghouse.net](http://www.ncaaclearinghouse.net).

**Peterson's Education Portal.** An all-purpose site including a college search, as well as information about summer programs, summer camps, and jobs. The site asks you to register before using some of the search engines and other resources, but there is no registration fee. There is a charge for some of the services provided. [www.petersons.com](http://www.petersons.com).

**U.S. Department of Education.** The federal government's Web site is easy to use and an excellent source of information on financial aid, much of it in Spanish as well as English. [www.ed.gov](http://www.ed.gov).

### Financial aid Web sites

**The College Board.** Has a scholarship search, a loan calculator, and an online application form for the CSS/Financial Aid PROFILE® form, which is required by some colleges. [www.collegeboard.com](http://www.collegeboard.com).

**FAFSA on the Web.** The Web site for the Free Application for Federal Student Aid. This form must be submitted in the senior year (after January 1 and by June 30) for families applying for need-based aid. Students may complete it electronically at this site. [www.fafsa.ed.gov](http://www.fafsa.ed.gov).

**FastWeb.** Extensive information on merit- and need-based scholarships and aid. [www.fastweb.com](http://www.fastweb.com).

**FinAid!** Good site for information about types of financial aid and applying for financial aid. [www.finaid.org](http://www.finaid.org).

# College resources for students and families

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### Books

#### Comprehensive objective directories

*Barron's Profiles of American Colleges*. New York: Barron's Educational Series, Inc. Updated every two years.

*The College Board College Handbook*. New York: The College Board. Published annually.

*Peterson's Guide to Four-Year Colleges*. Princeton, NJ: Peterson's Guides. Published annually.

*Peterson's Guide to Two-Year Colleges*. Princeton, NJ: Peterson's Guides. Published annually.

#### Subjective guides

Fiske, Edward, and Robert Logue (contributor). *The Fiske Guide to Colleges*. Illinois: Sourcebooks Trade. Updated annually.

Greene, Howard, and Mathew W. Greene. *Green's Guide to Educational Planning: The Public Ivies*. HarperCollins, 2001.

Greene, Howard R., and Matthew W. Greene. *The Hidden Ivies: Thirty Colleges of Excellence*. New York: HarperCollins, 2000.

Pope, Loren. *Colleges That Change Lives: 40 Schools You Should Know About Even If You're Not a Straight-A Student*. New York: Penguin, 2006.

Staff of *Yale Daily News*. *The Insider's Guide to the Colleges*. New York: St. Martin's Press. Updated annually.

#### Specialized topics

Aaron, Scott. *Jewish U: A Contemporary Guide for the Jewish College Student*. Urj Press, 2002

*College Board Book of Majors*. New York: The College Board, 2006.

Detailed descriptions, written by professors, of more than 180 popular majors, plus lists of 900 majors and the colleges that offer them.

*Getting Financial Aid*. New York: The College Board. Published annually.

Mathews, Jay. *Harvard Schmarvard: Getting Beyond the Ivy League to the College That Is Best For You*. New York: Prima Publishing, 2003. Good insights on the college choice process from the education columnist for the *Washington Post*.

Nelson Reference. *Nelson's Complete Guide to Colleges & Universities for Christians*. 2002.

Princeton Review et al. (eds.). *The Hillel Guide to Jewish Life on Campus*. 14th ed. New York: Random House Information Group, 1999.

Princeton Review et al. (eds.). *K&W Guide to Colleges for Students with Learning Disabilities or Attention Deficit Disorder*. 8th ed. New York: Random House Information Group, 2005.

Schoem, David. *College Knowledge: 101 Tips for the College-Bound Student*. University of Michigan Press, 2005. Practical advice on how to become engaged in college intellectual and cultural life.

Windmeyer, Shane L. *The Advocate College Guide for LGBT Students*. Boston: Alyson Publications, 2006.

Strichart, Stephen S., and Charles T. Mangrum, II (eds.). *Peterson's Colleges with Programs for Students with Learning Disabilities or Attention Deficit Disorder*. 7th ed. Princeton, NJ: Peterson's Guides, 2003.

# College application checklist

Use this checklist to help you stay on top of your application tasks, paperwork, and deadlines.

	College 1	College 2	College 3
<b>Application Checklist</b>			
<b>Applications</b>			
Request info/application forms			
Regular application deadline			
Early application deadline			
<b>Grades</b>			
Request high school transcript sent			
Request midyear grade reports sent			
<b>Test Scores</b>			
Send SAT® scores			
Send SAT Subject Test scores			
Send ACT scores			
Send AP® scores			
<b>Letters of Recommendation</b>			
Request recommendations			
Send thank-you notes			
<b>Essays</b>			
Write essay(s)			
Proof essay(s) for spelling and grammar			
Have two people read essay(s)			
<b>Interviews</b>			
Interview at college			
Alumni interview			

# College application checklist (page 2)

	College 1	College 2	College 3
<b>Application Checklist</b>			
Send thank-you note(s) to interviewer(s)			
<b>Send and Track Your Application</b>			
Make copies of all application materials			
Apply online			
Include application fee			
Sign application			
Confirm receipt of application materials			
Send supplemental material, if needed			
<b>Financial Aid Forms</b>			
Priority financial aid deadline			
Regular financial aid deadline			
Mail FAFSA			
Submit CSS/Financial Aid PROFILE®, if needed			
Mail institutional aid form, if needed			
Mail state aid form, if needed			
<b>After You Send Your Application</b>			
Receive admission letter			
Receive financial aid award letter			
Send deposit			
Send final transcript			

**Source:** *The College Board*

## Tips for undertaking the application process

### Getting started

- Set up a folder for each application. Keep all material relevant to each college in its own folder.
- If you are filing online applications, be sure to save drafts to a disk.
- Review all application materials as they arrive. Set up a schedule for completing them. Completing applications is not much fun, and you may be inclined to put off this task as long as you can. Procrastination is risky. There is a lot to do, especially if you have several essays to write. You may not do the application (and yourself) justice if you leave it until the last minute. Remember: Leave enough time for correcting and revising.
- Make two or more copies of the whole application to use as rough drafts and extras in case you make a serious error and ruin the original.

### Completing the application process

- Review the application and its directions completely before you start to work on it.
- Work on your rough draft in pencil so that you can make changes easily.
- Be accurate, honest, and neat. Spell correctly and use correct grammar.
- It may be better to type the factual sections of your application form, though typing is not required. If you believe you can do a neat, legible, and accurate job completing it by hand, go ahead. Be sure to print legibly in ink. Black ink is preferred because it photocopied clearly.
- If possible, type your essay question responses.
- At your request, the College Board and ACT send the official records of your test scores directly to the colleges. Do not send a photocopy of your own test score report unless requested to do so. Sometimes, a college accepts a photocopy as a means of obtaining preliminary information, but it will need the official report to make an offer of admission.
- When you have completed your application, ask someone to review it and check it for errors. Keep a blank copy on hand in case you need to redo the application.
- If you are applying electronically, print a copy of the completed application before you send it. Your counselor will be happy to look it over before you push the “send” button.
- If you file an online application, be sure to tell your counselor when you have submitted the application and which materials the school needs to send to the college (such as recommendations or the transcript).

# Tips for undertaking the application process

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### Tips for online applicants

- Make sure a person whose opinion you trust reviews the application for errors before you send it.
- Use standard spelling and grammar—not e-mail-ese: treat this like a paper application.
- Have your test scores sent to the colleges to which you are applying, if you haven't already.
- Print out a paper copy for your records.
- Do not apply electronically and send a paper copy in the mail: wait for confirmation that the electronic copy was received (you should get that within three or four days, if not sooner).
- Tell your counselor of every online application you send, so he or she can send transcripts and letters of recommendation.

*Source: Susan Stagers, Cary Academy, North Carolina*



## College application FAQs: Students ask, counselors answer

### **Do I have a better chance of getting in if I apply early?**

This can vary from school to school and year to year and may depend on the applicant pool at the school to which you are applying. Check to see what percentage of students in the previous graduating classes at your high school were admitted as Early Decision to a specific college. Are you qualified to apply for Early Decision? If you are, and this is a school you really wish to attend, then apply for Early Decision.

### **How much time should I give my teachers to write letters of recommendation for me?**

Teachers should always receive a minimum of two weeks' notice before the postmark date. Be sure to ask in a way that allows a teacher to decline comfortably if he or she does not have time to do an adequate job. For example: "Do you feel you know me well enough, and do you have enough time, to write a supportive letter of recommendation for me?" Give the teacher a stamped envelope addressed to the college, along with any recommendation form provided by the college.

### **How many times should I take the SAT®?**

Some students are satisfied with their SAT scores the first time they take the test. Students who have taken the PSAT/NMSQT® more than once may feel well prepared for the SAT and take it only once. Most students will take the SAT in the spring of their junior year and the fall of their senior year. Some students will take it three times.

### **My SAT scores are very low and my grades are very high. Will this affect my chances of admission?**

While SAT scores are an indicator of success in college, admissions staff look at many different factors when making a decision about whether to admit a student. One of the main things they are looking for is to see if your high school academic profile indicates that you have the potential for academic success on their campus. What kind of courses have you taken? Have you taken rigorous courses such as honors or AP® courses? Have you taken AP Exams so that there are scores to indicate how you may perform in a college-level course?

### **My parents don't make a lot of money—will colleges hold this against me?**

Colleges should tell you whether they have a "need-blind" admissions policy. Those that do never consider ability to pay as an admissions requirement. Other schools, which are "need conscious," may consider ability to pay, but only for a very small proportion of the admitted group. My advice is always: Don't worry about this.

# College application FAQs: Students ask, counselors answer (page 2)

## **How can I improve my chances of getting in from the wait list?**

If a college is your first choice, let the college know that—although the college may not ask for this information. Write a letter to the director of admissions expressing your continuing strong interest and updating the admissions office with any new information that reflects well on you. In addition, you may wish to ask your counselor to make a call on your behalf. Many colleges keep track of these kinds of contacts, and students who are enthusiastic and persistent will get looked at first. Colleges want to admit students off the wait list who will accept the offer of admission.

## **Do colleges really care about your senior-year grades?**

Absolutely! Many colleges will not make a decision until receiving seventh-semester grades. They expect to see a performance that indicates you are ready for college-level work. The college at which you make your enrollment deposit will ask for a final transcript at the end of the senior year. (Admissions letters often say something like, “Your admission is contingent upon your continued successful performance.”) It is not at all rare for a college to withdraw an offer of admission when grades drop significantly over the course of the senior year. (I have a folder full of copies of these letters.)

Answers provided by Mary Lee Hoganson, a former counselor at Homewood-Flossmoor High School, Illinois, and Nadine K. Maxwell, a former coordinator of guidance services for Fairfax County Public Schools, Virginia.

*Source: The College Board*

## Some typical admissions policies

### Early Action

Students who apply under a college's Early Action plan receive a decision before the standard response date but are not required to accept an offer of admission or to make a deposit prior to May 1. Most Early Action deadlines are in November, December, or January, with notification some weeks later. Approximately 200 colleges have Early Action plans. Students should be sure to read the college policy carefully. Some colleges have "single choice Early Action" plans. In these plans, colleges place some restrictions on the applicant's right to make applications to other Early Decision or Early Action plans.

### Early Decision

Students who apply under Early Decision commit to enroll at the college if they are admitted and offered a satisfactory financial aid package. Application deadlines are usually in mid-November, with a mid- to late-December notification date. Approximately 230 colleges have an Early Decision plan. Some colleges have both an Early Decision and an Early Action plan.

### Open Admissions

Under this policy, a college admits students without regard to conventional academic qualifications, such as taking appropriate high school subjects and receiving suitable high school grades and admission-test scores. Virtually all applicants with high school diplomas or the equivalent are accepted. Most community colleges practice open admissions, although many have requirements for certain programs—for example, nursing.

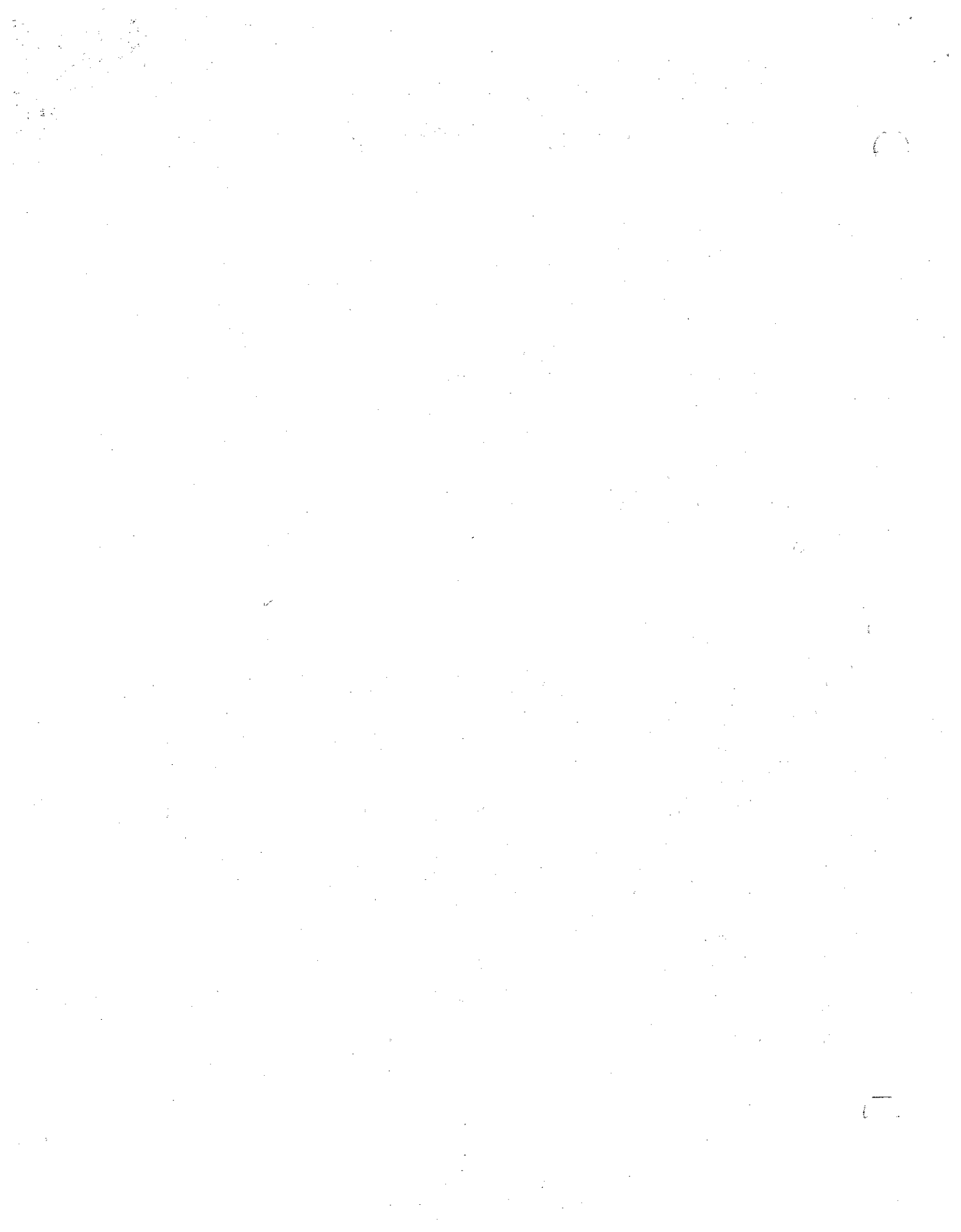
### Rolling Admissions

In this frequently used procedure, a college considers each student's application as soon as all the required credentials, such as school record and test scores, have been received. The college usually notifies an applicant of its decision without delay. At many colleges, rolling admissions allow for early notification and work much like nonbinding Early Action programs.

### Candidates Reply Date Agreement

A college subscribing to this agreement does not require applicants offered admission as first-year students to notify the college of their decision to attend (or to accept an offer of financial aid) before May 1 of the year the applicants apply. The purpose of the agreement is to give students time to hear from all the colleges to which they have applied before having to make a commitment to any of them.

*Source: The College Board*



## Transcript release form

I hereby give permission for my son's/daughter's transcript of academic work undertaken at \_\_\_\_\_ (school) to be sent to colleges, universities, or scholarship programs to which he/she is applying. It is the student's responsibility to notify the counseling office of those colleges and programs for which a transcript is needed and to do so at least three (3) weeks before the due date at the college, university, or scholarship program.

Student name: \_\_\_\_\_

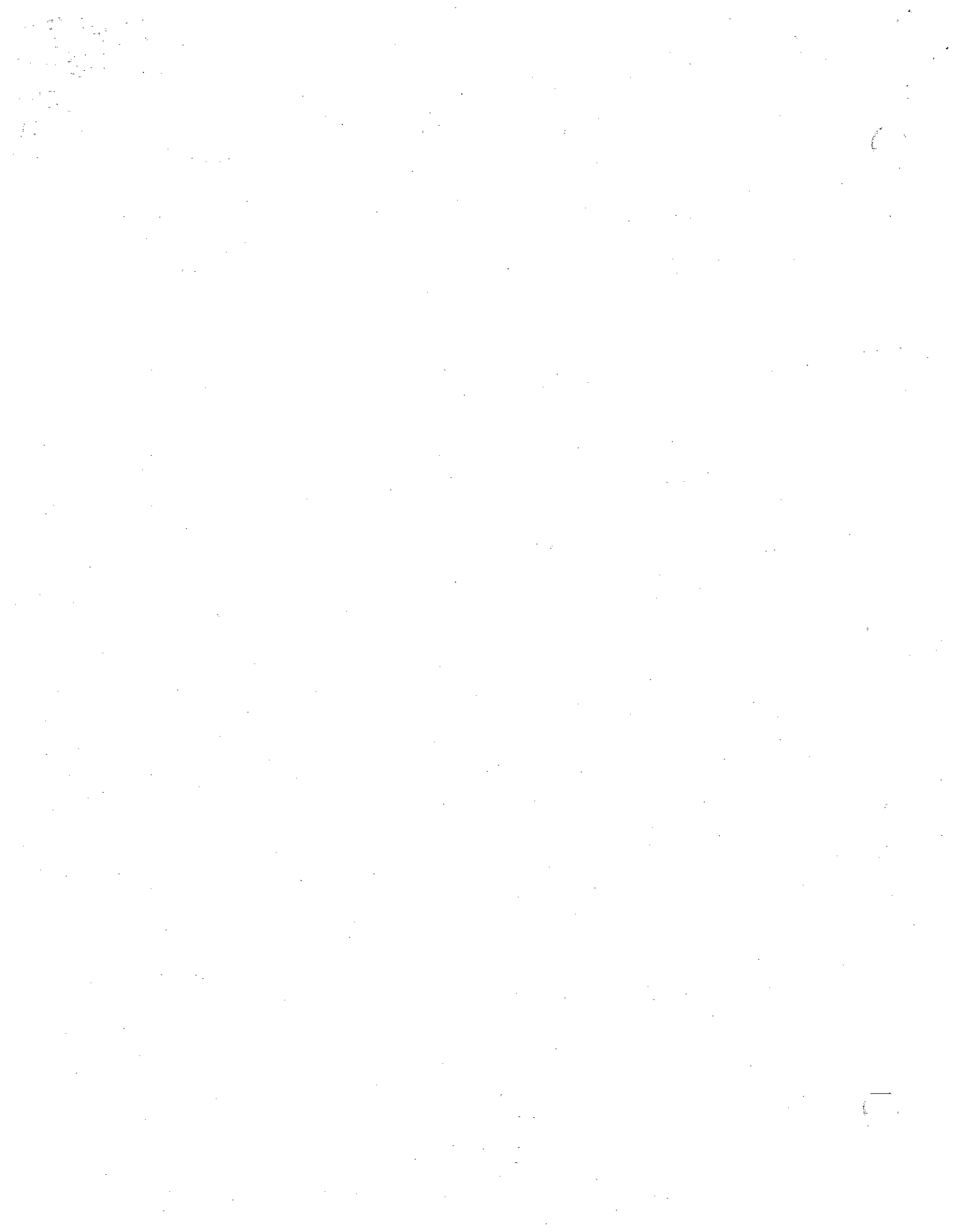
Parent/guardian name: \_\_\_\_\_

Parent/guardian signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

College/scholarship	Student initials	Due date at college/scholarship
1.		
2.		
3.		
4.		
5.		
6.		
7.		
8.		

### Handout 4E



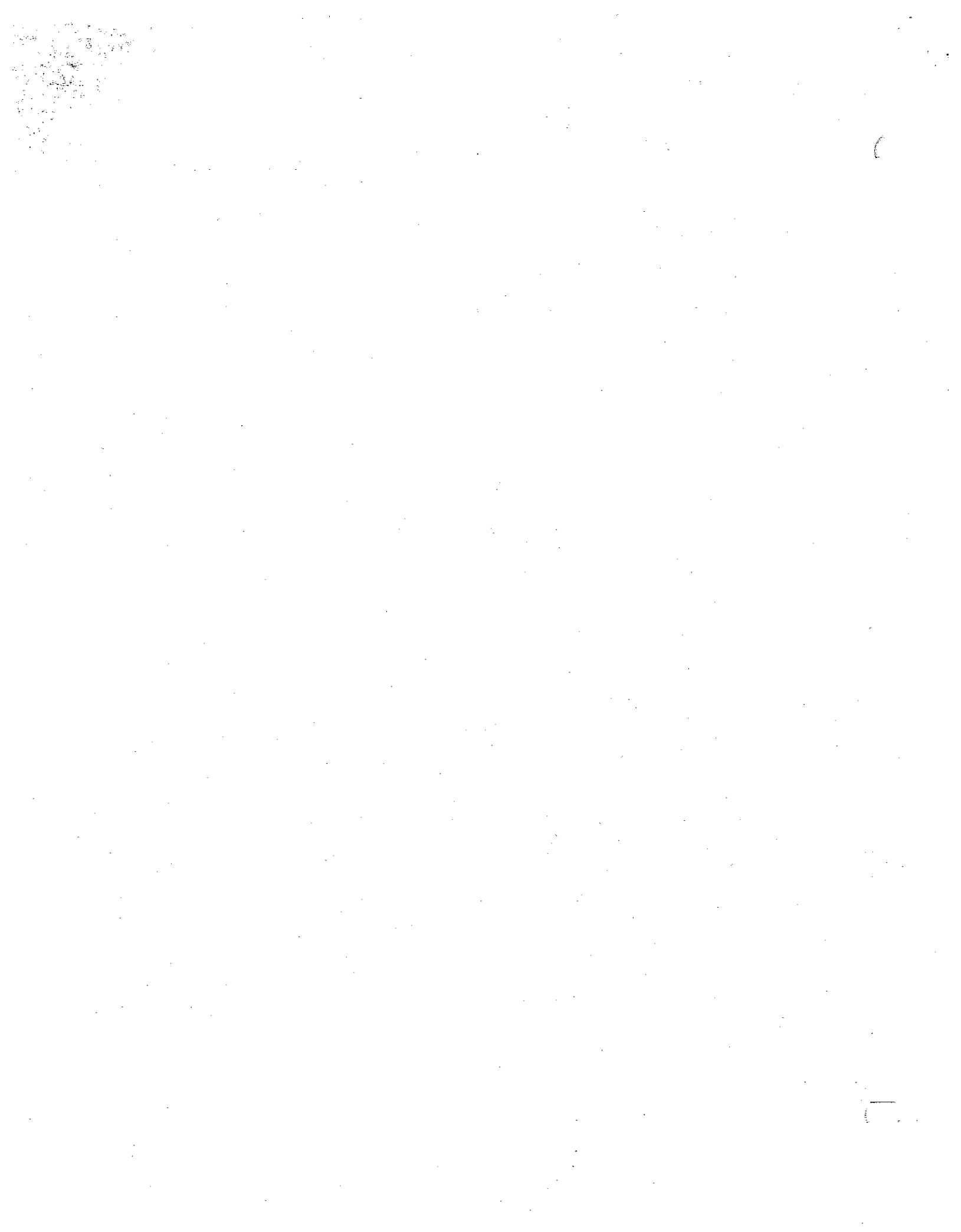
## Application ethics: What students need to consider

In recent years, college admissions officers and college counselors have seen a growing number of students and parents who, in an attempt to manipulate the system in their favor, are crossing the boundary between helping ensure a desired outcome and taking inappropriate actions.

The admissions process is not a game to be won at any cost. It is a complex process that demands a great deal of integrity on everyone's part, especially the school's. Here are some examples of what we consider crossing the boundary:

- Applying to binding Early Decision programs at more than one college or university. The whole point of a binding ED program is to make a contract: "If you accept me, I will withdraw all my other applications and attend your university." Many colleges now require that the college adviser sign the application along with the student and parents. The school will not send transcripts to more than one ED school or to any other schools once a student has been admitted under a binding ED program.
- Failing to withdraw your applications to other colleges when you have been admitted under a binding ED program. It isn't fair to those colleges or to the students who have applied to them for you to continue in the process just to see what happens.
- Attempting to gain release from an ED decision because you have changed your mind. The only acceptable reason for requesting release from your contract with your ED college is the inability to work out appropriate financial aid. You and your parents should discuss the cost factor when you are deciding whether to apply for ED in the first place.
- Having someone else write or heavily edit your essays. When you sign an application, you are indicating it is your work. If it is not, then you may be subject to the school's honor code.
- Submitting deposits to more than one college. If you are admitted to a college that requires a deposit by May 1 and wait-listed at your favorite college, call the college that admitted you and discuss the matter before you send your check. Your counselor can advise you how to conduct this conversation and what the appropriate behavior is.
- Stating an intended major that you have no intention of pursuing, because you think it might help your admission chances.
- Inaccurately describing your activities and accomplishments. Putting things in the best light is one thing; fabrication is something else.
- Stating to more than one college that it is your first choice.

**Source:** Adapted from material provided by Cary Academy, North Carolina





## Should you apply under an Early Decision program?

### What is Early Decision?

Some colleges have an Early Decision (ED) plan. Under this plan, a student submits his or her credentials early (usually by November 1 or November 15) and signs a statement (binding) that he or she will accept the college's offer of admission.

### Who should apply for Early Decision?

Ideal candidates for ED should fit both of these profiles:

- You have researched colleges extensively (visited at least three or four) and are absolutely sure that College X is your first choice. If you are accepted under an Early Decision program, you have committed yourself to attending that college and must withdraw all other applications.
- You meet or exceed the admissions profile of students at College X (i.e., your SAT® scores, GPA, and class rank should be comparable to students at College X). You should have completed one round of the SAT and SAT Subject Tests™ by October of your senior year. Some colleges, however, will accept November test scores if the scores are rushed to the admissions office. You have an academic record that has been consistently solid over time.

If you know that your senior-year grades will be much better than your grades in previous years, you may wish to apply under the regular admissions program and allow the college to evaluate your improvement.

### What are the advantages of Early Decision programs?

Your application is reviewed early and you receive notification of your admissions status by December 15. If you are accepted, you avoid having to complete other applications. Your application is reviewed against a smaller applicant pool. (However, it is usually a much stronger pool than the group of candidates for regular admissions.)

### What are the disadvantages of Early Decision programs?

Obviously, you could be rejected early. And next April, when other students receive their acceptances, you may end up wondering, "Could I have been accepted to Y University?" You might change your mind, but you are bound by contract to attend College X.

# Should you apply under an Early Decision program? (page 2)

## What are some of the mistakes students make in choosing to apply for Early Decision?

- applying to a college for ED when they have not researched/visited any other colleges
- applying early to a college just to avoid the paperwork and stress
- applying early because a friend is doing so

## What about financial aid?

When applying under an ED program, you fill out a preliminary financial aid form from the college. (Some colleges use the CSS Financial Aid/PROFILE® form available on the Internet at [www.collegeboard.com](http://www.collegeboard.com).) You will be notified of your financial aid package at the time of your acceptance. The package will be determined by the college based on an assessment of your family's economic needs.

If financial aid is an essential factor for you in selecting a college, you may not wish to apply under an Early Decision program because you will not be able to compare your aid package with financial aid offers from other colleges.

## Questions

Direct your questions about Early Decision programs to your college of choice. Institutions can and do vary in their implementation of early programs. There are also numerous Early Action programs, which are nonbinding. Contact the colleges about the regulations of each program, as they can vary widely.

**Source:** *Carlene Riccelli, Amherst Regional High School, Massachusetts*

# Understanding the College Application Calendar

By Sue Biemeret

One of the key processes that affects your college choice is the timeline that colleges use to admit students. Generally speaking, there are three different college application timelines:

**Regular admission.** You apply by a midwinter deadline, hear from colleges in early April, and make your decision and notify colleges by May 1 (known as the Universal Candidate Reply Date) about whether you will attend. This was the norm until fairly recently.

**Rolling admission.** You apply and usually receive an admissions decision within two to six weeks from the time you submit your application. Most public universities and many private colleges use this timeline. It's by far the most widely used calendar today—and popular with students because it reduces the period of uncertainty.

**Early application.** Early application plans have been around for decades. However, they've only become "hot" topics among college-bound students and their families over the past 10 years and, today, they can be the driving force behind some students' college planning. To understand how early plans have taken center stage for some students, you need to first understand how the college application calendar works. Essentially, two types of early plans—one nonbinding and the other binding—are offered by several hundred colleges that also use the regular application calendar. Here's how they differ:

- **Early Decision (ED).** This is considered "binding," so it's essential that you be certain about wanting to enroll at that college. As with Early Action plans, you submit an application in early fall. Sometime between mid-December and the beginning of January, the college notifies you whether you have been admitted, deferred to the pool of regular applicants for a spring decision, or denied admission to the college.

By applying under an ED plan, you have made a commitment to attend that college and surrendered the right to wait until May 1 to make a decision. High school counselors and college admissions officers take that commitment very seriously. Reneging on your agreement after being offered ED admission could result in other colleges refusing to admit you.

Most ED plans share the following features:

- You may apply for Early Decision to only one college.
- You may also apply for Early Action, rolling admissions, or regular admissions to other colleges during the fall, but once you are admitted under an ED plan, all applications to other colleges must be withdrawn immediately.
- You are only released from an ED program if the college is unable to meet your need for financial aid, as demonstrated by the completion of a financial aid form. It is vitally important for you and your family to understand that "need," as used in the college admissions process, does not refer to a subjective determination of a family's willingness to pay, but rather to the federal and institutional financial aid methodologies used to determine a family's ability to pay.
- **Early Action (EA).** This is a nonbinding plan that requires you to submit your application in early fall (usually by November 1 or 15). The college lets you know whether you're accepted by early January, but you have the right to wait until May 1 before responding. This gives you time to compare colleges, including their financial aid offers, before making a decision, since an EA application doesn't commit you to enroll if offered admission. Some colleges have two "rounds" of Early Action, with deadlines in both November and December.

Over the past several years, some hybrid versions of the Early Action plan have been established. Colleges such as Harvard, Yale, and Stanford now use a *Single Choice/Early Action* plan (some colleges call this "Early Action with restrictions"). Under this new plan, they will accept an EA application, but students exercising this option may apply to only one school EA, and may not apply ED to any other college.

What are the advantages of utilizing an early plan? For students who have found their "ideal" college, applying early allows them to bypass the regular spring notification deadline, avoid the time and expense of submitting multiple applications, and reduce the time spent waiting for a decision. Students who have already completed their college search can accelerate the admissions calendar by

applying under an early plan. Being admitted under an early plan may sometimes be somewhat less competitive than competing with all other applicants in the spring, just as letting a college know of your intense desire to attend can be a positive factor in the admissions decision.

Colleges and universities, too, benefit from early plans. Under the ED plan, admitting committed students early in the admissions cycle is a great way to build a strong freshman class. Also, some colleges find that they can stretch their limited financial aid budgets by admitting students who are not only bright and committed to their school, but who also are “full-pay” students, i.e., ones who are not relying on financial aid.

So why are early plans such a controversial topic among admissions professionals today? There is a growing concern that the increased publicity about and the popularity of early plans are causing some students to make premature college decisions and some colleges to fill their classes with a disproportionate number of early applicants.

In fact, some students even feel compelled to apply early in order to take advantage of the perceived competitive edge an early plan offers. What was originally designed to be a stress-reducer has become a stress-enhancer, as students focus more on the *strategy* of early plans rather than the *opportunity* early plans offer to the very focused student. In another vein, some students who apply early might find themselves disconnecting from their academic work during their last semester of high school. This particular strain of “senioritis” has created a national concern among high school and college educators alike. Students are expected to remain engaged in their course work throughout their eight semesters of high school; applying early was never designed to lessen a student’s academic participation during the spring of senior year.

Simply stated, early plans are wonderful options for students who have found a perfect fit between themselves and a particular college. However, because of media or peer pressure, some students who aren’t absolutely certain that one college is the clear winner on their list may find it tempting to apply under an early plan—even if it isn’t right for them.

For students who aren’t ready to make a binding commitment, applying under a restrictive early plan is extremely inappropriate because it forces them to make serious decisions long before they’ve explored all their options. Another potential disadvantage is that students

are not able to wait until the spring of their senior year to compare financial aid packages among colleges that have offered them admission. Therefore, if financial aid is a priority, applying under a restrictive early plan is probably not a good idea because it might eliminate, or greatly reduce, aid possibilities.

If you’re just starting the college admissions search, we encourage you to keep a few points in mind:

- Remember that the best college for you is the one that fits you best. A good match between your academic, personal, social, and philosophical interests and a college or university’s environment is what you are seeking. Get to know yourself well this year, and get to know individual colleges well by reading about them, visiting them, and speaking to their admissions counselors.
- Applying under an early plan is not required or necessary, but simply an option. If you find one college that appeals to you more than any other and fits you like a glove, consider using an early plan as you begin the application timetable early in your senior year. However, if you want to take more time to explore a variety of options, that’s OK!
- Include your parents in your plan to apply early. It is imperative that your parents understand the financial ramifications of applying under a binding ED plan. Make sure your parents have discussed their financial need with the college’s financial aid office before you apply under a binding ED plan.
- Include your school counselor in the process. You don’t want to make such a weighty decision without the help of a trained professional who can be objective about this decision. Your counselor is your strongest advocate in the college search process!

Susan Biemeret,  
College Consultant  
Adlai E. Stevenson High School  
Lincolnshire, Illinois



# Recommendations: Student self-assessment

## (page 2)

4. In or out of school, which awards and honors have you received? Which elected offices have you held?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
5. What book(s) have had the greatest impact on you? Why?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
6. Describe the academic accomplishment (major paper, science experiment, artistic project) you are most proud of, and tell why you take pride in it.
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
7. What kind of learner are you? Which academic setting or assignments make you thrive? What interests you?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
8. List your three most distinguishing or most admirable qualities. Explain each in several sentences.
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
9. What do you hope to accomplish in college and after? Consider your career goals and your broader goals.

*Source: Jim Bell, Lick-Wilmerding High School, California*

## Guidelines for students requesting recommendations

1. Think about who knows you and can attest to the quality of your work. If you need a recommendation from a teacher, request one from a teacher in an academic subject who knows your strengths. That may be a teacher in whose class you've gotten top grades, but it could also be a teacher who knows how hard you've worked to get B's and C's.  
If you need three recommendations—one from a counselor, an academic teacher, and another person—consider requesting one from someone who knows you well: a coach, employer, adult co-worker, religious or youth-group leader, or an adult in the community with whom you have had regular and positive contact.
2. Ask the person if he or she would be willing to write a letter for you. Remember, the person is doing you a favor.
3. Submit information about yourself (résumé, brag sheet), the recommendation form (if there is one), and other pertinent information to the writer at least two weeks before it needs to be completed. Remember, the deadline is the last possible day the letter/application may be **received** by the admissions or scholarship committee, not the day you put it in the mail.
4. Set your own deadline at least one week before you need to mail your application letter.
5. If the writer is to send your letter separately, provide a stamped, addressed envelope with a note attached listing a deadline for mailing that is at least five days before the application deadline. Politely check with the writer to be certain your letter was mailed (“How’s my letter coming? Do you need any more information?”).
6. Write a brief thank-you note to the writer.
7. If you receive the scholarship or are accepted to the college for which the letter was written, let the writer know.
8. Copy all parts of your application, essay, letters, and other materials for your own records.
9. Let the guidance office know when you have a response from the college or scholarship committee, one way or the other.

*Source: The College Board*





**Sample request for letters of recommendation**

Date \_\_\_\_\_

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

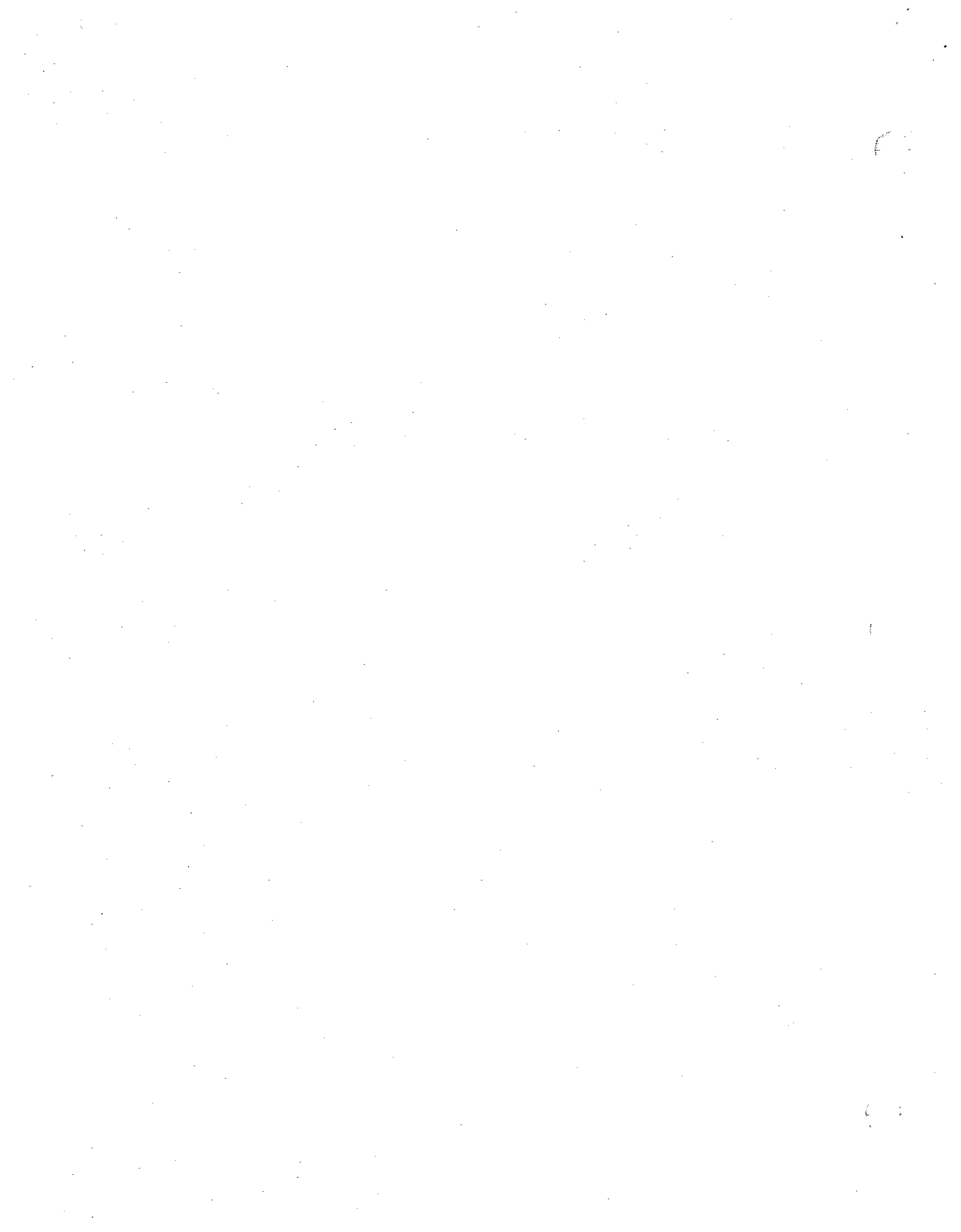
I am applying for \_\_\_\_\_ . I am required to submit \_\_\_\_\_ letter(s) of recommendation. Would you consider writing a letter for me? I have attached the instructions for the letter. My deadline is \_\_\_\_\_; therefore, I will pick up your letter by \_\_\_\_\_. You may put it in a sealed envelope if you prefer.

Thank you so much. I really appreciate your taking time to do this for me.

Sincerely,

Name of Student \_\_\_\_\_

**Source:** Joy Ahmad, Del City High School, Oklahoma



## Sample college application essay questions

**Howard University:** Howard University is interested in you as a person, as well as how you express your thoughts. Please submit a 500-word essay describing how you would contribute to the Howard University legacy.

**Pomona College:** Reinvent your high school. What is essential? What would you change?

**Florida State University:** How has your family history, culture, or environment influenced who you are?

**New York University:** Select a creative work—a novel, a film, a musical piece, a painting, or other work of art—that has influenced the way you view the world, or the way you view yourself. Discuss the impact the work has had on you. (We are more interested in how the work has affected you rather than reading a detailed plot summary or a description of the work.)

**Fordham University:** Discuss a political, social, or cultural issue that has had an impact on society and discuss why it is important to you.

**Northwestern University:** An old expression says, “What is right is not always popular, and what is popular is not always right.” Give an example of a time when you made a choice that was not popular but you felt was right. Why did you make this choice? What happened as a result?

**Rhodes College:** What risks have you taken in your life? What were the circumstances and the results? How have you benefited from risk taking?

**Common Application:** Choose one of the topics.

1. Evaluate a significant experience, achievement, risk you have taken, or ethical dilemma you have faced and describe its impact on you.
2. Discuss some issues of personal, local, national, or international concern and their importance to you.
3. Indicate a person who has been a significant influence on you, and describe that influence.
4. Describe a character in fiction, a historical character, or a creative work (as in art, music, science, etc.) that has had an influence on you and describe that influence.
5. A range of academic interests, personal perspectives, and life experiences adds much to the educational mix. Given your personal background, describe an experience that illustrates what you would bring to the diversity in a college community, or an encounter that illustrated the importance of diversity to you.

# Sample college application essay questions

## (page 2)

### Other commonly asked essay questions:

If you could travel through time and interview a prominent figure in the arts, politics, religion, or science, whom would you choose, and why?

Tell us about a teacher who has had a significant impact on your intellectual growth, and discuss that impact.

Ask and answer the one important question that you wish we had asked.

Explain why a particular day in the recent past continues to be important to you.

## Dos and don'ts on writing the college application essay

A great application essay will present a vivid, personal, and compelling view of you to the admissions staff. It will round out the rest of your application and help you stand out from other applicants. The essay is one of the only parts of your application over which you have complete control, so take the time to do a good job on it. Check out these tips before you begin.

### DOS

#### **Keep your focus narrow and personal**

Your essay must prove a single point or thesis. The reader should be able to find your main idea and follow it from beginning to end. Ask someone to read just your introduction to see what he or she thinks your essay is about.

Essays that attempt to be too comprehensive end up sounding watered down. Remember, it's not about telling the committee members what you've done—they can pick that up from your list of activities—but about showing them who you are.

#### **Prove it**

Develop your main idea with vivid, specific facts, events, quotations, examples, and reasons. There's a big difference between simply stating a point of view and letting an idea unfold in the details:

- **Okay:** I like to be surrounded by people with a variety of backgrounds and interests.
- **Better:** During that night, I sang the theme song from *Casablanca* with a baseball coach who thinks he's Bogie, discussed Marxism with a little old lady, and heard more than I ever wanted to know about some woman's gallbladder operation.

#### **Be specific**

To avoid clichéd, generic, and predictable writing, use vivid, specific details.

- **Okay:** I want to help people. I have gotten so much out of life through the love and guidance of my family, I feel that many individuals have not been as fortunate; therefore, I would like to expand the lives of others.
- **Better:** My mom and dad stood on plenty of sidelines until their shoes filled with water or their fingers started to freeze or somebody's golden retriever signed its name on their coats in mud. I think that kind of commitment is what I'd like to bring to working with fourth-graders.

# Dos and don'ts on writing the college application essay (page 2)

## DON'Ts

### **Don't tell your readers what you think they want to hear**

Most admissions officers read plenty of essays about the charms of their university, the evils of terrorism, and the personal commitment involved in being a doctor. Bring something new to the table, not just what you think they want to hear.

### **Don't write a résumé**

Don't include information that is found elsewhere in the application. Your essay will end up sounding like an autobiography, travelogue, or laundry list. Yawn.

- **Overloaded:** During my junior year, I played first singles on the tennis team, served on the student council, maintained a B+ average, traveled to France, and worked at a cheese factory.

### **Don't use 50 words when 5 will do**

Eliminate unnecessary words.

- **Okay:** Over the years, it has been pointed out to me by my parents, friends, and teachers—and I have even noticed this about myself, as well—that I am not the neatest person in the world.
- **Better:** I'm a slob.

### **Don't forget to proofread**

Typos and spelling or grammatical errors can be interpreted as carelessness or just bad writing. Don't rely on your computer's spell-checker. It can miss spelling errors like the ones below.

- After I graduate **form** high school, I plan to work for a nonprofit organization during the summer.
- From that day on, Daniel was my best **fried**.

**Source:** *www.collegeboard.com*, based on information from *The College Application Essay, rev. ed.*, by Sarah Myers McGinty (New York: The College Board, 2004).

# How to write a college application essay

By Margaret Metzger

Brookline High School, Massachusetts

Many colleges require a short essay as part of the application process. The directions for the essay vary from college to college. Most colleges offer some variation of the topic. "Tell us more about yourself."

Like most students, you might hate this subject and dread writing the essay. You know that it is a crucial piece of writing and that it must be done, but secretly you hope somehow to avoid the task. Like most tasks, the tension created by procrastinating is worse than the work itself—in this case, just sitting down and writing the essay.

You can use the college essay to strengthen your application. In fact, your essay can be the strongest part, presenting you as a thoughtful, sincere, interesting applicant. You can use the college essay to explain mistakes of the past—failed courses, low SAT® scores, or few extracurricular activities. Best of all, you can demonstrate that you know how to write well, an ability all colleges value.

## Find a topic

Colleges genuinely want to know who you are. Although it is difficult to believe, they do not have an "ideal student" in mind. They want a variety of students. They understand that they can't know everything about you by your grade point average and your SAT scores. They want to know what kind of person you are, what aspirations you have, what struggles you have gone through, what is important to you. They ask you to write an essay about yourself because they want more personal information.

Before you write, think about how you may be different from other applicants. What unusual experience would you bring to the college? What interests, activities, travel, struggles, or situations have had a particular impact on you? You are probably thinking, "Nothing is special about me; I'm just an average kid." That's what most students think. Sometimes it helps to ask other people what they think is unique about you.

If you know exactly what you want to write about, you are lucky. Use that topic. Be sure to consider the traditional, but appropriate and effective, topics, such as academic achievements, extracurricular activities, travel and work experiences, and life-changing events.

Also think of more subtle accomplishments. What kind of student are you? In which class did you learn to think,

to study? What do you do with your free time? What have you done for the past two summers? What words would you use to describe your personality? Do you belong to any organizations outside high school? What jobs have you held? What have you learned about organizing your time? Who is your most unusual friend? What magazines, newspapers, columnists, or authors do you like to read? What are some of the failures or disappointments in your life? What kind of plans do you have for the future? Who has been influential in your life? What responsibilities do you have at home? What do you do for other people? What does music (particularly playing or composing) mean to you? How have you changed (besides physically) in the last four years?

## Be specific

Remember that the admissions board is reading hundreds of applications, and you must make yours memorable. Some students resort to gimmicks: 8-inch-by-10-inch glossy pictures of themselves hang gliding, or a videotape or a cartoon book about themselves. You may have heard stories about an ordinary student getting into an exclusive college by taking a creative or startling approach. But gimmicks are high risk. Maybe the admissions board doesn't have the time or the equipment to play the videotape of your band. Maybe you will seem egocentric or cute or, more likely, as though you are dodging the difficult task that everyone else has done: writing an essay.

You can make yourself stand out from the crowd and stress your individuality by a less risky method. Your English teachers have been telling you for years to use specifics when you write. Specifics make a piece of writing memorable. This basic principle of good writing applies, as well, to writing the college essay. Be specific. Tell the truth about yourself as specifically as possible. If you claim that you like school, say exactly what you like: "I like biology and got particularly interested in a three-month project I did about algae on the teeth." Always be as specific as possible.

## Narrow your topic

You have only one-and-a-half to two pages for this essay. You can't write about everything that has ever happened to you. You need one to three topics for this paper. You must pick a few of the most important aspects of your identity.

If you cover too much, you will be forced to be superficial. Don't say, "I like school. I am a leader. I play basketball. I've traveled to Sri Lanka, Alaska, Iowa, and South Africa. I play the violin. I work every weekend. I believe in responsibility. I want to be famous." Pick one, two, or at the most, three important things about yourself and concentrate on them.

### **Show, don't tell**

You need to know and apply the writing principle of "show, don't tell": Give the readers such convincing evidence that they draw the conclusion you want them to draw. If you provide all the evidence of your fine qualities, you don't have to list them. Besides, the college will be much more likely to consider you sincere if you give examples rather than a list of glorious adjectives about yourself.

For instance, you might be embarrassed to say, "I am extremely responsible." Instead you could say, "Last summer, I was put in charge of 12 ten-year-old girls for a three-day hike." When the college admissions board members read your example, they will come to the conclusion, "Ah, some adult must have felt this applicant could be responsible for a dozen children's health and safety for several days. This sounds like a responsible person." Give your readers the evidence and examples, and they will reach the right conclusions.

### **Describe what you have done**

You don't need a long list of flashy experiences. What you have experienced is not as important as what you have done with the experience. Real maturity depends on how you understand what has happened to you and whether you let your experiences change your perceptions.

Colleges want to know how you have reacted to your experiences. For example, many students have failed some test or course. Colleges would like to know what you did with that failure. Did you mope? Blame the teacher? Quit doing homework because you were angry at the failure? Did you see the failure as a warning, an impetus, a challenge?

Even if you write about something exotic, you must say what you did and what you learned. One student went to Israel for two weeks; her only observation was that the Israeli women wore longer skirts than the Americans. Her trivial description revealed her immaturity and poor powers of observation.

When you are explaining what you learned, do not say, "I learned a lot." Be specific. Tell exactly what you learned. You want to show colleges that you will change and grow through a college education.

### **Focus on yourself**

If you feel self-conscious writing the essay, you may be tempted to dodge the task of writing about yourself and write, instead, about something related to you, such as a group or an organization you belong to. Avoid this approach.

### **Work on the first sentence**

There are two opposing approaches to making a strong opening sentence. The first suggestion is that you spend hours on the first sentence because it sets the tone and direction of the essay. The reasoning is that you need to know where you are going before you begin. The problem with this approach is that students become paralyzed trying to find the perfect beginning.

The second suggestion is that you begin anywhere and write the first sentence last. The reasoning is that you need to get started, and you don't know what you will end up saying until you have finished the essay. You may discover that your essay really begins in the middle of the second or third paragraph, and you can cut out all the preliminaries. Then you can start with a sturdy statement. The problem with this approach is that you might begin an essay without a sense of direction and wander too much.

You may go back and forth between trying to write a perfect beginning and just trying to get started. No matter what you do, when you finish the essay, go back to the beginning and work on the first sentences. Cut out all wordiness. Make it specific. Check the grammar.

### **Final bit of advice**

Millions of students before you have written college essays. They hated the task, too. But it must get done. Of course, it is better to write it long before the deadline. The real problem for most students is how to get started, what topic to use, and how to avoid procrastination.

The solution is simply to begin.



## Choosing an essay topic: Advice from member colleges of Associated Colleges of the Midwest

The essay personalizes your application. The essay is your chance to use your voice. The essay is the living, breathing part of your application to a college. In the essay, you can speak in your own voice and personalize your application. Here's your opportunity to show something about you that doesn't really come across elsewhere in your application.

So, step back and be reflective. Think about who you are as an individual. How do you view the world? What do you care about deeply? What experiences and people have been important in shaping you as a person? What are your aspirations in life? It is in such reflection that you can find your own unique voice. That's the voice that will help you write an interesting essay that only you could have written.

### Why do colleges require essays?

A college application includes a lot of information about you, such as grades, recommendations, lists of your extracurricular activities, and test scores. All of that information is very important and helps admissions officers form a picture of your accomplishments and abilities. However, while it tells about how other people see you, there isn't much about how you see yourself. It's that inside view—how you see yourself—that colleges hope to find in your essay.

The essay performs other functions, as well:

- The essay can be a way of showing that you have researched and thought carefully about the college to which you are applying. It shows, in your own words, why you and the college would be a good match.
- An essay demonstrates your writing ability, a key component of success in college.
- In your essay, you can show that you are willing to put yourself into what you do. That kind of commitment is an important part of effective learning in college. And it shows the admissions committee that you are willing and able to be a contributing member of a community of learners.
- For selective colleges especially, the essay helps admissions committees draw distinctions and make choices among applicants. An essay will rarely take an applicant out of consideration at a college, but it certainly can elevate an applicant in an admissions committee's eyes.

# Choosing an essay topic: Advice from member colleges of Associated Colleges of the Midwest (page 2)

## Choosing and handling a topic

Show your command of the basics of good writing. Here are some key points that admissions officers look for in an essay:

- Make sure to answer the essay question and to follow all the instructions.
- Start off with a strong opening paragraph that captures the reader's interest.
- Use a style that you find comfortable and that is appropriate for the subject matter.
- Use correct grammar, punctuation, and spelling.
- Make a point and stick to it; develop your argument or narrative.
- Check all your facts. Do you mention a date, a place, or an event in your essay? Make sure it's correct.
- Give your reader complete information, so he or she won't be confused.
- In general, be succinct. If there is a recommended length for the essay, pay attention to it.
- The essay should be neatly typed.
- Remember that mistakes, especially sloppy mistakes, make it look as if you don't take the essay (and, by extension, the application) very seriously.

## Good sources of essay topics

Does the application ask you to choose a topic? There are as many good topics as there are applicants. Look for a topic among your interests, or among causes or events that touch you personally:

- Do you have hobbies and nonschool pursuits that engage your heart and mind? Writing about your out-of-classroom interests can help reveal a part of you that's not covered—or not covered to your fullest advantage—elsewhere in your application.
- Is there a social cause that you hold near and dear? Remember, an essay is not an academic paper; however, a cause that you feel passionately about may be the basis for a strong essay.
- Perhaps there is an event (local, national, or international) that has touched you in a personal way.
- Is there an academic subject that sparks your interest? Why does that subject excite you? Has it led to experiences or study outside of school?

# Choosing an essay topic: Advice from member colleges of Associated Colleges of the Midwest (page 3)

## How to handle a topic

Often, you will be asked to write about an experience you've had, an achievement in your life, or a person who has been significant to you. Go beyond the what or who and dig into the how and why:

- This is a personal essay, not a travelogue. So if you're writing about a trip to another country, describe how your experiences affected you and why they were interesting or meaningful to you. The people reading the essay are interested in what makes you tick and how you got the way you are, not in how the trains run in Paris.
- Are you writing a tribute to your grandparents and their influence on your childhood? Be personal and specific, not just sentimental. Explain how the particular things your grandparents did or said were important to you.
- Did you overcome an athletic injury and recover to perform well? A description of the type of cast you wore and your rehab routine won't make a compelling essay. But a reflection on what it felt like to watch your teammates, instead of playing alongside them, just might be the ticket.

## Tips on avoiding possible pitfalls

- Writing a poem or making a videotape in place of an essay is probably not a good idea, unless you're applying to a specialized school that encourages such a submission.
- Humor can be risky, so be careful how you use it.
- Honor code rules are in effect when you write an essay, so do your own work and don't make things up. As a practical matter, other items in the application, such as letters of recommendation, make it likely that you'd be found out if you tried to give misinformation.

## Some final tips

- Leave yourself time to rewrite and revise. For most people, this is not an easy assignment. You need to give yourself weeks, not days, and certainly not hours, to rework your essay.
- If your essay is longer than three pages (unless the instructions call for something longer), then it had better be interesting! Think hard about what you really want to focus on, and take out whatever distracts from your central point.
- The admissions committee will take your essay seriously. You should, too. You have a lot to gain by putting in the time and effort to write a good essay.

*Source: Associated Colleges of the Midwest ([www.acm.edu](http://www.acm.edu))*



## Excerpt from “In the space provided: The college application essay”

By Sarah Myers McGinty

Time and reflection have brought me to the belief that it is neither the questions nor the writing skills that make the application essay a mighty challenge. Rather it is the level of thinking required that causes so much trouble for the writers and so much fatigue for their audience in admissions. The true challenge of the application essay is the demand it makes on young writers to think objectively about subjective experience....

### Helping students write application essays

How can we help? Certainly all language arts teachers have a stake in preparing their students for the writing tasks before them. Nor do I discredit the values of assuring students that an application essay is similar to other work in their school courses. But assigning a lot of “Tell us about yourself” themes or talking about the parallels between personal and academic writing—while not without value—won’t fully bridge the gap. What follows are my suggestions for how to help students over the cognitive hurdle and into the required unembedded condition of reflection about their application topics. These suggestions should help young writers construct a self for the space provided.

1. As it isn’t just telling a story that’s difficult—students spend most of their nonclass time in this activity—a September assignment might ask for a specific and vivid retelling of a personal event. Stress the need for detail, but do not allow students to assign a meaning to, or draw conclusions from, their story. This is just a telling, and revisions should stress the showing rather than the meaning.

- When finished, these narratives should sit in your desk or in the students’ writing folders for several weeks. Authors will mull over their choice of incident, even if in a passive way, and enforced distance of time will generate some disengagement.
- In October or early November, return to this assignment and provide a photocopy of each student’s narrative to each member of a peer-writing group. Group members should read each other’s incident and then write several thoughts about what they

believe the incident means. The idea is to give the writer five or six possible constructions of meaning for the event.

- From the suggestions, writers set out now to build their own meaning from the story. Time and peers’ contributions should broaden the choices; they also maintain the appropriate passive intervention of the teacher in this particular writing assignment, leaving students free to frame the result in their own words....
  - You must leave students to fine-tune things on their own. You have framed the process, established a distance for them about their material, and encouraged them to look carefully and from a variety of points of view. All this should be a first step toward the reflective mode the college essay requires. The rest must be up to them.
2. An alternative is to ask for a short essay on a topic with built-in reflectiveness:

*questions about a change of mind*

- a good friend who isn’t a friend anymore
- something you believed once but don’t believe now
- a decision you’d like to make over again
- a choice you’ve regretted

*questions with a built-in double vision*

- a time something or someone misled you or you acted on a misperception
- a time you tried to learn something and didn’t learn it
- something you were but aren’t anymore

### The application essay

High school English departments can do more to help college applicants and all writers. It is, moreover, in the service of their own programs that they show students how able they already are for the task.... The application essay is meant to nudge students toward a collegiate frame

Excerpt from "In the Space Provided: The College Application Essay" (page 2)

of mind. A little help in framing the challenge, applying known skills, developing a voice of objectivity, and working on the revision of vision will make Thanksgiving Monday a safer and easier holiday for teachers, the March reading season more pleasant for admissions counselors, and April 1 a happier day for students. We are all working together in the business of teaching, learning, and growing; encouraging applicants to disengage from adolescence and move into the sense of reflection and voice that college and adult work require. This transformation takes place in the space provided...either on the application page, or later, in the quad. But it begins in the secondary classroom.

Sarah Myers McGinty was English department chair at Milburn High School, New Jersey, and associate director of admissions at Sarah Lawrence College. She is the author of *The College Application Essay* (The College Board, 2004).

This article originally appeared, in slightly different form, in *English Journal*, March 1995. Reprinted with permission of *English Journal*.