

ADMISSION SCIENCE PRESENTS

COLLEGE ADMISSIONS 2.0

THE HANDBOOK

*How to Stand Out from the Crowd
and Get Accepted Into the School
of Your Dreams*

ADMISSIONSCIENCE.COM



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Welcome to **College Admissions 2.0: The Handbook**.

Recently, we surveyed over 22,000 families on our email list to discover their most pressing questions about the College Admissions Process. In this book, we provide detailed answers to the most frequently asked questions.

While the college admissions process is becoming increasingly competitive, families that start early enough will still have ample time to be fully prepared. It's very realistic for a student to have a fulfilling and enjoyable high school experience while still being in a great position to apply to elite universities.

So without further ado, let's get to the questions.

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David was accepted into every Ivy League school, plus Stanford.

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Jordan was accepted into every Ivy League school, plus Stanford.



CH 1. THE BIG PICTURE

- 1.1 How can students stand out and get into a top college? / What are admissions officers really looking for?
- 1.2 If you could pick one thing for students to focus on, what would it be?
- 1.3 How much do GPA and test scores affect admissions outcomes?
- 1.4 If a student doesn't yet know what they want to do, how should they pick classes, activities, colleges, etc?
- 1.5 Does a student's "central passion" need to align with their intended major in college?
- 1.6 Are admissions criteria different for students at public vs. private schools? / Are students competing against others from the same school?

CH 2. MANAGING STRESS

- 2.1 How can we prepare for college admissions while managing stress and anxiety?
- 2.2 When should we start preparing for college admissions? / Is it too early to start?
- 2.3 What can we do to get an early head start?
- 2.4 What can I do as a parent to help my child? / How can I motivate my child more? / How do I know what's best for my child?
- 2.5 How do we know if we've done enough?

CH 3. PAYING FOR COLLEGE

- 3.1 How to do we finance and pay for college?
- 3.2 How do can students earn merit-based or special situation scholarships?
- 3.3 Does requesting financial aid affect your chances of getting admitted to a school? / Is it better on FAFSA to show you that have less money or enough to pay?



CH 4. ACTIVITIES

- 4.1 Can strong outside-of-school activities make up for weak in-school activities?
- 4.2 Should students do a summer program at the college they want to attend?
- 4.3 How important are extracurricular activities?
- 4.4 Which types of extracurricular activities will improve my chances of getting into a top university?
- 4.5 Which of my activities should I include on the application? / Do they all need to align with my central passion?
- 4.6 How important is volunteering or starting a nonprofit?
- 4.7 How important are summer activities?
- 4.8 Which types of summer activities are the most “impressive” to colleges?

CH 5. ACADEMICS

- 5.1 How important are AP classes? / Do top colleges expect to see only AP classes?
- 5.2 If my school doesn't offer a particular AP class, can I study for the AP test on my own?
- 5.3 Is it better to take AP classes and get a B or regular classes and get an A?
- 5.4 What does my GPA need to be to get into a top college / Ivy League / UC's / <insert school here>?
- 5.5 Can I still get into an Ivy League school with more than one B?
- 5.6 How does grade inflation play into the equation? / What if the student goes to a very competitive high school and thus has lower grades?
- 5.7 Does an upward sloping GPA trend help?
- 5.8 Do 12th grade classes matter?
- 5.9 How do we handle low grades from important classes?
- 5.10 How do we choose between the AP route, IB program, or pre-college credits?



CH 6. STANDARDIZED TESTS

- 6.1 Are tests really optional at “test-optional” schools? / Are subject tests (SAT II’s) optional? / Is there a score that’s “too low” to submit?
- 6.2 What’s the best way to prepare for the SATs or ACTs? / What if we can’t hire a private tutor?
- 6.3 When should students start preparing for the SATs?
- 6.4 How important are SAT scores to admissions outcomes? / Can a student still get into an elite school without perfect or near-perfect SAT scores?
- 6.5 How do we make up for poor standardized test scores?
- 6.6 Should students who scored <insert score here> retake the SAT / ACT?
- 6.7 What does the new adversity score really mean and how can it impact students?

CH 7. APPLICATION STRATEGY

- 7.1 How do we pick the right schools to apply to out of so many options? / How do I find a school that’s a good fit?
- 7.2 What are the best options for students with lower grades / late bloomers?
- 7.3 How do we decide if a school is considered a “reach” school or a realistic school?
- 7.4 What are the different application options (Early Action / Early Decision / Restrictive Early Action / Early Decision II / Rolling / Regular), and what are the best strategies for each?
- 7.5 How important are college visits? How about reaching out to the admissions officer at the school?



CH 1. THE BIG PICTURE

1.1 How can students stand out and get into a top college? / What are admissions officers really looking for?

Alright, let's kick this off by addressing THE single most commonly asked question from the survey: As competition continues to rise ***how in the world do you stand out?***

How can students really show colleges what makes them special and unique... when there seems to be an ocean of qualified candidates out there? In other words, what exactly are admissions officers looking for today?

Today, students are...

- (1) Applying to more colleges on average (with many top schools having lower acceptance rates)
- (2) competing with qualified candidates from overseas, and
- (3) feeling more stressed out because they feel like they need to fit into a “perfect” mold to succeed.

And while the first two of those points—more applications per student and increased competition—are true, **students should NOT aim for some idea of a “perfect” mold.**

Top colleges are already receiving so many applications from candidates who look nearly identical on paper... how does a college choose between several applicants who each have a 3.9 GPA, were varsity sports captains, and scored in the top 5 percentile on their SATs?

The answer is that admissions officers need to dig deeper. They need to answer the one big question, which is **“why should I accept this student over everyone else who look equally qualified on paper?”**

As a result, most top universities have shifted to a more **holistic evaluation system** they use to try to understand candidates at a deeper level. For example, Harvard scores



students on a numeric scale from 1 to 6 for qualities like “personality,” “humor,” and “grit.”

Ok, now you might be wondering... *how in the world can they evaluate a student’s “grit” or “personality” from an application?* Well, the answer is that they don’t purely rely on individual metrics such as your GPA or test scores. Instead, they’re looking for the overall “story” that your application tells.

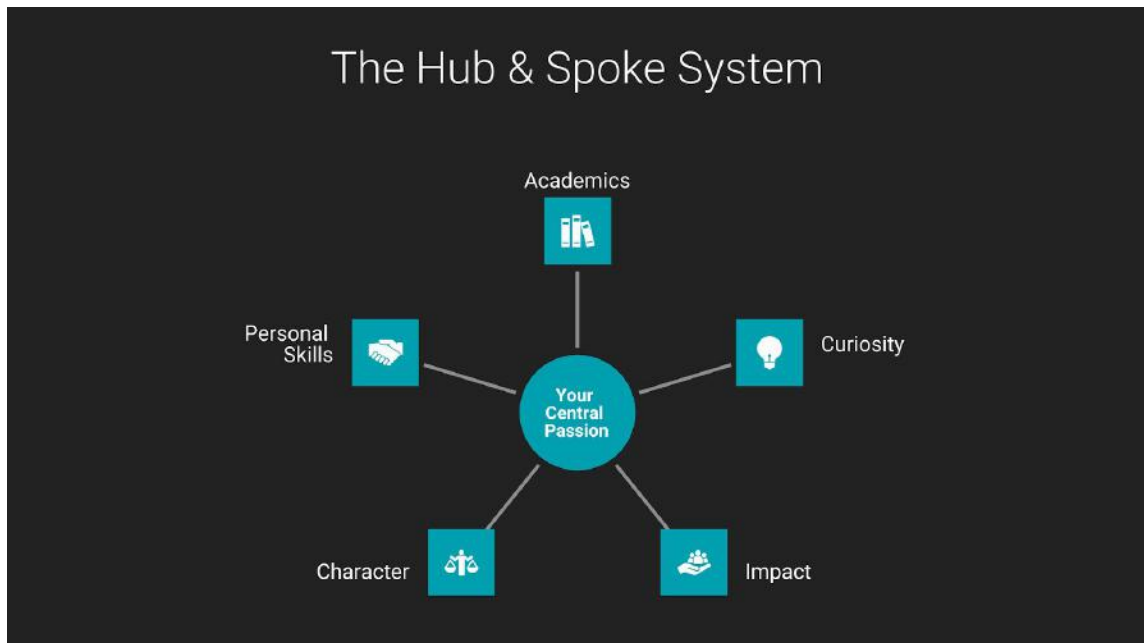
If you’ve seen any of our other materials, you’ll know what we recommend students to develop a **Hub & Spoke Application**. A Hub & Spoke Application is NOT about checking off a laundry list of items, such as GPAs, SATs, recommendations, essays, etc. While each of those are important *individual inputs* into the equation, they don’t tell the big picture by themselves.

Successful admission to the top schools require more than a list of credentials. You need to tell your **unique story** in order to truly stand out. Remember, many Ivy League schools will literally score applicants on their “personal skills” or “character,” neither of which is a direct input into the application.

Therefore, a *Hub & Spoke Application* demonstrates each of the following 5 core traits:

1. **Academics** - can this student handle the academic challenges at our college?
2. **Intellectual Curiosity** - does this student have a genuine love of learning?
3. **Impact** - will this student make a positive impact on his or her peers?
4. **Character** - can this student handle challenges and adversity?
5. **Personal Skills** - will this student be a good fit for our community?

Each of these “spokes” will also support a student’s “**central passion**,” which lies at the hub of the system. We’ll discuss this in more detail later. At a high-level, this system allows the student to focus on what makes them excited, avoid becoming another “cookie-cutter” candidate who looks identical on paper, and show the college why they should accept YOU in particular.



As a starting point, these are five tips you should keep in mind throughout the process.

#1 - Build your application around a “central passion.”

For many students, this will be their intended major in college (but it doesn't have to be). You're also not locked into your choice for the next 8 years. Think of your central passion as a lighthouse that will help you navigate in the right direction (e.g. when picking courses or prioritizing activities). We will discuss this in more detail in the next question, *“If you could pick one thing for students to focus on, what would it be?”*

#2 - Start planning ahead as early as possible.

Starting early has two major benefits. First, it will reduce and spread out the stress of college applications. We will go into the stress aspect in more detail inside [Chapter 2. Managing Stress](#). The second major benefit is that you'll be able to get a headstart on long-term activities that align with your central passion. We'll revisit this topic in [Chapter 4. Activities](#).



#3 - Do not tunnel-vision on one part of the application.

Yes, grades are important. Yes, standardized tests are important. And yes, you'll ideally want to knock them out of the park. But we've seen too many students tunnel vision on one element of the application.

For example, we've seen students take the SATs over and over again just to make marginal improvements to their scores. Instead, they could have better spent that time on pursuing leadership positions in their activities, forming better relationships with their teachers (for stronger recommendations), or brainstorming ideas for giving back to the community. Remember, it's a holistic application.

#4 - Don't try to win every battle.

This is the other side of the coin to #3. Many students think that a "holistic" application means that it needs to be "perfect." That's simply not the case. Trying to be "perfect" at everything can lead to more anxiety, as well as students being spread too thin. Instead, a "holistic" application simply means that each piece of the application works harmoniously to tell a cohesive story. For example, an aspiring doctor should definitely be prioritizing getting higher grades in relevant classes (e.g. Bio) versus electives.

#5 - Remember that it's never too late to improve your admissions outcomes.

Look, not every student will have the foundation by senior year to get into an Ivy League. It would be misleading to say otherwise. However, every student still have the potential to improve admissions outcomes, whether it's through making a big push for leadership positions in student clubs, taking an SAT II to fill in a gap, or writing a better essay that aligns with your central passion.

We'll get into more specifics throughout the rest of this FAQ, but if you keep these 5 tips in mind throughout the process, then you'll already be off to a great start.



1.2 If you could pick one thing for students to focus on, what would it be?

We'll give a high-level strategic answer and a tactical answer to this question.

From a **strategic** point of view, the best thing for students to do is to pick a single “central passion” to build their application around. This will make the entire application more cohesive, with each spoke of the wheel working in unison to support that central story (see the previous question).

For most students, your “central passion” will probably be your intended major in college, but it doesn't have to be. You're NOT locked into it because most universities allow you to change your major fairly easily.

Having this strategic “central passion” has many benefits:

1. It helps you prioritize the right courses and activities.
2. It makes your entire application cohesive, instead of appearing like another “manufactured” cookie-cutter application.
3. It helps make a more **memorable** impression on admissions officers. What's easier to remember: “*Jane, who has a 3.2 GPA average, 1410 SATs, and a hodgepodge of school activities*” or “*Jane, the future diplomat who started the International Relations club at her school and became VP of Model UN?*”

Building an application around your central passion means choosing activities, classes, summer programs, optional standardized tests (e.g. SAT IIs), and/or essay topics that build toward that central, focused story.

From a **tactical** point of view, it will vary depending on the student. However, from our experience, one of the biggest points of leverage is the **Student Activity**.

Having a single “**showstopper activity**” that's related to the student's central passion can really move the needle. Not only are they impressive in their own right, but they also have great 2nd-order consequences. For example, they provide opportunities for recommendations and offer topics for essays.



Examples include:

Central passion: **Sports x Statistics**

Showstopper activity: Start a blog that covers the NFL/NBA from an analytical perspective, perhaps even going into fantasy sports.

Central passion: **Computer Science**

Showstopper activity: Start a “programming club” at the local library and teach youth/elderly/underprivileged kids/etc how to program.

Central passion: **Literature**

Showstopper activity: Write a collection of short stories and self-publish it on Amazon.

As you can see, a showstopper activity does not need to be out-of-this-world impressive or absurdly expensive / time-consuming. It just needs to support your central passion in an interesting way that shows genuine intellectual curiosity and impact.



1.3 How much do GPA and test scores affect admissions outcomes?

Colleges have ideal ranges that they'd like to keep GPA and test scores within. This is because they need to disclose average scores from admitted students. Thus, higher scores contribute to the “academic rigor” ranking of the school.

However, keep in mind that top schools will still consider the application holistically. High GPA and test scores are neither sufficient by themselves nor *always* necessary.

Yes, you should try your best in your classes and on standardized tests. You ideally want them to be your *advantages* instead of *disadvantages*... but your overall **application strategy** should always be to emphasize your strengths instead of dwelling on weaknesses.

For example, outstanding activities, recommendations, essays, and leadership roles can make up for otherwise “below-the-range” GPAs and test scores. It's not uncommon for top schools to accept students who excel in arts, culture, entrepreneurship, writing, music, sports, community impact, etc... even when their grades are on the low side.

At the end of the day, top schools want to accept students whom they believe will succeed in college, and GPA/test scores are only one piece of the puzzle.



1.4 If a student doesn't yet know what they want to do, how should they pick classes, activities, colleges, etc?

We recommend to *always* start by identifying that strategic “central passion” to build your application around.

Remember, you're not locked into your chosen central passion, and it doesn't need to define everything that you do. It's simply a strategic choice that serves as a unifying force.

If you have no idea what that central passion would be, simply choose your best subject in school for the time being. Choosing your best subject as your central passion is an easy way to ensure that your Hub & Spoke already makes sense from an academic point of view, since schools will see that you're excelling in that subject.



1.5 Does a student’s “central passion” need to align with their intended major in college?

No, but it can definitely help. If your central passion aligns with your intended major, you’ll have more specifics to write about in your essays for why you’re applying to that school.

In general, if you don’t know what else to pick, you can pick your strongest subject in school as your central passion. That being said, your central passion could also be out-of-the-box (e.g. entrepreneurship), not directly related to school (e.g. caring for the environment) ,or based on the future career you’d like to pursue.

Don’t overthink it—simply pick one (for now) as a guiding force for your holistic application.



1.6 Are admissions criteria different for students at public vs. private schools? / Are students competing against others from the same school?

High schools operate differently. A small private high school may be more rigorous and stricter with grading than a metropolitan public school. Admission officers do take into account the varying levels of intensity of high schools across the U.S.

When admissions officers receive a student's application, they'll also receive a **“school report.”** This report will have statistics and information about the candidate's high school. It gives admissions officers an idea of the high school's difficulty level.

This report also provides a snapshot of the courses available at the high school. It gives admissions officers an idea of how to evaluate a candidate in case an underfunded school offers fewer APs than a better funded school. Of course, colleges also have an internal system that standardizes different GPA scales.

In other words, **colleges cross-calibrate candidates by accounting for differences between high schools.**

Now, that raises the question: do students compete against others from the same high school? Well, colleges publicly state that they do NOT have quotas on students from the same high school. However, from our experience, we do notice that **colleges tend to have soft targets or quotas based on geographic location to ensure geographic diversity.**

So while student A might not be competing head-to-head with student B from the same high school, they might be competing against each other at a state level.

To understand the trends at your school, you can **look at the historical average acceptance rates from your high school to your target college.** This info is built into popular portals like Naviance. Check if your school has access to it. If it is not publicly available to you yet, you can ask your counselor how many students got accepted into a given college over the past several years.



CH 2. MANAGING STRESS

2.1 How can we prepare for college admissions while managing stress and anxiety?

We completely empathize with students and parents asking this question.

Stress, anxiety, and mental health are extremely important issues. Nobody should take these concerns lightly, and we strongly encourage all families to openly discuss these concerns.

Here are a few recommendations for managing stress and anxiety during the college admissions process... especially if the student is aiming for a top university.

#1 - Start early.

We've found that the #1 source of stress for most students is realizing *too late* that they are behind on their preparation. As a result, they scramble to take their SATs, pull up their grades, squeeze in college visits, and join school activities... all while dealing with their standard course load and activities.

- Fact: Students WILL need to take the SAT/ACT for college applications.
- Fact: Students WILL need to list their activities, including any leadership positions, on their applications.
- Fact: Students WILL need to prepare a variety of application inputs (e.g. recommendations, essays, etc.) by their senior year fall.

So why not start on these things earlier?

For example:



Less Stress

Spreading SAT/ACT preparation over 9th grade summer, at a leisurely pace, before high school really picks up. If you're not satisfied with the score, you still have several more years of buffer space.

Starting an activity in 8th or 9th grade so that you can smoothly and naturally transition into leadership positions.

Having an overall strategy around your central passion that will help you prioritize courses and activities.

More Stress

Waiting until 11th grade to cram in SAT/ACT studying while dealing with a heavier course load. If you're not satisfied with the score, then you need to really make sacrifices in order to retake the test.

Scrambling last minute to join more activities to "beef up" your resume. It will also be more difficult to secure leadership roles.

Being spread too thin because you're not sure what's important so you try to be perfect at everything.

A hundred pounds of pressure can rest very comfortably when spread out across a mattress... but will pierce the skin if concentrated into the size of a single pin. Similarly, the college admissions process does not need to be stressful if you can start early and spread out the preparation.

#2 - Don't aim for "perfection."

Don't try to be "perfect" in every single part of the application. Instead, aim for a cohesive holistic story surrounding your central passion. A "holistic" application simply means that each piece of the application works harmoniously to tell a cohesive story.

As we discussed earlier, the Hub & Spoke application is all about making sure your "inputs" (e.g. resume, essays, courses, activities, etc.) highlight the five core decision



criteria (academics, curiosity, impact, character, and personal skills) and tie each one back to your central passion.

This allows the student to be more memorable and come across as fully 3-dimensional, instead of just a list of credentials on paper.

A side benefit to using this approach is that you'll be able to pick your battles and prioritize the things that are most important for *your* story, instead of trying to be perfect at everything.

#3 - Remember that college is just one step in the journey.

College is not the be all end all. Yes, college is about setting you up for the future, but it shouldn't be viewed as the final destination. You can be successful and happy in life without going to an elite college.

While it may come as a surprise that we would say this (as a college admissions company), **the reality is that students live happier lives, perform better in school, AND do better overall during the college admissions process when they are NOT 100% fixated on the outcome.**

It's the same idea as being a practice star but "choking" during the game, or playing beautifully during rehearsal, only to run into "stagefright" on performance night. Complete fixation on the "stakes" is counter-productive and only leads to more anxiety.

Instead, we recommend families taking their college visits as early as possible to begin the discussion of what the student enjoys doing and wants to continue doing. Don't frame it as "you need to get into XYZ school" but rather "XYZ school provides these great opportunities for you."



2.2 When should we start preparing for college admissions? / Is it too early to start?

A common misconception is that starting to prepare for college admissions earlier leads to more stress and a less fulfilling high school experience. We've found the opposite to be true.

When students start preparing earlier, they spread out the stress of preparing for college, and they reduce it overall because they'll feel more confident and better prepared.

Instead of a high-anxiety "crunch time" in junior and senior year, those who start earlier will have already built up very strong profiles. They can do so with only a couple hours of strategic effort every week.

This effort really adds up over time, and students who prepare early will be at a big advantage come senior fall. Plus, by laying the foundation earlier, students will have more free time to fully enjoy their high school experience.

See the next question for suggestions on how to get an early head start.



2.3 What can we do to get an early head start?

There are five things we recommend families do to get an early head start.

#1 - Learn more about the overall admissions process, important deadlines, and requirements.

For example, some families know that summer activities are very important for college admissions, but many families DON'T know that the most competitive/impressive summer programs have application deadlines as early as the prior winter! Planning ahead helps you stay on top of these milestones.

#2 - Explore a variety of potential central passions and try to pick one before the start of high school.

See the question, *[“If you could pick one thing for students to focus on, what would it be?”](#)* for more context about central passions. When you start preparing early, you have the luxury of being able to explore multiple options and decide on one later.

#3 - Start a *creative* activity that’s related to your central passion and has the potential to grow into a long-term “showstopper activity.”

A great example of this would be to start a podcast around your central passion and record one episode every month. Not only will this give the student much more exposure into the topic, but it will also allow them to build up an impressive body of work over the long run.

#4 - Develop good study skills.

Many high schools don't really help students develop good study skills. They just give them information and expect the students to retain it. But studying is a real skill that can be improved fairly easily. There are many different books and systems out there, and



each system might work better for different types of learners. Our recommendation is to start experimenting early, while the stakes are not as high.

#5 - Practice test-taking skills.

Many students end up blind-sided by standardized tests because the skills for standardized test-taking are different from those needed to succeed in school.

It's not about learning how to "game the system" nor how to "hack it." Rather, it's about becoming familiar with the format, pacing, and time pressures that would otherwise cause a normally smart student to perform poorly on the test.

A great way to practice for these AND immediately improve your college application is to take some of your SAT II Subject Tests as early as 9th/10th grade.

(Bonus) If possible, try to visit university campuses earlier in the process.

It can just be a casual visit that's tagged onto a family trip! We've found that many students become more inspired and motivated after getting the chance to walk on campus and see what they have to look forward to.



2.4 What can I do as a parent to help my child? / How can I motivate my child more? / How do I know what's best for my child?

First, it's important to understand what it takes to get into a top university, including major deadlines and milestones throughout high school. In many high schools, college counselors don't start working with students until 11th grade or so, but as we've already explained, starting early will give you a huge advantage while reducing stress and anxiety. We've covered these topics earlier in this chapter.

Second, it's important to help the student identify a central passion as early as possible in the process. That does NOT mean *everything* they do needs to be aligned with that central passion. They can still do other activities that they enjoy. However, by arriving at a central passion and gradually building around that, you'll help the student build a "safety net" come application time.

Finally, the question of motivation comes back to identifying that central passion. Remember, college is not the ultimate destination. College will provide resources, opportunities, and an incredible circle of peers that will become the student's lifelong friends. So instead of fixating on "getting better test scores," we recommend focusing on connecting those dots for the student and showing them the link between their future opportunities and the work they do right now.



2.5 How do we know if we've done enough?

Think of preparing for college applications preparing for a major sports championship game.

There are a myriad of factors that go into the preparation process. On one hand, you definitely need to take preparation seriously and make your best effort if you want to win the game. But on the other hand, you also need sufficient time to rest and recover, or else you'll be exhausted by the time the match rolls around.

Just remember that the *preparation process* itself is not the end goal. Instead, winning the championship is the end goal, and you have a **finite amount of time** to prepare for it. Therefore, when you're preparing for the championship, there's no official "end point" until the actual match.

Now, that doesn't mean you go hit the gym for 8 hours straight or run laps on the practice field until you collapse. It simply means that you should have an integrated schedule that balances practice, rest, and nutrition.

Similarly, in the college application process, there isn't an official "end point" until the application itself. You'll know if you've "won the match" depending on the results. And there's no one moment that marks the end of when you're unable to improve your outcomes anymore.

That being said, just like preparing for a championship match, it doesn't mean that's the only thing you should think about. It comes down to balancing school work, extracurricular activities, personal & family time, and prioritizing what's important to you.

Therefore, a better framework of thinking about preparing for college application is to **integrate** a plan on how to improve your holistic application into your regular schedule. Start as early as you can, and allow your body of work to accumulate over time. This way, it's less of a stressful mindset to "get it all done last minute before the deadline" or "how good is good enough."



CH 3. PAYING FOR COLLEGE

3.1 How to do we finance and pay for college?

First, it's important to dispel the common misconception that the only way to pay for college is either through receiving a lot of financial aid from the school or paying for everything yourself.

When a student gets into one of their top choice colleges, they should not turn down the acceptance before exploring all the financing avenues available to them. There are a plethora of ways to finance college, and you can mix and match them in order to make college much more affordable.

Let's discuss 3 different avenues for financing college.

1. **Grants.** These are funds you receive that you don't have to repay. To find out your eligibility for grants, you have to fill out a form called the FAFSA (Free Application for Federal Student Aid), which is due around the same time as college applications. For most families, the Federal Pell Grants will award a few thousand dollars per year, depending on financial need, cost of attendance, full or part time status, and whether you will be attending the full academic year. There are additional grants available to students pursuing different career paths and for families who have served in the military.
2. **Loans.** These can be categorized into two: federal student loans and private student loans. It's generally a good idea to exhaust federal loans offered before taking on private student loans, as federal loans allow you to delay payment until you graduate, have a fixed and lower interest rate, and allow the interests you pay on the loan to be tax deductible.
3. **Scholarships.** This is something most families are not taking full advantage of. There are scholarships at different levels that you can pursue: at the high school level, at the state grant agency level, at the college level, at companies and foundations where the parents work, at the community and organization level,



and at national level (such as online scholarship engines). Generally, scholarships at a more local level are more attainable. For example, getting awarded a \$5,000 scholarship from the local church is more attainable than getting the national Ayn Rand essays scholarship.

Just like with college admissions preparations, starting early in researching how to pay for college will yield better results than waiting last minute.

Here are a few things you can do immediate:

1. Find out your Estimated Family Contribution (EFC) score. This is an index score that colleges will use to determine how much financial aid you will receive. You can work backwards from this score to predict how much financial aid the college will likely offer you, and plan to fill out the rest of the need with scholarships, grants, and loans. The EFC equation changes every year, and you can find an EFC calculator here ([FAFSA](#)) or with a quick Google search.
2. Just like you should be setting a timeline for the college application process, you should block out time with an accountant to make sure your FAFSA form and CSS profile (which is essentially another aid form, but to individual colleges) are completed accurately and on time.
3. Create a list of local scholarship opportunities. Here are a few examples:
 - a. High schools often have scholarship opportunities. You should talk to your guidance counselor about eligibility.
 - b. Communities you belong to. Churches, temples, athletic groups, clubs outside of school, ethnicity-based or cultural group, etc.
 - c. Local businesses and organizations, including parents' place of work.



3.2 How do can students earn merit-based or special situation scholarships?

First, let's cover the three main ways that you can get direct merit based scholarships from colleges.

1. Some colleges provide opportunities to apply to selective merit scholarships within their school (e.g. the Jefferson Scholarship at the University of Virginia). Students can apply by writing additional essays and submitting additional qualifications to the school with their college application.
2. When a student applies and gets accepted to a school that they are overqualified for, the school may- on a case by case basis- provide a merit scholarship to entice the student to accept its offer over the acceptance of a different school. Colleges do this to move up the national academic ranking (which is often done via reporting of the new class of students' SAT/ACT scores, GPA, and class ranking) and boast a higher quality of students. However, in order to receive this kind of merit scholarship incentive, the student generally needs to show dedicated interest in actually attending the school. This usually come in the form of applying early to the school.
3. When a student has National Merit Semifinalist / National Merit Finalist status and has a GPA above a certain threshold (depending on the school), they can be eligible at a long list of schools willing to give very generous scholarships. For example, the University of Southern California (USC) gives half off tuition to National Merit Finalists accepted into the school.

We recommend a three-pronged approach to acquire merit based scholarships.

1. Prepare early and do your research on what additional scholarships are available for the colleges on your list. For certain schools, simply applying early is enough. For others, you'll need to provide extra essays and documentation through a different application portal. The key is to know which school has additional scholarships available (via a quick Google search), and their requirements.
2. Incorporate safety schools into your college list. Ivies are unlikely to provide you merit scholarships to incentivize you to attend; however, a mid tier school that



you're happy with but are slightly overqualified for may provide you a hefty scholarship bonus to incentivize you. Having safety schools on your list not only provides a safety net, but also increases your overall chance of gaining merit scholarships.

3. Prep for the standardized tests early, if you haven't taken them yet. Most students get caught off guard by the PSAT. It's mandatory to take it in October of junior year. Although colleges won't actually see your PSAT score, the PSAT can have large ramifications for scholarships because it's what you use to qualify for National Merit. So the earlier you start to prepare, the better. The great news is that you can just prepare for the SAT or ACT directly, as the PSAT is a shorter and easier version of the SAT, and the testing strategies transfer over well from the PSAT to SAT, and vice versa.



3.3 Does requesting financial aid affect your chances of getting admitted to a school? / Is it better on FAFSA to show you that have less money or enough to pay?

There's no definitive answer for this across the board. The answer depends on the level of funding the school has, the current economic climate, the performance of the university managed fund in the market, and a myriad of other factors that change from year to year. Colleges also tend to provide very PC answers for public image reasons.

However, we think it's important to provide a few general rules of thumb:

1. If a school is "need blind admission", then your request for financial aid should not affect your chances of getting admitted to the school. Need blind admission means the school has a policy of not considering an applicant's financial situation when deciding admission.
2. If a school is a safety or target, where you are safely within the range of students accepted in terms of application quality, you should not worry about your request for financial aid affecting your chances of getting admitted to a school.
3. However, if you're an "edge" case (usually happens in reach schools)- meaning you're right on the border of being accepted or denied- it may help to need less financial aid ONLY if the college is not as well funded or more cautious about spending its financial aid fund this year. For colleges that are historically well funded and have strong financial health, you do not need to worry about this.



CH 4. ACTIVITIES

4.1 Can strong outside-of-school activities make up for weak in-school activities?

Yes, with certain nuances. Admissions officers understand that not all high schools will have all of the offerings that students want. Strong out-of-school activities can be just as strong, or even stronger than in-school activities, provided they align with your central passion.

There are two nuances to be aware of, however:

#1 - Interpersonal Skills

Do your out-of-school activities have a social or community aspect to them? Are you part of a team or organization? Schools care about admitting students with social skills who are able to integrate well with the rest of the incoming class.

If you don't have many in-school activities, be sure your out-of-school activities show this. (As a side note, this point is especially important for home-schooled students.)

#2 - Availability

Are you able to do something similar in your school, provided you take the initiative to start a club about it?

For example, let's say your school doesn't have an astronomy club, but you love the activity and even take classes on it at a local college. In this case, why not start an astronomy club at your school? This has the double benefit of providing you a leadership position right off the bat.



4.2 Should students do a summer program at the college they want to attend?

A student should never do a summer program at the college they want to attend **solely** on the basis that he/she thinks that this will increase the chance of acceptance to that school.

Most summer programs (e.g. “3 Days Science Camp at XYZ college!”) are hosted by 3rd parties unrelated to the university. In these scenarios, the university simply rents out the dorms, classrooms, and lecture halls to 3rd party programs to make use of unused real estate during the summer. It is easy to fall prey to marketing tactics that these 3rd parties use to market themselves as being associated with the university.

Of the summer programs that are indeed hosted by the university (e.g. summer school at XYZ university, taught by that university’s professors), note that the team looking at your application for that summer program is different than the admission officers actually looking at your college application. Again, the location of the program does not add any meaningful points to your application.

A student should do a summer program at the college they want to attend if they want to get a feeling of what it would be like to live on the campus and explore the university at a deeper level. They can then use vivid examples of how they’ve fallen in love with the campus in their supplemental essays to the college in the actual application (this is especially effectively for questions like “Why XYZ college?”).

The bottom line is this: college admission officers care about **what** you gained from the program, rather than **where** (the exception being highly selective and prestigious summer programs, which we will touch on later).

It is better to do a meaningful summer activity elsewhere than to go to a summer program located in a college purely because you think it will increase the chance of acceptance to that school.



4.3 How important are extracurricular activities?

Let's think about the role of activities *from the perspective of an admissions officer at your dream school*.

There are three main considerations.

The first consideration is **Character**. In college, most students have more freedom than they've ever had at this point in their lives. Some students thrive. Others sink. Well, it's no surprise that colleges want to bring in students who they feel can thrive. Therefore, admissions officers are looking for applicants to show discipline, commitment, and the ability to manage their own time.

The second consideration is **Community**. An admissions officer is not assessing each student in a vacuum. They are building a community within the college by bringing in an entire class of students. Therefore, they want to accept students who they believe will make a positive impact on their peers.

The third consideration is **Network**. When you get accepted by a college, they're not just agreeing to teach you for 4 years. It's much more than that. They are welcoming you into their lifelong alumni network, which includes all of the connections, resources, and opportunities that it brings.

In other words, you will become a representative of that university for the rest of your life. This is why you hear about a lot of straight-A students who actually get rejected by top schools despite looking very strong paper. It's because it's not enough to just be good at school. Top universities want to admit students who are also intellectually curious, with their own dreams, passions, and aspirations.

So if an admissions officer is considering a student's **character**, the overall **community**, and even the entire university's **network**, then how do you think they can evaluate these things? Just by looking at a student's GPA or SAT scores? Of course not. They need to look at essays, recommendations, and... you guessed it... extracurricular activities.

Therefore, building strong extracurricular activities is one of the most essential pieces of getting accepted into a great college. The key is to be aware of these important factors at play and begin to strategically prepare for them as early as possible.



4.4 Which types of extracurricular activities will improve my chances of getting into a top university?

The best extracurricular activities display **at least one** of the following traits:

1. **Longevity:** How committed you are to an activity. Colleges don't want to see students blindly stuffing their resumes with activities. They want to see long-term commitment and dedication. This reflects a student's character and makes the admissions officer more confident that the student can thrive in a college environment.
2. **Leadership:** Do you hold any high-level positions? Are you willing and eager to push initiatives forward? Have you started a club, a business, or a non-profit? In other words, they want to see if you can step up and make a positive impact on the community around you.
3. **Passion:** This will be the cohesiveness within your application. Essentially, they care about how meaningful an activity is to your long-term goals and/or declared major. This is a point that many students miss. While they may be passionate about their activities, they don't figure out how to fully align the two within their applications.

Having these types of activities on your resume will help increase the quality of your application. Again, the earlier you can start to focus on building these types of extracurricular activities, the better.



4.5 Which of my activities should I include on the application? / Do they all need to align with my central passion?

You'll want to have a mix of activities on the application that showcase your commitment, your leadership skills, and your passion.

On the actual Common App application (widely used by colleges in the U.S.), you will have 10 slots to fill in the Activities section. If you have more than 10 activities, a quick rule of thumb is to first put the ones that check the most boxes of the three traits:

1. Longevity
2. Leadership
3. Passion

For example, for a candidate with a central passion in History, they should prioritize putting down the National History Day activity that they've done for the past 4 years over the Math Team they've joined in junior year. This is because National History Day relates to their central passion of history AND shows their commitment through longevity.



4.6 How important is volunteering or starting a nonprofit?

Starting a non-profit and volunteering both show that the student is making a positive impact in their community. This is important, as we mentioned before, because an admissions officer is not assessing each student in a vacuum. They are building a ***community within the college*** by bringing in an entire class of students. Therefore, they want to accept students who they believe will make a positive impact on their peers.

A trap that many families fall into, however, is putting too much emphasis on those one-off volunteering activities, or starting a nonprofit without following through to actually grow the nonprofit.

This is why ***having longevity in volunteering and nonprofits is especially important***. For example, volunteering on a one-off basis at the local soup kitchen is not as impactful as teaching the elderly how to use the computer *every weekend* at a local library.

If you do not think you can commit to your volunteering activity or your nonprofit, then it is typically more valuable to spend your time improving other parts of your application.



4.7 How important are summer activities?

Summer activities are extremely important for the following reasons:

1. Colleges want to know **how you've been spending your time**. They want to take a peek into your life and get to know you- and your summer is the perfect way for them to peek in.
2. How you spend your time dictates what your priorities are and who you are as a person. At the end of the day, you'll have even **more freedom and choice in college**, so admissions officers want to know that you can thrive in that kind of environment.
3. Summertime is a great time period to really **go deep on activities related to your central passion**, boosting your overall resume strength. Furthermore, many powerful recommendations can come from summer activities!

Extracurricular activities are extremely important in the application. And within extracurricular activities, strong summer activities can really make the candidate stand out from the rest.

We'll cover specific types of activities and strategies in the next question.



4.8 Which types of summer activities are the most “impressive” to colleges?

Most summer activities can be placed into 4 categories:

1. **Highly Competitive Summer Programs**, where the programs are known to only accept top high school students. These are generally marked by free costs to attend or even stipends, low acceptance rates, and a long application process. These programs serve as signals to colleges that the attendee is someone who is highly motivated, and has been accepted to an extremely competitive program.
2. **“Internships, Work, & Personal Project”**, where the student needs to take some self initiative to find and develop these endeavors. These are generally related and relevant to their overall story.
3. **“The Slightly More Selective Summer Program at XYZ School”**, where the university is actually involved and puts its own resources to run the program. You can usually identify these by the faculty that run the program.
4. **“The Program at XYZ School”**, with strong marketing but weak content and faculty involvement. These are marked by high price tags, weak faculty, and an extremely easy or nonexistent application process.

The pre-college programs (Category 3 & 4) may be useful in helping a student discover their career interests and glimpse into potential paths. However, in terms of improving their college application, they don’t have much effect in most cases.

This is because most summer programs do not require or ask much of the student- the student will simply show up and absorb new experiences. However, the student won’t meaningfully contribute to anything. In other words, the summer program becomes another passive class that the student takes.

A better strategy would be to apply to a competitive summer program that has significantly lower acceptance rate and signals to colleges a certain level of competence in a given subject (**Category 1**) OR doing some sort of internship related to the central passion/intended major (**Category 2**). In these cases, the student takes an active role in participating in the internship or contributing to a project/research at the selective



programs. Furthermore, the student gains hands-on experience and can potentially receive a glowing recommendation from an internship.

We recommend taking summer activities very seriously. In fact, we suggest viewing the process to land summer activities as a mini practice run for college applications.

1. Think of the highly competitive summer programs as **“Reaches”**. Find a few of these “reaches” that you’re interested in and apply, with the understanding that the acceptance rates are low.
2. Think of internships, work opportunities, and your own projects related to your central passion as **“Targets”**. Really spend time to reach out to your community and show self initiative in pursuing these endeavors. Whether it’s sending emails to local professors for an opportunity to do research, or asking for a warm referral to a startup nearby, the more effort you put in, the more likely you are to land that internship / work opportunity.
3. Think of summer programs at XYZ school as **“Safeties”**. These have such high acceptance rates that you’re essentially guaranteed to get in. Have these as last resorts for your summer, and know that you can still make the best out of it by exploring your career interests, network with professors, and even squeeze in a college trip there.



CH 5. ACADEMICS

5.1 How important are AP classes? / Do top colleges expect to see only AP classes?

Taking AP classes (and, along the same vein, the IB program) serve as a signal to colleges that you are challenging yourself academically and that you're pursuing a rigorous course load. This shows both academic ability and drive.

As you can imagine, most applicants to top colleges are indeed loading up on APs whenever possible. Top colleges don't expect to see *all* APs throughout high school, but they certainly expect to see a ramp up in intensity of your courses, especially towards junior and senior year.

But remember- top colleges look at more than just courses taken; the rigor of the courses is just one part of the equation in our Hub & Spoke system.

A rule of thumb is to start with the AP / more difficult class if it is available to you. You can always switch to an easier class during the beginning of the school year. Most schools have a grace period of allowing you to drop a class without it showing up on your transcript. Check with your guidance counselor on your school's policy.



5.2 If my school doesn't offer a particular AP class, can I study for the AP test on my own?

You can technically study for and take the AP test without enrolling in an AP class.

However, if you want to showcase your competence in a subject, a more efficient way of doing so would be to take a **SAT Subject Test (SAT II)** in that subject. Plus, you have more “shots” to get a great score with SAT Subject Test, which are available several times throughout the year, than with AP tests, which are offered in May.

If you want to showcase your ability and interest in that subject because it is related to your central passion, you can instead spend that time developing another meaningful activity related to your central passion, or doubling down on one.

Remember, colleges will receive a school report that details the courses available at your high school, so they will understand if you don't have a specific AP on your resume.



5.3 Is it better to take AP classes and get a B or regular classes and get an A?

In general, you want to balance 2 factors when selecting courses:

- The effect a class has on your GPA: you want to ensure that your grades won't drop off a cliff because you're taking an extremely challenging class with a tough teacher.
- The challenge level of your schedule: you want your transcript to show that you're challenging yourself and not just settling for the easy classes.

Here are three guidelines:

1. Maintain 4 years of the core subjects unless you've reached the highest level already.
2. Pick classes that are relevant to your central passion, if given the chance.
3. Pick the harder choice to start. If you're in over your head or if the teacher seems to be especially strict, then you can always drop to an easier class. Most high schools have a grace period of allowing you to drop a class without it showing up on your transcript. Check with your guidance counselor on their policy.

A good rule of thumb is that if the advanced course would make you drop more than half a grade compared to the regular course, or if your overall GPA needs to be raised significantly, you should opt for the regular class.

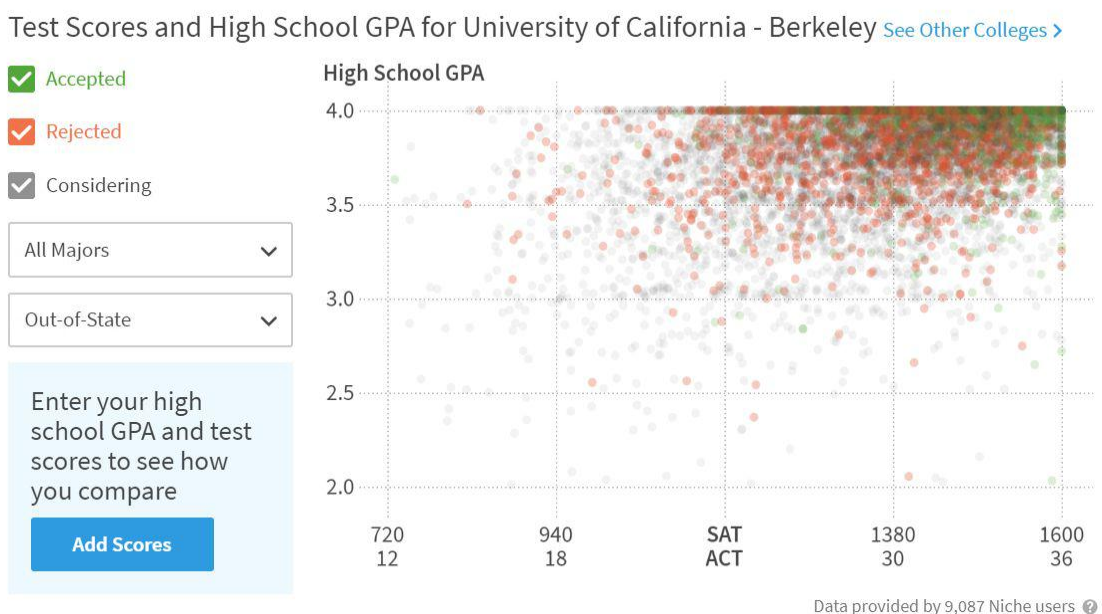


5.4 What does my GPA need to be to get into a top college / Ivy League / UC's / <insert school here>?

Most colleges don't have hard GPA cutoffs because they understand that high schools vary in difficulty. However, colleges do have ranges that they'd like to keep GPAs and test scores within. Colleges need to report average scores, so higher scores will contribute to the "academic rigor" ranking of the school.

One resource we recommend is [Niche.com](https://niche.com). You can see graphs of the stats from students who were accepted or denied at your target school.

For example, for UC Berkeley, here is a graph of the admissions decisions for out-of-state students with varying GPAs (on a 4.0 scale) and SAT / ACT scores.



And here is a graph of the admissions decisions for in-state students with varying GPA (on a 4.0 scale) and SAT / ACT scores.



Test Scores and High School GPA for University of California - Berkeley [See Other Colleges >](#)

☒ Accepted

☒ Rejected

☒ Considering

All Majors



In-State



Enter your high school GPA and test scores to see how you compare

Add Scores

High School GPA

4.0

3.5

3.0

2.5

2.0

720

12

940

18

SAT
ACT

1380

30

1600

36

Data provided by 10,790 Niche users

As you can see, even though there are target GPA ranges, many scores also fall out of those ranges. Remember, the application is considered holistically. High GPA and test scores are neither sufficient nor always necessary.

Yes, you should try to do as well as you can in your classes and on standardized tests, but your overall application strategy should always be to emphasize your strengths instead of dwelling on weaknesses.

Outstanding activities, recommendations, essays, and leadership roles can definitely make up for otherwise “below-the-range” GPAs and test scores. Top schools want to accept students whom they believe will succeed in college, and GPA/test scores are only one piece of the puzzle.



5.5 Can I still get into an Ivy League school with more than one B?

Yes. Remember, colleges are looking at your application holistically. The Bs you have—along with the rigor of your courses, the difficulty of your high school, and other factors—are just one part of the evaluation process.

While top candidates applying to the Ivies tend to have very high GPAs, you can still shine through by having stronger extracurricular activities that showcase your character, better recommendations from teachers who vouch for your impact and curiosity, and more interesting essays that showcase your personal skills.

Essentially, you have the rest of the Hub & Spoke System on your side to help increase your chances of being accepted to an Ivy League school. No need to panic.



5.6 How does grade inflation play into the equation? / What if the student goes to a very competitive high school and thus has lower grades?

Refer to [1.6 - Are admissions criteria different for students at public vs. private schools? / Are students competing against others from the same school?](#)



5.7 Does an upward sloping GPA trend help?

Yes. While not as ideal as consistently high grades throughout high school, admissions officers will definitely notice upward sloping trends. Colleges understand that there are a multitude of factors that can affect a student's academic scores, and an upward trending GPA displays grit and adaptability.

It's also important to note that students will have an opportunity to provide an explanation for poor academics. There will be an Additional Information section in the common app, which students can use to provide additional context on poor grades (e.g. family emergency, spread too thin, health issues, etc.). When coupled with an upward sloping GPA, this Additional Information section can be very effective for mitigating the impact of lower grades at the start of high school.



5.8 Do 12th grade classes matter?

Yes. Schools you apply to during the early application cycle will receive a snapshot of your grades up to November, and schools you apply to during the regular application cycle will receive a snapshot of your grades up to January. After January, if your grades drop a full letter grade or more, then you'll be at risk of the college putting you on academic probation, rescinding scholarships, or even rescinding the offer in extreme cases.

Students should:

1. Continue to take challenging courses in senior year.
2. Continue your upward trajectory of grades (or maintaining strong grades).

The bottom line: Max out on challenging courses (as many APs as possible) while maintaining a good GPA.



5.9 How do we handle low grades from important classes?

Low grades from important classes can be remedied in a few ways. Let's go through them.

1. Use a high testing score to showcase your competence in that area. Specifically, take a SAT II Subject Test in that area to show that you do indeed have mastery in that area.
2. Use the Additional Information section of the application to explain away these low grades... whether they're due to family responsibilities, stretching yourself too thin, or interest in other subjects. The key is to show personal growth and lessons learned.
3. Double down to study and prepare in that subject, so that the next year's course in this subject shows an upward trajectory.
4. Finally, if the grade is unusually low, it may be a good idea to explore options to retake a credited version of the class over the summer.



5.10 How do we choose between the AP route, IB program, or pre-college credits?

There are a few factors to consider when deciding between AP, IB, and pre-college credits. Let's go through them.

#1 - Flexibility

APs / pre-college credits allow you to take whichever course you want at an advanced level, while IB programs have a set list of classes and extracurricular requirements that you need to meet. For students who want more flexibility in course selection, AP / pre-college credits would be better.

#2 - Content Standard

Although AP is much more popular than IB, both programs are well recognized by colleges. Furthermore, the AP exams and IB exams serve as standard measuring sticks that universities know well.

However, a pre-college credit course from a local university has a bit more variability in the material covered, the faculty's expertise, and the grading rigor. This makes a pre-college credit course harder to decipher for a college admission officers. In this regard, most students should pick AP or IB.

#3 - Your Personal Goal

These three options have different goals.

- AP is focused on giving you content in a specific subject and testing your knowledge through the AP exam.
- IB puts stronger emphasis on writing and developing your thinking skills; thus, it requires an extended research paper and extracurriculars.
- Pre-college credit courses, for the most part, basically give you credit just for attending the course. Depending on your goal, you should choose among the three accordingly.



CH 6. STANDARDIZED TESTS

6.1 Are tests really optional at “test-optional” schools? / Are subject tests (SAT II’s) optional? / Is there a score that’s “too low” to submit?

One reason some schools became test optional is to even the playing field for students who can’t afford test tutors and other resources. Some officers in those schools view standardized testing as intrinsically flawed, since they feel that the tests gauge how well a student tests, rather than how well a student thinks.

For these schools, test are indeed “really optional.” However, the schools still have data on their historical averages. If your test scores (presumably you’ll still take the test because you’re also applying to other schools that are not test optional) are around that range and/or higher, it may be advantageous for you to submit it as another piece of evidence of your academic ability. If your test score is lower than the average, then you can skip reporting your score.

For SAT Subject Tests, each school’s policy differs.

- Some schools, like Georgetown University, strongly recommend 3 of them.
- Some schools, like the University of Pennsylvania, recommend 2 of them.
- Some schools, like Boston College, only consider them if submitted.
- And many others simply mark them as optional.

It is also important to note that each school’s policy may change year by year.

At its core, a subject test serves to showcase competence in a specific subject. Thus, if you’re able to score highly on a test, it can only help your application, even for schools like Boston College that “only consider them if submitted”. A common score threshold to showcase competence in a subject in the SAT Subject Tests is 700 or above.



6.2 What's the best way to prepare for the SATs or ACTs? / What if we can't hire a private tutor?

We've found that the best way to prepare for SATs / ACTs is to set up a structured preparation regimen where you consistently take practice tests over an extended period of time. In fact, for many students who are self-motivated, this can be even more effective than hiring a tutor.

For context, neither of us ever hired a private tutor. We both relied on low-cost practice test books from the bookstore.

For example, over the summer, you can take a practice test every weekend under live test conditions (i.e. with strict time stops). Then, throughout the week, you can spend 30-60 minutes per day reviewing what you got right (to reinforce what you know) and doing targeted practice on the topics you got wrong. Each weekend provides a checkpoint for your overall progress, along with some much needed practice for the timing and format of the test.



6.3 When should students start preparing for the SATs?

Some schools require you to send all your scores from the SATs if you've taken them multiple times. Therefore, we recommend you to do as many *practice* SATs as possible before taking the real ones that count.

As a rule of thumb, once you've scored above your target score two or three times in a row on the *practice* tests, you'll be ready to register for the real tests.

Therefore, we strongly urge students to start preparing for the SATs as early as possible. Since this is something that you'll eventually need to do the work for no matter what, we strongly recommend knocking this out as soon as possible.



6.4 How important are SAT scores to admissions outcomes? / Can a student still get into an elite school without perfect or near-perfect SAT scores?

Strong test scores are very important, but they are neither necessary nor sufficient. Top universities accept many students who do not have near-perfect test scores, and they also reject plenty of students who scored perfect SAT scores.

Think of it this way: the best schools want to accept the best students. Now, “best student” doesn’t always mean the best test scores. Remember, it’s about the holistic application.

Even so, strong test scores are still a huge help for you. Strong test scores show colleges that you are disciplined and ready to handle the academic challenges.

That being said, you can demonstrate the same traits through your coursework, AP tests, subject tests, essays, and even your activities (because strong activities show that you’re keeping yourself busy in a meaningful way outside of school). So if you have lower test scores, be prepared to make up for them with something else, such as a “showstopper activity” that demonstrates your passion, commitment, and leadership traits.



6.5 How do we make up for poor standardized test scores?

There are several strategies:

1. First, you can try to retake the test. See the next question for criteria on deciding when to retake the test.
2. Second, from an academic perspective, a strong GPA and AP Tests can make up for a poorer SAT/ACT score, as they also demonstrate your ability to handle the academic rigors of college.
3. Finally, strong school and extracurricular activities can also make up for poorer academics in general. Starting a non-profit, taking a big role in student government, attending competitive summer programs, excelling on your sports team, starting a business, and other similarly strong activities can shift the attention away from your weakness (i.e. test scores) and onto your strengths (i.e. leadership, creativity, community impact, etc.).



6.6 Should students who scored <insert score here> retake the SAT / ACT?

Our recommendation for retaking these tests depends on three factors:

#1 - Your target schools' SAT / ACT ranges.

While not the be-all-end-all, you will be at a disadvantage if you scored below the published ranges at your target schools. Even if you scored in the bottom half of the published ranges, you can turn an “acceptable score” into an advantage if you can bump that score into the top half of the published ranges.

#2 - Your practice test scores.

The best way to prepare for standardized tests is to take plenty of practice tests, and you should have a rough baseline of how you expect to score. If you scored more than 30-40 points off (SAT) or more than 1 point off (ACT), you should consider retaking the test, as your poorer performance may have been due to external issues (e.g. time pressure, unfamiliarity with the location, scheduling, etc.).

#3 - How close you are to a “psychological tier.”

The two notable points for the SAT are at 1400 and 1500. Generally, going from 1480 to 1500 has a bigger impact on your outcomes than the same 20 point bump from 1420 to 1440 for example. Therefore, if you are close to a new “tier,” even if off by 20 points, you should consider retaking the test.



6.7 What does the new adversity score really mean and how can it impact students?

The “Adversity Score” is a new score that College Board will add to all SAT scores, viewable by college admissions officers. Based on aggregated data on the socioeconomic levels of the high school and its surrounding neighborhood, each student will receive an Adversity Score that is meant to convey the environment they live and learn.

The underlying reasoning by College Board is that students from higher-income families earn higher scores on average than students from lower-income ones due to the amount of resources available. So they include this new datapoint to allow admissions officers to view a student’s academic accomplishment in the context of their resources.

So far, some universities have been in favor of it, while others haven’t. Regardless of whether it receives widespread adoption by admission officers across the U.S., the Adversity Score overall will help applicants from relatively disadvantaged zip code and hurt those from relatively advantaged zip codes.

If the Adversity Score negatively affects you, you can opt for the ACT instead of the SAT, as ACT has taken a stance against the Adversity Score due to its opaque calculation.



CH 7. APPLICATION STRATEGY

7.1 How do we pick the right schools to apply to out of so many options? / How do I find a school that's a good fit?

Finding a good fit is very important. While higher ranked colleges tend to have more funding and resources, each college also has its own “culture” and “style.” Different colleges will have different majors, activities, student life, and future career options after graduation.

However, it is unlikely that you will be able to visit every single one of the schools on your list to ensure it's the right fit.

As such, we recommend a different approach:

1. Figure out your “must haves” and “must not haves” criteria in a college.
2. Select and apply to a set of schools that fit those criteria, making sure that you have some safety, target, and reach schools. We generally see most motivated students applying to a larger number of schools, such as in the 10-15 range.
3. After you get accepted to a handful of those universities, attend their “pre-frosh” events, visit the school, and speak to alumni to evaluate which one is the best fit. After all, there is no better way to evaluate fit than actually interacting with your future classmates, speaking with past students, and being on the campus.

Here are a few common criteria to consider:

1. **Undergraduate size:** do you prefer a school that has a small, medium, or large undergraduate population?
2. **Proximity to city:** do you want to be in a school in the middle of a big city like NYU, or a school like Dartmouth that is a bit more tucked away, or something in the middle?



3. **Faculty to student ratio:** do you learn better with more interaction with the teacher, or do you thrive in larger classrooms?
4. **Geographic location:** do you have certain state or regions that you prefer / want to avoid?
5. **Ranking:** while ranking is not the be all and end all, it does tend to correlate with a school's overall reputation and prestige. How important is that to you?
6. **Scholarship and financial aid opportunities:** do these play a role in you college selection?
7. **Specific majors / tracks / programs offered at schools:** some schools are better at certain subjects or have better career tracks- do those matter to you, or do you prefer to be flexible in your future career?



7.2 What are the best options for students with lower grades / late bloomers?

We recommend students with applications that have some sort of major gap—whether it's a low GPA, poor test scores, or lackluster activities—to apply to more colleges (in the 15-17 range). This will allow you to “play the field” and have more chances of being accepted to a great college. You can do this with relative ease, as most colleges have similar essay prompts.

In addition to trying to explain away the lower grades / late blooming in the Additional Information section of the application, we recommend the candidate to really focus on the essays and making sure the rest of the application is superb.

Remember, even if your “Academics” spoke is weak, the strength of your other spokes in the **Hub & Spoke System** can draw attention away from your weak academics. This can come in the form of glowing recommendations from your teachers, compelling essays, strong extracurricular activities, etc.



7.3 How do we decide if a school is considered a “reach” school or a realistic school?

Essays, extracurricular activities, recommendations play heavy roles in the probability of getting accepted into a college. However, since we can't evaluate each person's application on an individual basis here, we will provide an approach that's statistical based.

We generally define a school as a reach school if any of the three criteria are satisfied. Of course, there will always be exceptions- but these are good general rules of thumb.

1. **Your standardized test scores (ACT/SAT) is below the range of scores at that school.** You can find this range readily on the internet to ensure you have the latest data. For example, if you google “Columbia University ACT Scores”, you'll see that it has a range of 32 to 35, with 32 representing the 25th percentile of scores and 35 representing the 75th percentile of scores.
2. **The acceptance rate is less than 23%.** Generally, schools with acceptance rates in the teens / below are very competitive. For example, Harvard, Yale, Stanford, Princeton - those will always be Reach Schools for the majority of applicants. Schools with these rates will likely not be Safety Schools for most students.
3. **Your GPA is a full-letter grade away from the school's average GPA.** For most schools, the average GPA is going to be around an A- or B+. For a more accurate proxy to your specific school, you can find this information online in a variety of places, including searching for it on Google. If your GPA is a full-letter grade away, which is also another way of saying if your GPA is too low, you should peg that school as a Reach School.

Again, these are a few guiding metrics when classifying Reach schools. Other components of the Hub & Spoke system play heavily into whether the college is a true Reach.



7.4 What are the different application options (Early Action / Early Decision / Restrictive Early Action / Early Decision II / Rolling / Regular), and what are the best strategies for each?

Let's go through each one and their strategies.

Regular Decision (RD).

For **most** colleges, the deadline for regular decision application is on **January 1st**. Do note that the University of California schools (UCLA, UC Berkeley, UC San Diego, etc) have a deadline on **November 30th**. Public state schools may also have different dates.

You will usually hear back between March-early May.

You can also apply to as many Regular Decision schools as you want.

Early Action (EA).

For **most** colleges that offer Early Action application option, the deadline is **November 1st**. Do note that some schools like UNC Chapel Hill have deadlines that's in mid-October.

This is essentially a “no strings attached, submit your application early option”. You get to know the decision earlier, with notifications coming back between December and February.

For many schools, in order to qualify for their merit scholarships, you have to apply early. **And by the way, the rest of the definitions that include the word “Early” (except for Early Decision II) share similar timeframe on deadlines.**

You can apply to as many Early Action school as you want, as long as you are not applying to a school that's Early Action Restrictive (see below).



Early Decision (ED).

Early Decision adheres to similar deadline as Early Action (October - November 1st time frame). The difference between the Early Decision and Early Action is that **Early Decision is binding**. This means that if you apply to a school Early Decision and get in, you **MUST** go to that school. Essentially, you are entering into a binding contract with a school.

This is a way for applicants to tell schools that, "Hey, I am so interested in this school that I'm going to commit to the school regardless of any other colleges I get into".

Early Decision is very much for students who know *exactly* where they want to go.

You can only apply to 1 Early Decision school, as it is binding. You may not apply to an Early Decision school if you're applying to an Early Action Restrictive school.

Early Action Restrictive (EA Restrictive).

This is a variation on Early Action. **Schools that offer Early Action Restrictive are ones that do not allow you to apply to another school Early Decision or Early Action, UNLESS the Early Action school is a public school.**

You often see this option at top schools in the Ivy League. For example, say you want to apply to Yale early. Since Yale only has Early Action Restrictive, in order to apply to Yale early, you cannot apply Early Action to a private school like Georgetown. However, you can apply Early Action to a public school like the University of Michigan. Note that you cannot apply to any Early Decision school, regardless of public or private.

You can only apply to 1 Early Action Restrictive school. You may not apply to an Early Action Restrictive school if you're applying to an Early Decision school.



Early Decision II (ED II).

Some schools have added an application option called Early Decision II. Although it's called "Early Decision II", **Early Decision II deadline is actually around the same time as the Regular Decision deadline (in December - January timeframe)**. Just like Early Decision, Early Decision II is binding. If you apply Early Decision II, you are basically saying, "Hey, I'm willing to commit to the school and if I get accepted, I will go regardless of my other options."

You can only apply to one Early Decision II school, as it is binding.

Rolling Admissions.

Rolling Admissions essentially means "first come, first served". You can apply as soon as the applications open. **For schools with Rolling Admissions, you'd definitely want to apply earlier because they'll have more space and thus would be more likely to accept you.**

There is no "standard" deadline for rolling admissions, as it's first come, first served.



7.5 How important are college visits? How about reaching out to the admissions officer at the school?

College visits are important in showcasing your interest to a school. In fact, on the actual college application, some schools ask you if and when you've visited them in the past. While the value of visiting a school on the application differs from school to school, here are a few benefits of college visits that most don't realize:

1. **You can reference specifics from the school, making your essays more compelling.** For example, you may have encountered an especially interesting tour guide who showed you the Economics Department and introduced you to a professor in the Student Center. These are all additional colorful and vivid details that can bring your essays to the next level.
2. **You find out more about your preferences for colleges.** Without visiting, you may never learn that you love schools that are smaller in undergraduate size, or that you prefer a school in a bustling city. These discoveries will help you filter colleges on your list better, even without visiting every college on the list. For example, if you find that you truly prefer smaller schools, you might get rid of schools you were on the fence about that have 19,000+ undergraduates.
3. **You can confirm whether or not you'll want to do Early Decision to a school.** Early Decision is binding, which means that you are obligated to go to the school if accepted. A college visit to a potential Early Decision school will help you affirm your desire to commit to attending there.

If your goal is to keep your application / name top of mind, reaching out to the admissions officer at the school is less helpful than reaching out to your state admissions representative of that school. Most colleges have admissions representatives that are "in charge" of certain high schools or geographic areas. These admissions representatives serve as your point of contact at the college admissions office. You can generally find the admissions point person responsible for your school via the college website.

You can reach out to them via email, send a brief introduction, and ask insightful questions to stay top of mind. However, be aware that they're likely very busy, and you don't want to annoy them with too many messages or minute updates.