

Getting Ready for College

A grade level guide

8th Grade Getting Ready for High School

1. DEVELOP A FOUR-YEAR HIGH SCHOOL PLAN

In general for college prep you'll need:

- * 4 years of high school English
- * 3-4 years of math (at least through Algebra II)
- * 3-4 years of science (at least two lab courses)
- * 2-4 years of history and social studies
- * 2-4 years of foreign language
- * 1 year of a fine art (drama, music, or art)

2. BECOME WELL-ROUNDED AND ACTIVE

College and scholarship committees like to see students who have been actively involved in extra-curricular activities. In particular, they like to see quality and depth of involvement more than quantity of activities. Get involved. Choose some activities that you might enjoy in high school. Some ideas include:

- * athletics
- * student government
- * drama
- * clubs
- * youth group/church
- * scouting
- * community service

3. PREPARE FOR HIGH SCHOOL WORK

- * Develop good study skills
- * Read. Read. Read.
- * Write a lot – it's a critical skill
- * Get involved in problem solving in your math and science classes
- * Go to the library, museums, aquariums—places to learn about literature, art, history and science

9th Grade Now Everything “Counts”

1. GRADES MATTER

Freshman grades are used to calculate GPA for college admissions and scholarships. The courses, semester grades, and credits are a part of the student’s transcript. For college admissions, the more selective the school, the more important the grades are

- * Monitor academic progress: carefully read progress and grade reports
- * Consult with individual teachers if your student is struggling in a course
- * Provide encouragement and support

2. PLAN 10th GRADE COURSES

Sophomores typically take the following courses in 10th grade:

- * English
- * Mathematics
- * Biology
- * AP Human Geography
- * Foreign language (preferably level 2 or 3)
- * World Religions
- * Fine art, computer science, or physical education

3. GET INVOLVED

Students should find activities to get involved in, and if possible, take on a leadership role. Depth of involvement is also important because it shows focus and commitment. As a freshman, they can

- * Try a new sport or join a club
- * Participate in activities outside of school (church, scouting)
- * Do community service (Humane Society, Access, Science Works, Red Cross, etc.)
- * Keep track of activities and awards in a folder or on your computer and update it annually

4. PLAN SUMMER ACTIVITIES

With school ending in early June, now is the time to discuss summer plans. A number of possibilities exist:

- * Attend a summer program at a college or university
- * Do volunteer work (the YMCA and summer camps are excellent options)
- * Get a job
- * Take a fun class from the summer school program
- * Participate in a sports camp

10th Grade The Journey Continues

1. REVIEW FOUR-YEAR HIGH SCHOOL PLAN

Are you on track with the plan you made? Does it need to be revised? Be sure to select appropriate classes for the junior year. They should include

- * AP English
- * Mathematics (if possible, pre-calculus or finite math)
- * AP U.S. History
- * Chemistry
- * Foreign language (3rd or 4th year)
- * Religion
- * AP U.S. Government

2. CONTINUE TO MONITOR ACADEMIC PROGRESS

Are the student's grades on track as well? If not, it's not too late to make a change. Colleges like to see upward grade trends throughout high school. If the student is struggling, look into getting extra help, either in the writing or math labs or with some tutoring. For college admissions, a minimum cumulative GPA goal is a 3.0 (and a 3.5 or better is preferable for both admission and scholarships).

3. PSAT/SAT

Review the PSAT score report especially the advice on how to improve the student's skills and scores. Take this advice to heart and act on the suggestions. Because the SAT will change in March 2005, it is important that students continually work on building skills in the following areas:

- * Mathematics—the test will include Algebra II questions
- * Reading—the verbal section will now be called "Critical Reading" so students should read, read, read
- * Writing—students should continue to write a lot and take teacher's comments seriously to improve their writing skills

4. STAY INVOLVED & ACTIVE

In addition to working hard in school and being involved in a variety of activities, sophomores should be identifying their personal abilities, aptitudes, and interests. Perhaps choose community service and summer activities that relate to a career field or personal interests. Be sure to update the "Activities and Awards" file.

5. BEGIN EXPLORING COLLEGE OPTIONS

Toward the end of the sophomore year, students begin to get mail from colleges. It is a good time to discuss and explore college possibilities. Some tips on the research process:

- * Visit colleges while on vacation (even if the student may not attend that school, it's nice to get an idea about the ways colleges differ)
- * Assess issues such as size, geographic location, cost
- * Get on-line—college web sites provide a plethora of information

11th Grade It's Time to Get Serious

1. FOCUS ON ACADEMIC PROGRESS

While colleges do care about both freshman and sophomore year grades, the junior year is the most important because these are usually the last grades on the transcript prior to applying for college in the fall of the senior year. Students should

- * Strive to do their best ever, academically; upward grade trends are important
- * Prepare a solid Junior Project (this is frequently referenced in recommendation letters)
- * Work hard in their courses and be engaged in learning (junior year teachers are the ones who most frequently write recommendation letters to colleges)

2. TAKE PSAT

The PSAT that juniors take in October is the one that “counts” in the National Merit Scholarship competition, so juniors should be sure to prepare for it by doing the practice tests and practice packets provided by teachers. They will receive their scores back sometime between mid-December and early January.

3. SAT vs. ACT

Colleges typically accept either the SAT or ACT admissions tests, and some colleges require SAT II tests, which are subject-specific tests. Students may take each of these tests multiple times, and colleges will typically take their best score from the exams. Some frequently asked questions about these tests include:

* *“What is the difference between the SAT and the ACT exam?”* The SAT exam currently consists of a verbal section and a math section; the questions asked are similar to those from each of these sections on the PSAT exam. The ACT consists of four sections: reading, math, English (grammar), and science reasoning.

* *“When should students take the SAT or ACT?”* These tests are only administered during the academic year (from October to June). I recommend that they take it at least once and preferably twice during the winter/spring of their junior year. Typically, the first time they take the exam, they don't score as well as they would like to and do significantly better the second time. Frequently, students will take it again once in the beginning of the senior year as well and see an improvement in their scores.

* *“Who should take the SAT II tests?”* Some colleges require the SAT II exams, which are subject-specific tests in the areas of writing, literature, mathematics, science, social science, and foreign language. Each test is only one hour long and three can be taken on the same test date. I suggest that students take these exams at the end of their junior year of high school because they have just completed these courses and typically score quite well.

4. TALK ABOUT COLLEGE OPTIONS

Because there are approximately 3,500 colleges across the United States, it helps to narrow the choices by looking at the following criteria:

- * Location (East Coast, Midwest, West Coast, urban, suburban, small town)
- * Size (small, medium, or large)
- * Cost (What are you as parents willing to pay? Is this a factor in your decision?)
- * Available majors (Is there a specific major or program desired?)
- * Reputation/Competitiveness (level of selectivity)
- * Community (religious based, conservative v. liberal)
- * Extra-curricular programs (athletics, fine arts, study abroad)

Once you have answers to these questions, I can assist you in putting together a list of schools to investigate.

5. SET UP COLLEGE VISITS

Both spring break and summer vacation provide wonderful opportunities to make college visits. Call at least two weeks prior to your trip and schedule a college tour as well as an appointment with an admissions counselor. To make the most of your visit:

- * Research information about the college prior to your visits (college catalogs and brochures are available in the College Room, and the internet is an excellent tool)
- * Prepare a checklist of questions to ask and things to note (based on the criteria you established under #4 above)
- * Visit a dorm and eat in the cafeteria to get an idea about campus living
- * Inquire regarding special programs your child is interested in (athletics, music, clubs, travel abroad, etc.)
- * Ask about scholarship opportunities
- * Pick up a student newspaper in addition to the admissions materials

6. PLAN SENIOR YEAR COURSES

When the course registration form and catalog become available, check to make sure that your son or daughter is on track to fulfill St. Mary's graduation requirements. Encourage them to continue taking academically challenging courses even though they may want to "take it easy" for the senior year.

7. CHOOSE MEANINGFUL SUMMER ACTIVITIES

Students should continue to stay active and participate in meaningful summer activities. Some options include:

- * Get a summer job
- * Take a SAT prep class
- * Engage in community service and volunteer opportunities
- * Attend a summer program at a college
- * Assist with or participate in an athletic camp

8. UPDATE THE “ACTIVITIES AND AWARDS” FILE

If you haven't already done so, now is the time to prepare a high school resume outlining the various activities, awards, and community service projects the student has accomplished since freshman year. If you would like a copy of the template to follow, please contact me.

12th Grade Time to Apply to College

The senior year is when everything comes together. Students are busy in the fall selecting and applying to colleges. Some areas to consider include:

1. GRADES STILL COUNT

Sometimes students think that senior grades are not important, especially since the college applications ask about grades in courses through the end of the junior year. However, many schools rely on the mid-year transcript (which reflect 7th semester grades) to make admissions decisions. In addition, seniors must successfully complete all of their courses and graduate, and the college of their choice does receive the final transcript.

2. DECIDE ON A LIST OF COLLEGES TO APPLY TO

Fall is the time to make up a list of college choices, but what's the best way to go about this?

- * Meet with college counselor to discuss a list of possibilities based on factors that are important to you (size of school, location, majors)
- * Attend the local college fair, which is usually held in late October or early November
- * Attend school's college recruiting visits throughout the fall
- * After doing some research on (and hopefully visits to) the colleges of interest, cull down your list
- * The general rule of thumb is to have 1-2 reach schools, 2-3 "good fit" schools, and 1-2 "safety" schools; however, the size of the list is completely up to the parent and student

3. GET ORGANIZED

Because there are multiple deadlines and multiple forms to be completed for the application process, students need to get organized early on:

- * Set up a calendar for the year with ACT and/or SAT registration and test dates, college application deadlines, scholarship deadlines, and key St. Mary's dates
- * Get a filing system for college applications, which includes a place for a computer disk containing the student's resume and college essays
- * Organize college recruiting materials for the schools in which your child is interested; recycle the rest

4. EVALUATE SAT/ACT SCORES

Hopefully, your son or daughter took an ACT or SAT test during the junior year. If not, they should sign up for one in the fall as soon as possible. When you have received the results back, look at the scores and determine whether or not your child should retake the SAT/ACT.

* Highly selective colleges require high standardized test scores (Stanford and Pomona look for SAT scores of 1350 or better) while competitive schools look for SAT scores ranging from an 1100-1300

* Merit-based scholarships are also based on test scores and cumulative grade point average (usually at least 3.5 GPA or better and a 1200 or better SAT score) but the criteria varies from school to school

5. OBTAIN COLLEGE APPLICATIONS

If you have been receiving recruiting information from a college, chances are that they will send you an application in the fall. If not, you have a variety of options:

- Download the application from the college's web site (typically in a pdf file)
- Apply on-line at the college's web site
- Complete the Common Application form (over 240 colleges across the country accept this form—go to www.commonapp.org to find a list of schools and to download the forms)
- If using the common application, check to see whether or not the individual college also wants you to complete a supplemental application
- State colleges and universities do not accept the common application form

6. COMPLETE COLLEGE APPLICATIONS IN A TIMELY MANNER

- Students should notify Mrs. Anderson or Mrs. Baumbach when they have a list of schools they're applying to and the deadline (postmarked or received by date) of when each application is due; at least a month's notice is preferred as the bulk of college applications are due between November and February
- Students should ask for teacher recommendations early by personally talking to junior and senior year instructors (usually we suggest one English/humanities instructor and one math/science instructor); however, they should bring the teacher recommendation forms to Mrs. Anderson instead of giving them directly to the instructor
- Students should complete their portion of the application as neatly and thoroughly as possible; typing up the application either on line or on a typewriter is always a good idea
- If they haven't already done so, students should prepare a resume of their high school activities and awards to include with their application
- Parents should help their senior by making sure the student has obtained the correct forms, proofreading the application and essay, and generally offering support and encouragement
- If students would like us to help with proofreading essays, resumes, and applications, they should get them to us 2-3 weeks prior to the deadline
- Many colleges have January 1st deadlines, which falls during Christmas break, so we will need their application materials the first week of December

* Even if a school doesn't require a recommendation or essay, you still may include them to strengthen the application if necessary

* Be sure to have your child write a thank you note to the teacher(s) and counselor who have assisted them in the application process

7. COMPLETE FINANCIAL AID FORMS AND SCHOLARSHIP APPLICATIONS

* The earliest date for filing the FAFSA (Free Application for Federal Student Aid) is January 1st of the student's senior year. This form can be accessed at www.fafsa.gov.

* Some colleges will ask you to complete the CSS Profile which can be found at www.collegeboard.com while others may have their own financial aid statements for you to complete

* For many colleges, the student's application for admissions also functions as the scholarship application, and no additional paperwork is required

* Look for talent scholarships—athletics, art, music, forensics—at each college; usually these require an audition and separate application form

* Local scholarships are typically announced in December and January

8. THE WAITING GAME

Once all the applications are submitted, then the difficult part comes—waiting to hear.

* Colleges that have rolling admissions will typically notify you within 6-8 weeks from when the student applied

* Most of the admissions committees meet in February and March to make their admissions decisions (after receiving the 7th semester grades) and will notify students in March and April

* If the student goes through the special/conditional admissions process, they may not hear from the school until mid to late April

9. MAKING A DECISION

* The national deadline to make the choice and notify colleges of your decision is May 1st

* Please *do not choose a college before making a college visit!*

* Submit the necessary forms and deposit to the college of choice as soon as possible as the preferred housing fills up the quickest

* Out of courtesy, notify the other colleges of your decision