



**Compelling Why College Resource Packet**  
Your guide for planning and paying for college

# COLLEGE CAMPUS TOURS

It is never too early to start visiting colleges, but if you are a rising sophomore, junior, or senior, you should definitely consider adding college tours to your calendar. Getting on campus is one of the best ways to find out if a college will be a good fit for you. Of course, this can be an expensive trip depending on how far the school (or schools) is from home, so it's best to develop a shortlist of your top four or five colleges to visit. If visiting your favorite colleges is not financially feasible, consider visiting a nearby college campus and sitting through the college admissions presentation. You will often get general admissions and financial aid information that could prove helpful even if you are not applying to that college.

Here are some tips to help you make the most of your campus visit:

## **Research the University Before You Visit**

Learn all you can about the college before traveling there. Research may bring to light critical information that may cause you to change your mind about applying. Looking into the school will also help you understand the admission requirements, college majors available, student population, internship and job opportunities, and the social scene and traditions that make the university unique.

## **Take a Campus Tour and a Self-Guided Tour**

A campus tour will allow you to see the layout of the campus and give you a glimpse into life as a college student –e.g., classes, dorms, the cafeteria, traditions and the social scene. The tour guide, who is usually a current student, will happily answer your questions.

You should also conduct your own self-guided tour of the campus. Don't hesitate to check out the bulletin boards in hallways (this will give you a great sense of what happens on campus and off-campus, too), eat in the dining halls or cafe, sit in on a class (if possible), and scope out other areas where students tend to gather.

If you are unable to visit a college before applying, **virtual tours** can be the next best thing. Do keep in mind that many universities have a virtual tour option on their website. Here is a website to help get you started:

- ▶ [www.campustours.com](http://www.campustours.com)

## **Talk to Current Students**

One of the best ways to get very candid (unscripted) feedback about a college is by talking to current students. While the tour guides are very friendly, remember they work for the school and will likely follow a script that focuses on the benefits of attending the school. If you want a deeper insight into life on campus, ask the students you meet in the cafeteria or around campus. Don't be afraid. Just introduce yourself, explain that you're considering attending, and ask them to be honest about life at that college or university.

With these tips, you can make the most of your campus visits!

# 8<sup>TH</sup> GRADE COLLEGE PLANNING CHECKLIST

***Eighth grade is not too early to start thinking about college.***

- Study hard** and maintain high grades. Get tutoring help if you are falling behind.
- Develop a plan to go to college:** Learn about college and how different colleges, degrees and career paths will propel you to reach your goals. A great website to help with this task is <https://bigfuture.collegeboard.org>.
- Develop a plan to pay for college:** Begin saving for college and learn how you will fund your education. Learn more at <https://studentaid.gov>.
- Visit college campuses:** This is a great way to get a feel for the various sizes and types of colleges in the US. Ask your parents to add a campus tour onto a vacation.
- Summer Programs:** Use summer for academic enrichment and to explore an area of interest (e.g., engineering, business, writing, etc.). A couple of local organizations with summer programs include:
  - Boys & Girls Club of Greater Dallas ([www.bgcdallas.org](http://www.bgcdallas.org))
  - Girls Inc. of Metropolitan Dallas ([www.girlsincdallas.org](http://www.girlsincdallas.org))
- Honors and AP Courses:** When selecting classes for high school, be sure to challenge yourself academically.
- Time Management & Organization:** Take a class before high school to help you manage your time and remain organized. High school is much more demanding than middle school, and you do not want to risk getting a failing grade because you forget the due date of a project.
- Find a Niche to Stand Out:** Find an extracurricular activity you are very passionate about and get plugged in. There are many clubs and activities available on your school campus. If you are more of an entrepreneur, consider starting your very own business.
- Community Service:** Find ways to serve your community and give back to others in need. Helping others allows you to focus less on your problems and build empathy - a key component for personal and professional success in life. In addition, most high schools will have a community service requirement, so it's a good habit to form. Discuss community service opportunities with your parents, teacher or counselor.
- Talk to your parent, guardian, counselor/teacher:** Discuss your career interests and opportunities to explore those interests with a trusted adult. They can provide guidance to help you select the right high school graduation plan and stay on the path to success.

## 9<sup>TH</sup> - 10<sup>TH</sup> GRADE COLLEGE PLANNING CHECKLIST

- Prepare to work hard:** Every class counts! Your entire high school career - Grades 9 to 12 - will show up on your transcript. Take every class very seriously. Get help early before you fall behind. Many teachers are very happy to help after school at no cost or take advantage of free online resources such as [www.khanacademy.org](http://www.khanacademy.org).
- Take challenging classes:** Colleges expect to see several AP courses or honors courses on your transcript if your school offers them. Do ensure you are on track to take the highest-level classes, especially if you plan to apply to highly selective colleges.
- Explore career options:** If you haven't already done so, take the Department of Labor's O\*NET Interest Profiler, Your Next Move ([www.mynextmove.org/explore/ip](http://www.mynextmove.org/explore/ip)), to help you determine some possible majors/careers of interest. This online questionnaire will highlight some career options based on your responses centered around your skills, values, interests and personality.
- Build a College List:** Start doing your research and building an initial list that could include as many as 24 colleges based on your interests and specific features in a college – small/large; private/public; rural/urban, etc. As you get closer to actually applying, you would have had a chance to visit some of these colleges or do other research that will allow you to whittle your list down to no more than 8 to 10 colleges.
- Visit Colleges:** It's never too early to start college visits. This is a fantastic way to discover what your likes and dislikes are when it comes to a college campus. Do you prefer small over large schools? Do you prefer one in a city or a quiet rural town? Campus tours will help you discover more about yourself and see other parts of the US in the process.
- PSAT, SAT®, AP Exams, Dual Credit, CLEP:** Take AP exams offered through your school to become a competitive college applicant. Dual college credits and CLEP are also good options. Consider taking a prep class during the summer before you take the PSAT in 11<sup>th</sup> grade.
- Summer Programs:** Continue to enroll in summer camps to show consistency in an area of interest or explore something new. There are many free summer programs offered at colleges, high schools and non-profit organizations in your area (see list in resource packet).
- Extracurricular Activities:** Clubs, sports, internships, religious youth group activities, the list of opportunities is endless. Seek (or run for) leadership positions and show progressive organizational leadership. Paid jobs are just as important and could help you build skills that demonstrate commitment and a strong work ethic.
- Community Service:** Get involved! Colleges like students who give back to their communities, so even if you are playing football, which requires 20+ hours a week, you should still find ways to volunteer at a food pantry or shelter.

# 11<sup>TH</sup> GRADE COLLEGE PLANNING CHECKLIST

## SUMMER BEFORE 11<sup>TH</sup> GRADE:

- Resumé:** Update your resumé – ensure you include all of your activities and achievements from 9<sup>th</sup> grade, with a description and the number of hours per week you are engaged in each activity.
- Volunteer or work** during the summer to get experience in the career field of interest.
- Find a Niche:** If you are so inclined, consider starting a business or a non-profit with guidance from your parents or guardian. Find a need in your community that is not being served and develop a plan to address it. This is another great way to stand out during the college application process.
- Go to college:** Take a class at a community college for dual credits.
- STEM Camps:** Consider attending a STEM summer camp to learn more about careers in these fields. These are some of the fastest-growing and highest-paying careers.
- Build Your College List:** Begin building your college list, if you haven't already done so, and review each college's requirements, including what it takes to qualify for different types of financial aid to see if you are on track to apply. It's okay to start with as many colleges as 24; just be prepared to research and/or visit colleges and cut the list to a more manageable size – 8-10 colleges, depending on major and financial need. Your college list should include colleges that are the best fit academically, socially, and financially.
- Campus Visit:** Visit some local colleges in your area and some out-of-town to learn about the type of colleges (small, large, urban, suburban) that might be a good fit for you.

## JUNIOR YEAR:

- Maintain good grades | Honors | Dual Credits | AP | IB:** Your GPA is one of the most important factors considered in college admission. In addition, colleges want to see you have challenged yourself by taking dual credits, honors and AP courses.
- Meet with your Guidance Counselor:** Set up a meeting to discuss your high school plan and your college goals. This is a good time to review your college list and get your counselor's input.
- Volunteer & Extracurricular Activities:** Continue to give of your time to improve your community and engage in club activities that you are passionate about – jobs are important too.

- ☑ **Leadership Skills:** Ensure you seek opportunities to develop strong leadership skills. Colleges want to see you taking on more responsible positions in those extracurricular activities as you progress through high school. If you started out as a member of a club, look for opportunities to run for office the next semester or school year.
- ☑ **PSAT:** Prepare for the PSAT in October. This is good practice for the SAT, and students are eligible to compete for the National Merit Scholarship (NMQ).
- ☑ **College Fairs | Campus Tour:** Attend college fairs and get to know the reps for your area. Try to visit some additional colleges during the fall/spring of your junior year.
- ☑ **Summer Opportunities:** Begin looking for volunteer, internship, job and academic enrichment opportunities for the summer before your senior year. Most applications for the highly competitive summer programs open in the fall (or around January-February).
- ☑ **SAT® or ACT, SAT® Subject Tests, CLEP:** Prepare to take the SAT or ACT in late fall or early Spring. Take a practice test for both and the official test for the one you like the most. Take some SAT Subject Tests – Ivy League and other highly selective colleges require one or two Subject Tests for admissions. Taking College Level Examination Program (CLEP) tests is another option besides dual credits to earn college credits.
- ☑ **Letters of Recommendation:** Before you head off for your summer break, ask your teachers to write letters of recommendation in support of your college applications (check to see how many each college requires). You do not have to wait until you return to school as a senior to do this. Most of your teachers will be happy to start the process in the summer. Be specific about some of the content – e.g., a class project – you would like included in the LOR. While the teacher will focus on your work in the classroom, it doesn't hurt to provide your teachers with a copy of your resumé to give them a better sense of your overall accomplishments.
- ☑ **College List:** As your junior year winds down, reduce your college list to colleges you are serious about attending. Your list should include at least four colleges, but no more than 8-10 colleges. Pay close attention to the admission requirements.
- ☑ **Net Price Calculator:** Colleges are required by law to have Net Price Calculators on their websites. The calculators allow you to enter basic information (e.g., your GPA, test scores, and parent's income) and then calculate an amount, minus grants and/or loans you are likely to pay – called your Expected Family Contribution (EFC).

# 12<sup>TH</sup> GRADE COLLEGE PLANNING CHECKLIST

## SUMMER BEFORE SENIOR YEAR:

- Resumé:** Update your Resumé/Activity Sheet
- Essays:** Begin developing your essays for your college applications. Solicit feedback from your counselor, a teacher or another trusted adult.
- ACT® & SAT®:** Take prep classes in the summer and sign up for additional SAT or ACT tests. Plan to practice at least 3 months before the test date. It is recommended that students take the test no more than three (3) times.
- SAT® Subject Tests:** Sign up and take SAT Subject tests [each test lasts one hour].
- Volunteer/Work/Intern:** Ensure you are engaged in a summer volunteer or paid position or a summer enrichment camp in your field of interest.
- Start your college applications:** The Common Application, Coalition Application, and Apply Texas generally open up around August 1 of each year.

## FALL OF SENIOR YEAR:

- College Applications:** Continue working on your applications and set your own deadline well ahead of the college's deadline. The deadline will vary depending on the college and whether you are applying for Regular Admission, Early Application or Early Decision.
- SAT® & ACT:** Take the test for the final time if you fall short of your target scores; remember some colleges "super score" the SAT – using the highest part from multiple sittings to give you the highest cumulative score.
- Essays:** Finalize your essays.
- Interviews:** Sign up for interviews, if applicable. Most interviews are optional, but in the world of competitive college admissions, anything optional should be completed.
- Scholarships:** Be on the lookout for great scholarships; some are available at the time you complete your college application, while others might require a separate application. Don't forget to apply for scholarships available through local and national organizations.
- Grades:** Continue maintaining high grades; don't fall prey to "senioritis" – a false sense of accomplishment that overcomes a student after completing their college applications. Remember that colleges will get your mid-year and end-of-year transcripts. If there is a drastic drop in your GPA, a college could request a written explanation or, worst yet, rescind the offer of admission.
- FAFSA:** Get ready to complete the FAFSA (for financial aid), which goes live in October.

## JANUARY – MAY (SENIOR YEAR):

- Offers of Admission:** Review and compare offers of admission, including the financial aid package, to ensure you select the best college based on your circumstances.
- Deposit:** Submit your deposit, shot record and all final official documents requested by the college. Ensure you have secured housing with this deposit, and notify any college you have decided not to attend.
- Send final grades** to the college you have decided to attend.
- Orientation:** Sign up for orientation at your college.
- Graduation:** Prepare for your high school graduation. Celebrate! Thank everyone who helped you get here.
- Financial Management:** Take a class; you will be on your own soon, and money will be scarce. You must learn to make good financial decisions that could affect you for the rest of your life.
- Develop a College Graduation Plan** to graduate on time unless your major requires more than four years (e.g., engineering or joint BA/MA programs).

# FINANCIAL AID: PAYING FOR COLLEGE

## College Costs & Financial Aid Overview

Look at the tuition costs, and you might think you were looking at a payment plan to buy your first home. Add room and board, books and other fees, and you might think you are about to take on the US national debt.

The cost of attending college continues to rise at an alarming rate. The average cost of attending a private, non-profit, four-year university was \$43,505, and \$11,011 at a public in-state, four-year college (US News).

**Fast Fact:** Did you know Princeton University is one of only a handful of colleges that do not use loans to meet financial needs? Students who qualify, get grants that do not have to be repaid.

Due to the costs and the highly competitive nature of college admissions, this is usually a very stressful time for families.

Here are some things to help relieve some of the stress of applying to college:

### 1. Parents & Student Should Discuss Tuition Budget

Talk with your parents about how much they are willing or can afford to pay for college. A good place to start is by using the Net Price Calculator (NPC) available on each college's website to estimate how much you could pay after grants and/or loans. Do not wait until you have been accepted to a college to come up with a plan to pay for college. Whatever you do, don't rule out a college because of the costs. Some colleges with very high tuition (e.g., private colleges) could cost less than a public university after financial aid. Keep in mind that private colleges generally have more funds available for scholarships and aid.

### 2. Enhance Your Academic Record

Students with strong academic records have a better chance of qualifying for scholarships. Most private and state colleges give merit aid to the top students with the highest GPA, class rank and standardized test scores. Even if you are only trying to get need-based aid, you will still need a strong academic portfolio to get into college.

### 3. Invest In Test Prep

Test scores – SAT® or ACT® – are essential components of most college applications, so there is often no way around it unless the college is test-optional – e.g., American University, Wake Forest University, to name a few. However, please be aware that you will need a stellar academic record and strong extracurricular involvement to stand out in an applicant pool where many students still submit high ACT and SAT test scores. If you cannot afford a test prep program, consider some free options like Khan Academy or purchase the official study guide and follow a self-study plan.

**4. Selecting The Right College Could Affect Your Aid:** Students whose academic record places them in the top 5-10% of applicants at a particular school or who have an exceptional talent will often receive the best merit aid available. Ensure your college list includes a few colleges where you fall into that category, if possible.

**5. Consider Little-Known Colleges:** Some little-known colleges (often small liberal arts colleges) sometimes offer generous financial aid, but students and families must be willing to shed the need for a brand name. *Colleges that Change Lives* (CTCL.org) lists a number of Liberal Arts gems that are graduating exceptional and bright students – some also provide very generous scholarships.

### 6. Don't Over-borrow – consider the return on investment

Affordability is an important component of 'best fit.' Parents and students have to be realistic in setting their goals, not thinking that every college will offer their students a full-ride scholarship. Consider how much you are likely to earn when you graduate college before deciding how much to borrow.

## FINDING THE RIGHT COLLEGE

There is a wide variety of universities across the US, each with strengths and unique characteristics. Finding a school that fits a student's needs is much easier than you may think with the diverse number of universities in the US. These universities include liberal arts colleges, public universities, historically black colleges, and schools with focused programs such as art or business.

As you search for your "best fit" college, here are a few questions to consider:

- Does the college have majors/programs catering to my interests?
- Is the program academically challenging?
- Can I afford it? Use the college's Net Price Calculator (every school has one on its website) to determine how much you will pay after financial aid. Find out if you will be saddled with more debt than you are prepared to take on.
- What size school is ideal for me? Some colleges have fewer students than your high school, while others have tens of thousands of students. Visiting college campuses can give you a better sense of what size fits.
- Where will my new college be located? You have to figure out if you prefer to attend college in a big city, small town, or rural area.
- Will I be happy there? What kind of contribution will I be able to make on this campus? Ask yourself these questions whenever you visit a college campus. Some students might not consider a college without a football team, while other students are more interested in joining causes to impact the lives of others. Think about your "must-haves" in a college before making your final selection.

As you embark on your college admissions journey, finding a college that meets your academic and personal growth expectations and will prepare you for a career and life is essential.

There are a number of great websites to help you in researching colleges.

- **[Collegescorecard.ed.gov](https://collegescorecard.ed.gov/)**: This website, sponsored by the US Department of Education, makes it easy to go through a host of different factors (affordability, location, programs or majors offered, enrollment size, etc.) and provides you with the critical information necessary to make an informed decision about one of the most important times of your life.
- **[BigFuture.collegeboard.org](https://bigfuture.collegeboard.org/)**: This website provides comprehensive college planning resources, including information about testing, college application essentials – essays, interviews, resumes – and career search. There are many videos of college admission professionals sharing important recommendations on what it takes to get into your best-fit college.
- **[Nces.ed.gov/CollegeNavigator](https://nces.ed.gov/CollegeNavigator/)**: This site, courtesy of the Department of Education, provides detailed information about every college profile, admission requirements, cost, athletic teams, clubs, etc., and allows you to compare up to four colleges side by side.

Finding the right college doesn't have to be stressful. If you take the time to carefully research available college options, you will feel much more comfortable with your final decision.