



Research Brief

Preparing for College: A Guide for Parents

Question: What can parents do to help students prepare for college?

Summary of Findings: With many of today's high school students having the opportunity to be the first in their families to attend college, parents undoubtedly feel the stress of making sure that their son/daughter is fully prepared to enter this phase of their life. Making the transition from high school to college can be overwhelming for both parents and students. However, to ease some of the stress, the following items are intended to provide parents with viable options for ensuring their child's post-secondary success.

According to Dick Riley (2000), former U.S. Secretary of Education,

“We have a responsibility to our children. While they represent only 20 percent of our population, children are 100 percent of America's future. They are our greatest investment, and it's up to us to help them understand the importance of investing in themselves.”

Why Attend College?

A college degree has the potential to open up doors and provide immense opportunities for students, many of which may have seemed otherwise inaccessible. In fact, according to the U.S. Department of Education (2000),

“Some of these benefits of college may not be obvious to your child. Even though he or she has to make the final decision to attend college, you can help in the decision-making process by learning about all aspects of college yourself and sharing what you learn with your child.”

Over the long run, a college degree also makes great financial sense. According to the 2005 College Board report, “Education Pays”,

“In 2003, the typical full-time year-round worker in the United States with a four-year college degree earned \$49,900, 62 percent more than the \$30,800 earned by the typical full-time year-round worker with only a high school diploma.”

This dramatic increase in income serves as a major financial incentive for attending college.

Never Too Early to Begin Planning

The art of preparing for college is to avoid falling into the trap of thinking that it's “too early” to begin the planning process. The earlier in high school you begin preparing academically and financially, the better off you'll be. **Even though this life stage may be stressful, it is imperative that parents be involved with**



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helping their children prepare for entering college due to the complexities involved. According to a recent College Board survey of 1,778 prospective college students,

“More than 50 percent of the students surveyed indicated that parents were ‘very involved’ in college planning activities”, ... [while] “nearly 30 percent of students want more, not less, parental involvement”. (2007)

Course Selection

Parents should keep a watchful eye on their child’s course selections in high school, and ultimately the grades that he/she earns. This should be done during each of the four years in high school to ensure that the student’s GPA is at an acceptable level. School guidance counselors are generally responsible for monitoring a student’s course selection, but as a parent, it’s essential to also assess how your child is performing.

In order to do this, the first place to start is being familiar with the required courses that must be completed for graduation purposes, along with what courses generally satisfy college admissions standards. Here are many of these required courses recommended for college admissions:

(<http://www.actstudent.org/college/plancourses.html>)

(www.collegeboard.com/student/plan/high-school/33.html)

- English -- Four years (Composition, literature, etc.)
- Math -- Three or more years (Algebra I and higher)
- Science -- Three or more years (Earth science, biology, chemistry, physics, etc.)
- Social Studies -- Three or more years (history, economics, geography, civics, psychology, etc)
- Other Courses -- May include two or more years of foreign language, Fine-arts, and/or computer science

For parents and students to track what course requirements have been met and which courses still must be completed, College Board offers a useful planning sheet to serve as a visual reminder. A full description and print-out can be found at:

<http://www.collegeboard.com/student/plan/high-school/110.html>.

AP Courses

With college admissions becoming increasingly competitive nationwide, the courses that students enroll in during high school significantly impact their chances of gaining acceptance into the school of their choice. Within the past decade, rigorous Advanced Placement (AP) courses have become widely accessible, and in turn, the number of students enrolling in such classes has sky-rocketed. In 2006 alone, an estimated 1.3 million students took 2.3 million AP tests (Mathews, 2006), double the figures from 1995 (Marklein, 2006). Many claim that there is a strong correlation between AP success and college success. According to Jay Mathews of the Washington Post,



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“Large studies in Texas and California over the past two years indicate that good grades on AP tests significantly increases chances of earning college degrees.” (2006)

College Board attributes much of this academic success as a result of AP’s track record of:

- Giving students an edge in college preparation
- Helping students stand out in the college admissions process
- Broadening the intellectual horizons for students

At the same time, parents should be cautious of their child enrolling in too many AP courses. College Board announced in early 2007 that “five is plenty in a high school career” (Mathews, 2007). This rationale stems from college admissions offices indicating that “three, four or five AP courses are sufficient” for gaining acceptance into many colleges and universities (Mathews, 2007).

Taking the Tests

Generally, students will need to take the SAT and/or the ACT tests prior to applying to the college(s) of their choice. The best time for students to take either of these tests is during the spring semester of their junior year. The scores on these tests are factored into a college’s admissions criterion. Even though both tests are similar, students often take both tests in hopes that a higher score on either one will increase their overall chances of being admitted. Taking the tests in the spring will give parents and students enough time to receive their results and decide whether or not these scores are sufficient. Parents and students should research test score requirements for the school they wish to attend in order to accurately determine whether or not it’s in the student’s best interests to re-take either of the tests.

Below are useful websites that provide useful information that should be helpful in making the decision of which tests to take.

“The Facts on Taking the SAT/ACT”

<http://www.princetonreview.com/college/research/articles/prepare/satfact.asp>

“SAT vs. ACT: How do the Tests Compare?”

<http://www.princetonreview.com/college/testprep/testprep.asp?TPRPAGE=141&TYPE=SAT>

Also, here are two free test preparation websites designed to help better prepare students for taking the SAT:

“SAT Online Demo”

<http://www.princetonreview.com/college/testprep/testprep.asp?TPRPAGE=78&TYPE=NEW-SAT-PRACTICE-TEST>

“The Official SAT Question of the Day”

<http://apps.collegeboard.com/qotd/question.do>



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The Application Process

After having narrowed down the list of school choices, it's time to apply. Generally, the best time to begin the application process is at the beginning of the student's senior year. To assist with the process, CollegeAnswer.com offers an "Admissions Timeline":

September

- Obtain admission applications from schools on your list.
- Decide who you'll ask to write your letters of recommendation
- Request transcripts from your guidance office.

October

- Ask for letters of recommendation
- Start working on admission applications and essays.
- Verify that your transcripts are accurate.
- Make copies of documents you send for your files.

November–January

- Complete your applications, either online or by mail. If submitting by mail, plan for possible delays.

February–March

- Ask your guidance counselor to send transcripts with first semester grades to your intended schools.
- College acceptance letters will start arriving.

April–May

- Review your admissions information to ensure you've completed the application process.
- Request that your final transcript be sent to the college.

Paying for College

One of the fundamentals for attending college, but which is often overlooked, deals with how to pay for college. According to the National Center for Education Statistics report, "Getting Ready to Pay for College" (2003),

"Many college-bound students and their parents do not have an accurate idea of what it costs to attend college. In this study, even among students close to college age (11th - and 12th -graders) with intentions of enrolling in college, roughly one-half of the students (52 percent) and their parents (54 percent) had not obtained information about what it costs to attend college."

<http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2003/2003030.pdf>



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Many parents rely on their children receiving scholarships as a result of good grades and test scores, but very often scholarships do not eliminate all of the costs. This is why it is important to have a plan to tackle these costs. The National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators (NASFAA) report, “Cash for College” (2006), is a great resource to help parents and students prepare for paying for college. (<http://www.nasfaa.org/AnnualPubs/cashforcollege.pdf>)

The report focuses on the importance of:

- Researching your list of specific schools financial aid information
- Being thorough in submitting financial aid paperwork and adhering to deadlines
- Holding on to all financial aid forms and communications that you receive or send to specific institutions
- Submitting the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA)

The FAFSA is intended to help families offset the costs of college by providing student loans and grants for those students who apply.

Federal Grants

Depending on economic need, there are a variety of federal grants that your child may be eligible for to assist with the costs of tuition, books, and other related college expenses. Federal grants do not have to be repaid.

Student Loans

Even if your child does not qualify for federal grants, the FAFSA also provides for federal student loans for students to utilize to offset their educational expenses. Student loans, on the other hand, do require repayment by the student. These loans are generally repaid after the student has completed their degree program. It's important to remember that these are federal loans, and even if the student does not complete their degree program, they are still obligated to repay these loans in full.

When to apply?

Any time after Jan. 1 of your son/daughter's senior year of High School. However, it's best to submit your child's FAFSA after the parents have filed their Federal Income Tax. The reason for this is that your son/daughter's level of financial aid (federal grants/loans) will depend on your family's income level.

After you submit this initial FAFSA, for each additional year that your son/daughter is enrolled in college, another FAFSA will have to be submitted. The time frame and guidelines for submitting future applications remains the same.

Accessing the FAFSA and other important financial aid information is available at www.fafsa.ed.gov.

As with nearly everything else in life, preparation is key. This is no different in the college planning process. For high school students, as well as for their parents, preparing for college may seem a daunting task. However, according to the research, it's during this time that parents need to exercise their parental



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responsibilities and assist their child in making a smooth and successful transition into college. Having a helping hand from parents in making these “life decisions” can significantly impact a child’s post-secondary education.

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Online Resources:

The College Board

<http://www.collegeboard.com/student/apply/the-application/8626.html>

Resources for avoiding “senioritis” during the last year of high school and good tips on how to make sure students finish on a good note before entering college.

FAFSA

www.fafsa.ed.gov

Information and application to help parents and students apply for federal student aid.

Senior Year College Planning Calendar

<http://mapping-your-future.org/MHSS/>

Provides useful links for specific tasks that should be completed by students and parents during each of these grades to ensure your child is well prepared ahead of time for entering college.

Scholarships

www.fastweb.com

Website devoted to provide students/parents with available scholarships.

(Important: Never pay for scholarship services who promise to provide you with a list of possible scholarships. Most on these lists can be found by you for free by performing a simple search through a reliable search engine service.)

Student Aid on the Web

<http://studentaid.ed.gov>

U.S. Department of Education offers free information on preparing for post-secondary education.

“Show Me the Future”

<http://showmethefuture.org/game/index.cfm>

Interesting online futuristic version of the game “Life”. Gives students, and parents for that matter, a preview into life’s annual expenses once they’re in charge of handling their own finances.

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