

Your Guide to

High School Senior Year & Applying to College

Help Your Student Make It Through College Application Season



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Senior year is here! It's an exciting chapter for your high school senior, with lots to do. We're here to help you both along the way.

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If you are the parent or guardian of a high school senior, life is about to get (or may already be) crazy.

On top of all the activities that go along with finally being a senior, your student is getting ready for life after high school — and for many seniors that means applying to college.

Already people are asking them, “Where do you want to go to college?” “How many schools are you applying to?” “What do you plan to study?” (You’ll get asked, too.) They may not know the answers yet — and might prefer not to talk about it with every person they bump into!

How do you support them, and help them keep stress at bay so they can enjoy senior year and look to the future with excitement rather than dread? How do you stay calm and positive yourself?

Read on for advice and tips for getting things done with your high school senior this fall, and keeping family life in healthy balance at the same time.

Part 1: A Parent's Role

Start With an Honest Look at Your Own Feelings

College admission can bring out the best in us — and the worst.

We may approach it with inspiration, helping our children reflect with a sense of wonder and pride on their high school journey and what lies ahead. Or we may lead with anxiety, giving too much weight to a college's place on the rankings list and wondering whether our student will be “good enough” in the eyes of an admissions committee.

These feelings are human. And if you're worried, it's natural — we're bombarded with so much messaging about what college means and how hard it is to get into a “good” school.

We're also influenced by what we hear about the application experience from friends and relatives whose kids are already in college. And as we've raised our children, we've formed expectations (expressed and unexpressed) about them and who they might become.

Whether our teens admit it or not, they look to us for guidance. They listen carefully to what we say to them, and observe our reactions to what they share and how they act.

If we approach college admissions from a place of fear and doubt, we may inadvertently communicate those feelings: fear that our teen won't get into a school that can ensure their success and doubt in their abilities and value.

There's a better way!





The College Admission Copilot

As our children grew through the years, our role as a parent shifted. We went from dabbing food from their chins to reminding them to use their napkins.

Navigating college application season requires the same type of parental adjustment, a shift from pilot to copilot.

As copilot, you retain many of your pilot duties. You continue to advise, encourage, ask questions and set limits, such as college budget or location. While you're no longer manning the controls, you sit next to the pilot (your senior), present at each and every step of the journey. The difference is that you are no longer directing or doing for your teen.

What does this look like in real life? Attend campus tours with your teen, be

there to provide moral support, but let them ask the questions. If you have your own questions about the school, provide them to your teen ahead of time or do your own research on the website.

By putting your teen squarely in that pilot's seat, you're reminding them that they own this project. By supporting them throughout the process of applying to college, you remind them they have your unwavering support.

Find more tips from Amy Romm Lockard, founder of Dovetail College Consulting, about how to be a great college admission copilot.

[LEARN MORE](#)

3 Ways to Empower Your Student



1 Schedule a Weekly Check-In

The college topic doesn't have to take over your entire life. You have other things to do and talk about! Set a weekly day and time to discuss college admission including progress on researching and applying to colleges. Some families like dinner time on the weekend because students aren't worn out from a day of school.

Your student will feel less anxiety knowing when and where these questions will arise. They can arrive prepared for the conversation.

2 Ask Open-Ended Questions

We get more insight when we ask open-ended questions rather than "leading the witness." It's the difference between "You're great with math. Have you thought about statistics?" and "What topics interest you? What can you see yourself digging into?"

When teens are given the space to respond, and feel that space is judgment-free, they volunteer much more information.

3 Set the Tone

Your teen will take note of the emotions you bring to this process, so think about what you'd like to convey. Students do the best work on their college research and applications when they're compelled by enthusiasm, their own and their parents'.

This is an exciting time! Our students get to be consumers — picking different colleges and careers off the shelves, reading the labels, opening them up to take a taste. So approach your copiloting role with joy and purpose. If you do, your teen is likely to be excited, stay on top of their work, and communicate with you more openly.

In a Nutshell:

Lead with joy and purpose to empower your student to pursue their interests and goals, and create space for them to communicate openly with you.

Remember that our high school seniors are more than their college applications! Don't talk about college all the time, and keep stress down by not asking your student's friends where they're applying or talking about your child's plans with other parents.

Part 2: Start Strong, Stay on Track

The most important thing your teen can do to have a great fall? Dive into their senior year. Engage in their classes and activities with enthusiasm. Have fun!

They also need to take care of their health and keep their busy life in balance (this is something parents can really help with). A balanced life will make it easier for them to maintain a good attitude during the strenuous college application season, and will result in a stronger application, too.

To help them keep up with deadlines, start with our [Senior Year of High School Timeline on p. 15](#). Here are some more priorities and tips for early fall tasks.



1 Get Organized

If your senior doesn't already have a filing system for college-related communications and materials, help them start one. Suggest they create a separate email account (e.g., `firstname_lastname@gmail.com`) for all college-related emails, create a landing zone in the home for all the brochures and paperwork, and start adding tasks on a calendar (either a wall calendar, an Excel or Google spreadsheet, or an app that can be synchronized with the family).

Here are some [free apps for college prep organization](#).



2 Meet With Their Counselor

All seniors should meet with their counselors to make sure they're on track to fulfill graduation requirements.

If they're applying to college, their counselor can use tools like Naviance to help them identify schools that line up with their interests and where they would be a strong applicant. It's time to finalize the list of schools they'll apply to ([more about that on p. 11](#)).

Counselors can also talk to your student about [alternatives to traditional four-year college](#). Maybe your student is interested in a gap year, or an apprenticeship.

3 Request Letters of Recommendation

There's no time to waste. Teachers, counselors and administrators are busy people. With multiple students asking for recommendation letters, your student wants to be first in line.

They should choose people who know them well and will be able to make the recommendations more personal. And they shouldn't feel self-conscious about asking; writing these letters is part of the job when you work with teens.

The teachers may ask your student to complete a form providing information about their activities, goals for college, schools they're interested in, and more in order to help them craft the best possible letter.

If your student is **applying for outside scholarships** (which every new and returning college student should!), they may need recommendations from other people who have mentored or supervised them.

Scholarships can only go so far. There are 15 other simple ways to save money on your student's college education.

[LEARN MORE](#)





4 Discuss Finances and File the FAFSA



If you want to avoid disappointment when offers of admission arrive, have **the “money talk”** before your student applies to colleges. Decide what you can afford, what you will be willing to contribute toward the costs, and what you expect your student to contribute.

This is a good time to **discuss the dangers** of too much student loan debt.

The **FAFSA** (Free Application for Federal Student Aid) is available online October 1. Filing when it becomes available should be a priority. Students must complete the FAFSA in order to be considered for federal aid and also for college-based aid grants and scholarships. Colleges will **award financial aid** along with their admissions decisions. If eligible, your student wants to be first in line for both need-based and merit aid.

A good financial aid package can make an expensive school much more affordable.

Read “Sticker vs. Net Price: Understanding the Real Cost of College” >

Make a senior year wish list that has nothing to do with applying to college!

Find time to do some fun things as a family. Treat your student to a getaway weekend or concert tickets. Make a gift of lessons for something they’ve always wanted to try. Start a tradition of cooking Sunday brunch together. Take up a craft together, start a family book club, binge watch a new show.

Part 3: The College List and Application

Remind your teen that the point of the college application is to present an authentic picture of themselves and their accomplishments. They shouldn't try to be someone they aren't.

And every chance you get, counter the hype. College is an exciting opportunity, and it can change a person's life. But there are so many schools where your student could thrive and be successful. Where they go isn't who they are, or **who they'll become.**

Where Will They Apply?

This is the fun part! It's time for your teen to finalize their college list. They may need to add more schools to a short list, or winnow down a long one. How do they do this?

- 1** Attend in-person and virtual college fairs, and admission staff visits to their high school.
Make sure they do their homework ahead of time and have a question or two to ask so they can make an impression on the admission reps.
- 2** Make final campus visits.
In-person visits aren't always possible (especially during a pandemic). But a few **fall tours** can help your teen get a better feeling for the kind of campus they're looking for and settle on a top choice. Visiting a college also demonstrates interest.
- 3** Continue to research school websites and attend virtual tours and events.
- 4** Schedule interviews (on campus, over video, or with alumni) at the top colleges on their list.
- 5** Talk to older siblings and friends about their college experiences.





A Balanced College List

After your student has gathered impressions and information, it's time to nail down the college choices. Look at the entire picture for each college: Is it a fit academically, socially and financially? Is your student at the top of the applicant pool and in the best position to receive merit aid?

The final list should be built around schools that are affordable for your family and where your student is a strong applicant with a better than 50/50 chance of acceptance (match schools). It's fine to have one or two "reach" schools but remember that the most elite schools are highly selective even for top students.

It's important to have one or two schools on the list that your student is sure to get into and would be happy to attend. This may be one of your state universities.

Within the parameters you've established, be open to any colleges

on your teen's list and prepared to compromise. You can guide them to schools you think would be a good fit, but remember that you won't be the one attending and it's not up to you to choose for them.

A few more things to consider:

- Many large public research universities have honors programs — a great option for academically strong students looking to work closely with faculty. Your student's GPA and test scores might qualify them for scholarships at out-of-state universities.
 - Read these current college students' views **on why location matters when choosing a college.**
 - Don't overlook historically women's colleges and **HBCUs.**
 - **Learn more about schools that specialize in technical education >**
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The Common Application and Personal Essay

More than 950 colleges and universities accept the Common Application. It's time for your student to **start their Common Application** if they haven't already. There's a mobile app so they can even work on it on their phone. The **Application Guide for First-Time Students** is a helpful reference.

It's also time for your student to put the finishing touches on the **college essay** they began working on over the summer. The essay is their chance to offer insights into who they are beyond their test scores and grades. Here are this year's Common App **essay prompts**.

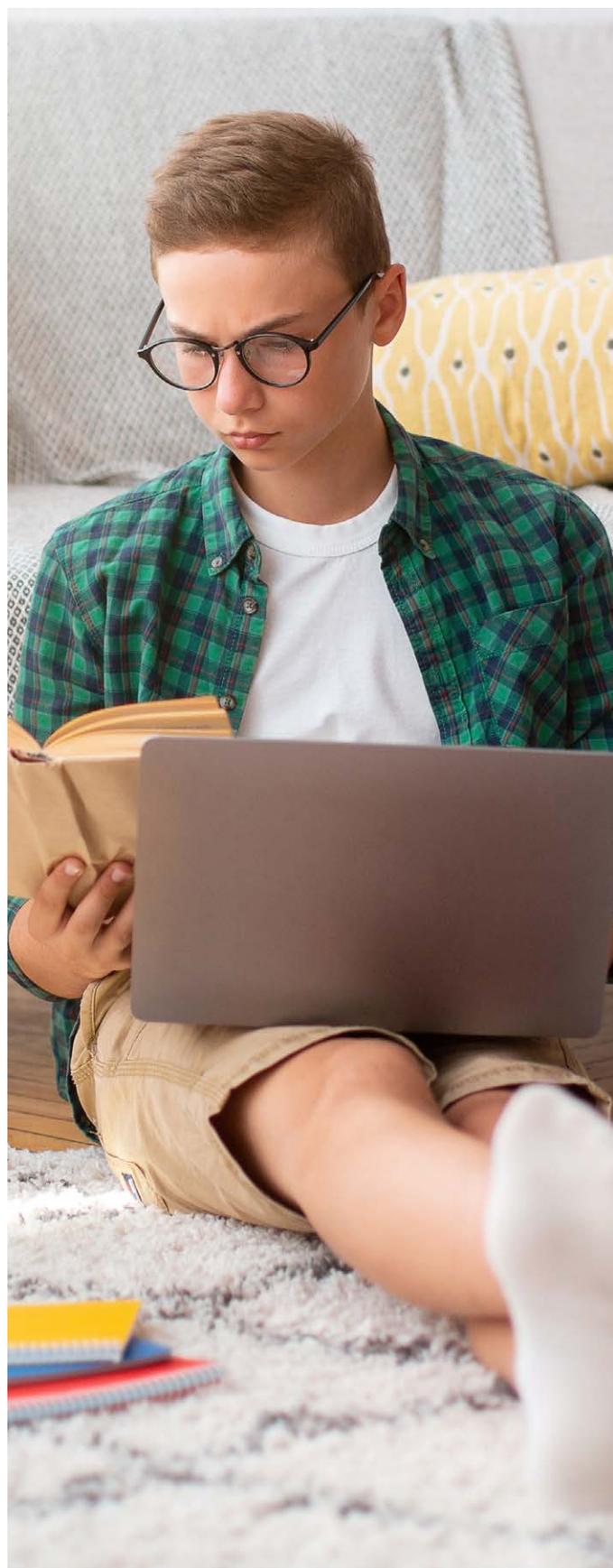
Completing college applications takes time and organization. Encourage your student to schedule a chunk of time once or twice a week to work on it.

Information collected on the Common Application:

- *High school courses and grades*
- *List of activities*
- *Standardized test scores*
- *Academic honors*
- *Family demographic information*

Remember that your student is the one filling in the application, although they will need your input for some of the demographic information. The only part a parent needs to help complete is the Early Decision Agreement if your student will apply ED.

This **Requirements Grid** can help your student keep track of what the different schools on their list require regarding test scores, recommendations, supplemental essays and application fees.



Get Applications in Early!

Your student may want to consider applying Early Decision or Early Action to their top choice schools. **Applying early** means they'll hear from the colleges sooner and also get information on the financial aid award.

Applying EA (Early Action) doesn't entail a binding commitment if your student is offered admission, so they can apply to more than one school. If your student is looking at schools that offer Rolling Admission, it would be great to hear from those early as well.

[Learn more about test-blind and test-optional college admission >](#)

[Get 8 top tips for applying to college >](#)

[How to support your student through early admissions decisions >](#)

College application options and deadlines:

- **Early Decision (ED):** Deadline is typically November 1st or 15th.
- **Early Action (EA):** Most common deadline is November 1st.
- **Priority Deadline:** Deadlines vary but are typically similar to ED or EA.
- **Regular Decision:** A majority of schools use the deadline of January 1st, but this varies, so double check.
- **Rolling Admission or Late Applications:** Rolling Admissions allow students to submit at any time.
- [Get more info on college application options and deadlines >](#)





Is your student dragging their feet about this whole process?

Don't overlook the importance of talking about "why college?" They may just assume they should go to college without having thought about what they want from it. You can help them understand that they don't need to know their major or desired career for college to be valuable; they do need to be intellectually curious and excited to work hard on academics and self-discovery.

Or maybe it's a question of "when college." Your student can apply to colleges and still opt to **take a gap year** by deferring.

"If your student is unmotivated, it won't help to nag and push them to do the college prep work. There is one lesson I learned with both of my kids (as well as the clients I work with): If your student isn't invested in the college process, they won't be invested in college. Save yourself time, money and heartache and wait until they're ready and know that college is what they want. Our teens and young adults deserve the chance to determine their own unique paths."

– Suzanne Shaffer, Parenting for College



High School Senior Year

Timeline



September

Get psyched for senior year!
Meet with counselor – double check graduation requirements, discuss other post-high school options, make preliminary college list.
Create calendar of admission and financial aid deadlines.
Plan final campus visits
Register for Oct., Nov. or Dec. test dates if retaking SAT or ACT.
Request teacher recommendations.
Draft Common Application essay.

October

Work hard in your classes.
Attend admission rep visits at the high school.
Complete financial aid forms (FAFSA, CSS Profile).
Polish Common App essay; begin supplemental essays (if required).
Finalize list of schools to apply to.
Complete Early Decision and/or Early Action application(s) if applying early.
Keep up with and enjoy extracurricular activities.

November

Prepare to submit regular decision applications in advance of deadlines.
Schedule virtual or in-person interviews if available.
Clean up social media accounts.
Research and apply for scholarships.
Take care of your health.
Have a happy Thanksgiving with your family!

December

Follow up with teachers/counselor about recommendations.
Send test scores and transcripts.
Complete Common Application and supplements.
Submit applications before winter break so you can enjoy the holidays!

January

Submit applications to colleges with late deadlines.
Send fall semester grade reports.
Follow up with schools to make sure your applications are complete.
Considering a gap year or an alternative to college? Research options.

February

Stay engaged with high school (watch out for senioritis).
Plan something fun for spring break.
Continue to apply for scholarships.
Order graduation announcements.

March

Celebrate your offers of admission!
Compare financial aid awards.
Think about summer (job? internship? volunteer? travel?).
Make graduation party plans with friends and family.
Focus on self-care.

April

Attend “admitted student” events at colleges you’re considering.
Decide whether to accept wait list spots (if offered).
Keep grades up — the college you accept will require a final transcript.
Choose your college and mail the deposit by May 1st!

May

Take AP tests (your college may accept scores for course credit).
Inform counselor/teachers who wrote recommendations of your choice (and write thank-you notes).
Research first-year housing options; connect with potential roommates.
Happy graduation! You’re a college student now!

There are many paths into adulthood and the working world, and unique individual timelines for accomplishing our personal goals. Whether or not they will apply to college, this is an exciting time in the life of your high school senior! They've worked hard and have so much to look forward to. They should be proud of themselves (and you can be proud as well).



CollegiateParent

CollegiateParent is here to answer your questions throughout the college years. Explore our website and [shop for college](#), [join our Facebook group](#) and [sign up for our parent newsletter, the Loop](#).