

Blissfield High School



College Counseling Handbook

**BHS Counseling & Career Center
630 South Lane Street, Blissfield, MI 49228
Phone: 517.486.2148 ext. 203
Fax: 517.486.4749**

Greetings from the Counseling & Career Center!

We hope you will find this handbook a useful tool as you move through this next year. We have done our best to anticipate your questions and hope that you will be able to find most of your answers in these pages. What follows is a combination of advice, explanations, procedures, and policies, some BHS-specific, some not.

Please use this handbook in conjunction with the BHS Counseling website and your PrepHeadquarters (PrepHQ) account. There you will find links to extensive resources on all aspects of the college search, and the application process.

To our parents: We want you (really, we *need* you) to be active participants in this process. We will do our best to keep you informed of your child's progress and invite you to create an account in PrepHQ and on Home Access Center to monitor requests and review information your child receives from our office. Conversely, we encourage you to be as open as possible with your child and with us about your expectations and, if applicable, your boundaries, whether they be geographic, financial, or otherwise. We invite you to contact us at any time in the search with questions you may have, to let us know if you need to meet with us, and to join our college admission and financial aid workshop in the winter. We encourage you to pay particular attention to the section in this handbook outlining application procedures to understand the responsibilities that rest with your child. As we will tell students repeatedly over the coming months, they own this process. We will help them when they ask us (and often when they don't), but they need to understand that their role is central to a successful search.

To our students: You are the *you* we keep referring to in the pages that follow. While your search is a collaborative process, ultimately you are the one who will be going to college. To that end, we'll expect you to take the lead in the process. You'll be the one researching the colleges. You'll be the one keeping tabs on your deadlines. You'll be the one writing your essays and completing your applications. Your counselor will be here to help you through the process, from now until the day you accept an admission offer. But we won't do it for you. Use this handbook wisely. Almost everything you need to know is right here. If you can't find an answer, then ask your counselor. And if you aren't sure what to ask, then tell us that as well. Conducting a college search is hard work, but it shouldn't be frightening, and it shouldn't be lonely. Nor should you allow it to ruin your senior year. You have abundant resources at your fingertips. Use them.

Sincerely,

Cheryl Bausman, Counselor
Jolene Nofzinger, Counseling Office Assistant
Jennifer Haynes, Counseling Intern

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MISSION AND PHILOSOPHY

The Blissfield High School Counseling & Career Center strives to assist each student in finding the best possible post-secondary match. Our students apply to and enroll in a wide range of colleges and universities, reflecting the variety among their interests, talents, and priorities.

College counseling is distinct from college placement. Central to the process is discussion about academic program; potential for success and degree of effort required within a given program; general demeanor among students; quality of relationships among students, faculty, and other advisers; and attitudes towards the school—real, perceived, or otherwise. Throughout the process, we encourage students to clarify their thinking about college options; make intelligent and informed choices; present themselves and their credentials as accurately, fairly, and clearly as possible; and resolve any difficulties or confusion that arise along the way.

The college search is an educational process, a journey of self-discovery replete with challenges, rewards, and responsibilities. **We assume that students who are preparing themselves to go off to college within a year will possess the motivation and self-discipline to seek the help needed rather than wait for the counselors to come to them. In all steps of the process we expect students to take initiative and be aware of the procedures and deadlines.** *Careful planning, realistic thinking, and a willingness to adjust—if necessary—previously held and possibly unreasonable goals are essential to finding an environment that fits the needs of the student.* The college counseling process is a partnership among students, parents, and the school. We need your input, we welcome your questions, and we stand ready to assist.

THE COLLEGE SEARCH TIMELINE

This timeline will give you an idea of how your college search will unfold. It notes important benchmarks along the way. You will find detailed information about many of these bullet points in the sections that follow.

Grade 9

- Select classes that will both challenge you and match your career interests.
- Get involved: athletics, the arts, publications, student government, etc. Play to your strengths or try something new.
- Work to your academic potential. Remember, your semester grades and attendance become a part of your permanent record.
- Meet your high school guidance counselor and discuss your plans for the next four years.
- Update your EDP.
- Check out what high school courses colleges require.
- Become familiar with the NCAA core course requirements if you want to play sports in college.
- Keep an academic portfolio and a co-curricular record.

Grade 10

- Keep working hard to earn the best grades you can. Enroll in challenging courses.
- Take the PLAN test. It helps identify early college readiness and career interests. With qualifying PLAN scores, you are eligible to dual-enroll as a junior.
- Attend the Sophomore visitation at the LISD Tech Center. and consider a class for next year.
- Update your EDP to familiarize yourself with a career pathway and begin considering important school characteristics.
- Keep a record of your co-curricular involvement, volunteer work, and employment (all year).
- Athletes should continue to focus on the NCAA academic eligibility requirements and take classes to meet them.
- Sign up to take the PSAT in the spring of your sophomore year.

Grade 11

Fall

- Take the PSAT test. With qualifying scores you may dual enroll as a senior. In addition, the PSAT is the National Merit Scholarship Qualifying Test.

- Review your EDP and discuss your credit status with your counselor.
- Explore potential careers by utilizing CareerCruising and job shadowing opportunities.
- Begin planning for after high school by visiting the CCC and learning what is available for you there.
- Attend college night and visit with the representatives who visit the CCC during VIP.
- Athletes should focus on the NCAA academic eligibility requirements and continue taking classes to meet them.

Winter

- Visit local colleges to help develop a list of characteristics you want to find in a college.
- Prepare a list of colleges that have the characteristics you are looking for by using Career Cruising, College Board’s website, and the Princeton Review website.
- Research admission requirements for colleges of interest.
- Prepare to take the Michigan Merit Exam

Spring

- Take the MME in March. This includes the ACT, WorkKeys, and Michigan developed tests.
- Narrow down your college list by continuing to research and visit colleges.
- Consider summer opportunities to further your studies or explore schools.
- Prepare to send applications to highly selective schools by early fall.

Grade 12

Fall

- Attend Senior Dessert Night—you will review your credit status and obtain important information for college planning.
- Work toward finalizing your college list.
- Attend college night and visit with the college admissions representatives who visit the CCC during VIP.
- Visit schools that look promising to you.
- Ask teachers to write letters of recommendation.
- If needed, retake the ACT or take the SAT exam. (December is the last date to qualify for some State of Michigan scholarships).
- Set up your PrepHeadquarters (PrepHQ) account and sign the release form in the CCC in order to request transcripts online.

- Complete and submit applications for colleges with rolling admissions as soon as possible. Watch for Early Action/Decision deadlines.
- Register with the NCAA Clearinghouse if you plan to participate in college athletics. Make sure you meet their eligibility requirements.
- Check the scholarship file in the CCC and on PrepHQ. Begin applying for scholarships.

Winter

- Attend the financial aid workshop at BHS in late January or early February.
- File your FAFSA as soon as possible after January 1. Pay careful attention to the financial aid deadline and requirements of each college.
- Continue to apply for scholarships.

Spring

- If necessary, review your financial aid packages with your counselor.
- Visit or “re-visit” schools to decide which to attend. ***May 1: You must send a deposit to the college of your choice by this deadline. Do not send more than one deposit.***
- Share your enrollment intentions with your counselor.
- Notify colleges you do not plan to attend so that they can begin to admit students from their wait lists.
- Beware the senior slide! Colleges will receive your final transcripts. A drop in grades may cause them to reevaluate their offer.

STANDARDIZED TESTING INFORMATION

BHS students are automatically registered for the following standardized tests:

- Grades 9 & 10—PLAN
- Grade 11—MME, which consists of a college reportable ACT, WorkKeys, and State of Michigan items for Mathematics, Science and Social Studies.

Registration information for any other ACT or SAT test is available in the counseling office; however, we do not facilitate that registration. Most students find the registration process easiest to complete online. Online registration requires a credit card number.

A word of caution to students: Take special care that your name, address, birth date, and Social Security Number are identical each time you register. Using a nickname on one test but not on another, or using your home address at one sitting but your BHS address at the next, will prevent test agencies from matching subsequent test results. If you notice any discrepancy, correct it immediately.

Keep the number below handy; you will need it to register for additional ACT tests or for SAT and the SAT Subject Tests:

BHS School Code (or CEEB) Code: 230-345

ACT: The ACT is a subject based exam that evaluates four areas: English, math, reading, and science reasoning; there is also an optional essay. The ACT is widely accepted at nearly all colleges and, in some cases, as a substitute for both the SAT and SAT Subject Tests.

SAT Subject Tests: The SAT measures verbal and mathematical reasoning skills. The SAT Subject Tests evaluate knowledge of specific disciplines: math, sciences, foreign language, etc. The more selective a college, the more likely it will require SAT Subject Tests—usually two, sometimes three. As you prepare to apply to colleges, you must make sure you know what each college will require.

Score Reporting: When you register, and again on the day of the exam, you can choose to send your scores to as many as eight colleges: four at no extra charge, and up to four more for a fee. If you need to send scores to additional colleges, or if you decide after the test date that you want scores reported, you will be charged a fee for each report sent.

Blissfield High School automatically records standardized test scores on your transcript. However, to report scores on a transcript, you need to sign a release form. The testing record attached to your transcript is cumulative. For more information on this topic, read the section in this handbook on Application Procedures.

Extended Time Testing and Other Accommodations: Students who have documented learning or physical disabilities can qualify for additional testing time or other accommodations (use of a computer, etc.). You may apply for this nonstandard

administration if you have been tested for a learning disability or physical disability within the past three years and if you have on record at BHS a signed statement from a licensed clinical psychologist, physician, child study team, or learning disability specialist indicating that you require extra time on both major evaluations and standardized testing. Please note that you must apply to the testing agencies in order to receive extended time on standardized tests; in other words, simply being approved for extended time here at BHS does not automatically allow you the same accommodations on standardized tests. For more information, talk to your counselor your special education provider.

STARTING YOUR SEARCH

The college search process begins early when students complete their EDPs. Beginning in the 9th grade, we ask students to start identifying schools that have programs or training in areas they are interested in vocationally. Although many schools may be appropriate for a student, we encourage students to search for that “best fit.” A *best fit* is a school that feels like home to them. Rather than begin with a school name, we encourage students to identify characteristics or priorities that are important to them. We want you to have some serious conversations with your parent(s) about priorities. And sometimes, their priorities and your priorities won’t necessarily coincide. It’s best to get that ironed out at the start.

We’ll be asking you to do some self-assessment and report on your activities, interests, skills, and values (fall senior survey). Your responses will help us help you narrow the field of college choices. To find the best fit, you need to be aware of, and think about the kinds of options that exist. Do you want a big school? A small school? Something in between? What does size even mean, anyway? A liberal arts college? How about a comprehensive university? Do you know what the differences are? Ever consider a women’s (or men’s – there are a few) college? And what about location? City? College town? Rural area? How close to (or far from) home do you want to be? How do you occupy your time out of class at Blissfield? At home? What have you done and do you plan to do with your summers? What classes excite you? What classes put you to sleep? Where do you shine? Where do you stumble?

Chances are you’ve already thought about some of these things. Maybe you have some answers. Maybe you have none. Either is fine. Don’t ever apologize for being undecided. It means you are open to new ideas and suggestions and places.

If you have specific colleges in mind, we want to know that. The ultimate goal is to create a list of possibilities. If your interests (academic, geographic, and otherwise) are specific, you will probably find a lot of similarities among the schools you identify. If you are more open, you might be interested in different types of schools for you to research so you can get a sense of the variety of places that exist. We will also suggest schools that span a range of selectivity. In the end, we want to ensure that the colleges to which you apply represent a range appropriate for your interests, finances, academic performance, and test scores. Your list may not change much at all from the beginning until the time you apply to colleges. Alternatively, you may wind up scrapping the initial list entirely as you begin your research and discover new opportunities. Or you may just wind up changing your mind—and that’s fine, too.

To start your research, you’ll want to use the resources in our office and on the internet. The college counseling office maintains a library of guidebooks, college catalogs, view books, and media. The internet can provide you with extensive—sometimes overwhelming—information as well. When using college websites, try to dig beneath the polished veneer the marketers have created. Also, be wary of online college admissions forums; while these sites are staffed by college admission professionals, too much of the

content is posted by students and parents, and it is mainly unreliable and oftentimes incorrect.

During spring and summer breaks, you should continue your research by visiting as many colleges as you can. By the time you return for your senior year, you will have narrowed your list considerably—and, in fact, may even have a final list. Throughout the fall, we are visited by admission representatives from colleges across the country. You should attend as many of these meetings as possible. More and more, colleges are taking student interest into account when making admission decisions. One of the ways in which you can show interest is by attending these on-campus information sessions. Typically, the representatives who visit will be the same people reading your applications, and they can find these conversations very useful. By late fall, you should be close to a final list. After that, it's just a matter of applying—and waiting.

Here are some books you might want to use to get started:

The Fiske Guide to Colleges by Edward B. Fiske

Colleges That Change Lives by Loren Pope

College Unranked: Ending the College Admissions Frenzy edited by Lloyd Thacker

The Insider's Guide to Colleges edited by the staff of *The Yale Daily News*

Letting Go: A Parents' Guide to Today's College Experience by Karen Levin Coburn and Madge Lawrence Treeger (a great resource you may find more useful at the end of the process)

PLANNING A COLLEGE VISIT

It doesn't matter how many viewbooks you read or websites you surf: there is simply no way to get a sense of how a college campus really feels until you visit. Some colleges are now counting student interest among the variables they consider when making admission decisions. Nothing demonstrates this interest more than visiting campus. Here are some tips to help you make the most of your time there.

First, do some research before you go using the resources online and in the college counseling office. If you haven't yet received any material from certain colleges, you should be able to find what you need on their websites. This background information will help you plan your visit efficiently and decide what questions you'd like to ask once you get there.

While there isn't one best time to visit a college campus, there are a few times that are not especially good. Visits made during vacations or exams will give you an incomplete and often inaccurate picture of the school. While you can see what a college physically looks like anytime, you'll want to talk with a variety of people—admission counselors, financial aid officers, students, faculty—to learn what the place is really like. And you can't do that if they're not around. (That said, it's better to visit a campus at a non-optimal time than not to visit at all, so if summer visits work best for you and your family, that's fine.)

It makes sense to spend at least a half day at each school you are considering; if you can manage, spend all day, especially on larger campuses. After all, this is where you may be for the next four years, and you want to determine if the college will be a good fit for you.

Phone ahead to the admissions office to find out what you can do during a visit and what you need to sign up for ahead of time. You will probably visit the admissions office, most likely for a group information session, perhaps for an individual meeting. Individual meetings may be evaluative interviews; you can find out by contacting the admissions office. Be sure to ask about proper dress, as well as time and length of sessions. Try to arrive a few minutes early to avoid last minute anxiety. For either group or individual sessions, come with questions that you want answered. There is nothing wrong with making a list ahead of time; it shows that you're prepared. Avoid questions, however, that are easily answered by reading the school's recruitment materials, like how many students attend the school or the availability of a certain major. Also, *you* need to be the person asking the questions – not your parents!

A visit to the admissions office is often part of a campus visit, but that alone is not sufficient to explore a college fully. It's important to include time to look around the campus, both on your own and with a tour guide. You may want to sit in on a class, talk with a professor or a member of the athletic staff, or visit the music department. If part of the reason for your visit is to talk with one of these individuals, don't hope to drop in on the day of your visit; make appointments ahead of time. You definitely should make time

to talk with current students. A visit to the library, student union, art museum, or bookstore will help give you a sense of what the institution is really like. Some schools have programs to host you overnight in a dorm; if you are interested, ask the admissions staff about it when you call ahead.

A college may send you an invitation to its “Open House,” a day or weekend full of programming designed to highlight that school’s strengths. While an Open House can be a useful introduction to what a school has to offer, it is not always the best reflection of what a school is like. On these days, the college will be swamped with visitors. A school that prides itself on the personal attention it offers its students may not in fact be able to demonstrate that quality on a day it is besieged by 150 visiting families. This is not to say that you shouldn’t attend Open Houses. Just keep the visit in perspective. If you want a visit centered around your interests and your interests alone, an Open House will not offer that opportunity.

Be sure to view the college critically in terms of your own priorities for the next four years. Consider both the academic and social life of campus as well as any other points that are important to you. Throughout your visit, make some notes about your impressions and the information you gained at the college. (A colleague at another school suggests that her students purchase a postcard from the campus bookstore and use it to record their immediate impressions of the school.) Taking a camera isn’t a bad idea, either. You’ll find all these resources useful later on.

Finally, be wary of the opinions of others. Just because your best friend or your cousin or your teacher or your mother’s business partner’s daughter loved or hated a place doesn’t mean that you will too. Trust your own instinct regardless of what others have to say. You owe it to yourself to form your own opinions.

APPLICATION PROCEDURES

Applying to colleges can be a cumbersome process. To make it run as smoothly as possible, and to make sure that everything gets to where it needs to be by the time it needs to be there, we've outlined the steps you'll need to follow. If you have questions, please ask.

Admission applications generally comprise the following items:

- the student application
- essay(s)
- the application fee
- a transcript, secondary school report (SSR), and counselor recommendation
- standardized test scores
- teacher recommendations.

Not all colleges will require all items, and it is your responsibility to keep track of what each college needs.

What You Send	What We Send
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• the application, including essays• the application fee• official test scores• ANY and ALL supplemental materials (CDs, DVDs, etc.)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• SSR and counselor's recommendation• transcript and school profile• school record of test scores• teacher recommendations

Here are the procedures you need to complete to ensure materials are sent by appropriate deadlines:

1. Register at PrepHQ—our electronic resource for tracking applications and requesting transcripts. You will need to sign a release form in order to utilize PrepHQ.
2. Request transcripts through PrepHQ for each college to which you apply. Generally, a transcript request is due in the college counseling office at least two weeks prior to the deadline. If you do not give us at least two weeks notice, we cannot guarantee that we will meet the deadline.
3. Request Counselor recommendations through PrepHQ for those schools that require such documentation. Place documents for the counselor in the basket outside of the counselor's office at the time of your request.
4. Application fees can vary widely and can be paid with a personal check, money order, or credit card if applying online. Some colleges will reduce or possibly waive their fees if you apply online or by a certain date.

If you think the application fees may create an undue financial burden on your family, talk to your college counselor. We can help you determine if you are eligible for fee waivers.

5. You must follow these steps to obtain your **Teacher Recommendations**:
 - Be sure to afford faculty plenty of time in which to write the recommendations. So, by **November 1**, identify two (2) teachers to write on your behalf and ask these individuals IN PERSON if they are willing to do so. If you are applying to colleges with **Early Action** or **Early Decision** deadlines of November 15 or earlier, you must make this request by **October 1**.
 - Be sure to notify the faculty of your earliest application deadline. You also should tell them which schools the letter will be sent to.
 - Notify the CCC which teachers will be writing recommendations. Teachers will give the recommendations directly to us.

Here are some suggestions for choosing the teachers who will write for you:

- Ask a teacher who has taught you in a traditional academic discipline in either junior or senior year. References from advisers, unless they have taught you, are not much help to the admission committee.
- You don't need to ask the teacher who knows you best outside the classroom; colleges want to hear primarily about your ability as a student. Is there a class in which you worked particularly hard to earn the grade you did? Is there a class in which you made a significant amount of progress over the course of the year? The best recommendations don't necessarily come from the teachers who gave you the highest grades.
- Consider what you plan to study. If you are undecided, that's fine. But if you are applying to an engineering program, for example, the college will probably want to hear about your math and science ability.

If you would like to supplement your file with a recommendation from a coach, employer, adviser, or clergy person, that's fine as long as these references do not take the place of letters from your teachers. (Keep in mind that colleges are not impressed by letters from politicians or CEOs or Joe Alumni unless these people have served in one of the roles suggested above.) Three letters should be the maximum number you send. These additional recommendations should be mailed directly to the colleges by the individuals who write them.

6. Most colleges will require that you submit **Standardized Test Scores** from the ACT, SAT and/or Subject Tests. It is your responsibility to know which colleges require what scores. Always check the college website or the most recent admission publications to verify this information.

Many colleges require that scores be sent directly from the testing agency. These are known as **“official scores.”** It is your responsibility to know if a college needs official scores. As a rule of thumb, the larger the school, the more likely it

will expect official scores; state university systems always require official scores as well. If a college asks for official scores, it is your responsibility to see that the college receives them. You can find detailed instructions for sending scores in the SAT and ACT registration booklets available in the college counseling office or online at www.collegeboard.com and www.act.org.

If a college does not specify official scores, it generally means the college will accept scores from your transcript.

TO RECAP STUDENT RESPONSIBILITIES IN THE APPLICATION PROCESS:

- Keep track of each college's individual requirements.
- Know your application deadlines.
- Complete a transcript request for each college to which you apply, and return it to the college counseling office at least two weeks in advance of the deadline.
- Ask two teachers for recommendations by November 1 (by October 1 if you are applying EA/ED).
- Determine what test scores are required at each college, and make arrangements to have those scores sent, either as part of your BHS record or through an official score report from the testing agency. Note which schools require official test scores, and request the testing agency to send them well in advance of the school's deadline.

And one final word of advice: **PHOTOCOPY** anything that has not been saved electronically.

DEADLINES AND EARLY PROGRAMS

Deadlines: While deadlines vary from school to school, the admissions world has some significant benchmarks: November 1 and November 15 for most early programs; January 1, January 15, February 1, and February 15 are other common regular decision deadlines. The more selective the school, the earlier the deadline is likely to fall. Unless a school explicitly states otherwise, these are postmark deadlines.

More often than not, January 1 will be the earliest regular decision deadline you see. Many public universities have instituted “Priority Deadlines” well in advance of January 1. While they may have a later “final” deadline, you would be foolish not to meet the priority date. You should also take note of (and meet) any special filing dates for scholarships and honors programs, some of which require application materials in advance of the regular admission deadline.

Many public universities and some private ones sometimes publish what appear to be very late deadlines, well into the late spring and early summer. These schools typically make decisions on a “rolling” basis, reviewing applications as they arrive. When the class is full, it’s full, so if you are applying to any schools with rolling admissions, your best bet is to send an application as early as you can. Only in the case of rolling admission will you benefit by sending your application in early. While we don’t recommend that you wait until the last minute to send your other applications, there is absolutely no advantage to submitting your application weeks before a school’s deadline.

Early Decision and Early Action: Many colleges and universities have created three admission programs that enable students to fast-track the application process: Early Decision, Early Action, and Restricted Early Action. Early Decision (ED) plans require that students apply to their first choice colleges in the fall of the senior year, often by November 1. Colleges typically notify students of their decisions in December; if admitted, a student must withdraw all other pending applications. Early Action (EA) plans operate along the same general timeline but do not require a commitment of students; anyone admitted under an EA plan will have until May 1 to make a final choice. Restricted EA applies a restriction on the front end; students applying Restricted EA may not apply elsewhere under an ED or REA program, but they still have until May 1 to make a final choice. To confuse matters, some colleges offer both EA and ED programs, while others have two rounds of ED, with their ED II deadline sometimes falling later than the regular decision deadline!

EA is a very user friendly plan: apply, hear early, and, if admitted, take comfort in the letter you’ve got in your back pocket as you wait for answers from your other schools. You have no obligations to attend.

ED is a different animal altogether. It is true that—statistically speaking—you *may* have a better chance of being admitted to some colleges in the ED round than you would in the

regular pool. That said, you should not seriously consider applying ED at any school unless you have:

- researched all the colleges on your list thoroughly;
- identified a clear first choice;
- visited that school at least once (and preferably more than that); and
- decided you will not need to compare financial aid offers from other schools.

Why all the caveats? Because ED requires a commitment that EA and regular decision do not. When you apply ED, you sign a contract stating you will withdraw all other applications if admitted. Also, your college counselor must sign the ED agreement, and we are bound by the code of ethics of the profession to sign only one ED agreement for any one student. It's one thing to decide early in the senior year where you will apply. It's another matter entirely to decide where you will attend. Do not make this decision lightly, and do not be goaded into it by promises of an easy road to admission. You should be especially wary if you know your ultimate college choice will be based on finances; committing early will not allow you to compare need-based aid or merit scholarship offers from other schools.

If you apply under an early program, you will receive one of three decisions in December (or January, depending on the college's timeline): admission, deferral, or denial. Colleges most often deny a student in the early rounds when they know the student will not be competitive in the regular pool; it's their way of helping you focus your attention on realistic options. A deferral, on the other hand, is decidedly not a "no". A college will defer an early applicant if it believes the candidate has a fighting shot in the regular decision pool. Because you may be denied or deferred under an early program, you ought to have your other applications ready to go.

YOUR APPLICATION

Before you begin to write your applications remember this: what you submit is a reflection of you, the candidate. They should be thorough, thoughtful, well-written, and error-free. If you don't take your applications seriously, then why should the admission committees?

The Common Application: The Common Application is accepted by 300+ private colleges and a handful of public ones. It allows you to complete a single application that you can transmit to any college that accepts it. If you will be applying to several schools that accept the Common Application, you should definitely use it. It can save you a good deal of work.

Be aware that many colleges require supplements to the Common Application with varying degrees of complexity. It is your responsibility to know if your college requires a supplement and how to obtain it. This information is listed clearly in the Common Application itself, along with deadlines and testing requirements for each college.

The Essay: Except for standardized tests, no part of a college application seems to elicit as strong a reaction among students as the college essay. Some fear it, others loathe it, and many wonder why they have to write it at all. But regardless of your own personal feelings, consider this one fact: the essay is the only piece of the application over which you have absolute control. So why not use it to your advantage? Before you can figure out how to make the most of your essay, though, you should probably take a moment to think about why the essay is there in the first place.

College applicant pools tend to be self-selecting. This means that the students who have applied to the college have determined ahead of time that getting admitted is a possibility—even if that possibility is a reach. The result is an applicant pool that is generally similar in academic achievement: good grades, good testing, good course selection, etc. As you can guess, it doesn't take long before those students start to look alike, at least when it comes to the numbers. So that's why colleges ask for other things: extracurricular activities, interviews, recommendations—and essays.

The essay is your voice in the application. When put in context with the other pieces, it should help admission officers learn as much about you as they can. One of the myths of essay writing is that there is some "right" topic, and unless you stumble across it, you are doomed. This is simply wrong. Don't try to second-guess what admission counselors want to read. The truth is that they want to read whatever you want to write. That's the only way they will ever get a sense of who you really are.

That said, however, there are some tips you should keep in mind. First of all, don't waste the opportunity. Essays about frivolous topics might be fun to write, but chances are they won't really help the admission committee get to know you very well. Admission officers want to see that you have spent some quality time reflecting on who you are and how you

can best present your strengths. Here's a suggestion: take a look at the teacher evaluation forms included in the application. See all those boxes they ask the teachers to check, the ones rating your academic promise, leadership, creativity, reaction to setbacks, and the like? Take a few minutes to think of specific examples that illustrate one of those qualities. You might just stumble upon a good topic.

Next, talk with someone about what you plan to write. A conversation with your college counselor or a writing center consultant can help you clarify your thinking during the process.

Also, don't bite off more than you can chew. World hunger, homelessness, and the AIDS epidemic are problems worthy of serious attention, but they are incredibly complex issues. Trying to fit them neatly into two typed pages may make your genuine concern seem like superficial understanding. This isn't to say that you shouldn't write about important topics such as these. Just make sure you know what you are getting into.

Try to avoid the obvious. Most importantly, show, don't tell. Make the reader the twelfth man on the soccer team, the ninth singer in the Octet, another student in an AP course. The best essays are those that let the readers draw their own conclusions. Any essay that ends with, "Because of this experience, I now know the value of (insert appealing quality here)" hasn't done its job. Let your essay speak for itself.

Finally, **PROOFREAD YOUR ESSAY!** Then proofread it again. Then give it to someone else to proofread for you. Careless editing can ruin an otherwise perfect essay. Granted, given the volume of applications, admission officers don't generally read with red pen in hand, but if you don't care enough to edit your essay, admission officers may question your interest in their school — and that certainly is not the message you want to send.

Regardless of what you write, remember this: a stellar essay won't get you in, nor will a lousy essay necessarily keep you out. It is merely one piece in the puzzle. If you have a weak academic record, chances are the essay won't make much of a difference. On the other hand, if you are a top-notch student, you can probably squeak by with a so-so essay. But most applicants fall somewhere in the middle. With admission officers constantly on the lookout for reasons to admit you, make sure you use your essay to give them a feeling that their school needs you.

INTERVIEWS

You might hear conflicting information about the function and significance of the interview in the college admissions process. That's because the role the interview plays varies from school to school. Most large universities have moved away from personal interviews simply because of volume. In larger schools where personal interviews are still available, the emphasis tends to be on giving information rather than on gaining an impression of the candidate for use in the admissions decision. Most small colleges, however, highly recommend an on-campus interview (distance permitting) as a way of knowing you more personally—and possibly determining your interest level.

You can best prepare for an interview by anticipating the questions you might be asked. Some that are not out of the realm of possibility could be:

- What do you like about high school? What would you change?
- What are your favorite classes and why?
- Tell me about your family.
- How did you learn about our school?
- What activities are most meaningful to you?
- Do you keep abreast of current affairs? If so, how?
- How do you spend your summers?
- How would your teachers and/or friends describe you?
- What are the most important factors in your choosing a college?
- What do you read outside the curriculum?
- Is there anything you want the admission committee to know that may not be addressed by your application?

Don't be surprised if the topic of grades and test scores never comes up. Admission officers can find that information easily enough. The interview is to learn about those things they can't get from the few pieces of paper that comprise your application. Also, don't be surprised if you find yourself sitting across from a current student instead of an admission officer. Many colleges train senior interns to interview prospective students during busy times of the year. Use this as an opportunity to learn as much as you can from a student perspective and don't worry that the person you're speaking with is "just a student."

Alternatively, a college may arrange for you to meet locally with one of its alumni. That's a great opportunity to learn about the mileage the alum feels he or she received from his or her college degree. Alumni love talking about their alma maters and are impressed by intelligent questions about how their lives and careers have been impacted by their college experience. If you wind up talking to a student or alum, remember that an interview is an information exchange, not a referendum on your candidacy. Compared to an on-campus interview with a member of the admissions staff, an alumni interview carries relatively little, if any, weight, in the admissions decision. Have the interview anyway and still put your best foot forward. Rest assured—for as much faith as they

have in their volunteers, admission committees do not cede their decision-making role to students and alumni.

Here are some other tips for a successful interview:

- Make your appointment as far in advance as possible.
- Bring a map of the campus and the admission phone number so you know where to go and can call if you find you are running late.
- Make sure you allow for sufficient travel time—including finding a parking spot.
- Be prepared to ask intelligent, pertinent questions.
- Dress appropriately: neat, but not overly formal.
- Get the name and title of your interviewer. If you enjoyed your visit and plan on applying, be sure to write the interviewer a thank you note.

Most importantly, be sincere, be confident, and be yourself. Unless you suffer a complete breakdown in social skills the morning of your meeting, an interview can only enhance your application.

FINANCIAL AID

Finances may or may not have an impact on where you ultimately attend college. If you and your family will be going through the financial aid process, here is some (admittedly very basic) information to help you out. Financial aid is too complex an issue to be addressed fully in this handbook. Fortunately, internet resources abound. We strongly encourage you to use the financial aid links on the college counseling website to supplement what's written here.

Let's start with the basics: How much does college cost? This will vary, depending on tuition, fees, room and board, books, personal expenses, and transportation. In gathering information, be sure to consider all the charges; they will define the cost of your attendance. But based on availability of financial aid and financing options, the "sticker price" you see in guidebooks or catalogs may not be what you and your family will actually have to pay.

College financing is a partnership among families, colleges, and government. While application procedures may vary from school to school, you'll want to complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). This government form collects information about your family's finances and is available online at www.fafsa.ed.gov. The FAFSA cannot be filed prior to January 1 of the year you plan to enroll. Many private schools will also ask you to submit the College Scholarship Service's PROFILE form. You can find PROFILE at www.collegeboard.com. The FAFSA and PROFILE collect similar information; the main difference is that the FAFSA asks about income while the PROFILE also asks about assets. Each college to which you apply will have its own priority filing date for these forms. It is your responsibility to know these dates and to meet them. Failing to file on time does not necessarily mean you will be shut out. Colleges with limited aid budgets, however, often distribute their aid by filing date to students who miss the priority deadline. **These forms ask for information from your tax returns; you and your parents should estimate your financial information if you have not yet filed tax returns.** You can always correct the information later. Additional forms may also be required. Be sure to check on a college-by-college basis.

Financial aid officers use this information to calculate your expected family contribution, or EFC. That amount is then compared to the college's cost of attendance. If it is equal to or greater than the cost of attendance, your family will be expected to finance the full cost of your education. But if your family's resources fall short of the college's costs, you demonstrate need and may be eligible for financial aid.

You can get a sense of what your EFC might be very early in the process by using a financial aid calculator online; try www.finaid.org, www.fafsa4caster.ed.gov, two public service sites generally regarded as the most comprehensive source of student financial aid information available.

Aid comes in three basic forms: grants/scholarships, loans, and student employment. Grants are available from federal and state sources and private organizations, as well as

from the colleges themselves. Some are awarded on the basis of need, others in recognition of talent and performance.

Student loans, primarily the Federal Stafford and Perkins Loan programs, are students' largest sources of support: you borrow from the fund now, your interest is deferred until you graduate, and you repay after college. If you do not qualify for need-based loans, you may obtain what's called an "unsubsidized" loan; this means that you'll be responsible for paying the interest that accrues during your college enrollment.

Student employment allows you to earn money while you're in school. Many students and parents wonder how work and study mix, but research shows that students who work part-time often perform better than those who don't work. You can often find jobs in dining halls, libraries, offices and labs. Working can also help you define your career goals and limit the money you must borrow.

Your financial aid package will depend on the cost of attendance, your family contribution, and how a college chooses to proportion its aid. Wealthy colleges may be able to offer substantially more grant aid than loans. Colleges with smaller aid budgets may be forced to do the opposite. Many colleges will not be able to meet your full need. If this is the case, they will often provide you with information on alternative loan sources, either through the federal government or third party lenders. Colleges will usually supply a list of lenders; these are the colleges' preferred lenders; be sure to look elsewhere as well so you can obtain the best terms and rates; again, try www.finaid.org.

If you know that finances will play an important role in your final decision, you'll want to make sure your list includes at least one or two financial aid backups—that is, schools (often public colleges in your home state) your family can afford without significant aid or, for high achieving students, colleges at which you may be a strong candidate for merit scholarships. That said, don't eliminate a college from your list just because of a high sticker price—at least not at the outset. Given all the financing options that are available, costs which seem insurmountable at first glance can often prove to be quite workable. And if you have any doubts or questions, just call or e-mail the financial aid offices at the colleges you are researching. You'll likely find that they are as eager to help you as you are to be helped.

Finally, be sure to use the internet to search for scholarships. One particularly useful site is www.fastweb.com. It allows you to search a database of 600,000 scholarships by various criteria. Also, be sure to stop in the CCC to check on scholarships regularly!

SPECIAL CONSIDERATIONS

Athletics: We ask that all prospective student-athletes keep us informed if they plan to compete in college athletics. Athletic talent can serve as an important hook in the admission process if used properly, but dealing with college coaches can also confuse matters. It is important that students work with our NCAA Clearinghouse representative to help them complete their NCAA initial eligibility application online and to develop a comprehensive recruiting strategy in conjunction with our own coaching staff. It's helpful to think in terms of two college lists: one driven by a particular sport, the other with viable admission options regardless of coach interest. In either case, you must make sure you are comfortable with all aspects of your college choice, not just the athletic one.

Visual and Performing Artists: If you are applying to arts programs (particularly Bachelor of Fine Arts programs), take care to note any special requirements or deadlines they may have. Admission is often contingent upon an audition or portfolio review, and it is your responsibility to keep track of these requirements and schedule whatever appointments are necessary. Our fine arts faculty members are eager to work with you on your audition or portfolio, but please make sure you allot enough time to prepare work which best represents your talents. In most cases you will be applying concurrently to both an institution and a program within that institution, and it is possible that you may be admitted to one and not the other.

ADMISSION DECISIONS AND DEPOSITS

May 1 is an important date in the admission process. Colleges agree to hold their offers of admission open until May 1, and students must respond to their offers by that date (postmark deadline) with a non-refundable admission deposit. Any college that requests an admission deposit prior to May 1 must grant you an extension until that date if you request it.

No matter how difficult your decision may be, do not send deposits to more than one school. “Double depositing” is a highly unethical practice and will not be supported by the college counseling office. If a college to which you have committed learns that you have done the same at another institution, both have the right to rescind their offers. Upon your graduation, the High School office will send a final transcript to one college and one college only.

Waiting Lists: Even the most selective colleges will offer more acceptances than they actually have places in the freshman class. They do this because they know not all the students they admit will choose to attend. As a result, they frequently maintain a “Waiting List” of students to whom they can offer places should their freshman class turn out to be smaller than they anticipated. Obviously, most colleges will not know what the situation is before May 1, for colleges give accepted students until that date to indicate to them their intentions. Even after the May 1 reply date, it frequently takes several days or even weeks before the college knows (a) whether they are going to go to their Waiting List, or (b) the extent to which they will be able to go to it.

If you find yourself on a Waiting List at your preferred college, you are in a difficult position. On the one hand, a Waiting List offer is an indication from the college that you are in every way admissible; there is simply insufficient room to make a firm offer. On the other hand, because those colleges will have offered places to a larger number of freshmen than they have room for, there is no guarantee that the Waiting List position will ever be more than just that. It is a kind of limbo state. However, because the offer of a Waiting List is an indication that you are academically and in other ways admissible to the college, the Waiting List offer is a signal to the you, your family, and your counselor to provide to the college as much new, useful information as possible.

The Senior Slide: Three words: Don’t do it. In every acceptance letter, there is a qualifier that reads something like this: “This offer of admission is contingent upon successful completion of your current academic program.” Translation? If you decide to coast through the remainder of your senior year with grades that are not comparable to those you presented to the college in your application, the college can yank its offer. Please consider the consequences and make good choices.