





# How to Survive College Admissions

## and Enjoy the Ride

By Angela Geiser

**M**any families attend their first college fair in the junior year of high school and go into a panic. How can their student possibly complete all these tests and essays and narrow down colleges and career in just one year? While some families have no choice but to push through at a hurried pace, a better approach is to start early, by eighth grade, and help the student answer some big questions about what they want to study in college – and who they want to be.

But whether you start in junior high or the junior year, there are several guidelines to keep in mind. We offer tips from local experts as well as from the College Board, a national nonprofit that promotes college attendance, on ways your student can avoid the panic, land at an ideal school with a well-chosen major and grow tremendously in the process.

### Begin With “The Talk”

No, not *that* talk. The *college* talk.

“Parents should start by sitting down (with their kids) and having a conversation that asks: What is the purpose of going to college?” says Sophie Silverstein, an admissions counselor who has advised applicants for more than five years Bay Area-wide. “What are parent expectations? How did going to college – or not – serve the parents and how have things changed since then?”

The first discussion should take place by middle school if possible and progress over the next several years. This helps your student grow used to the idea of college and keeps it in the front of their minds. After chatting about college’s general purpose, Silverstein says parents should focus the discussion on their child with questions like: “Does the student want to go to college? What is the student expecting of their experience? How can they start to get more information? What are other options – gap years, community college, working and etcetera?”

### Explore Interests and Careers

Many students delay considering their future career until late in high school or even college. This is problematic because there’s little time for self-exploration in the junior and senior years when

they're bogged down with school work and college applications.

Also, without a career area in mind, it's hard to develop a list of colleges they want to attend.

"Students get overwhelmed by the variety and number of colleges," says Santa Clara-based admissions consultant Angela Sun, who has helped coach students into Harvard, Columbia and MIT. "They don't know what they're interested in, so they don't know where they want to go."

Finding their passion a bit late is also a problem if it's a high-demand major, such as engineering, biology or business, says Sun, who counsels students all over the region. Being accepted in impacted majors requires more than

good grades; students need to prove their competitiveness by completing AP coursework, taking SAT tests in the subject or gaining internships – none of which can be squeezed into a few weeks.

It's best to begin exploring a few areas of interest in middle school, Sun says, continuing especially during the summers and into their upper high school years. Ask your child to think about what he loves and is important to him – and how it can become a career.

"They need to develop a hypothesis about what they might want to do for a living, and then confirm or dispel that through experimentation," Sun says. "Experimentation is the key word."

By experimentation, Sun doesn't mean simply taking hard classes in their area of interest, but by gaining real-world experience. That means joining a programming club, volunteering at a hospital, attending an intensive summer camp or job-shadowing an architect before or by their junior year. And as a junior or beyond, it may mean getting an internship in their field of choice.

"They need at least one real-world experience for at least a semester ... to find out if it's really interesting to them," Sun says.

After a couple years of testing a few hypotheses, the less thrilling career options will fall to the wayside and the more exciting options will rise to the top.

### Develop a Strong, Four-Year Course Plan

The first things that colleges review on

applications are courses, rigor and grades, so spending time on class selection – and the coursework – is important, Silverstein says. "Ideally, students are taking courses that are interesting to them, rigorous and that they can do well in," she says.

That means taking a few advanced placement (AP) classes – not necessarily a schedule packed with them. Students can look on the website of their favorite college to check the average GPA and number of AP classes of incoming freshmen and aim to meet those averages. Their four-year plan should also contain a couple of extracurricular activities each year, Sun says. That shows they're involved in their community and indicates consistent commitment to a few interests – if

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possible, one related to their future career.

### Visit Before Junior Year

College Board, which is best known for administering the SAT but has a wider goal of expanding access to college, recommends that parents take their kids on their first college visit by middle school. The nearest state or community college will do, and you can throw in a concert or big game on campus to make it more enticing. Each year, add a few more campuses to your travel plans. Tour some of your student's top picks by junior year.

"Being on a campus illuminates what it could feel like to go to college," Silverstein says. It also "helps break down elements students should be looking for, like what it actually feels like to be on a campus of 2,000 students versus 10,000 students versus 40,000 students; how size impacts classes; what it's like to be in a lecture hall; how important food, housing or gyms are; and how accessible support is," she says.

### Practice College Admissions Tests Early

Students should take a practice ACT or Preliminary SAT (PSAT) test by sophomore year. (If their school doesn't offer one to sophomores, they can take it in a test prep book or online.)

To see which they perform better on, take both a practice ACT and SAT. But if time is short, focus on one. How to pick? The SAT's sections are split evenly between math and reading/writing skills, whereas

the ACT features only 25 percent math, and the rest is largely reading comprehension (even the science section). So the ACT may be better for a strong reader and writer, while the SAT – while it also has challenging reading excerpts – may be best for someone strong in math.

Test results will pinpoint weaknesses to work on. And if they practice, they will improve, Silverstein says. The teens she coaches regularly raise their SAT scores 200 points and ACT scores by three or four. They should allow several months to practice, so they can take the SAT or ACT in spring of 11th grade and again the next fall if needed, College Board says. If testing is not a strength, find colleges that don't require the SAT or ACT at [fairtest.org](http://fairtest.org), the website of the National Center for Fair & Open Testing.

### Know Your Guidance Counselor

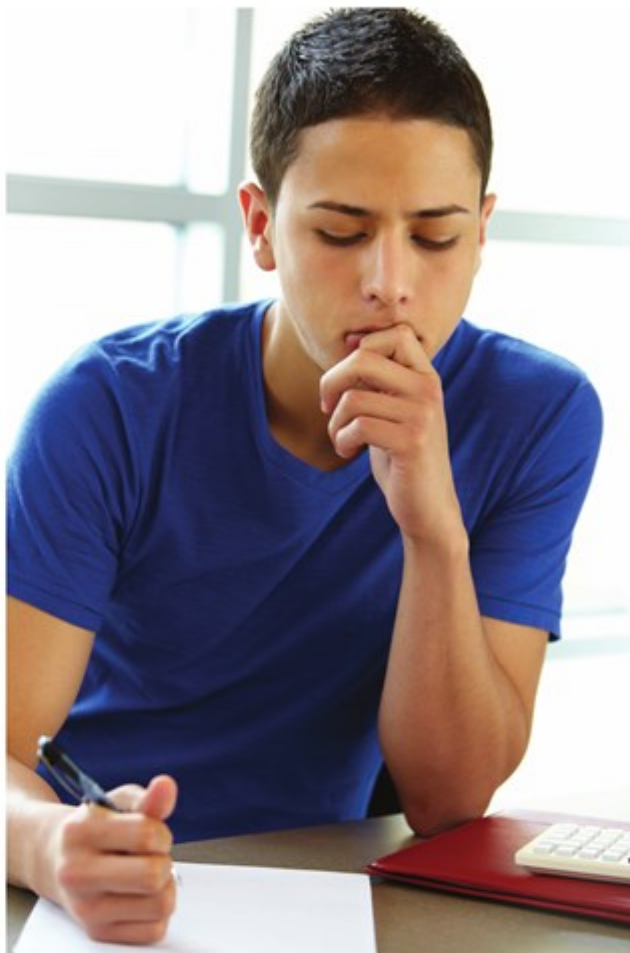
Doing so is important not only because the counselor can help choose appropriate classes and target colleges, but because the student will need a letter of recommendation from him or her to submit with the college Common Application. The Common App is a single form that can be submitted for many private and public colleges.

Interestingly, many top students struggle making time to visit their counselor. "They think there's nothing to talk to the counselor about," Sun says. But students at all levels can benefit from building a relationship over four years so the counselor will genuinely care about them – and translate that into an enthusiastic letter of recommendation. Getting to know a few teachers, hopefully one in their future major, also is a boost, as teacher recommendations are also used in the Common App.

### Don't Just Apply to the Obvious Schools

With more than 3,000 four-year schools in the United States, it can be difficult to discover lesser known schools that could be a perfect match for your teen.

Silverstein suggests starting the college selection effort by discussing how all the aspects of a school – its size, location, culture and academic rigor – play into the campus experience. Is the quality of your student's academic department paramount to him, or is the political atmosphere or cost of living more important? Share your own experience. Visit schools



or talk to a college counselor who visits a number of colleges every year, she says.

When your teen has an idea what they're looking for, check out sites like [collegexpress.com](http://collegexpress.com) to find colleges he or she hasn't heard of that fit the bill. College Board offers a school finder where you can input preferences like school size and rural or urban setting at [bigfuture.collegeboard.org/college-search](http://bigfuture.collegeboard.org/college-search). Make sure your student is an academic match for the college by checking average incoming freshman test scores and GPA on school websites or at [collegelists.pbworks.com](http://collegelists.pbworks.com) (search SAT scores).

Once you have a broad list, narrow it down by taking campus tours – real or virtual – and reading the *Fiske Guide to Colleges*, which publishes rankings and analysis not on the colleges' own websites.

Many applicants gravitate toward top national or large state universities, but a smaller, still well-rated school may be a better fit. Private schools can end