

# College Admissions: Step by Step

By Julie Hartline, ASCA's School Counselor of the Year 2009



It sounds like a simple enough question, but it can feel a bit overwhelming when you consider that there are over 7,000 technical, two year, and four year colleges in the country. When you think about it that way, starting high school is like being in a house with many doors and you have to figure out which door is right for you, and what you do from the beginning of your ninth grade year until the time you graduate will determine which doors stay open for you. You have to start planning now for your future.

## Freshman Year

Your freshmen year is the foundation of your high school record. I tell my students to think of it as the foundation of your high school "house" with tenth and eleventh grade being the walls and twelfth grade being your roof. If your foundation is weak, your house may crumble. Freshmen grades are the first grades that become a part of your high school transcript and your Grade Point Average (GPA). While that may not seem important now, it is one of first indicators of which doors will remain open for you. If you goof off your freshmen year, you have already started to limit your options so it is important that you develop good study habits and make good grades. Also get involved outside the classroom in co-curricular or community activities. This involvement will give you experience and will help you to determine what you may be interested in for your future. Let your school counselor help you to start your high school career off on the right foot.

## Sophomore Year

As a sophomore, continue to earn good grades while taking the most challenging courses that you can handle. Stay involved in clubs, sports and/or community service, and you will also take the PSAT and/or PLAN which are practice college admissions exams. These tests will help you to begin to explore and plan your college and career options. Meet with your school counselor to help you to understand your test scores, to begin exploring your future options, and to select the best courses for you to take in high school so that you will be prepared for your future.

## Junior Year

Junior year is critical! Not only should you continue to take challenging courses, make good grades, and be involved outside the classroom, but also this is the year to attend college fairs, schedule campus tours, begin your scholarship search, take the SAT and/or ACT, and ultimately select the four to six colleges that you will apply to next year Whew! That sounds like a lot, but hope -

fully you spent your freshmen and sophomore years building the foundation so that this is just the next step in the process of planning for your future. Consider the basics of what you are looking for in a college: location, environment, size, majors, and co-curricular activities. While cost is also a factor, I encourage you not to rule out a school at this point because of the tuition. The cost of college can be compared to buying a car; rarely do you pay the "sticker price" on the window for a car and the same goes for college. The true cost of a college will not be determined until the colleges have prepared your financial aid package, and many private colleges have their own private endowments from which to give scholarships and grants. Therefore, while it is important to look at cost at this point, I would not eliminate a school that you are really interested in until you have seen the financial aid package.

Once you have determined your preferences for a college, start searching for schools that match those preferences. With all your basics in mind, also consider what the colleges require of their applicants. Does your GPA, your SAT and/or ACT score, the rigor of your high school course work, and your co-curricular involvement match what the college is looking for in a potential student? The only way to match your preferences with the colleges' preferences is to do research, and I encourage you to use your school counselor and your school's career center as resources in this process because many off-line and on-line tools are out there to help you to figure out what college is right for you. Ultimately, you want to start your senior year with four to six colleges to which you plan to apply. The majority of the colleges should be target schools where your GPA and SAT/ACT scores match those of last year's incoming freshmen. You can include a reach school with GPA and SAT/ACT scores above yours and include a likely school with GPA and SAT/ACT scores below yours. All of the schools should be places that you would be happy to attend.

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## Senior Year

Finally, you are a senior. If you have determined your short list of colleges, this year will involve mostly completing applications for colleges, scholarships and financial aid. Just remember that you have to keep your grades up because colleges can revoke admissions decisions if you slack off your senior year; beware of "senioritis." As for your applications, be certain that you pay attention to deadlines as they will fall throughout the year from September to June. Continue to search for and apply for scholarships. If you need letters of recommendation, give your teachers and your school counselor at least two working weeks advanced notice so that you can get the best recommendation possible. Don't forget to send official transcripts to the colleges; this is usually done through the School Counseling office. Also, make sure your SAT and/or ACT scores are sent to the schools. As soon as possible after January 1, complete the FAFSA online at [www.fafsa.ed.gov](http://www.fafsa.ed.gov) so that the colleges can prepare your financial aid package. In the spring of your senior year, you will make a final decision about which college you will attend based on your acceptance letters and financial aid award letters.

For many students, where to attend college will be the first major decision that they will make in their lives. For twelve years, your parents and your community most likely told you where you would attend school, and now you get to decide for yourself. It is a big decision. However, there are people out there who will help you through the process. You can talk to your friends and family, alumni from the colleges, your teachers, and definitely your school counselor. By planning and letting others help you with the process, you will find the door that is right for your future.