

Regardless of whether you're a sophomore, junior or senior in high school, you may think that post-secondary schooling is well down the road, and you'll have plenty of time to think about it later. However, there are several things you need to start doing right now to prove you are the type of student for whom admission counselors are looking.

* ***Think about different jobs and careers that interest you.*** Consider your own interests, skills and talents. Talk to professionals who work in the field in which you are interested to get the inside scoop on what that career entails. This will give you a better idea as to whether this is what you would like to do.

* ***Start thinking about the type of school that you would like to attend.*** Compare colleges and universities across the nation in terms of total enrollment, campus setting, average class size, tuition and the percent of attending students who receive financial aid. You can also take virtual campus tours.

* ***Make sure you have taken all of the necessary courses in school.*** Just as there are certain requirements you must fulfill to graduate from high school, there are requirements for going on to higher education. Talk with your high school counselor and check informational brochures on schools you are interested in attending.

* ***Study hard!*** You don't have to be the smartest student in your school or even earn the highest GPA. You do need to work hard and meet your own potential. You can show an admission counselor dedication and initiative by working hard to earn high marks and showing improvement. Don't be discouraged, and keep working!

* ***Get involved in extracurricular activities.*** Don't overdo it and join several all at once, but select activities that interest you and allow you to exhibit your leadership skills. Consider sports teams, school clubs, community groups and church activities. Most admission counselors are looking for a well-rounded student; someone who can bring more than just "book smarts" to their school. Plus, it shows that you are responsible enough to handle the pressures of schooling while taking part in other activities.

* ***Take advantage of your school counselor's experience.*** Your counselor can offer you school brochures, scholarship applications, admission applications, financial-aid applications, SAT dates and much more. Your school counselor will also be sending your high school transcripts to the schools to which you are applying, so it is important to form a good relationship early on. It's important to get started right away to ensure your place at your first-choice post-secondary school!

Five ways to find a college

Picking a college is probably the biggest decision you've had to make, and there are lots of ways to mess it up. Here's some advice about what to do, and a few things not to do:

1. Get a guidebook. College/university guide books have all sorts of great info, including lists of colleges and universities by state, details about degree programs and statistics on

the sizes of incoming classes. College guides and magazines are great bases from which to start gathering information.

2. Don't stop there. You have interests and ideas that need more attention than fine print can provide. Make lists of the things you're looking for in a college, such as co-ed dorms or credit-transfer options. Make sure the schools you're considering meet those criteria. Then, check out each school's Web site to learn what else they have to offer. See what options they have for providing current student feedback to prospective students. Few people will relate to you as well as a college's current students.

3. Don't go to a school just because your friends are there. Start asking questions to find out which schools your classmates are considering. Ask why they think those colleges are good bets. Don't stop with high school friends; get in touch with older people who attend college. Find out what they appreciate most about their schools, and then ask what they wish they'd known before they got there. What works for your best friend might not do it for you. You'll make friends wherever you end up.

4. Don't rule out other regions. Don't be afraid to leave home, even for a school in an unfamiliar part of the country. Exposure to new things helps you grow; however, don't rush to move away just because you can. Community colleges and public universities in your state are likely to offer the best financial-aid packages.

5. Don't limit your options. College brochures are designed to sell you something: the college. Just because the book's pictures show things you like doesn't mean it's time to sign the loan form. Small colleges can showcase intimate classes, but are fewer classmates what you want? Or if you grew up in a rural area, will you feel comfortable in a big city? Rule out schools that don't have the majors you're interested in, and use visits and personal feedback to pare your other options. Read brochures, visit campuses and talk to students and advisers to help you decide where you'll be the most comfortable. It could be 1,000 miles from home or right next door.

Your Senior-year Plan

Maybe we should blame all of our college admission woes on the board game Life. Remember that game? A simple spin of the game's wheel got us a college degree! Real life, however, is not so easy.

Here is one of the coldest and hardest facts that high school students must face each year: The college applicant pool is getting larger and more competitive, while the number of spots for the incoming class mostly remains the same. It is a scary (but very possible) scenario that the college you seemed destined for at the beginning of your junior year may slip out of your grasp by the start of senior year.

A few years ago, the reason for receiving a rejection letter might have been poor SAT scores, lack of extracurricular activities or an early case of senioritis. These days, however, with more and more students recognizing the need for a college education, the simple reason is that even though you're good, colleges have an uncanny way of finding someone who is better. "Better" does not have to mean a higher average or longer list of accomplishments; it could mean that despite a very similar admission profile, an arbitrary decision must be made when it comes down to two good students for one spot. It is not uncommon for a top-notch student [to be rejected by] a college and a student with a weaker profile to be accepted if it means that the school will be satisfied with the nature of the incoming student population.

It is important to understand that the college admission process is not a conspiracy. The newest admissions phenomenon has above-average students scrambling to find spots anywhere in the nation's middle-ranked schools. It doesn't matter if you are the fifth generation to attend a certain school; there are no guarantees these days.

Here are some tips to help alleviate your growing pains:

1. Apply early

Get your application materials in as soon as possible. Colleges, above all, are businesses, and they need tuition money to survive. If you are a good match for a certain school, an application letter—and possibly some scholarship money—could be in the mail to you well before any date printed in the application materials.

2. Be aware of rolling admissions

These open-ended deadlines are double-edged swords. Think of them as no-cost insurance policies for colleges, who can see their numbers climb gradually but steadily as opposed to jumping dramatically in April and May if there were a set application deadline.

Consider this one terrific advantage: You'll know early on if they want you. You'll also know if they don't. If you're rejected, all is not lost. Although colleges won't advertise this loophole, you might be able to submit updated materials—or even a completely new application—later on in the admissions cycle. It's a long shot, but if a school's confirmed student numbers are not where they should be by the start of summer, a school that said "no" in December may say "yes" in June.

3. Don't assume anything

Point for point, you may very well match the profile for the school's ideal student. But don't paint your room in those school's colors just yet. If you are planning to major in a certain field, keep in mind that the school may already have reached its capacity for majors in that field and is currently recruiting for a different program. As a result, you may get a rejection letter simply because there are no more spots in the program at the time you applied, even if you do submit a stellar application.

4. Be a frequent and courteous visitor to your high school's guidance office

Your admission to college is a sign of your high school's success as well as your own. If you experience a snag, your school counselor should help you regroup for another plan of attack, whether that means sending a new round of applications to be dispatched immediately or writing an essay to get you off the waitlist.

5. Interview whenever possible

A one-on-one meeting with a college's admissions counselor helps them fill in the gaps and clarify anything missing on the application. Nervous? A case of the jitters at this time in your life will most likely be considered charming and, unlike when you interview for a job four years from now, probably won't be held against you.

6. Avoid the "S" words

"Safety school," that is. If you feel like you're treading water in the application pool, don't expect your "safety school" to be there to bail you out. There are many ways that so-called safety schools can fail you. If a school that you are over-qualified for sees that you are also applying to a higher-ranked institution for which you are also a good match, the admissions committee may assume that you will attend the more prestigious school. Instead of wooing you with a large scholarship, the committee may send you a rejection letter, wanting to instead spend its time on students they think want to attend their school more than you do.

The college admission process is a crazy, nerve-wracking time of your life, but you'll make it. Think of it as an adventure, and try to keep an open mind as far as the possible outcomes. Real life might not be as easy to navigate as the game of Life, but it is certainly a lot more interesting!