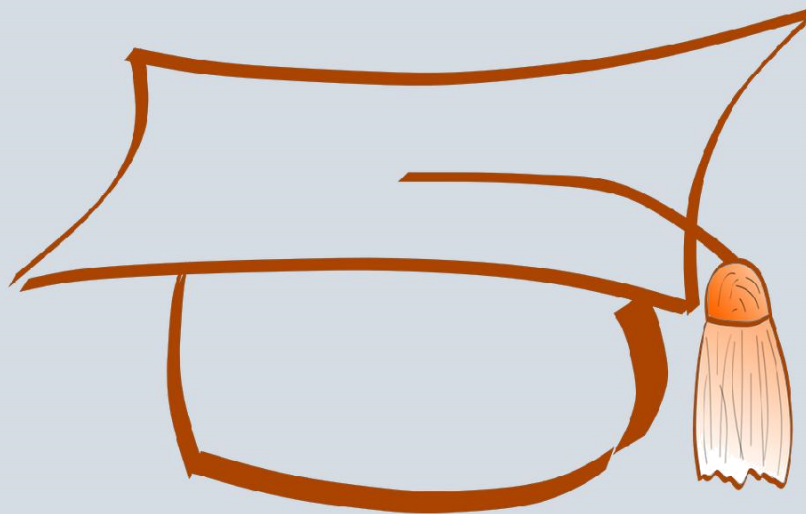


MAKING THE COLLEGE CONNECTION IN HIGH SCHOOL



: A JUNIOR PREP SUCCESS GUIDE



SoarToCollege.com

| | |
|--|----|
| Introduction..... | 2 |
| WINTER | 3 |
| <i>Five New Year’s Resolutions for High School Juniors</i> | 3 |
| <i>College Planning: January is for Juggling Test Dates</i> | 4 |
| <i>College Planning for Parents: February is for Finances</i> | 5 |
| <i>Winter Bonus Tip: Interpreting Your PSAT Results</i> | 6 |
| SPRING | 7 |
| <i>March Tip: Selecting Your Senior Year Courses: Is a B Better Than an A?</i> | 7 |
| <i>College Planning: April is for Asking Away!</i> | 8 |
| <i>College Planning: May is for Making Your Case</i> | 9 |
| <i>Spring Bonus Tip: Thinking About Your Summer Job</i> | 10 |
| SUMMER | 11 |
| <i>College Planning: June is for Judging Test Scores</i> | 11 |
| <i>College Planning: July is for Beginning Your College Journey</i> | 12 |
| <i>Summer Tip: Getting a Jumpstart on Standardized Testing</i> | 13 |
| <i>Summer Bonus Tip: Make Your Way Around the World</i> | 14 |
| Thank You | 15 |

Introduction

Winter, spring, summer, and fall – the passing of the seasons of the year sometimes seem to tick by slowly, and other times rush by at the blink of an eye. You'll find that when it comes to checking off the items on your college prep to-do list, the year will fly by. Now you're studying for the SAT or ACT and lining up an impressive summer job and before you know it, you'll be shopping for a mini fridge and pop-up laundry hamper and heading off to your top-choice college.

There's a lot to do and getting it all done before the buzzer is going to take focus, hard work, and lots of organization. That's why I've written *Navigating College Admissions & Beyond* – to help you stay on top of the complicated college admission process, to walk you through the various steps of preparation, and to show you that applying to college doesn't need to be a stressful experience.

This special guide is organized according to the seasons, starting with the winter, and bringing you through the spring and summer, up until the fall when you'll finally sit down and apply. This report is for *pre-applicants* – that is, eleventh graders who are still in the initial planning stage of their applications. (High school seniors who are already filling out their applications should download [Common Application Tips](#)

Please enjoy this seasonal guide brimming with expert advice to help you make your way through the college admissions maze.

Now, are you ready? Set? Go!

WINTER

Five New Year's Resolutions for High School Juniors

Happy New Year! The New Year inspires all sorts of resolutions and fresh starts. If you are a high school junior, it also marks the time for you to begin your college planning.

Here are five resolutions to get you started:

1. **Consider what you love to do:** Following your passions will help the admissions committee understand you better. In most cases, colleges are attracted to students with depth in addition to breadth, so pursuing extracurricular activities is important. More importantly, pursuing your interests – whether it's archery or Arabic, debate, or drama – will make you happy, and continuing to participate in activities you love won't just improve your college application profile, but will lower your levels of application-induced stress.
2. **Plan for summer now:** The **summer before your senior year** is a critical time in the college planning timeline. Princeton University explicitly asks how you spent it. Lounging by the pool might be lots of fun, but more actively engaging with the world around you during the summer will boost your chances of acceptance to your top choice schools. Far-flung travel experiences might sound tempting, but you need not travel far or spend a semester's tuition. Look to local universities for academic enrichment or research opportunities, make a bigger commitment to your volunteer work, or try to find a part-time job. As the winter and spring months fly by, time will restrict these possibilities. Plan now!
3. **Create a testing plan using your PSAT results as a guideline:** If you took the PSAT last fall, you should receive your scores from your high school counselor sometime in January, if you have not already. With these results as a guide, plan your SAT and ACT test dates for the next 12 months. Are you planning to take a review course or work with a tutor? Are you planning to take SAT subject tests? When do those tests tie in best with your curriculum?
4. **Visit a college:** College might seem like it is off in the distant future. Begin to envision it now. Take a day and [visit a college](#) not far from your home. What do you like? What doesn't appeal to you?
5. **Evaluate your high school's advising resources and consider whether you will need additional guidance:** Many high schools begin college planning in earnest during the second half of junior year. Take some time to understand the resources available to you in your school. If you don't feel that your school is providing the support you need for your college planning, identify outside resources that can be of help. Independent educational consultants can help you plan your future and expose you to options you might not have considered. You can learn more about working with Soar.

College Planning: January is for Juggling Test Dates

Look at the calendar. In one year, your college applications will be submitted, and you'll be waiting for admissions committees to pore over your accomplishments and carefully read your essays before rendering a decision.

This month create a long-range plan for your standardized testing. If you took the PSAT in October, reflect on your scores. Are they at the level you hoped they would be? If not, consider how you are going to improve your scores: a tutor, test prep course, or the old-fashioned book and computer program route?

Some parts of the U.S. administer a college reportable version of the ACT as part of their statewide standardized testing. If you attend public school in Colorado, Michigan, or Illinois, your high school has already planned an ACT date for you. Otherwise, consider taking both the [SAT](#) and the [ACT](#) test during one of the available testing dates between now and June. Register early to commit your time to the test and to ensure access to the testing center of your choice.

For students considering application to the more selective colleges in the United States, SAT II scores are often required as well. These subject-oriented tests are usually given on the same dates as the SAT I exam, although you cannot take both the SAT I and the SAT II on the same test date. Colleges that require the SAT II exams generally ask for two subject tests. If you are considering studying engineering in college, consider choosing to take one of the two math exams; many engineering schools specifically request such a score.

By this time, you may have allocated three Saturdays in the next six months to your No. 2 pencils and a desk at the local high school. Look ahead to the fall and pencil in a chance to do it all again. Research has shown that many students increase their test scores with familiarity. You might find that your scores on either the SAT or ACT are substantially higher than the other and choose to concentrate a second round of testing on only one exam. That's fine but give yourself ample opportunity to achieve your best scores prior to the first application deadlines you are trying to meet next fall.

College Planning for Parents: February is for Finances

When I talk with parents about their goals for their child's college application process, I pose to them a series of statements:

College is expensive and

- We are prepared to cover all costs.
- We are planning to apply for need-based financial aid.
- We are specifically interested in colleges that offer merit scholarships.
- Cost of attendance will be a factor in where our child goes to college.
- We have discussed the role of finances in college choice with our child.

The answers to the first three statements help me to offer suggestions of colleges that might make financial sense to a family. The latter two statements are designed to encourage conversation.

As you undoubtedly know, there are several ways to finance a college education, most commonly, grants or scholarships, loans, and self-help. At most colleges, the cost of educating a student for a year is substantially more than the amount charged in tuition and fees. And yet, for most families, the comprehensive cost at a private college exceeds an amount that they can pay. Fortunately, these other financing tools help to fill some of the gap.

As you compile your tax paperwork this month, consider talking with your child about the financial ramifications to the college search. I don't recommend eliminating colleges from consideration based solely on cost at this early stage. As a parent, there is nothing worse than dashing your child's dreams. At the same time, an honest discussion during the planning phase is far better than seeing the joy on a child's face after receiving an acceptance letter, and then dulling it with financial concerns of which he or she was previously unaware.

Winter Bonus Tip: Interpreting Your PSAT Results

By now you have received your [PSAT/NMSQT](#) results. While some students will anxiously await their scores in hopes of progressing further in the [National Merit Scholarship/National Achievement Scholarship](#) competition, many simply glance over the report before relegating it to their growing pile of college related information. Fortunately for test takers at all score levels, the PSAT score report provides a wealth of information to aid you in your SAT and college preparation.

At the most basic level, you can add a zero to PSAT section scores to gain a rough estimate of how you might perform on the SAT. Remember, the SAT also contains an essay, and for many test takers, scores can fluctuate, regardless of preparation, so use this as a guideline, not a gospel.

In addition, you will receive a percentile score. Junior year students are compared with all other students in their class year. All younger students are grouped together for percentile purposes. For most students, when they apply to colleges, their test scores support their day-to-day classroom performance, as it is reflected on their transcripts and in course selection. If your test scores are significantly higher or lower than your grades and the rigor of your curriculum, consider the reasons behind this. Should you be applying yourself more in class? Should you put an emphasis on your preparation for the spring SAT and ACT administrations?

The PSAT is one of the few times you will receive your test booklet with your score report. It doesn't take too long to compare the two and understand your errors. Did you run out of time? Guess when you should have omitted the answer? Do you need to brush up on geometry? Identifying your weaknesses will help you determine what type, if any, of preparation might benefit you the most.

SPRING

March Tip: Selecting Your Senior Year Courses: Is a B Better Than an A?

For many students, spring means time to look forward and select classes for the following fall. Each year, it presents the same question: “Should I take the AP (IB, honors, accelerated.) class and chance a B grade, or should I protect my GPA with the easier course?” College admissions officers like to answer that with: “We’d like you take the toughest course, and earn an A.”

Admittedly, the choice is a tough one. If you are planning to apply to selective colleges, then it is important that you have taken several the most rigorous courses available to you in your high school. Chances are, you are drawn to some subjects more than others, and those areas are a good place to seek the more rigorous classes. Are you interested in math and science? In a year or two, you might find yourself applying to engineering programs. You’ll be well served if your high school curriculum has included as much math (preferably through calculus) as possible. The math background both demonstrates your interest and ability in this subject area, but it will also enhance your preparation for college coursework. If you have a passion for history, or an interest in psychology, again, opt for the most rigorous options.

At some high schools, you have many options in multiple subject areas. If four of your five academic courses are at the most rigorous level available, what about the fifth? If you can handle the coursework, go ahead. If making it through accelerated French means hiring a tutor and dropping several of your afterschool activities, perhaps the standard level class is a better fit. There is a balance between the learning that happens in your academic work, and the learning that happens outside of it. Keep the balance.

There isn’t necessarily an easy answer to this question. Take on a rigorous, but enjoyable course load. Balancing achievement in demanding courses with development of your extracurricular passions will help your college application to stand out from the bunch.

College Planning: April is for Asking Away!

As you begin to [visit colleges](#), I can't stress enough the importance of breaking away from the admissions office and the campus tour. The tour and information session are a thorough introduction to the university, but to get a better sense of the student experience (and of course, not every student's experience is typical), step outside. Find a student in the cafeteria or in line at the coffee shop or arrange to meet with a student who graduated from your high school who's currently at your target college. Talk to them and gain greater insight.

Prepare

Most students have multiple colleges and universities they want to tour. Great! Tour them all (or as many as possible) and then tour some more. This is not something to be taken lightly. **Print our [checklist](#) to help you stay organized!**

1. Write down dates that the whole family is available for touring campuses.
2. Contact the admissions department and set up a group or individual tour.
 - o Write down the contact person's name, email, and phone number when you schedule your visit.
3. Find driving directions to the campus.
4. Print a map of the campus or bookmark the map on your phone or tablet for easy access.
5. Make a list of questions to ask. We created a [list](#) to help you get started!
6. Fill out [our campus rating sheet](#) and make notes during your tour; this form will make it easier to compare your visits.
7. Decide on a method of taking notes on your visit. Smartphone? Tablet? Pencil and paper?
8. Find out if a campus tour request form is required. Often these are optional, but they can be helpful to complete.

BONUS TIP: Ask if there is an overnight option to gain the full experience. If it is, that means they allow students to stay in a dorm room, eat in the cafeteria and "live" like a college student.

Tour Day

It's the day you've been anticipating. It's a day you should enjoy, but don't forget that you're there to learn about the potential college... so there is business to be conducted during the fun! Whether you're on a group or individual tour, there are places you need to see and things you need to do to get a real feel of the campus.

What should you see on the academic's side?

(I mean; therefore, students attend college, right?)

- Classrooms, especially in your interest
- Library
- Computer labs
- Bookstore
- Career Center

What should you look for as far as student life is concerned?

- Newspapers
- Athletic events
- Bulletin boards
- List of organizations
- Housing
- Recreation facilities
- Radio station
- Health care facility

Bonus Tip: Drive around town. Students will call their college home for four or more years. Does it offer what they want and need: stores, restaurants, theaters, parks, other things to do, safety?

Where do you find food?

- Cafeteria
- Student center
- Where else??

Talk to students and professors on your tour. Ask questions you prepared and ones that pop up while on the tour. They will love answering questions and will want to persuade students to attend "their" college or university.

Pro Tip: Get names and business cards or email addresses of those you encounter so you can reach out after the tour if you have questions.

Follow up

Follow up with a note to your tour guide or your contact on campus with a handwritten note. This note should thank them for their time, tell them what impressed you, and ask any questions that you have. Handwritten notes make a big impact, but your note can also be an email (especially if you have questions or concerns so they can be addressed in a timelier manner).

Reflect

When reflecting on the tour experience, students should try to place themselves at that school long-term. Committing to a college is a huge decision.

Fill out our [rating sheet](#) that looks at important aspects of the tour: people, social life, major offered, classrooms, housing, town, campus, food, and safety. Add other factors if you consider them important and a basis for deciding.

Students should ask themselves: What did I like best? What was the worst thing about the college? Did it have everything I need and want? For example: would there be a good chance of getting a part-time job doing something I enjoy? Are there enough things to do in my spare time to unwind?

Staying organized with your planning helps you enjoy and get the most of your experience. Tour as many colleges as you can. The decision of where to attend college should not be taken lightly. Start as early as 8th or 9th grade and tour more each year. Repeat if necessary.

Keep in mind: touring colleges and universities should be fun!

Bonus: Print out a bingo card (there are three different ones below) and mark off any square that matches something an admissions office representative or tour guide tells you. Are you on the tour with family members or friends? Give them a different card so they can play along, too. ([Click here to download the full three-card set.](#))

College Planning: May is for Making Your Case

Your high school path suddenly takes a detour. Your grades, which had been steady and consistent, take a nosedive. Perhaps it's due to illness, personal or family issues, or a learning disability that eventually made itself clear. As you move forward into the summer before your senior year, it is time to consider whether this impacts the colleges you plan on applying to.

For most students, the answer is yes. Sometimes, the circumstances change your mind about how far you would like to be from home. In other cases, illness or other family issues have a financial impact that necessitates finding financial safety schools or looking first to a nearby community college for a period. If your challenges impacted your GPA or course selection, then that also may impact the schools you choose to apply to.

Yes, you will have opportunities to explain your circumstances, and many times, you will be met with a sympathetic reader on the other side of your application. Sympathy, however, does not guarantee admission. Be prepared to discuss your situation. You can do this through your essay, an additional statement, your guidance counselor recommendation, or, in some cases, a personal interview on campus with an admission counselor. In most situations, the admissions staff will be evaluating your response to the challenge. Did you overcome adversity? What did you learn from the situation? Is the college going to be able to meet any future needs you might have?

In most cases, it is to your benefit to discuss any aberrations or weaknesses in your academic performance. The keys are incorporating your challenges into your college search and then finding the appropriate avenue to explain your record.

Spring Bonus Tip: Thinking About Your Summer Job

Summer break is just around the corner and with the break from the traditional school schedule, you might want to consider spending your summer working. Colleges are looking to see that you have spent your summer in a productive manner and there are many ways to demonstrate that. As you consider what to do with your summer, here are some things to consider:

- **Why should you have a job?** Yes, the regular paycheck is a big incentive. If you are responsible for a portion of your college costs or just your own spending money, the earning opportunity can be an asset on its own. If you are working in a traditional teen position in retail, service jobs, or as a camp counselor, you can learn a lot about both leading and following others, independence, and initiative. You may find that you have a great boss and co-workers, or you might find the opposite.
- **Can you explore a career interest?** If you are an aspiring lawyer or potential politician, look to people you know in the field to find a related summer experience. Your first opportunity might not be a paid one, but the experience can help you focus your career and lead to more responsibility down the road. Some careers, including fields such as veterinary medicine, architecture, physical therapy, specifically look for students who have demonstrated background in the area prior to entering their degree program.

As you plan your summer of hard work and earned relaxation, think about the lessons you're learning. In addition to a paycheck, an interesting experience, or new insight into a potential career, you might also have the basis of one of your essays.

SUMMER

College Planning: June is for Judging Test Scores

At many colleges, an applicant's SAT or ACT scores are just one piece of the admissions picture. Many times, a student's test scores nicely correlate with his or her transcript, providing a one-time corroboration of the day-to-day achievement. But what if you are one of the students whose test scores are lower than you think they should be?

I encourage most students to plan to take the SAT or ACT more than once, and to take at least one full scale practice exam for each test prior to the real thing. Unless you score at the very upper echelons of either test, familiarity is likely to result in at least modest score increases. If your first test administrations don't produce the scores you are seeking, then consider your test prep options.

While you are preparing for the tests and planning for subsequent test dates, keep in mind that your scores should influence the final list of colleges to which you apply, and remain honest with yourself. Look at the scores range for admitted students. If your scores fall outside the middle 50%, your chances for admission are not as high. Not impossible, but spend time thinking about your strengths and making certain that you have explained them well in your application.

[Fairest](#) has a comprehensive list of colleges that do not require (but may accept) standardized test scores as part of their assessment for admission. Not all applicants to these colleges are students with test scores below the range for the institution, but if testing is an obstacle for you, it might be worth looking to see if these colleges and universities meet your other criteria.

Above all, it is important to remember that you are not simply a number between 0 and 2400. Each student can bring tremendous assets to a college community and leave after an intellectually and socially fulfilling experience. Embrace your strengths and try to find college communities that meet your needs.

College Planning: July is for Beginning Your College Journey

If you are fortunate, you have an accessible and knowledgeable guidance counselor available in your high school. But as a recent survey from the non-profit research group [Public Agenda](#) indicated, 48% of recent high school graduates surveyed felt their counselor viewed them as simply another “face in the crowd.” If you have knowledgeable and available resources at school, it’s a great place to start. If not, other resources, such as books and websites are plentiful.

Start by evaluating your academic profile because that's what colleges will do first. Overall, you should plan to apply to a range of schools, covering a spectrum from “reach” to “likely.” Colleges will evaluate your application in the context of your high school. In general, the more competitive you are within your high school class, the more competitive a college you can apply to. Have you taken the AP, IB, or honors classes that are offered? Have you taken four or five solid academic courses each year? Are your test scores within or above the ranges cited by your target colleges? It might be easier to obtain “A’s” in less rigorous classes, but the most selective colleges will look for demonstrated rigor in a more challenging curriculum.

You might have a well-formed idea of your intended major, or you might join the largest freshman major on most campuses: “undecided.” How much of a role should your anticipated area of study play in your college planning? Honestly, it varies. If you have some interest in a specific field, like engineering, it’s important that you include in your search universities that offer such an option. The same holds true for nursing, business, architecture, and a few other select areas. Yes, you might change your major later – which is why selecting a college based upon an external ranking of a single division, like engineering, can be problematic. But if you have a serious interest, consider the availability an important factor. It is quite difficult to receive an engineering degree from a college that does not have an engineering program.

Summer Tip: Getting a Jumpstart on Standardized Testing

As the summer stretches out in front of you, think for a few minutes about your SAT and ACT exams. As a rising senior, you probably have a few tests on your record at this point, and that's a good start. Are your scores where you'd like them to be? How might your expected college applications benefit if the scores were a bit higher? While your scores might already be at or above the ranges published by your college choices, higher scores may make you a more competitive candidate for merit scholarships or awards.

With planning your testing calendar comes the inevitable question: how should I best prepare? There is truth to the idea that scores on the SAT or ACT are likely (in most cases) to rise when you take the test multiple times. The higher your scores, the less room for dramatic improvement, but familiarity with these exams can be to your benefit.

There are several ways to prepare for standardized tests: There are large national and international companies that specialize in test prep; there are one- on-one tutors; there is a wealth of books at your library or local bookstore. Which route is best for you?

Consider your strengths. Do you work well in a group setting or do you prefer individual attention? Are you looking for guidance and a sense of accountability or are you able to focus and stick to a routine on your own? You can gain familiarity with the test by working through commercially prepared resources on your own; however, you must spend the time with the material to make the most of it. Look for an example in your own life. Are you an athlete? If your coach suggests running 3-5 miles several times a week during the off-season, are you out doing it on your own, or are you waiting for the team captain to organize the group that will hold you accountable for being there?

Whether you sit in a classroom or complete practice tests at the kitchen table, familiarity and preparation will likely lead to higher scores in the fall.

Summer Bonus Tip: Make Your Way Around the World

Study abroad is extremely popular, and the opportunity of a lifetime for many students. Per the [Institute for International Education](#), more than 250,000 American students study abroad each year, and the number continues to grow.

Almost every college offers study abroad opportunities, and at some schools, the number of students staying on campus is dwarfed by the number who spend at least one semester elsewhere. Living and learning in a foreign country takes the independence a student gains in college to a new level, provides an opportunity for immersion in a new culture, perhaps enhances language acquisition, and broadens a student's view of the world and himself.

Certain world events may contribute to what feels like ever growing risk to study abroad, but please keep in mind that colleges have strong support networks established which aid their students in travelling, living, studying, and transferring credits, and even evacuating, if necessary, around the world.

As you look forward to your college experience, consider planning to include a study abroad experience in your undergraduate years.

Thank You

Thank you for downloading this exclusive SOAR special guide. We hope it will ease your way as you transition from eleventh grade to your senior year and the college application process.

If you still don't feel confident about navigating the choices, decisions, and options presented by the admittedly demanding admissions process, then SOAR will be happy to help you navigate the college admissions & Beyond. And even if you think you can choose schools on your own, an expert can provide a wise perspective as you write your application essays and personal statements or just a second set of experienced, objective eyes.

Please check out our [services for college admissions and consulting](#). We look forward to hearing from you!