

11th Grade: College Planning Timeline

This is a key year in the college planning process because you'll be taking standardized tests, narrowing down your college list, and learning more about financial aid. In addition, you'll need to stay involved in your high school courses and activities.

Fall: Take the PSAT and start a list of colleges

Stay on track with your classes and grades.

Meet with your counselor to see what you still need to take. Check on your class rank and your GPA. Even if your grades haven't been that good so far, it's never too late to improve. Colleges like to see an upward trend.

Take the PSAT.

Taking the test qualifies you for the National Merit Scholarship program, which means you could earn money for college. In addition, it's a good way to practice for the SAT.

Evaluate your education options.

Now is the time to follow a more specific path. Decide whether you want to pursue full-time employment, further education or training (such as a vocational-technical school, career college, or two-year or four-year college), or a military career. If you're interested in attending a military academy, talk to your guidance counselor about starting the application process now.

Make a college list.

Your list of colleges should include schools that meet your most important criteria (for example, size, location, cost, academic majors, or special programs). Weigh each of the factors according to their importance to you and develop a preliminary ranking of the schools on your list.

Continue gathering college information.

Go to college fairs, attend college nights, and speak with college representatives who visit your high school; use an online college finder and search top college lists. You may be able to narrow your choices or add a school to your list.

Organize a testing plan.

Figure out when you'll be taking important tests like the SAT, ACT, SAT Subject Tests, and AP exams, and mark the dates on your calendar. You'll want to have plenty of time to prepare.

Make sure you're meeting any special requirements.

If you want to play Division I or II sports in college, start the certification process and check with your counselor to make sure you're taking a core curriculum that meets NCAA requirements.

Winter: Stay involved, organize college lists, and prepare for standardized tests

Stay involved with extracurricular activities.

Colleges look for consistency and depth in the non-academic activities you pursue. Taking on leadership roles and making a commitment to the same groups are more important than trying out tons of new activities each year.

Organize your college information.

Set up a filing system with individual folders for each college's correspondence and printed materials. This will make it easier to locate the specific information you're looking for.

Begin narrowing down your college choices.

Make sure you have all the information you need about the colleges you're interested in (entrance requirements, tuition, room and board costs, course offerings, student activities, financial aid, etc.). Then begin comparing the schools by the factors that are most important to you and rank your choices.

Prepare for standardized tests.

Find out if the colleges you are interested in require the SAT, ACT, or SAT Subject Tests. Register to take the tests you need; most juniors take them in the winter or spring. You can take them again in the fall of your senior year if you're unhappy with your scores.

Talk to your family.

Have a discussion about the colleges you're interested in. Your family can learn about what you want to pursue and you can hear any concerns or suggestions they might have.

Learn more about financial aid.

Examine your family's financial resources and gather information about financial aid from the schools you're interested in. High-school sponsored financial aid nights, college financial aid counselors, and advice articles are also good sources of information.

Spring: Search for scholarships and gather recommendations

Prepare a challenging schedule for senior year.

Meet with your counselor to determine what classes you'll take next year and to make sure you're on track for graduation. When you pick your classes, don't load up on easy electives. Colleges do consider your senior year courses and grades, so stick with a schedule that challenges you.

Start a scholarship search.

There are lots of scholarships out there; you just need to spend a little bit of time and effort to find them. Check with your guidance office for scholarships from local organizations and use online scholarship search tools to find a wider range of options. The sooner you start looking for scholarships, the easier it will be to select some to apply to during your senior year.

Contact your recommendation writers.

Teachers and guidance counselors are often asked to write recommendations for lots of students. Consider whom you want to ask now and let them know so they'll have time to prepare before getting tons of requests in the fall. Ask teachers who know you well and who will have positive things to say. Letters of recommendation from a coach, activity leader, or adult who knows you well outside of school are also valuable.

Apply for a summer job or internship.

Summer employment and internships in fields you're interested in will look appealing on a college application or resume. The money you earn can also be used to help pay application and testing fees in the fall.

Set up appointments at your top college choices.

You'll often have to plan ahead when visiting colleges. Call the admissions office to set up a personal interview, tour, and a meeting with a professor or coach if you're interested. You can also ask them to send you an application.

Summer: Visit colleges and work on application essays

Visit colleges.

Visit the campuses of your top five college choices. Take a tour and speak with the admissions and financial aid staff. You may also be able to talk to students if some classes are in session. If you have an interview, be sure to send a thank-you letter to the interviewer once you return home.

Get advice from other college students.

If you have friends or relatives in college, talk to them about what college life is like, especially if they attend a school you're interested in. Although it's important to hear what the admissions staff has to say about a school, it's also important to get the students' perspective.

Organize your financial aid information.

Develop a plan that includes a list of the aid sources, requirements for each application, and a timetable for meeting the filing deadlines. Getting organized will make the process of applying a lot easier because you'll know where to find important information.

Start working on your application essays.

Compose rough drafts of the essays you'll need for your college applications. Have a teacher read and discuss them with you so you can see what to work on. Make any revisions to your application essays and prepare final drafts. Don't forget to proofread your final essays a few times.

Make early decision preparations.

If you plan to apply early decision to any school, take the time to visit the school again and make sure you're willing to commit. If you elect to apply early decision, you should start working on your application as soon as possible because its deadline will be earlier than others.