



# The Creative Roadmap to College



# HERE COMES COLLEGE. GET READY FOR THE JOURNEY.

*In this guide, you'll find free resources where you can get key information about each stage of the college preparation process. If you're trying to gauge where you should be right now, skip to the end of this document and check out the timeline.*

## QUESTION #1:

# What matters most to me?

*You are starting to develop the language of you, learning how to tell your story—this material is often the foundation of great essays, interviews, and letters of recommendation.*

To gain some insight into your strengths and blindspots, you might want to check out [this Myers-Briggs personality-type assessment](#). If thinking about the qualities of your idea work environment interests you, try this [Holland code career-type test](#).

To get better acquainted with specific career tracks, head over to [O-NET](#). If you want to think about how college majors and career paths relate, [this part of the College Board's Big Future website](#) might be right for you. If you're just not sure where to begin, try [this page](#).

Once it's time to turn the conversation toward college fit, [this survey by School Buff Steven Antonoff](#) is the ticket. (The others on his website are worthwhile, too.)





## QUESTION #2: Where do I need to be?

*Thus starts the college search!*

The [Big Future college search page](#) is a great way to filter your search by school size, GPA and test score ranges, and other more typical criteria. Performing artists should also check out [PlaybillEDU's college search site](#) to start exploring programs in Dance, Theater, and Music.

With your goals and interests in mind, your next task is to create a free account on [CollegeXpress's Lists and Rankings](#). Search for something—anything from [entrepreneurs' dream colleges](#), to [strong Division III women's tennis programs](#), to [colleges that get Greek life right](#). They probably have it. If they don't, you might take a glance at [this wiki page](#) for other lists that college counselors have collected over the past decade or so.

Visiting colleges campuses is a must in order to develop a true feel for the different environments out there—even if they aren't your top choices. Here's [a handy guide for making the most of visits](#). If you're not physically able to get to campus, take a virtual campus visit by adding the college name to [this Google search bar](#).



## QUESTION #3: Why?

*This is the question that sets stellar applicants use to set themselves apart from the rest. You have two objectives: to delve deeper and to see the bigger picture.*

To dig a little deeper, read as many student reviews as possible to see what motifs come up again and again. [Unigo](#) and [Cappex](#) also require free accounts, but they're essentials—just make sure to read many reviews from each site. And while they're not quite free, [this book from the Princeton Review](#) and the ever-popular [Fiske Guide](#) provide great reports for the best-known 10% of colleges and universities in the U.S.

What about the rankings? US News and World Report is only a piece of the puzzle; play around with [this rankings mashup](#) to understand multiple perspectives on what value means. Name value isn't everything; just look at all the schools you've never heard of on [this list of Harvard Law School's newly accepted students](#), or take a look at [where these famous folks did their undergraduate](#).

Also, for visual and performing artists, [the Strategic National Arts Alumni Project](#) should indicate that following your dreams does not mean the life of a starving artist.

[What's particularly important to employers](#) nowadays is the hands-on work experience you have to show from your college days. [Many news outlets](#), [media pundits](#), and [magazines](#) are making the case for the value of the kind of broad-based, multi-disciplinary thinking you develop by studying the liberal arts. The important thing is to consider [where the world of work appears to be headed](#); even Stanford is adapting to [teaching the kinds of skills needed to lead a fulfilling lifestyle in the 21st century](#).

## QUESTION #4:

# What do I have to do?

*The last two questions go hand-in-hand—this is where we get into the logistics!*

**SUMMERS:** Throughout high school, make sure you're taking full advantage of the opportunities to further explore the things you love during summer. [This guide](#) has a lot of great options, or, at the very least, will get the ideas flowing.

**TESTING:** Students should choose either the [SAT](#) or the [ACT](#) and make sure to practice with full-length exams to [build test-taking stamina](#). Free online preparation for both exams can be found at [Number2](#) (don't worry—the site is legit!), and for the new SAT starting in March 2016, [Khan Academy has an entirely free curriculum](#).

The most selective schools often strongly recommend submitting two or three [SAT Subject Test](#) scores, which require their own preparation. For students who aren't the strongest test takers, the last piece of the puzzle is to consult [the ever-growing list of colleges that do NOT require standardized test scores](#).

**SOCIAL MEDIA:** Don't forget that, in this day and age, what goes out into cyberspace stays in cyberspace—and can impact admissions decisions. Check out [this recent study from Kaplan](#) and follow it up with [their guide to help clean things up](#) (scroll down to "Managing Your Social Media Profile").

**DEMONSTRATING INTEREST:** Admissions officials have a tough calculus to manage, and [this fantastic guide](#) illuminates how to show interest and why it's beneficial to both sides of the admissions equation.

**BALANCING THE LIST:** Your final college list should reflect that you'll be sending out about 6 - 10 total applications, with a minimum of two likely (70% chance or above), two target (35% - 70%), and two reach schools (do the math!). [Naviance Family Connection](#), if your high school has it, is a great resources for organizing and tracking admission likelihoods. Everyone should open [a free account with Parchment](#), the go-between for high schools and colleges for official transcripts. They've got the insider info!



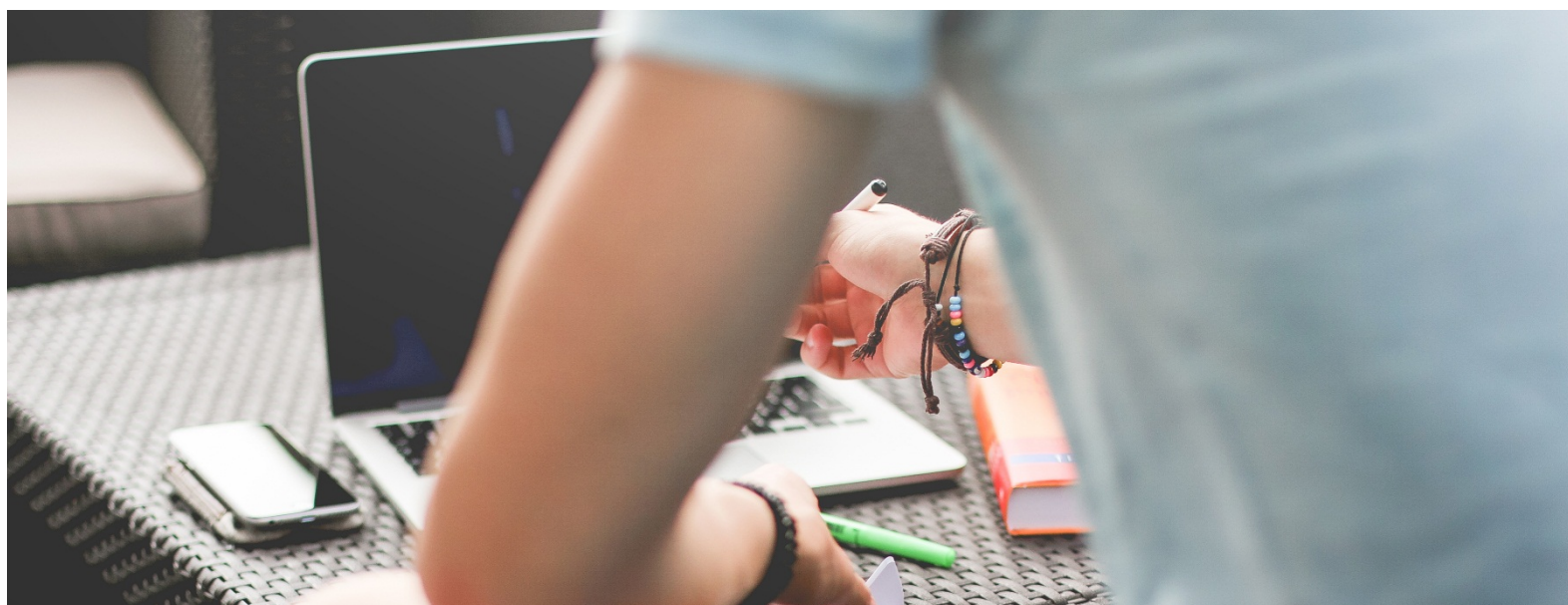
**AFFORDABILITY:** Then there's the financial piece. Oy. [Khan Academy has a segment](#) devoted to breaking down the basics of financial aid. After that, head back to [BigFuture to get a sense of what you'll be expected to pay](#) according to the FAFSA. If you get fuzzy on the differences between Federal Methodology and Institutional Methodology, [check out this guide from the College Board](#).

Lynn O'Shaughnessy, one of the great financial aid gurus out there, has written excellent blog pieces—in particular, one about [colleges that meet 100% of need](#), and another about [how to identify generous colleges](#). For additional scholarships, give yourself plenty of time to plumb the internet, starting with Finaid and [scholarships.com](#), and then getting into more detailed Google searches.

One more necessary stop after those aid letters come in: [the Debt Wizard](#). It's a great way to break down what thousands of dollars of debt will realistically look like month by month following graduation.

**PERSONAL STATEMENTS:** The first step is to [get organized by gathering all of your writing prompts](#) (including the supplemental prompts) and deadlines together in one place. Then you start writing. That's it. Write first and think about [the prompts](#) later, because you want to tell your most revealing story—one that goes beyond the grades, scores, classes, and activities. A good story inevitably fits the prompts.

UC Santa Barbara has [a handy guide online to writing the UC statements](#). If you need some help getting going, [the objects exercise](#) and [the values exercise](#) can be great to get some momentum. For inspiration, check out [Stanford's page of strong openers](#), and make sure to read LOTS of successful essays. [Johns Hopkins](#), [Tufts](#), and [Connecticut College](#) are a few schools that publish examples online.



# QUESTION #5:

## By when?

### 9TH & 10TH GRADE:

- Start high school off right—establish study habits, connect with teachers, and get involved outside of class.
- Set goals and a tentative course load through senior year.
- 10th grade: Take the [ASPIRE](#) (pre-ACT) and/or [PSAT](#).
- Explore personality tests, interest inventories, and learning style assessments.
- Go see some college campuses, locally or abroad.
- [Plan a dream summer](#).

### JUNIOR YEAR:

- Stay focused—keep grades up and make up Ds and Fs.
- Get to know your counselors and teachers—they'll be writing your letters of rec.
- Take the [ASPIRE](#) and [PSAT](#). Choose whether the SAT or ACT is best for you.
- Develop a game plan for testing, starting in winter; plan on taking it twice.
- Stick with your activities and take on leadership roles.
- Start researching colleges.
- Include at least one campus visit in your holiday planning.
- Attend local college fairs, a [NACAC college fair](#), and/or [National Portfolio Day](#).

### SUMMER BEFORE SENIOR YEAR:

- Brainstorm and draft your personal statement(s).
- Fill out your brag sheet for recommenders.
- Finalize your college list.
- Fill out the basic info on [the Common App](#) and/or [UC application](#) (open Aug. 1st).
- Get your visits in.
- Make up any D or F on your transcript.
- Prep for fall SATs or ACTs.
- Start researching scholarships.

## FALL OF SENIOR YEAR:

- Get organized: collect all deadlines and assignments from the schools on your list.
- Get on a regular weekly schedule for working on applications.
- Finalize college essays and personal statements.
- Complete supplemental writing.
- Submit official test scores.
- November 1st or 15th: most Early Decision/Action submission deadlines.
- Schedule interviews & auditions.
- October 1st: fill out the [CSS PROFILE](#), if applying to private schools.
- Review & submit applications.

## WINTER & SPRING OF SENIOR YEAR:

- January 2nd: fill out the [FAFSA](#).
- March: submit transcripts for [Cal Grants](#) (for CA residents).
- Visit the campuses to which you've been accepted.
- Assess financial aid letters.
- Accept your invitation and send in your deposit by May 1st.
- Review waitlist policies and deferral strategies.
- Keep up those grades! Don't earn yourself a [Fear of God letter](#).
- Relax...you did it.

