

College Planning for Gifted Kids

Grades 9-12

by **Sandra Berger, M.Ed.**

Read more on FamilyEducation: <http://school.familyeducation.com/gifted-education/college-prep/37511.html#ixzz3D1ywlmWk>

Ninth Grade

- ▶ By this year, you should have developed a **four-year plan** that will help you decide how to use your in-school and after-school hours most effectively.
- ▶ Review your four-year plan with your parents and high-school counselor. Get copies of the courses offered, the requirements for graduation, and an explanation of the grading system. Build a flexible schedule that will accommodate time for studying, extracurricular activities, working out, and relaxing.
- ▶ Select the most rigorous courses you can handle. The more selective colleges will check to see whether or not your courses represent the most challenging program offered by your high school.
- ▶ Think about additional academic areas you might like to explore that are not offered by your high school (e.g., philosophy, archaeology)? Consider a summer program and send for an application if the program has an early deadline.
- ▶ Talk to your parents about financing college. What portion of college costs will be your responsibility? Do you need to work during high school?
- ▶ If your high school includes a career center or multimedia center, get to know the people who work there and the resources available.
- ▶ Look for opportunities in your community to share your talents with others by volunteering. **Get involved.**
- ▶ Read widely. Exposure to different kinds of material will improve your vocabulary and language skills.
- ▶ Familiarize yourself with the most recent version of the Preliminary Scholastic Assessment Test (PSAT). Obtain a Student Bulletin (free from CEEB) to learn what the test is like, how students may prepare, and how scores are reported and used.
- ▶ Investigate computer-assisted career guidance programs such as *Career Options*, *System of Interactive Guidance and Information (SIGI or SIGI PLUS)*, or *DISCOVER*.

▶ In the spring, review your four-year academic plan with your guidance counselor and parents. Decide which extracurricular activities you are committed to and which activities to eliminate from your schedule.

Tenth Grade

▶ Register for the PSAT, given in October. In eleventh grade, your PSAT scores will be used for the National Merit Scholarship Qualifying Test (NMQT) and the National Merit Hispanic Scholarship. Scores don't count this year -- take the test just for practice.

▶ Through the PSAT/NMQT, you will probably get mail from colleges and universities that are interested in students like you. Start a filing system to organize the information you receive.

▶ Become familiar with college-planning reference books and websites. Start making a list of features you might want in a college and surrounding environment.

▶ Visit a nearby college and take a tour. Find out if your school has college videos.

▶ Take SAT-II: Subject Tests at the end of this year in any subjects in which you have done well but do not plan to continue studying in high school (e.g., biology, foreign language). If you wait until junior or senior year, you may not be able to take as many Subject Tests as you want.

▶ Plan a meaningful summer activity. Consider an internship, volunteer work, travel, or spending time with someone who works in a career that interests you.

▶ Get more involved in your favorite extracurricular activity. Colleges look for **depth** of involvement. Look for leadership opportunities.

▶ Look into careers. If your high school administers vocational aptitude tests, interest inventories, learning style inventories, or personality tests, take some of them and discuss the results with your counselor and parents. Select one or two careers to read about. Spend some time with someone who works in those fields.

▶ If computer-assisted career-exploration software is available (*SIGI* and *SIGI PLUS*, *DISCOVER*, or *Career Options*), spend some time exploring.

▶ By the end of this year, review your [four-year plan](#) and high-school transcript with your parents and guidance counselor. Plan for your junior year by signing up for challenging academic courses, but leave time for rest and relaxation, family activities, your favorite extracurricular activities, and community service.

Eleventh Grade

▶ Discuss college plans with your parents and counselor. Attend local college fairs. Pick up information on admissions requirements for schools that interest you. Speak with as many college representatives as possible when they visit your school. Compare and contrast what they tell you, what you have read, and what you have seen for yourself.

▶ Register for the PSAT. This year it counts!

- ▶ Familiarize yourself with the most recent version of the Scholastic Assessment Test (SAT-I). Obtain a Student Bulletin (free from CEEB) to learn what the test is like, how students may prepare, and how scores are reported and used. Plan to take the SAT or ACT in the spring.
- ▶ If your SAT or ACT scores are not as high as you expected, consider taking a preparatory course. Try to find a course in which the instructor will analyze your answer sheet, provide you with specific information on your strengths and weaknesses, and offer tips and hints on how to raise your scores.
- ▶ Take SAT-II: Subject Tests in subjects you will complete at the end of this school year or in courses such as foreign language, even if you plan to continue.
- ▶ If you are taking Advanced Placement (AP) courses and doing well, consider taking AP tests. **Choose carefully.** A fee is charged for each test, and studying for AP tests takes a lot of time. Ask your counselor about financial assistance for AP exams, which might be available from your state. Be sure you know what you hope to gain from taking each test. Some colleges offer exemption, credit, or both for AP grades of 3, 4, or 5. If you take AP tests, be sure your grades are reported to your high school and sent to the colleges of your choice.
- ▶ Discuss finances with your family. Plan now for summer or part-time jobs if your family expects you to pay for part of your education. Begin early.
- ▶ Keep up a good level of academic achievement. Balance work, play, and extracurricular activities. Colleges like to see an upward trend in your grade point average.
- ▶ By the end of this year, review your [four-year plan](#) and high-school transcript with your parents and guidance counselor. Are you accomplishing your goals? Compare your courses with college admissions requirements and adjust your plan if necessary.

Junior Year College-Planning Steps

- ▶ Prepare a college-planning portfolio that includes academic courses (including courses taken during the summer or after school), extracurricular activities, community service, achievements, and awards.
- ▶ Save your writing samples. Some colleges ask to see all of the drafts as well as the final product.
- ▶ Develop a list of 10 to 20 colleges. Work up a comparison chart. Include factors that are important to you, and keep in mind the following factors:
 - Size (campus; number of students).
 - Geographic location (urban, rural, North, South, etc.).
 - Course offerings (Do they teach subjects you like?).
 - Cost (tuition, room and board, books, travel to and from home, etc.).
 - Available scholarships or tuition-assistance programs.
 - Extracurricular activities (newspaper, sports, etc.).
 - Selectivity (degree of difficulty).
 - Curriculum and course requirements for specific majors.
 - Student life.
 - Special programs (e.g., study abroad).
 - Academic advising and career-counseling services.
 - Teaching: Who teaches freshman courses -- professors or graduate assistants?

- Student access to required readings, laboratory space, and computer terminals For example, are there enough terminals for everyone to use during peak periods such as mid-semester and final exams?

- ▶ Spring vacation is an ideal time to visit colleges. Make sure that the colleges you want to visit will be in session, and call ahead for an appointment if you want an interview with an admissions officer or faculty member. Visit several different kinds of colleges (large and small, public and private, "quiet," and "rah-rah party" schools). Think about where you want to live for four years.

- ▶ Request financial-aid bulletins from all of your target schools. Estimate the college costs, and begin to identify the ways in which you and your family will meet them. Get a copy of the Free Application of Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) and take your family through the process of completing the form. Use one of the software and/or online programs to estimate your Expected Family Contribution.

Your Last Summer in High School

- ▶ Consider a summer activity such as:

- A local or university-based summer school (typing, performing arts, computer programming, engineering, philosophy, etc.).
- A summer internship.
- School-sponsored travel.
- Courses offered by the regional talent-search programs. (Some programs offer an opportunity to acquire college credits and try out a college lifestyle.)
- A college-planning seminar (offered by many colleges).

- ▶ Be sure to ask for letters of recommendation before you complete your summer activity. Do not wait until the winter. You want people to write when they remember you best. Ask that the letters be addressed to "To Whom It May Concern," and give the letters to your guidance counselor as soon as possible. Keep copies.

- ▶ Send away for application forms for 6 to 10 colleges.

- ▶ Make appointments for interviews at colleges you plan to visit in the fall or winter.

Twelfth Grade

- ▶ Continue to speak with college representatives who visit your high school. If you have a file on each college you are considering, make up a chart that includes:

- Application deadlines, including early-action and early-decision dates.
- Financial-aid deadlines. They often vary from college to college.
- Notification dates.
- Tests required.
- Costs.
- Number and type of recommendations required.
- Interview deadlines and locations.

- ▶ Write every important deadline on your calendar, including federal financial-aid deadlines.

- ▶ Maintain or continue to improve your academic standing. Most colleges look unfavorably upon an applicant whose grades are falling. If one of your grades is falling, write a letter of explanation.
- ▶ Continue visits to the colleges you are seriously considering.
- ▶ Update your college-planning portfolio. Be sure to add recent achievements and new events that have occurred.

College Planning Steps

- ▶ Sign up for the SATs or the ACT. You may take as many SAT-II: Subject Tests as you wish, but no more than three per test session.
- ▶ Make sure that your SAT or ACT scores are sent to your guidance counselor and the schools to which you are applying. Every college treats scores differently. Review your scores with your guidance counselor and ask for an interpretation that matches your target schools.
- ▶ Securing strong recommendations from your teachers, guidance counselor, and others requires advance planning. Keep the following pointers in mind:
 - Ask for recommendations from teachers and others who know you well.
 - Ask for a recommendation from a teacher in the field in which you may wish to major.
 - Provide stamped envelopes that are preaddressed to the colleges.
 - Ask teachers if they are willing to send you a postcard that says "I have sent your recommendation to (Fill in name) University/College." If so, provide a stamped self-addressed postcard.
 - Thank the teacher. Inform him or her of the colleges' decisions.
- It is your responsibility to make sure that letters of recommendation arrive before the colleges' deadlines.
- ▶ List all deadlines. **It is your responsibility to ensure that applications and supporting materials reach the colleges on time.**
- ▶ Make sure that your courses are described in your applications. Colleges know the rigor of AP or IB courses, but they might not know about "honors" courses in your school. Be sure your school profile or transcript supplement is included.
- ▶ Consider using the "Common Application" (www.commonapp.org). Explore e-application websites like xap.com or one of the computerized methods for completing a college application.
- ▶ Applications require objective and subjective information. Subjective information includes the presentation of extracurricular activities. Provide information that makes you "come alive" to the reader and that clearly demonstrates your ability to do college-level work. When possible, document your activities and demonstrate long-term commitment.
- ▶ If your transcript is a "roller coaster" of ups and downs (grades that vary from A to F) or has any quirks that need to be explained, explain what happened during the tough periods and what, if anything, you learned.
- ▶ Complete application forms no later than December, earlier if you are interested in early admission. Make extra copies of each application form. Use the copies for practice before filling out the originals.

- ▶ Have someone proofread your application forms for neatness and spelling.
- ▶ If colleges offer an interview, take advantage of the opportunity to give the college information about yourself that is not apparent from a review of your application and other records. Ask good questions. If you have a particular academic interest or want to combine academic majors, this is the time to ask how the college can help you.
- ▶ Many colleges have eliminated on-campus interviews. Find out if you can interview with an alumnus.
- ▶ The more competitive colleges require essays and detailed written analyses of extracurricular activities. If a college does not require an essay but asks a question in the application that allows you to write one, take the opportunity to do so.
- ▶ Ask your teacher or counselor to review your essays. Spelling and grammar must be perfect, and neatness counts. Keep copies of everything you write.

Waiting Lists

If you are placed on the waiting list of a school you really want to attend, there are several things you can do.

- ▶ First, ensure your place at a school that accepted your application by sending a deposit.
- ▶ Find out what being on the waiting list means at the particular college (e.g., How many students do they usually accept from the waiting list, and do they rank students on the waiting list?).
- ▶ Ask your guidance counselor to find out why you were placed on the waiting list. The reasons will help determine the best action to take.
- ▶ Write to the dean or director of admissions, indicate your intent to attend the school, and ask for a review of your folder. State your reasons for requesting a review.
- ▶ Consider attending your second-choice college or university for one year. You may have a better chance as a transfer applicant than as a graduating high-school senior if you can prove that you are capable of high achievement.
- ▶ Submit additional applications to colleges with "rolling" or late admissions policies.
- ▶ After June 1, inquire about unanticipated openings. (This is called "summer meltdown.")
- ▶ Spend a year investigating career paths: find an internship, work in a law office, or volunteer for a community service project.
- ▶ Spend a year bolstering your academic weaknesses. Take courses at a local community college to prove that you can do college-level work.
- ▶ Look for a sense of direction and begin again.