

Applying to College: You Can Do It! ¹

Danielle Scott and Heidi Liss Radunovich²

Applying to college is not an easy process; it can be intimidating and time-consuming. Tricks and tips from professionals can often help to make the process a little smoother. This publication will help you get started.

Ideally, you want to start thinking about applying to colleges as soon as you start high school, so that you can take the courses that you need, make good grades, and begin looking into scholarship programs. However, the summer before your junior year of high school is the time to get serious about where you want to go and how to get there. This will give you enough time to look at schools, prepare for the assessment tests, and plan your future. But don't worry if you haven't started preparing, or if you are thinking of applying to college after taking a break from school. You still have time, and *you can do it!*

You must remember that applying to college can be a very lengthy process and involves following explicit instructions. You should always double-check the application deadlines and directions. Also, it is important to stay in contact with the schools after your application is submitted. The answers to some common questions regarding the college application process are outlined below.

How do I decide where to apply?

There are several types of colleges to consider. Public universities tend to have a large number of students and a lot of options for areas of study and activities, and usually cost less than private colleges or universities. However, the classes at public universities may be very large, and it may be difficult to get individualized attention.

Private colleges and universities are often smaller and provide more individualized attention. However, they are usually more expensive and tend to have fewer options as far as courses of study and campus activities.

Community colleges are available locally and are an inexpensive way to obtain a two-year college degree. However, they may have fewer campus activities available, and they generally do not offer a four-year degree (a bachelor's degree). If your career choice only requires a two-year degree, a community college would be an excellent choice. For others, it may make sense to attend community college for the first two years in order to save money, then transfer to a four-year college or university to obtain a bachelor's degree.

1. This document is FCS2272, one of a series of the Department of Family, Youth and Community Sciences, Florida Cooperative Extension Service, IFAS, University of Florida, Gainesville FL 32611; First published: April 2007. Please visit the EDIS Web site at <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu>.

2. Danielle Scott, undergraduate student, and Heidi Liss Radunovich, assistant professor, Department of Family, Youth and Community Sciences, University of Florida, Gainesville FL 32611.

One of the best ways to find colleges that fit your needs is to search the Internet. There are many web sites that provide free college searches, but they can be time-consuming and heavy on advertisements. If you are still in school, your best resource is your guidance or career counselor. Ask your counselor if he or she has a computerized college search program available for you to use. If this program is not available and you do not have Internet access at home, you can always go to the public library.

The next step is to come up with a list of schools that fit your needs. Make sure that the school you choose offers your intended area of study or major. Look at the cost of the school, the school's location, and the types of sports, clubs, and organizations available to students. Once you have a list of schools, begin to narrow it down by searching the schools' web sites or borrowing books about colleges from your school's counselor or the public library (you may also purchase these books at most bookstores). If it is available at your school, you can also use the "Discover" program. This program asks you questions about your college preferences; from those answers, it finds colleges and scholarships that fit your needs. If this program is not available to you, please see the reference list at the end of this article.

When you are looking at schools, you should compare your academic history to the colleges' average admissions criteria. You can get this information through college guides, such as *Peterson's College and University Almanac* or other similar books. These books list average student GPA, average standardized test scores, the total number of applicants, and the number of applicants admitted. It is in your best interest to get the best grades possible while in high school, but if your grades are not up to par, you can still apply to community colleges and other colleges with more lenient requirements. If you still want to go to a four-year university, and you do well at a community college, you can apply to transfer to a four-year college or university once you finish your two-year degree.

Visiting a school is a great way to learn about the school and its programs. Most schools offer free tours and information sessions on a daily basis and by appointment. If you do not have the money to travel,

school guidance counselors can tell you when representatives from these schools will be visiting your high school. You can also ask the colleges if they will be sending representatives to your area. Representatives are often administrators from the colleges, but may also be alumni who volunteer to talk to students. Talking to representatives can be very beneficial because they can answer your questions immediately and give you information that you may not be able to find on a web site or in brochures. If you visit the school, you can go to the financial aid department to find out about scholarships specific to that school. The best advice is to keep in contact with the schools to which you are applying, and not be afraid to call and ask questions.

After choosing the colleges to which you want to apply, the next thing you need to do is prepare for and take the SAT and/or ACT.

What do I need to know about testing?

If you are still in high school, it is strongly recommended that you take the Preliminary SAT/National Merit Scholarship Qualifying Test (PSAT) during your sophomore or junior year. Although colleges and universities do not consider this score in the admission process, it can be helpful for two reasons. First, it provides good practice for taking the SAT, and gives you a sense of your current potential on the test. Second, by taking the PSAT you will become eligible for the National Merit Scholarship program, and earning such a scholarship is both prestigious and financially helpful. At the time of writing this publication, the fee from the College Board is \$12 (although some schools may charge slightly more to cover administrative costs), but fee waivers for this test are often available for students from low-income families.

The SAT is the original college entrance examination, but according to Matthews (2006) many students prefer taking the ACT. The ACT allows students to send only their best test scores, tests them on subjects closely related to those taught in school, and does not penalize for guessing (the SAT provides an additional penalty for wrong answers). The best option for you as a student is to take both tests. Some

students score higher on one than the other, but most score similarly on both. It is possible for students in Florida who are on free or reduced lunch to get fee waivers for both tests, but talk to your counselor early, because there may be a limited number of fee waivers. You should plan on taking the SAT and/or the ACT for the first time in the fall or spring of your junior year. Taking the test early will give you more time to prepare and allow you to retake it your senior year if necessary.

There are many ways to prepare to take the SAT and ACT tests. In Florida an Internet site called "Choices" is available. The Choices site allows students to take practice tests and to look at colleges and careers. Students are asked to create an account, after which they can explore as much as they want. For more information, visit the Florida Department of Education website at <http://www.fldoe.org/student/default.asp>.

There are also test preparation books available in stores, as well as programs for purchase online. Many schools also offer test preparation programs through the school, so ask your counselor if there are any available. Sometimes these programs are offered in the summer, and in some schools they can serve as a semester elective. In many areas, test preparation companies, such as Kaplan and the Princeton Review, also offer classes for a fee.

Learn about the free resources offered to you through your school. If none are available, you may want to purchase test preparation books or pay for test preparation classes. Sometimes the free programs are not well-advertised, so keep in contact with your counselor and do not be afraid to ask if he or she has any more information. The web sites for both tests also offer practice questions and study guides.

Here is what you can expect from each of the standardized tests. This information is current as of the time of publication of this article, but fees may increase.

SAT

- Cost is \$41.50 (with required writing section)

- 3 hours and 45 minutes long
- 3 sections: Reading, Math, and Writing
- Each section score is from 200-800, for a total of up to 2400 points
- Web site: <http://www.collegeboard.com/student/testing/sat/about.html>

ACT

- Cost is \$29 without the optional writing section and \$43 with the writing section
- 3 hours and 25 minutes long
- 4-5 sections: Math, Science, English, Reading, and optional Writing
- Scores are out of 36 points
- Web site: <http://www.act.org/aap/>

Scores are usually mailed within a month, but are available online within two weeks for an extra fee.

You should always indicate your high school code and list the colleges you want the scores sent to. This is true for both the SAT and the ACT. The results will be sent to four schools of your choice for free, but you will have to pay to send them to additional schools.

Advanced Placement (AP) tests are a way for students to obtain college credit through testing. There are a variety of test subjects available. Test scores of three or above (on a scale of one to five) translate into credit at most universities. In order to take the exams, you should take AP courses at your high school, which will prepare you to take the AP test. AP courses are offered in most high schools and are taught at the college level.

Now that you have completed testing, it is time to start your application.

What do I need to know to complete the application?

Your application will include six things: the application itself, the application fee, your test scores, your essay or personal statement, your letters of recommendation, and your transcripts. In order for a decision to be made by the college's admissions office, all six items must be completed. It is important to remember that deadlines are **not** suggestions. They are deadlines that must be observed in order for your application to be considered!

For most Florida schools, applications can only be completed online. If you do not have access to the Internet at home, you can go to the public library or ask your counselor for help at school. The school computer lab could be a good place to work on applications, but you'll need to check the hours and rules to make sure.

In order to fill out the application, you will need to know the courses you are currently taking and the courses that you will take in the last semester of your senior year. If you are under the age of 18, you will also need your parent or guardian's voter registration, driver's license, and vehicle registration for residency purposes. You will also need to know your Social Security number, because universities use it to identify applicants.

Application Fee

The application fee usually ranges from \$35-80 depending on the school. Unfortunately this fee usually cannot be waived, but there are sometimes exceptions for low-income students. To find out for certain, contact the financial aid office at each of the schools to which you are applying. This is why it is important to consider your finances when applying and to consider the number of schools to which you can afford to apply.

Essay and Personal Statement

Most colleges require that you write 500 words (sometimes broken into two essays) as part of your application. The topic is not always the same, so be sure to check with each school about this portion of the application. Before you begin writing, make sure

that your essay answers the question that they ask you to answer (Stewart & Muchnick, 2004). The essay is your chance to provide colleges with more information about yourself. There are some books out with tips on how to write a good college admissions essay. These books have examples of good essays for many topics and include comments from university staff. The Internet is also a great source for help with essay writing. You can find other essays and get ideas and check to see what the schools suggest when writing.

It is important to read and reread your essay for errors. Nothing looks worse than an essay with mistakes, and it is always a good idea to have at least one other person look over your work. Make sure to be yourself in your writing; admissions officers read hundreds of these each year, and they can tell when you are not being genuine.

Letter(s) of Recommendation

Many schools require that you submit letters of recommendation. You should ask someone who knows you well and is able to describe your strengths. The longer you have known them, the better; however, in the case of teachers, it is best to go with someone with whom you have a relationship outside of class. Employers and close family friends are also good options. If all else fails, you can also ask your counselor. You should not ask relatives for a letter of recommendation, because they will not be able to write an unbiased letter.

If you ask a teacher, it is important for the teacher to know you well and be able to say good things about you. If you know your intended field of study, choosing a teacher from that field who knows you well is ideal. For example, if you want to major in pre-medicine, request a letter from a biology or chemistry teacher. Some schools also require a supplemental form from the school counselor. If your school requires this form, take it to the counselor early so that he or she will be able to get it back to you sooner. Remember that you are asking the recommenders for help, so be respectful of them and always give them at least two weeks' notice (preferably more) to get recommendations done. You should provide them with an envelope to put your letter in and ask them to sign the flap as proof of

confidentiality. If the letters need to come directly from the recommenders, be sure to put postage on the envelope before you give it to them.

Transcripts

The easiest part of this whole process is getting the transcripts. To get them, talk to the secretary at the guidance counselor's office. This person will send them electronically or mail them depending on the requirements of the school. Most schools charge \$1-3 per transcript for this process.

When you think you are finished with all of your application materials, be sure to go through them all again. Check to make sure that everything is filled out correctly and that you have read over everything for errors. Be sure that you have included a check for the application fee or paid it online. Also, make sure to use the proper postage, and observe all deadlines. If possible, ask someone else to review all of your materials and ensure that you have everything you need. Follow all directions carefully and pay attention to details. For example, some schools ask that you send two copies of your transcripts and letters of recommendation. You want to make sure you do not miss such details.

Once your application is in, you should always call the colleges where you sent applications to make sure that they received all the parts of your application.

When do I apply for financial aid?

Do not wait for an acceptance letter to begin thinking about financial aid.

The financial aid process begins in January after you or your parents receive W-2 tax forms. Once you have these forms, you can file your FAFSA, the form that colleges and the government use to determine how much money you need to go to school. It is to your benefit to apply as early as possible so you can get more money. To retrieve the FAFSA form, go to <http://www.fafsa.ed.gov>. You can also use <http://www.facts.org> for information on scholarships. Many other Internet sites offer scholarship information as well. Books on financial aid and available scholarships are also available at many bookstores and in many school guidance offices.

What do I do once my application is in?

Now that your applications are finally in and your financial aid is taken care of, you can begin planning for the future. Some schools admit on a rolling basis, while others admit on a deadline. Schools that use rolling admissions will review your application upon receipt and notify you as soon as they have made a decision. Schools that admit on a deadline basis will notify you after a specified date. Check with each school to find out which type of admission they use.

Once you have been admitted, it's time to make the decision about where to attend. When you know what school you want to attend, be sure to let that school know that you are coming there and sign up for orientation. Notify all the other schools that accepted you that you will not be enrolling. You may need to provide a deposit to your school of choice in order to guarantee that you can enroll.

Sources

<http://www.facts.org> Online access to Florida colleges and universities.

<http://www.collegeboard.com> Registration for the SAT and test preparation materials

<http://www.act.org> Registration for the ACT and test preparation materials.

<http://www.collegelink.com> Offers a month-by-month planner and articles about financial aid.

<http://www.collegenet.com> Search engine for college-related web sites.

<http://www.floridastudentfinancialaid.org> Bright Futures scholarship application site.

<http://www.collegesportsclearinghouse.com/> Site for athletes who wish to make official college visits.

<http://www.fafsa.ed.gov> Web site for federal financial aid form.

<http://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/cool/> Database of 7,000 colleges.

http://www.usnews.com/usnews/edu/college/rankings/rankindex_brief.php Annual rankings of colleges according to *U.S. News and World Report*.

References

ACT, Inc. (n.d.) *A student site for ACT takers*. Retrieved December 20, 2006, from <http://www.actstudent.org>

College Board (n.d.) *About PSAT/NMSQT*. Retrieved January 2, 2007, from <http://www.collegeboard.com/student/testing/psat/about.html>

College Board (n.d.) *About the SAT*. Retrieved December 20, 2006, from <http://www.collegeboard.com/student/testing/sat/about.html>

Matthews, J. (2006, August 28). Test wars: the SAT vs the ACT. *Newsweek*, 148(8/9), 78-80.

Stewart, M. A., & Muchnick, C. C. (2004). *Peterson's best college admission essays*. Lawrenceville, New Jersey: Thompson Peterson's.