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COLLEGE GUIDE / LI LIFE

College search timeline: What to do in 9th, 10th, 11th and 12th grades



A campus tour at Stony Brook University. Credit: Stony Brook University/John Griffin

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Getting ready to apply to college can be overwhelming for families and students, but experts say a key to a successful college application journey is starting early in high school and having the proper preparation. Educational advisers said waiting until junior year may hurt a candidate's chance of getting into their dream school.

"Organization is the key to a successful admissions journey," said college admissions consultant Scott Gibney, of Long Island-based Gibney College Solution. "It's actually sitting down as a family and discussing what college means to the family."

Andy Lockwood, owner of Glen Head-based Lockwood College Prep, said a student has to be the CEO of their college application journey and not solely rely on guidance counselors.

Here are some key dates, tips and advice that can help high school students and parents manage their college application process.

9th grade: Setting the stage

Experts say freshman year is the perfect time to map out a student's college career.

Students should consider taking advanced courses if their school offers them. This is the right time to explore International Baccalaureate and Advanced Placement classes for the next few years. These courses give students a glimpse into college-level academics, boost their weighted GPA and allow them to potentially earn college credit, experts said.

- Teens should seek a rigorous course load.
- Students should create a professional email address and begin to build their resumes.
- A key for the next few years is to build strong study habits and focus on getting help with challenging courses.
- Students should also focus on joining clubs that align with their personal interests. It's about the quality of the extracurricular activities and leadership roles over the quantity.
- Students should get in front of their guidance counselor early in their high school careers and not wait until junior or senior year.

- This time is great for students and parents to get on the same page about academic goals for the next four years.

"Beyond course selection, ninth graders should focus on establishing habits that will support long-term success throughout high school," said Stacie Reid, the Uniondale school district's director of guidance. "Maintaining a strong grade-point average [GPA] from the very beginning is important, as colleges review a student's entire high school transcript."

10th grade: Challenge and build yourself



By sophomore year, students should start visiting college campuses. Credit: Newsday/John Paraskevas

The next two years will likely be the most vital of the application process. Consultants said it's important for students to keep up a rigorous course load in areas such as STEM and mathematics. Colleges are looking for strong coursework and high GPAs along with meaningful involvement in activities.

- Students should start taking practice SAT exams to evaluate their strengths and weaknesses. Students can register with their schools.

- Focus on leadership roles and start building relationships with teachers. This step can help students determine which educators could be right for college recommendation letters.
- Start visiting college campuses or taking virtual tours, which can help families trim their list down early.
- Learn about the financial aid process and strategize how to pay for higher education.

"Find out what strategies are available to you while you can still do something about it," Lockwood said. "Also start looking at the net price calculators on each college's website that you are considering."

Experts said families should learn the net price, or true out-of-pocket cost to attend a school, before making any decisions.

11th grade: Refining coursework



By junior year, families should have narrowed down their college choices. Credit: Jeff Bachner

Junior year is a continuation of sophomore year, but with more at stake. Experts say this year is about going deeper in academics as well as clubs and other activities.

- Gear up to take the SAT and ACT tests. Some students may need to take the exams more than once to get their highest score, so it's important to start early.
- Line up academic recommendations. At least one recommendation should come from an educator who teaches in the major a student is going to pursue in college. Consultants say admissions counselors care about a student's character and problem-solving skills as well as respect for other opinions.
- By this time, families should have narrowed down their college choices and should demonstrate interest by visiting campuses, following a school's social media accounts and contacting college representatives.

Toward the end of junior year, students can start brainstorming their personal statement for their college essays, experts said. Teenagers should draft up statements during the summer and finalize them by the start of senior year.

"I tell my students to start to look at essay prompts and start writing your college essay and writing ideas down, so you have the summer between junior and senior year to finalize your essay," said Valley Stream Central guidance counselor Amy La Personerie. "You should be refining that ... they play a huge role."

12th grade (senior year): Finish strong

Senior year is full of deadlines, key dates and important decisions. Confirm every college's admissions, materials and decision deadlines, as many may vary. State and city universities also waive application fees during a certain period. Experts say that while many students get senioritis, it is imperative that they finish their high school careers strong as some colleges look at a student's senior year grades as well.

Fall

- File the Free Application for Federal Student Aid, also known as FAFSA, as soon after Oct. 1 as possible. FAFSA helps determine need-based aid, grants and loans.
- Some schools ask students to fill out a College Scholarship Service Profile (CSS), an online application that colleges and scholarship programs use to award nonfederal, institutional financial aid.
- For New York State students, the Tuition Assistance Program applications open in the fall as well. The program provides up to $5,665 in need-based grants to eligible state residents to help pay for college.
- Ask colleges for application fee waivers to save money.
- For those applying Early Decision, during which students apply early to their top-choice college, advisers recommend making choices with "clear eyes." Deadlines for Early Decision are usually in early November; regular decision deadlines follow shortly afterward.

Winter/spring

- Acceptance letters and financial aid offers will start to arrive in late winter and early spring.
- Compare financial aid packages and visit final choices. Advisers said it's possible to appeal for additional merit or need-based funding.
- May 1 is widely known as Decision Day, when students across the country formally commit to a college and place their deposit. While it's not required, some experts say it's courteous for students to inform schools they will not be attending, which allows them to free up space and funds for other students.
- Submit final transcripts and complete enrollment requirements.
- Schedule a campus orientation and start registering for classes.

- Parents should set up an appointment with their campus financial office if they have any questions and to know what to expect when receiving their first bill.

"Getting into college is not where it ends — that’s where it starts," Lockwood said.