

FREQUENTLY ASKED COLLEGE PLANNING QUESTIONS

Educational options available after high school

What types of educational options are there?

Almost every career requires education or training after high school. Students should consider all possibilities and make the choices that are right for them:

- Colleges and Universities (2 and 4 year)
- Community Colleges (open enrollment for most programs)
- Career and technical schools
- Military
- Apprenticeships
- Job Corps (a federally funded job training program)
- Gap year programs (e.g., City Year, Americorps, etc.)

Factors in College Admission

What factors do colleges consider in selecting students for admission?

College admissions committees consider the high school transcript, with its record of courses taken and grades earned, the most important factor in evaluating a student. The more challenging the curriculum, as evidenced by course selection, honors, and AP courses, the better. Other factors include:

- Class rank and grade point average
- Test scores (when required)
- Recommendations
- Extracurricular activities
- Special talents (e.g., athletic, artistic, musical)
- Essay
- Legacy status
- Geographic distribution
- Portfolios, videos/CD's, or auditions (when required)
- Interviews (when required)

What factors should students consider in choosing a college?

Various factors will help to narrow students' college search. Here are some to consider:

- Programs and majors offered
- Selectivity (how hard is it to get in?)
- Cost and Financial aid availability
- Retention rate (percentage of students who return after freshman year)
- Graduation rate
- Location (distance from home, climate, urban/suburban/rural, etc.)
- Extracurricular opportunities, including athletics, music, art, etc.
- Affiliation (public, private, religious)
- Size of student body
- Diversity of student body
- Faculty-to-student ratio, class size, professors (full-time, adjunct, or grad students as instructors)
- Admission requirements
- Housing availability

- Graduate study (percentage of students who earn advanced degrees)
- Opportunities for internships, service learning, study abroad, etc.
- Social life (fraternities and sororities, commuters, weekend activities)
- Community (character of surrounding area)
- Career or graduate school placement
- Other factors important to the student

College Testing

What tests do students need to take for admission to a four-year college?

Standardized tests can be an important factor in admission decisions at most selective colleges and universities. A recent trend is the growing number of colleges which have eliminated test requirements entirely. Students should carefully check test requirements at the schools they are considering and arrange to complete all tests and send results in time to meet college deadlines. Be sure to copy school and test center codes correctly and have a social security number on hand, as this will be used for both college examinations and applications.

What is the PSAT/NMSQT?

The Preliminary SAT/National Merit Scholarship Qualifying Test is designed for juniors. The PSAT gives students practice for the SAT, which they will take for college admission, and is used to determine National Merit Scholarship candidates. Another benefit of the PSAT is identification of students who have the potential to take Advanced Placement (AP) courses. The PSAT measures math reasoning and reading and writing skills and includes multiple choice and fill-in response questions.

What is the SAT?

The SAT is the most widely used test for college admission and is used as a predictor of academic success and as a requirement for entry at many colleges. It is a 3 hour and 45 minute test with three sections yielding three scores: Critical Reading, Math, and Writing. Scores are reported on a range of 200 to 800 with 500 as the average. Students register online at www.collegeboard.com. Results are sent to the student, to the high school, and to colleges the student has selected. The SAT is given on designated Saturdays throughout the school year at a local test site.

When and how often should I take the SAT?

The College Board recommends that most students take the SAT twice, but not more than three times, usually in spring of the junior year and early fall of the senior year. Registration deadlines are set well in advance of test dates, so it is important to check and register early.

What is the ACT?

The ACT is also a standardized college admission test which students can take instead of or in addition to the SAT. The ACT gives sub-scores in English, math, science, reading, and an optional writing test. At some colleges, the ACT can also replace the SAT:Subject Tests requirement. While the SAT and ACT have a high statistical correlation with each other, some students will do significantly better on one than the other. For that reason, students may want to take the ACT with or without writing at least once in addition to the SAT. Do colleges accept both the SAT and ACT? Every college and university that requires standardized test scores will accept either the SAT or ACT.

Should I take the SAT or ACT – or both?

Some students may want to take each test at least once, given that colleges will use the highest score set. Other students may decide to take a timed practice SAT and ACT to see which test they do better on and feel most comfortable taking.

What are SAT: Subject Tests?

SAT: Subject Tests are each one hour long and cover a specific academic area. Only 45 (7%) of the most selective colleges require subject tests, and all but three of these colleges want two scores. Sometimes specific majors require specific tests (e.g., an engineering major might require a math and a science subject test). Students can take a maximum of three subject tests on one test date. Students must check college websites to confirm requirements.

When should students take SAT: Subject Tests?

Most students take SAT:Subject Tests at the end of the semester when they have completed the highest level of the course prior to senior year.

How can students raise their scores on the SAT or ACT?

Studies have shown that practice can improve scores. Students should become familiar with standardized testing by taking practice tests that are timed and becoming familiar with how each test asks questions. There are many free, or very inexpensive test prep programs available from the College Board, ACT, Princeton Review or March2Success.com. It is clear that students who prepare for these tests usually can improve their results, but the best long-term prep is classroom learning and study and outside reading.

What are Advanced Placement (AP) courses?

Advanced Placement offers more than thirty college-level courses, each of which culminates in a rigorous subject exam. Many four year colleges grant incoming students credit and/or placement in higher level courses for qualifying grades on AP exams. Colleges are increasingly using AP scores as part of admission decision-making. Students who achieve a score of 3 or higher on an AP exam should report this to colleges to which they are applying. It is not necessary to submit official AP scores for consideration in the application review process. Students may note the AP scores on the Common Application or colleges' own applications or submit a photocopy of score reports to the admissions office.

What if a student cannot afford the fees for test registration and college applications?

Fee waivers for college entrance tests and for applications are available for low-income students from their counselor.

Beginning the College Search

How can students research college options?

Students and parents can research post-high school options by using Idaho CIS, visiting college websites, attending college fairs, reading college guides, watching college videos, meeting college representatives, touring prospective schools, and talking with knowledgeable people.

Visiting Colleges

Why is it important to visit colleges?

Visiting college campuses is a great way to learn more about what you do and do not want in a college. A recent survey of college admissions personnel cited the importance of a student's "demonstrated interest" as a factor in admissions decisions. Colleges track candidates who schedule tours and information sessions at their school and college fairs. Other ways to demonstrate interest include requesting information, attending information sessions in your area, and meeting with college representatives who visit MVHS and at the Boise National College Fair.

How do students with busy schedules manage to visit colleges?

When possible, students are encouraged to visit colleges when they are in session. Colleges offer tours and information sessions on Saturdays and throughout the summer as well. Students should consult college admission offices or websites in advance to arrange visits.

What about the cost of college visits?

Students and their families should visit the colleges that are close by. Admissions officers realize that students often cannot visit every college they are applying to in the fall. Many families wait to see if a student is admitted before visiting a college far away. If students cannot visit, it is important to try to make contact with colleges at the college fair and by making sure they are on the schools' mailing list. Video campus tours are sometimes available on college websites or at www.campustours.com and www.collegechoice.com.

Decision Plans in Applying for College

What are the options for applying to college?

Colleges offer several different options for applying, so it is important to know the choices available at the schools on the student's list. These are the most common types:

- Regular Decision (RD) – Applications must be received by a fixed date for admission consideration.
- Rolling Admission – Applications are reviewed as they arrive. It is an advantage to apply as early as possible because programs may close once places have been filled.
- Early Action (EA) – Applications are due by an early date (usually Oct. 15-Dec.15), and candidates receive notification of their status by January 1. An acceptance is non-binding, and students have until May 1 (the universal candidate reply date) to decide whether to accept the offer of admission.
- Restricted Early Action – Candidates may only apply to one early action school, but there is no restriction on regular decision applications to other schools.
- Early Decision (ED) – Applications are due by an early date, and candidates receive notification of their admission decision by January 1. Unlike EA, students are expected to matriculate at the college, as ED is a binding agreement. In rare cases due to financial or other extenuating circumstances, students may be released from this commitment. If students are deferred under ED, they may apply to other colleges without obligation to the ED school.
- Early Decision II – A second round of ED in January, which allows students who were denied or deferred at their first choice school to apply in a second round ED plan.

Who should apply Early Decision?

A great deal of controversy has surrounded Early Decision plans. Critics complain that it forces seniors to commit to a college too early in the process and limits financial aid opportunities. Proponents cite the advantage of choosing ED because many colleges select a significant percentage of their freshman class from the ED pool of applicants. Students should only apply ED if they are certain that a school is their first choice and if financial aid is not a critical factor in the decision. By applying to several schools, students have the opportunity to compare financial aid packages before committing to a school by May 1.

What is the difference between being deferred and being wait listed?

Students who apply either Early Decision or Early Action may receive a deferral rather than an acceptance or denial. A deferral means that the student's application has been moved into the regular decision pool and will be reviewed for admission at a later date with the regular applicants. Students should not be too discouraged by a deferral, as there is still a possibility of acceptance in the spring. Deferred students should continue to send updated grades and other pertinent information to the admissions office to increase their chances for an acceptance. A letter or email to admissions emphasizing their continuing desire to attend the school is helpful as well.

Colleges assign a significant number of students every year to a wait list because they are not certain exactly how many students will accept their offers of admission. They maintain a wait list to complete their freshman class. In recent years, colleges have increased the number of students they have placed on wait lists, because it has become harder for them to predict their yield. The hard truth is that there is a low acceptance rate for most wait lists. If wait listed, students must place a deposit at a school where they have been accepted. If students wish to remain on a college's wait list, they must follow the college's instructions on how to respond to indicate their intent. Students should also reaffirm in writing their desire to attend the school. Should an offer of admission be extended after May 1, students will lose the deposit made at the previous school. Students should also ask about financial aid, as sometimes schools do not have the same funds to offer their wait list admits as they do for their regular admits. Accept a waitlist spot only if there is a strong possibility you will attend that college if admitted.

The Common Application

What is the Common Application?

The Common Application is an admission application that is accepted by 456 colleges and universities. It simplifies the college admission process by allowing students to complete an online application that can be duplicated and sent to multiple schools. All member schools fully support its use and give equal consideration to the Common Application and their own forms (when also an option). The Common Application can be accessed at www.commonapp.org.

Are there special forms that must be completed for each college?

Most colleges have specific supplements that must be completed in addition to the main Common Application. The supplements may include additional questions, short answers, or essays.

Recommendations

What recommendations do students need for college?

Most colleges want one or two letters of recommendation from teachers and often an additional counselor recommendation. Students need to check each college's requirement for recommendations. Sometimes colleges request recommendations from a specific academic area.

When should I request recommendations?

Juniors are urged to request recommendations by June to provide adequate time for teachers and counselors to compose thoughtful, personal, and well written recommendations. If students wait until senior fall, they should give teachers a minimum of two weeks to provide a recommendation. Also be sure to give your recommender a resume' that includes in and out of school accomplishments. Remember to send a Thank You note after you see that it has been submitted.

May students and parents see the recommendations?

Letters of recommendation are considered confidential and are not shown to students and parents. They are sent directly to institutions and agencies. Because colleges consider confidential recommendations more credible, students will be asked to sign a waiver of their rights under FERPA (Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act) to view confidential recommendations.

College Essays

What are colleges looking for in student essays?

The essay is an opportunity to tell colleges who you are and what you care about and to differentiate yourself from other applicants with similar academic records. They are looking for a thoughtful, well written essay that gives them a glimpse into a student's beliefs, aspirations, values, or passions.

Can I use the same essay for different colleges?

Often the main college essay (or personal statement) can be used for different schools, unless the college has a unique essay prompt. If the college has supplemental essays or short answer sections, it is important to write original responses for them. Students should be aware that short answer questions and supplemental essays are just as important as the main essay.

What kind of help is available for writing a college essay?

Counselors, teachers, parents, and friends can be helpful in brainstorming ideas or proofreading final copies. Many guides and websites offer examples of successful college essays. It is essential, however, that the personal essay is always the students' own original work and showcases their authentic voice.

College Interviews

Will I need to interview for college admission?

Not every college offers interviews, and the emphasis on them has decreased during the past several years. The general rule is that the smaller the college, the more important an interview is going to be. Most schools have one of the following policies:

- No interviews – group information sessions only (the majority of schools)
- Alumni interviews only – off-campus
- Interviews are optional (informational only)
- Interviews are encouraged and evaluative.

Athletes, Artists, Musicians, and Other Special Talents

What if I want to play an intercollegiate sport in college?

There are three NCAA (National Collegiate Athletic Association) divisions. Most Division I and II schools offer scholarships to recruited athletes. In all divisions, being recruited as an athlete may help students' chances of being admitted to a school. Athletes are encouraged to talk to their coaches and the Athletic Director to discuss whether they have the ability to compete in college at some level. Athletes may also be contacted directly by college coaches. All students with an interest in Division I or II programs must register with the NCAA Clearinghouse at www.eligibilitycenter.org by the end of junior year. Athletes should visit the college athletic department's web page for information about programs and to fill out the questionnaire that informs coaches of their interest. Those students interested in playing at the Junior College or Division III schools need to register with NAIA Eligibility. Remember that admissions committees make final admissions decisions, not coaches.

What if I have a special talent in music, art, theater, or another area?

Students with special talents often must complete additional application requirements, such as portfolios or auditions. Students should check all college requirements and deadlines for these programs and apply early to meet audition deadlines.

Special Circumstances

What help is available for students with special needs?

All colleges must provide support services for students with physical and learning challenges and assist with the transition to college. Some colleges are known for their programs for special needs students.

What help is available for first generation college students?

Colleges actively seek students who are the first in their family to go to college. Parents and students should identify themselves as first generation to colleges.

Money for College

What are the four types of financial aid?

The four types of financial aid are:

- Grants – money that is given to students, usually because of financial need, that does not need to be repaid.
- Scholarships – money that is awarded because of exceptional academic achievement, a talent or skill, community service, and/or financial need.
- Work –Study – money a student earns by working at a college job, usually 10-15 hours a week.
- Loans – money borrowed by students and/or parents that must be repaid.

What is the FAFSA?

The FAFSA is the Free Application for Federal Student Aid and can be accessed online at www.fafsa.ed.gov. It is required by all schools in the United States to qualify for financial aid and is filed after January 1 of the senior year.

What is the difference between need-based and merit-based financial aid?

Need-based financial aid is awarded to students who do not have sufficient financial resources to pay for college. A student's academic record is not a factor. Merit-based financial aid is given to students who have outstanding abilities, talents, or accomplishments, regardless of the financial situation of the family.

Where can I find information on national and local scholarships?

Students can check the state of Idaho Department of Education to find scholarships for students attending an Idaho school. Information on national private scholarships can be found at www.fastweb.com. Students should never pay for any service that claims to be able to find scholarships for them. MVHS Career Center Scholarship Board has announcements for various scholarships and should be checked weekly for updates. Parents can check with employers to see if they have a scholarship program. Also, civic organizations such as the Rotary or Masons sometimes give scholarships to children of members.

What are some tips for finding affordable college options?

- Make sure the list of colleges includes an economic safety school- a school that meets the student's academic needs and is affordable. Many in-state public colleges and universities offer the lowest tuition for residents.
- Research schools that offer merit scholarships.
- Investigate honors programs at public colleges and universities where students receive many of the benefits of a private school, such as small classes, research opportunities, and full professors as instructors.
- Consider spending two years at a local community college (CWI or Treasure Valley Community College) and then transferring for the final two years.
- Do not eliminate private colleges from consideration as they often can provide more generous financial aid packages.