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The College Application Process



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Like hot chocolate and apple pie, some things can be counted on to bring comfort every fall. Unfortunately, the college application process isn't one of them. In fact, for your child, it probably ranks right up there with going to a new school or wearing that first pair of eyeglasses. It's easy for your child to feel overwhelmed while trying to manage numerous applications, each with varying deadlines and requirements. Just imagine if you had to fill out multiple tax returns this year--and your future job depended on it!

But filling out college applications properly is crucial. After all, you and your child put a lot of time and effort into choosing schools--now it's time to complete that process. Your child should allow plenty of time to work on the applications, and you'll want to make sure that you're available for help. Here are some things to keep in mind before your child gets started.

What's required in the application?

Most college applications have standard requirements, such as:

- Biographical and family information
- List of extracurricular activities, hobbies, and interests
- Reference letters (usually from teachers but occasionally from someone in the community)
- High school grade transcript
- SAT/ACT scores
- Personal essay
- Application fee

The key is for your child to present all of this information in the best possible light. Though your child won't have any flexibility in the presentation of his or her personal information, grades, or SAT/ACT scores, he or she will have an opportunity to stand out from the pack with reference letters and the personal essay. Not surprisingly, then, these two items are very important.

Your child should spend some time thinking about the teachers whom he or she wants to write the recommendation letters. Also, your child should allow plenty of time for the teacher to write the reference, and tell the teacher what to do when finished (i.e., send the letter directly to the college--in which case a prestamped, preaddressed envelope should be provided--or give it back for inclusion with the rest of the application).

The personal essay is often the heart and soul of the application. It helps the admissions team distinguish your child from many other applicants and, in some cases, may be the deciding factor. To write a thoughtful, coherent essay, your child should choose a topic that is especially meaningful to him or her. As a parent, you'll want to refrain from actually writing the essay (it's also unethical for your child to hire a professional ghostwriter). However, you can certainly brainstorm for ideas with your child, offer editing suggestions, and proofread the final product for spelling and grammatical mistakes.

If your child needs help getting started, most college guidebooks devote a chapter to writing a good college essay. Ideally, your child should browse through this material in the summer before senior year to get familiar with the process, before he or she faces the terror of writer's block the weekend before the application is due.

The total package--what colleges look for in prospective applicants

Beyond grades and test scores, it's no secret that colleges will be looking at your child's extracurricular activities to see what interests and abilities he or she can bring to the campus. And as colleges have become more competitive, the quest of parents to find the "right" mix of activities has intensified. Many parents have spent countless hours (and dollars) driving their children to every extracurricular activity imaginable in an effort to ensure their child's entry into a prestigious university. Yet this isn't necessarily the magic elixir.

Instead, admissions officers generally say that they favor applicants who have demonstrated a real passion in one or a few areas, as opposed to those who participate in a long list of activities just for the sake of putting it on their application. So, instead of forcing your child to dabble in everything (e.g., music, art, theater, sports, community work, religious work, business internships), it's better to let your child focus on those pursuits that he or she truly enjoys. And if your child doesn't get accepted at a particular college, don't take it personally--your child's path to success doesn't depend on just one college.

Timeline for applying

Generally, college applications are submitted in the fall or winter of your child's senior year of high school, with acceptance or rejection letters arriving in the spring. However, if your child applies for early admission (via either early decision or early action), the acceptance or rejection should arrive by December of senior year. It's important to note that the college application timeline isn't the same as the financial aid timeline; the latter is usually later.

Each college has its own application deadline, as well as its own application requirements. Many private colleges use the Common Application, and require students to fill out short, individualized supplements to this application. Other colleges require their own individual application. To stay organized, write each deadline on a central calendar, and then create an individual folder for each college to keep track of applications, correspondence, reference letters, essay requirements, and other items. Most of the application paperwork can also be tracked online.

Early admission vs. regular admission

Some students favor early admission because it lets them relax and enjoy their senior year. There are actually two ways to apply for early admission:

- **Early action:** Your child applies by the early deadline but has until the college's normal deadline to decide whether to attend. Your child can apply to several schools under the early action process.
- **Early decision:** Your child applies by the early deadline but then must commit to attending immediately. Your child can only apply to one college under the early decision process.

If your child's heart is set on one particular college and the match is a good one, it might be worthwhile for your child to apply early decision. However, a note of caution--it's easy for your child to wind up with less financial aid than a regular applicant. This is because colleges know that your child is already committed to attending the college; thus, they figure they can offer a less attractive financial aid package. And although your child can rescind an early decision acceptance if the college doesn't offer adequate financial aid, he or she may be rushed in applying to other colleges.

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