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The Downside of Early Testing for College Admission

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coursework as a means to improve math skills, writing ability and critical reading. More formal test preparation can take place during the winter and early spring of 11th grade. A good rule of thumb is for 11th graders to plan to complete a first round of testing by the end of spring semester. There are many opportunities to retake tests in senior year, if necessary.

There are several very appropriate ways to prepare early for the path to college. Here are my top picks:

Students should focus on doing their best work in high school and take challenging courses over time-particularly in subjects they do well in and enjoy.

Students should engage in systematic and meaningful extracurricular activities such as sports, music, employment or volunteerism. Students who do a few things they are passionate about are better prepared for college admission than those who cram their schedules with many random activities. In this case less is more.

Use family vacations and school breaks to explore college campuses in relaxed, informal ways. It doesn't matter if the student plans to apply to these schools-the goal is to simply get a general feel for the variety of colleges that exist. Over the course of a year or so, try to include in the mix a two-year community college, a large public university (one in your state and/or one out-of-state), a small

These days I frequently hear the question: "Is it my imagination or is the college admission process starting earlier and earlier?" I can assure you, it is not your imagination. Parts of the college admission process are starting earlier each year. One unfortunate consequence is that some students are taking the official SAT or ACT before they are ready. In January of last year I provided an article on "The Big Tests" which addressed the basics of testing and the value of preparation (<http://www.lamorindaweekly.com/archive/issue0224/College-Admissions-The-Big-Tests.html>). This issue's article addresses the importance of proper timing for the big tests-when is the best time to take standardized tests like the SAT and the ACT?

There is a disturbing trend toward taking standardized tests in the fall of junior year, often preceded by summer test preparation. I have even heard of sophomores and even freshmen taking the SAT and ACT. This is disadvantageous to students because both the SAT and the ACT are designed to be taken by 11th graders in high school. And this is what colleges still expect. There are many good reasons to delay standardized testing until the second semester of 11th grade:

It bears repeating that standardized tests are designed for 11th graders. High school students learn at a fast pace. By taking the SAT or ACT in the fall, 11th graders deprive themselves of months of classroom education. Students can feel deflated by low test scores and think poorly of themselves. In fact, low test scores are often due to the fact that the student has not completed related coursework.

There is a strong link between greater maturity and better testing results. Younger students are frequently not interested in college because it seems such a long way off. Early testing can lead them to tune out or burn out. Trust me, neither one is a desirable outcome. All too often I see students suffering from burn out. Many times this is linked to early pressure to excel on standardized testing for college.

If a student has completed relevant coursework and really wants to test, an excellent option is to take a full length practice exam. Students can do so without these scores appearing on their permanent record. Some test preparation professionals offer this service in the hope you will return to their company for further preparation. That's a good way for students to get practice without some of the downsides of early testing. Just avoid getting drawn into early test prep. Use the practice to get a feel for the test(s) and learn strengths and areas to focus on for improvement. Use high school

liberal arts college as well as a technical or specialty school. Students can benefit greatly from these informal opportunities to become familiar with college admission terminology as well as the size and feel of college environments.

The journey to college can and should be longer and more relaxed, rather than forced and pressured. As a community we would do well to support this objective so that by the time students get to their freshman year in higher education, they will be primed to learn, grow and thrive over the course of four happy, productive years.

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