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Getting Organized for Your Junior Year in High School

By Elizabeth LaScala, Ph.D.



Elizabeth LaScala, Ph.D. is an independent college advisor who draws upon 25 years of higher education experience to help guide and support the college admissions process for students and their families. Dr. LaScala is a member of NACAC, WACAC and HECA. She can be contacted at (925) 891-4491 or elizabeth@doingcollege.com. Visit www.doingcollege.com for more information about her services.

Times have changed and getting into college is much different than it was even five years ago. Selecting a college is a big decision, and both public and private schools are increasingly competitive. Going through the college admissions process can seem daunting, but those who start early on to accomplish the tasks associated with a college search and the application process will have an easier, more enjoyable and successful experience. And, of course, this effort is in addition to academics, sports, volunteerism and jobs.

Our community has fine high schools and counselors. Yet school counselors have their hands full keeping their caseloads on track academically to ensure graduation and support individuals with special needs. Essentially it is the responsibility of the student, with support from family, to fully engage in the process of preparing for, selecting and applying to colleges. Here is a checklist of some basic tasks to accomplish no later than the fall semester of senior year:

1. Verify the accuracy of your high school transcript and assess your eligibility and competitiveness for the University of California (UC) as well as the California State University (CSU) campuses.
2. Find out and keep track of deadlines related to what the high school counseling office requires from you (e.g. setting up a Naviance account).
3. Make an appointment with your school counselor to review college plans and get advice.

4. With your counselor's guidance, begin a systematic search of "best fit" colleges that include reach, targets and nearly certain to get in options; use school breaks to visit college campuses.

5. Complete standardized testing requirements; for most students these tests are best taken in winter or more commonly spring of 11th grade. Although test prep companies often promote earlier prep, I personally have not seen much benefit to this strategy in my 12 years of counseling hundreds of high school students. In fact, quite the opposite is true: I have often seen negative consequences such as burnout due to over preparation and serious dips in student confidence due to gaps in academic mastery that could have been avoided by waiting until the completion of relevant coursework. My mantra remains the best preparation for standardized testing is high school academic achievement. This has never been truer as the new SAT is released in January 2016.

6. Complete two SAT Subject Tests in different disciplines (e.g. science and math or math and humanities); these one-hour content-rich exams are still required or recommended by many well regarded schools nationwide and can strengthen your application to most schools, including several of the UCs.

7. If permitted as an 11th grader, attend talks by college representatives who visit your school this fall, attend college fairs, make campus visits, research college websites - learn all you can

about colleges so you have a well-researched final list by fall of your senior year.

8. Check admission requirements as you explore college websites; although what is posted is for the current class of applicants, you can get a jump on things by understanding more about what it takes to apply to various schools; for example, you can benefit from paying attention to essay questions colleges pose to prospective applicants - these responses require much time and thought, and you can get a head start by considering how you might respond to similar questions next year.

9. Understand Early Action, Early Decision and Rolling application options and how they differ from Regular Application deadlines.

10. You will be asking your 11th grade teachers for recommendations; keep this in mind as you participate in class discussions, collaborate with your classmates and prepare for tests and projects; show staff and faculty respect and consideration in all your actions both in and out of the classroom.

11. Towards late winter or early spring, work with the counseling office to select appropriate senior coursework and maintain balance between demonstrating rigor and attaining good grades.

12. Check with your high school's college and career office for local and regional scholarships you may be eligible for and consider your options for both 11th and 12th grades.

13. Become familiar with financial aid this year so you will be better prepared next year; visit <http://www.finaid.org/> to learn more.

Younger high school students and their parents can review this checklist and think about where they will be in the process next year around this time. Start early! Getting all the information, keeping it organized and on track is not a matter of intelligence - it is a matter of time and discipline. Every family with a college-bound student needs to decide how to handle the timing and complexities of college admissions. There are many resources at our fine schools and our counselors are first rate. There are excellent books and websites, and good organizational tools available. With all the resources in our communities, students can stay on track for college!

Reach the reporter at: info@lamorindaweekly.com

[back](#)

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