

Frequently Asked Questions

for the College Search and Application Process

The College Search

Is it important to visit colleges before applying?

Absolutely. For most juniors, a college is just an abstract idea, an image in their minds that over time has become associated with a name. Even if a student has been going to Gator or Seminole athletic events from the time they were small, they probably have only a very limited perspective of campus life. When students (and parents) formally visit a campus, however, they experience a concrete reality that goes far beyond pretty pictures on the website, Saturday afternoon games, or what friends may have said about it. Each campus has its own personality, its own ethos, and if a student is to find the college that best fits her, a campus visit is crucial.

Will visiting or not visiting have an impact on whether my daughter is admitted?

At some schools, yes. As colleges face increasingly unpredictable applicant pools (see “What is ‘yield?’” below), many of them are seeking ways to gauge the extent of a student’s “demonstrated interest” in attending. Hence they have begun tracking the number of “contacts” a student has with their particular institution—through campus visits, meetings with admissions representatives, attending local admission functions, etc. While most large state universities have too many applicants to track contacts, many private colleges and universities keep careful records of the number of contacts a student has with their institution. As decision time draws near, students who have not visited campus can be at a distinct disadvantage.

Where do I find information about visiting?

The admissions or prospective student pages of college websites provide a wealth of information about visiting. There you will find times of campus tours and information sessions, directions to the admissions office, and even names of nearby lodging.

How much credence should I give to college rankings?

Very little. Consider this: Several years ago the editors of *U.S. News* decided to alter their formula to something that they believed offered a better reflection of educational quality. When a number of Ivy League colleges did not appear at the top of the list, they reverted to their old formula. The moral of this story is not that the Ivies and other highly selective colleges are “better” or “worse”; it’s that we must understand that the rankings are carefully designed to sell magazines, not evaluate educational experiences. The bottom line is this: your child’s college choice should be based upon the best *fit* for her, and very often the best fit and the most highly ranked college are not the same.

The Application and Admission Process

How many colleges should my daughter apply to?

The number of applications will vary by individual, but the average student applies to between four and five colleges. *We recommend that each student apply to anywhere from two or three to no more than six-eight carefully chosen colleges.*

What's the difference between Early Action (EA) and Early Decision (ED)?

Early Action programs are *non-binding* and enable the student to learn of an admission decision relatively early in the senior year (December) without committing to a particular college or university until May. Early Action applications are typically due in November. A handful of schools have recently implemented *Single-Choice Early Action (SCEA)* programs. Under such a plan, the student agrees to submit only one Early Action application to that school and no other, yet without committing to attend the college if accepted. Other applications can be submitted for Regular Decision.

Early Decision is a program in which a student makes a *binding* commitment to attend the college or university if accepted. Early Decision applications are generally due in November of the senior year, and the student will receive one of three decisions (admit, defer, deny) in December. Since the deadlines are so early, it is *vital* that a student applying under Early Decision have done a great deal of research and be absolutely convinced that the college is an ideal match. While an applicant gains a statistical advantage by applying under an Early Decision plan, she risks committing to a college in October when, six months later, a very different choice might be made. For precisely this reason, in recent years a number of colleges have replaced their Early Decision programs with Early Action plans.

What is "Rolling Admission"?

Most large state universities, and many private colleges and universities, notify their applicants of the admission decision on a "rolling" basis. This means that, a few weeks after the application has been submitted, a student will receive a decision in the mail. However, the student does not have to commit to attending the college until May 1.

What is "Early Admission"?

Not to be confused with either Early Action or Early Decision, *Early Admission* is for a student who believes that she is fully prepared for the rigors of college academic and social life by the end of her junior year, and so would seek to skip the senior year of high school and enter college after the 11th grade. Very few students are ready for this step; indeed, most colleges and universities discourage it. Any junior considering applying for Early Admission should begin discussing it with her Advisor immediately.

What's a "hook," and why is it important?

In admissions parlance, a *hook* is a student attribute that meets a college's institutional need at a particular time. The hook could be anything from athletics to development (a family's ability to add a new wing to a building) to an under-represented ethnic group to the arts (playing an oboe, for instance, when the college orchestra needs an oboist). When admissions officers at the most highly selective colleges and universities say "We could replace our entire admitted group with students from the Wait List and no one could tell the difference," what they mean is that there are so many outstanding candidates that they must make hair-splitting (and seemingly arbitrary) distinctions among them. When that is the case, a "hooked" student has a *significant* advantage.

What's "yield," and why is it important?

After "size of entering class," *yield* is the most important term in an Admission Director's vocabulary. Yield is the rate at which students who have been offered admission at a particular

college actually decide to enroll there. For example, if there are 1,000 offers of admission, and 400 students decide to enroll, then the yield for that year is 40%. While Harvard maintains the highest yield (around 80%), most highly selective colleges anticipate a yield in the 35-45% range. However, since more students are filing more applications, it becomes increasingly difficult for Admission Directors to accurately predict their yields. For this reason admission offices often look for signs of “demonstrated interest” (see “Will visiting or not visiting have an impact on whether daughter is admitted?”).

Standardized Testing

When should my daughter take standardized tests such as the SAT and ACT?

We urge students to take the SAT Reasoning Test and ACT *no earlier than January of the junior year*. The tests are designed with spring-semester juniors in mind, and thus taking them prematurely can give a family a misplaced (usually lower) sense of what a student might potentially score. In rare instances, students may wish to take an SAT Subject Test after the sophomore year (see “What are the SAT Subject Tests and should my child take them?”), but they should do so only after consultation with a college counselor. Parents should also keep in mind that students will have taken the PSAT during both the sophomore and junior years, and those results will provide a barometer of where the student’s standardized testing scores might eventually be.

There have been a lot of changes to the SAT since parents took it. What’s new about it, and how is it being used?

It’s now officially called the SAT Reasoning Test, and over the years there have been some significant changes to the exam. The old “Verbal” section is now called the Critical Reading section; analogies have been dropped, and the test places greater emphasis on reading comprehension. The Math portion is largely unchanged, although there are more Algebra II-related questions on the test. The most significant change is the new Writing section, which assesses both knowledge of grammar and usage, and includes an essay that comprises 30% of the overall Writing score. Each section is scored on a 200- to 800-point scale, so the high score on the SAT Reasoning Test is now 2400.

As always, the SAT plays an important role in admission at colleges that require it; very often, it is among the top two or three items in importance. (Some colleges do *not* require standardized testing for admission; see “Are there colleges that do not require standardized testing?”) At present, the Writing score is required by a great number of colleges, and many have begun using the Writing score as part of the admission process. Thus you may hear admissions officers referring to scores on either the 1600 or the 2400 scale. So far, there is some evidence indicating that the new Writing test has modest predictive validity, so we anticipate that more colleges will use this portion of the test as part of their admission criteria.

What is the ACT, and should my child take it?

The ACT is another standardized test used in the admission process, usually interchangeably with the SAT, and *we highly recommend that students take both tests*. The ACT has four categories and a variety of subscores and lasts 175 minutes. There is an optional Writing Test that lasts an additional 30 minutes. The four categories are Reading (including both social

studies and science), English (with emphasis on writing style in addition to traditional grammar), Mathematics, and Science Reasoning (combining all the physical sciences). The test is scored on a scale of 1-36.

Since the ACT and SAT are structured differently, some students will perform better on the ACT than the SAT (and vice versa). In fact, in recent years we have seen some Bolles students score the equivalent of 200 points (4-5 points on the ACT) *higher* on the ACT than on the SAT. Thus it makes a great deal of sense to take both tests; many students have qualified for Bright Futures, for instance, on the ACT but not on the SAT.

What are the SAT Subject Tests and should my child take them?

Once known as the Achievement (ACH) Tests and more recently called the SAT IIs, SAT Subject Tests are one-hour examinations that measure a student's knowledge of specific subject areas (e.g., Chemistry, French, U. S. History, etc.). Only about 40 colleges nationally *require* one or more Subject Tests for admission, so *unless your child is seriously considering applying to the one of the UCs, the Ivies, or a handful of other very highly selective colleges, they almost certainly will **not** need to take SAT Subject Tests.* If your daughter does need to take Subject Tests, please consult both the College Counseling Office and the subject-area teacher to determine the most appropriate time to take the test(s). *Please note: Beginning with students entering in the fall of 2012, the UCs will no longer require SAT Subject Tests.*

Are there colleges that do *not* require standardized testing for admission?

Yes; in fact, the number keeps growing. Visit the website www.fairtest.org for an up-to-date list of all the colleges that are test optional.

Should my daughter take a test prep class?

That depends on a host of factors. We can say two things for certain about preparing for a test: (1) it behooves anyone to be familiar with the format and content of a test before taking it; and (2) there is no independently documented evidence that test prep courses deliver the dramatic results that many in the industry claim. Students (and families) can make a significant investment in test prep, yet in some cases their scores go up, in some their scores don't budge, and in some their scores actually go down. We have found the same of students who have *not* taken test prep courses. With all that taken into account, here are a few guidelines to consider:

- If your child decides to enroll in a course, choose the format (size of class, frequency of meeting, etc.) that works best for her.
- Don't let the test prep take up so much time that it lowers your child's classroom performance. GPA (along with quality of curriculum) is still the top factor in virtually all admission decisions, and anything that lowers GPA is ultimately counterproductive.
- If your child is prone to test anxiety, be very careful about enrolling her in test prep. A growing number of educators are coming to believe that *test prep can actually raise test anxiety*, and thus have a negative effect on a child's scores. Over the years we have worked with a number of students whose scores went down during test prep, and then actually went up once they got out; we speculatively attribute this phenomenon to increased anxiety created by the test prep.

- Try to time the test prep so that it occurs shortly before an actual examination date. *However, don't allow the test prep to force your child into taking the SAT Reasoning Test earlier than January of the junior year.* The test is designed for spring-semester juniors, and we have witnessed a number of students who have taken the test prematurely and then gotten spooked by their scores. In effect, these students allowed a low test score to become a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy, and they never earned a score much higher than their initial results.

Again, we neither encourage nor discourage students' taking test prep courses, and we do not endorse any particular program or company. It must be an individual decision.

Financial Aid

We've seen how much college costs today, and we think we might have financial need. Is there any way we can find out if we qualify?

Yes. There are a number of financial aid calculators on the internet that provide a ballpark Estimated Family Contribution (EFC). These web-based calculators include the following:

www.fafsa4caster.ed.gov/

www.collegeboard.com/student/pay/add-it-up/401.html

www.finaid.org

It is important to understand that there are two methods (“methodologies”) of calculating aid: (1) federal methodology, which is based on the Free Application for Student Financial Aid (FAFSA); and (2) institutional methodology, which is based on both the FAFSA and the College Scholarship Service (CSS) Profile. Generally speaking, public institutions and most private institutions will require only the FAFSA, but many well-endowed private colleges that supply millions of dollars of their own institutional funds to need-based aid will require the CSS Profile as well. The first website above is for the FAFSA, the second for the CSS Profile, and the third will calculate both.

Keep in mind that, even if a student does not qualify for federal need-based aid, *any* student is eligible for a low-interest federal Stafford Loan. However, a FAFSA must be submitted to participate in the Stafford Loan program.