

5 Ways to Get Started on College Apps Before Senior Year

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By Lily Herman in [APPLYING TO COLLEGE](#)

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High school seniors everywhere are sitting next to their mailboxes, anxiously awaiting decisions from their respective colleges. But if you're a high school junior, you might just be trying to survive your high school workload without even starting to think about college. But you don't have to wait until September to get started on your college applications! There are plenty of things you can do now so you can be college-admissions-ready come fall.



1. Sign up for standardized tests (SAT, ACT, etc.) ASAP

If you haven't taken a standardized test for your college applications yet, now is the time to sign up for one (or many) and take it! Having an idea of where your standardized test scores stand can really influence where you apply to college, and obviously, not having any idea where your numbers are can make for an extremely [stressful application process](#).

Sarah Wiszniak, a freshman at the University of Connecticut, explains how waiting until senior year to take these tests can make your entire college application process much worse. "It is difficult to gauge your progress and recover from a bad score if you wait to take the SAT or ACT until the fall of your senior year," she says. "There is no room to mess up if you only have a few months to get your dream score. That's an insane amount of pressure to put on yourself."

Jillian Feinstein, a college admissions consultant and founder of [CollegeApp Chick](#), also points out that waiting could jeopardize your entire application process. “Students should begin taking their standardized tests as early as winter of junior year,” she says. “Because of the rise of the test prep book, it is not uncommon to see a student take the test two or three times, and this can often lead to a higher score.”

So, how do you get started registering for the SAT, ACT and/or SAT II (also called “Subject Tests”)? For the SAT and SAT II, check out the College Board’s [list of test dates](#), then go to the [College Board website](#) to register. For the ACT, go to the [official website](#), check out the [ACT testing dates](#) and follow the site’s directions.

Even more importantly, make sure you have a plan for which tests you’re going to take and when. Have a backup plan as well; if you don’t get the score you want the first time you take a standardized test, when is a good day for you to retake it, and what are you going to do differently to prepare for the test? Taking these steps now as a junior can save you a ton of frustration, stress and heartbreak come senior year.



2. Get the college experience through tours and admissions events

Want to really get ahead of the college admissions game? Become a **college tour** pro before senior year! Learning the art of touring a college is an extremely valuable skill for when you start creating your final college list senior year.

During **your visits** as a junior, start taking note of what's important to you in a college. Did you notice that you always ask about a school's dining hall food or dorm life? Find yourself really desiring a

college with pretty architecture? Seeing what you gravitate towards on a college campus can help you narrow your college list before you even begin senior year.

Kate Masters, a sophomore at Wesleyan University, toured 15 colleges during just her junior year alone and found it to be an extremely helpful experience. “One thing I figured out during my early college tours was that I liked small campuses,” she says. “Making this realization totally changed how I approached my admissions process when I was a senior, and I ended up applying to mostly small liberal arts colleges. I definitely wouldn’t have been able to make this deduction had I not had that extra time during junior year to decide what I wanted.”

Additionally, touring schools as a junior gives you some experience navigating an admissions office. To sign up for a tour, check out the college’s admissions website. Many colleges will take anyone who shows up for the tour, but some schools require you to register, so make sure you sign up if a college requires it!

Also, if you want to show “demonstrated interest” (that’s the admissions term!) in a school, many colleges will ask you to sign a card or a form either ahead of time or in the admissions office to signify that you were there. Colleges will keep these contact cards so they can send you additional information, and they’ll also add it to your application if you end up applying to that school. Obviously, it never hurts to show that you like a school when you apply, so take the minute or two to make sure you write the correct information on these cards.

Another way you can show interest in a college is attending an admissions event. Many colleges open their doors to high school students to give them a special look at campus. For example, Wesleyan University hosts a special event for high school juniors whose parents are alumni of the school where they show these students what Wesleyan has to offer. Other colleges offer opportunities to see departments on campus, like the science laboratories or the journalism school on campus. Feel free to call up an admissions office for a school you’re interested in (or visit their website) to ask if they have any of these programs available in the future!



3. Create a draft of your college list

The idea of creating a **college list** can be daunting for anyone, so to avoid any last-minute stress or skepticism, it's important to start thinking about yours now. Although you won't have **your list** nailed down as a junior, it's crucial to start thinking about what types of schools you want to go to and what their requirements are.

For example, colleges ask applicants have a certain GPA, particular test scores and varying numbers of classes in different subject areas, so the sooner you know what you need to have to get into your schools, the better.

Want some help with finding schools that fit your parameters? Check out the College Board's **College Search tool**, or check out **Admittedly**, a website that seeks to "game-ify" the admissions process, where you can earn points for searching for colleges, creating a college list and completing other tasks.

Aida Guhlin, a sophomore at Texas A&M University, recommends you sign up to receive mail from various schools. "What helped me discover colleges was checking the little box on the PSAT freshman

year that said, 'Please send me college information,' and I was inundated for years," she says. Though it may seem tedious to be receiving dozens of college brochures every week, all of this mail caused Aida to look at a broader range of colleges that she didn't look at before, and as a junior, it's all about keeping your options open!

4. Get money on your mind

You won't have to officially fill out the FAFSA (the free application you need to complete to receive federal financial aid) or start talking to collegiate financial aid offices for another year, but it never hurts to begin thinking about money now!

If you're a junior and you really want to get on top of your [financial aid](#), start looking at the [FAFSA](#) form now so you'll know what you need to fill out a year from now. The FAFSA is considered one of the most frustrating and lengthy parts of the college process, so the sooner you know what information you'll need, the easier it will be to fill out a year from now.

Another way you can start getting FAFSA-ready is by using a financial aid calculator to see how much money your family might have to contribute to your education. The FAFSA's website has a cool tool you can use called the [FAFSA4caster](#) that you can try out to get your estimated family contribution (EFC), which is how much money your family is expected to pay for your education.

If you already know some of the schools you want to apply to, Aida recommends getting a feel for [financial aid jargon](#). "What really helped me during my senior year was contacting the individual schools I was already considering and becoming familiar with the details of their financial aid policies," she says. "For example, several schools don't have 'stackable' scholarships, meaning that you don't get to collect money from every scholarship they give you, instead receiving the largest scholarship. That was important to know, and so was the Ivy League rule of no merit-based scholarships."

It's also important to start thinking about the hefty price tag that comes with just applying to college. How are you going to pay for all of those fees for both your actual college apps and your standardized tests? Talk to your parents about how much money you can afford to spend on these fees, and start looking at [fee waivers](#).

Another great financial area to start exploring? Scholarships! Though many scholarships are only open to seniors, there are in fact some scholarships and grants for high school juniors that you can apply for now. Many scholarship programs do open their applications as early as mid-summer, so it's great to have an idea of which program applications you'll be filling out beforehand. Keep a running list of which scholarships you'd like to apply for, any deadlines for these awards and what types of requirements they all have.

Need some places to start looking for scholarships? Check out websites like [Cappex](#), [Scholarships.com](#) or [Fastweb](#) to get started. You can look at pages upon pages of scholarships or create your own profile to get scholarships matched to your particular extracurriculars, GPA and other factors.



5. Create an overall college application timeline

Now it's time to put everything together! Junior year is a great time to create a master calendar of your entire college admissions process. Find a planner to input everything: standardized testing dates, scholarship deadlines, college application deadlines and anything you'll need to turn in during your college process. Additionally, create a timeline of when you'll be working on the various parts of these forms and applications.

Kate also suggests decorating this calendar to make it more fun to write in. "I'm into crafts, so I ended up coloring and doodling in my calendar to make it even cuter when I filled it out," she says. "Planning out your admissions process may seem like a bore, but that pretty calendar saved me when I was applying to schools, filling out financial aid forms and deciding which college to attend."



Again, the more preparation you put in now as a junior, the less stressed you'll be next year. Do you really want to be one of those seniors scrambling to finish applications by the midnight deadlines on January 1? If not, it's time to start planning everything out now!