

IRVINGTON NY PTSA

PARENT TO PARENT 2017: College Tips From our Parents

GETTING STARTED:

- Find a mentor: friends or acquaintances who have already gone through the process are a great resource, as are former high school students. Don't be shy to ask for help and have your own "go-to" people to speak with on a regular basis. You'll learn more than you think!
- Get an early start: investigate testing dates, visiting colleges, financial aid paperwork. The time will go!
- Make goals with timelines and accomplish them on schedule to avoid getting overwhelmed
- Take advantage of travel/vacation opportunities to visit nearby colleges. This can help in getting a sense of school size and geography for future comparison
- Go to local college talks at other schools and libraries. Familiarize yourself with college language
- Work backwards: use summer before junior year for test prep and summer before senior yr for essays
- Keep track of awards, accomplishments, test scores and keep a graded paper or two beginning in 9th grade. It will save you from looking for them later
- Get a cardboard box for all the information your student will receive from colleges. You'll be surprised when you need it and can't find it! File information by college or by topic. Or tell your child not to check the box for college materials when they take the SAT or ACT.
- Listen to your child: it's hard sometimes but so important. It will make the process go more smoothly
- Be honest and realistic with your child as a student and on a personal level; they could be disappointed later otherwise
- Keep an active dialogue with your child throughout the process and use common sense when deciding how to move forward
- Be prepared for a roller-coaster of emotion and effort – for your student and for YOU
- Don't rely exclusively on one person's advice; find time to do your own research
- Encourage your child to keep in touch with their guidance counselor. Work with the guidance department as a partner. They cannot do everything needed for your student and your student cannot succeed without them. It's a partnership
- Heed those warnings about junior year! The workload is heavy and grades are important. Under-schedule your child. Same holds true for first semester senior year
- Don't make college a constant topic of conversation and don't discuss it with your kid's friends unless they bring it up (and they probably won't)
- Try not to stress about the process. This is a huge opportunity for all to learn about each other and for your child to dig deep and figure out who they are and what they want from the next part of life
- Forget everything you thought you knew about college from when you applied. It's a different ballgame
- Back off as much as possible. Better for you and for your kid. It's good practice for letting them go
- Allow your child to own the process (school selection, application) but be prepared to assert practical guidance when needed
- Know when to keep your mouth shut. Your child must try on their own ideas about college selection, college visits, essay topics and honing in on interests. Your opinion of their opinion doesn't count and may serve only to tangle their process!

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- Try not to get crazy when you hear other parents talk. Everyone's experience is different. Don't get hung up on the chatter about the Ivies and who got in where. It's about the right fit for your child, not prestige
 - Take what you read on "College Confidential" with a grain of salt
 - Focus on some activities your child likes (not what looks good) and look for leadership opportunities
- Getting a summer job is more impressive than going on a service trip abroad. Really!
- Carefully plan senior year courses. Scheduling conflicts in this year are huge and can affect many subjects
 - Plan, plan, plan: do NOT leave everything until the last minute!

TESTING:

- Figure out if the SAT or the ACT is the right test. Diagnostic tests are available. There is no need to take both. Practice, practice, practice
- Do as much SAT/ACT "mock testing" as you can (and can afford!). This helps replicate test conditions and helps your student get accustomed to taking the real test
- If your child is motivated, have them sit for their tests in the fall and winter of their junior year. This means starting to study/getting a tutor in the summer. Getting testing out of the way left the spring of junior year open for visiting schools. If you are hiring a tutor, call early; good ones get booked!
- If your child needs accommodations for the SAT, don't wait until the last minute! Plan this during sophomore year (especially for the SAT)
- Research schools that require SAT Subject Tests and plan early to make sure that your student takes the right classes. You can take up to three in one sitting, but if you cancel one, you have to cancel them all
- Make sure you understand the complicated timetable for testing. If your student is taking SAT Subject Tests, they need to be taken separately from the SAT but are offered on the same dates. If your student is taking the ACT instead, SAT Subject Tests are usually not necessary but taking them and doing well on them can distinguish one candidate from another
- Plan flexibly for retaking tests and remember that your senior can still take standardized tests in the fall (even if they are applying early decision or early action)
- There are more and more test optional schools. Check them out using Fairtest.org
- Sometimes a review class, even if cheaper than tutoring, uses up valuable time but doesn't always improve scores because review classes don't target your student's strengths and weaknesses. But they can be useful with general test-taking strategies
- Test scores matter less than you think so don't agonize over them: rigor of curriculum matters more than you'd imagine. This is particularly true at small to mid-sized schools but increasingly the case everywhere

THE LIST:

- Research schools and think about what you bring to them and how you contribute to the student body
- Once the list is narrowed down, spend time surfing each college website; there is a lot of information to learn about. Many college websites can be complex to navigate; if you are looking for something specific, you might use Google with the keyword and the college name
- Consider creating a master spreadsheet with deadlines and other information for each college.
- Don't overlook large schools that have Honors programs (these don't show on Naviance). Some Honors programs have separate, earlier deadlines and additional essays and interviews. Be prepared!!
- Respect limits your child sets (I don't want to go south, I want to be outside NY) even if they seem weird to you. Plenty of schools will fit the bill and this helps narrow the choices
- Consider Canadian schools – they are much less expensive although they are colder! Or schools in the UK
- Within each category of schools, colleges tend to mimic each other. So a search aimed at finding your

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child's "one true love" is a waste of emotional energy

- Apply to "safety schools" you will actually attend. Another way of saying this: love your safety!
- Women's colleges offer an opportunity to obtain an elite, small college, liberal arts education even if GPA is less than stellar
- Be able to demonstrate interest when expected and know why you want to go to a particular school
- Suggest that your student look at the online course catalogue and schedule to see if the school has a broad selection of courses s/he is interested in or can take other classes at nearby schools
- Don't let your child apply to schools that s/he isn't interested in just because you went there or because you heard they give merit scholarships, for example. It's a waste of time, energy and money
- Suggest that your student "Google" about student life at particular schools (besides drinking and drugs)
- Even the most perfect candidate with perfect test scores doesn't get into every school! Target as best as you can and realize that colleges look for a mix of students
- If your child is applying to a specialized program (music, acting, architecture, art) the process is different and requires earlier planning. Ideally this should begin in sophomore year
- If your child is being recruited for athletics, the timetable is very advanced. Educate yourself early!

VISITING SCHOOLS:

- Visit a few schools early if you can – and try to get to a mix of large/small, urban/rural/suburban, private/public. It provides context for your student's decisions later on. Keep in mind that most 16-17 year olds have no idea what a college campus is really like unless they have older siblings. What your student may think they want may not really be what they like. Ideas change so make sure your list has a good mix of different schools
- Start campus visits early. Summer between sophomore and junior year is a good time. Use every day off, school breaks and long weekends open. Start with a small school because it is less intimidating. Remember that tours are often not given on the weekends
- Discuss pros and cons of different-size schools and distance from home; use college web sites as guides to hotels and restaurants in the area
- Take virtual tours and visit as many schools as possible so you get a feel for the kind of students attending the school and whether its physical aspects make it a good match
- Before visiting a school, find out if they recommend an interview and schedule one if it works for you
- Before visiting a school your child is most interested in, reach out to a professor or coach to see if they can meet during a visit. It gives an additional opportunity for information and adds depth to the visit. All professors' emails are online and the worst they can say is that they don't have time! If your child is interested in a specific major, speak to a professor in that department. Sitting in on classes will offer a good idea of the environment and educational philosophy. Professors rarely have a say in admissions
- Try not to pack in too many colleges into one trip or else by the end your student might lose interest or it may be hard to distinguish the schools later on
- Make sure your phone has battery for directions. Finding colleges can sometimes be difficult!
- If you have a slightly younger child, bring them on visits too. It will make the process easier for everyone the second time around
- Try to eliminate factors that subtly influence your perception of a school so you don't miss out on a good one: if it was a gloomy day, you may not like the school very much, but it might look a lot better in the sun. Conversely, if you visit a cold-weather school only in the summer, be prepared for a very different experience in the winter
- Register for and go on scheduled tours so the school knows you visited. Self-guided tours are never as informative Fill out the forms when you go to admissions. Show "demonstrated interest" when it matters

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(check college websites or call the college to find out)

- Try to visit colleges while they are in session. You can learn a lot by looking at the student body and watching their interactions. Encourage your student to walk around campus to get a visceral sense of how the school feels
- Look for a school that fits your child – not just the one with the best name
- When visiting a school don't share your opinion until your student shares theirs
- Don't discount a “gut” feel, especially when you and your student share it
- Try to find a simple and fast way of gauging interest – a 1-10 scale for example
- Have a meal in the cafeteria. Your child is going to eat there three times a day for four years!
- Try to have a conversation with your child after each visit (or better yet keep notes) because after a while every college will begin to look the same. Take pictures. Colleges blend together!
- The college tour (student-led) is more important than the info session (administrator-led)
- Try to evaluate the school based on its merits, not whether it you had a great or terrible tour guide
- See if you can find a local student who went to a school; they'll be happy to share their experiences
- Your student should not be afraid to email the admission representative for your region with a question or just to introduce him/herself. If you're visiting the school, they might meet with your student and with you. Not everyone can accommodate you, but you will be surprised who does
- If your child won't visit a school they are sure they won't like, encourage them to visit a school a little different from what they do like to make sure they are not forfeiting a potential good fit
- Every college claims to be educating students for a global community. But the walls between colleges and their neighbors are sometimes hard, sometimes fluid. If you want to perform a micro-test on a school's commitment to social responsibility, study the town-gown relationship
- Read the college newspaper and college-run student blogs for an “insiders” view of the school

THE INTERVIEW:

- Interview at schools that offer them and prepare by looking up sample questions and formulating answers so you don't get caught off guard. Try mock interviewing with family or other adults
- Schedule an interview in a timely fashion: some schools get booked up very quickly, especially in summer
- Don't interview at your top choice school first; do others first to gain confidence
- Find out if the interview is “evaluative” (a part of the application review) or “informative” (not an official part of the application review)
- Have your child create a “cheat sheet” for each school. Bring a copy of a resume if you have made one
- Schedule an interview after a tour; this way your child will have a ready question or two to ask
- Make sure your student turns off their cell phone during the interview!
- Parents: sometimes interviewers will come out and ask if you have a question. Have one ready! Ask for the interviewer's business card and tell your student to keep in touch if they have follow-up questions
- At an alumni interview, be punctual, dress for business, ask about your interviewer's experiences, and be prepared to meet your interviewer in a public location. Many alumni interviews are informational, not evaluative
- Always thank your interviewer and follow up with a thank you note – written or via email. Not a text!
- If planning an overnight visit, make sure your child is prepared. Alcohol might be abundant, especially on Thursday-Saturday nights

EARLY, EARLY, EARLY:

- If possible, apply to one school that has rolling admissions or early action: an early accept feels great and helps with the stress of waiting for other decisions

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- Don't apply early decision just because you think you'll get in - it could lead to a future transfer
- Remember that early decision is a binding agreement. Ask about financial aid before applying and, if money is a factor, ask for an early estimate of aid from the school. Sometimes the Net Price Calculator is not accurate.
- Do not treat a withdrawal from early decision lightly: the only acceptable reason is financial and it is YOUR responsibility to figure this out before applying. A withdrawal not only affects you, it affects the school and other students who apply
- Most highly competitive schools with large endowments are generous with early decision financial aid. Do your research
- If your child gets in early decision, they need to keep up their grades. Some schools will retract the offer if their grades dip significantly
- Early decision and early action require early preparation. Make sure all facets of the application are ready to go. Follow up with guidance to ensure that all official paperwork has been sent. Missing or late paperwork can compromise an application. It's up to you to know that the school has received everything

THE COMMON APPLICATION

- Don't wait until your college list solidifies before looking at the Common Application; essay prompts are published in the summer; your resume can be put together in junior year (and updated in senior year)
- Start working on the college essay over the summer before senior year. It takes longer than you think
- Ask your teachers for recommendations in the spring of your junior year; they get booked!
- Make a separate email address for college applications so that both you and your student can access it
- Once you send in the Common Application it cannot be changed but you can make separate versions
- Have all essays and applications done by Thanksgiving if possible, (especially if an early application results in a deferral; it's difficult to feel motivated after a December 15 disappointment)
- Be open to essays in the "ether." Something small your child tells you – that comes from his/her heart – could be the germ of an idea that leads to a sincere essay that only s/he could write
- Help your child find their sincere voice in the essay; this means answering the question in a different way than you might think the question requires. There are no wrong answers. Only the opportunity for your kid to be who they truly are
- Find someone who is a strong writer to give you feedback and editing advice on the essay: parent, teacher, tutor. But too many cooks in the kitchen can be overwhelming and counterproductive
- Supplemental essays can swallow up your child's late fall. As soon as your child mentally commits to apply to a school, put that school's supplemental essay(s) on the "to-do" list
- To make your supplemental essays stand out, include facts about the school you are applying to, like clubs or specific courses so that the school knows you did your homework and the essay feels unique
- Do not regurgitate what the school says about itself – they know it already. They want to know about YOUR student and what lights them up about the school
- Follow up on the Common Application to make sure all materials have been received. This is your responsibility (not guidance) and stuff happens

FINANCIAL AID AND SCHOLARSHIPS:

- Have a conversation about what you can afford before your student creates their list. The financial factor should be considered along with academics and location to avoid disappointment later
- Discuss the idea of "return on investment." How much "value" exists in one college versus another? Ask your student to think about whether the school will be able to provide them with an experience worthy of the tuition cost

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- If your child has a career path in mind, think also about the cost of graduate school versus the cost of an undergraduate education. Graduate schools usually don't offer financial aid, so saving money now can help later and make a masters degree a possibility
- The sticker price is often not the price you will pay; look into need-based and merit-based aid at every school. If you can't find information, ask at an information session or call the school
- Educate yourself about government loans and their terms. Policies are always changing
- Financial aid is a **headache**. Be prepared for all the paperwork, including the FAFSA, CSS Profile, and IDOC (Institutional Documentation Service). Give yourself time to fill out the forms, and make a spreadsheet to keep track of all deadlines, since they are final. While you can edit the FAFSA, you cannot do that with the CSS Profile or IDOC materials. You have to refile those forms
- Scholarships might be out there, but they take time to research and are sometimes very specific. Sometimes local is better!
- Finding information on merit scholarships takes time. Many schools require their own application, complete with essay and/or individual submission (music, art, theatre, etc.), a separate teacher recommendation, and their own deadlines. Start looking over the summer **before** senior year

AFTERTHOUGHTS:

- Admissions is not a meritocracy. With so many applicants, there are some arbitrary decisions. Colleges have many different ways of determining if a student is a "good fit"
- Responsibilities and activities do not stop when you apply to college. You still have homework, tests, rehearsals, sports, and a social life (maybe!)
- What you do doesn't need to be grand to be impressive. If you like charity work, keep it local. You don't need to go to a third world country or start a foundation
- Be patient with your child and understand they may not be as enthusiastic about the process as you would wish. *We* know how awesome college can be...for them it can be an anxiety-producing mystery!
- Different students need different support. Some will do a lot on their own, others will need prompting. Much is due to personality and the enormous pressures they are under. Try to be sympathetic!
- Let your student take control of the process so they are invested in their future
- Be aware of the many pressures and influences weighing on the child; be protective
- Try to remember, as hard as this is, that YOU aren't going to college. Your student will probably not fall in love with the school you think is perfect for them
- Talk to parents you trust. This is a stressful time and it's easy to feel alone
- Enjoy the college process! These are the waning days of childhood, and time spent visiting schools (and other activities) can be a very meaningful time for parent and child
- Remind your child to thank the adults around them – teachers, guidance counselors and any other adult who helped with the process. They will appreciate it!
- Try to be as organized as possible but also flexible. Your child is evolving so much, so the school they liked 6 months ago might not have the same appeal today.
- Talk with friends who have recently been through the process. Focus on those who have a child with similar interests and sensibility
- It's really all about fit: it's not about the student getting into the highest rated school. Help your student find an environment where they will feel comfortable and where they will thrive

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PARENT TO PARENT FAVORITE BOOKS & WEBSITES

BOOKS

Looking for Colleges:

The Fiske Guide to Colleges (by a vast majority our parents FAVORITE college guidebook)
US News & World Report (but don't pay attention to the rankings!)
America's Top Colleges List, Forbes.com
Book of Majors, The College Board
The Best 380 Colleges, Princeton Review
The Insider's Guide to Colleges, Yale Daily News
Students' Guide to Colleges: The Definitive Guide to America's Top 100 Schools
Ultimate Guide to America's Best Colleges – Glen Tanabe, Kelly Tanabe
Colleges That Change Lives, Loren Pope
Looking Beyond the Ivy League: Finding the College That's Right for You, Loren Pope
The Hidden Ivies, Howard Greene
The K&W Guide to Colleges for Students with Learning Disabilities or ADD, Princeton Review
Colleges with Programs for Students with Learning Disabilities or ADD, Peterson's
Design Intelligence: America's Best Architecture & Design Schools
Creative Colleges: A Guide for Student Actors, Artists, Dancers, Musicians, by Elaina Loveland

The College and Admissions Landscape:

The Gatekeepers, Jacques Steinberg
The Overachievers, Alexandra Robbins
College Unranked: Ending the College Admissions Frenzy, Lloyd Thacker
Where You Go is not Who You'll Be, Frank Bruni
Acceptance: A Legendary Guidance Counselor Helps Seven Kids Find the Right Colleges – and Find Themselves, David Marcus

Applications and Admissions:

Winning the Heart of the College Admissions Dean, Joyce Salyton Mitchell
A is for Admission, Michele Hernandez
Acing the College Application, Michele Hernandez
Rock Hard Apps, Katherine Cohen
The Truth About Getting In, Katherine Cohen
Acceptance: A Legendary Guidance Counselor Helps Seven Kids Find the Right Colleges, David Marcus
The Early Admissions Game, Christopher Avery
Admission Matters, Sally Springer (4th edition)
The College Admissions Mystique, Bill Mayher (former counselor at Hackley)
College Admission: From Application to Acceptance, Step by Step, Robin Mamlet and Christine VanDeVelde
The Perfect Score Project, Debbie Stier (Irvington resident Debbie Stier's attempt to get a perfect score on the SAT)
The Critical Reader: The Complete Guide to SAT Reading by Erica Meltzer
Getting IN by Standing OUT: The New Rules for Admission to America's Best Colleges, Deborah Bedor

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The essay:

The College Essay, Harry Bauld

50 Successful Harvard Application Essays (enjoyable to read; some very insightful essays)

Conquering the College Essay in 10 Steps: Crafting a Winning Personal Statement, Alan Gelb

http://thechoice.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/04/11/how-to-write-a-college-application-essay/?_php=true&_type=blogs&_r=0

<http://learning.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/10/14/going-beyond-liche-how-to-write-a-great-college-essay/>

<http://learning.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/04/11/getting-personal-writing-college-essays-for-the-common-application/>

http://collegeapps.about.com/od/essays/a/supplemental-application-essay-oberlin_2.htm

<http://collegeapps.about.com/od/essays/a/student-teacher.htm>

<http://www.petersons.com/college-search/application-essay-tips.aspx>

Money:

Paying for College Without Going Broke, Kalman Chany

The College Solution, Lynn O'Shaughnessy (updated edition)

The Scholarship Book, The College Board

The Ultimate Scholarship Book: Billions of Dollars in Scholarships, Grants and Prizes, Gen Tanabe

How You Can Maximize Student Aid, Tracy Foote

<http://www.scholarships360.org/resources/great-schools-great-scholarships/>

http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2012/07/08/education/edlife/8edlife_chart.html?_r=1&

Being a Student:

How to Be a High School Superstar: A Revolutionary Approach to Get into College, Cal Newport (terrible title for a great book by someone who actually thinks creatively about study skills and learning)

How to Win at College: Simple Rules for Successful Students, Cal Newport (follow-up book containing even more great tips for managing the workload at college without killing yourself)

The Secrets of College Success, Lynn Jacobs

The Thinking Student's Guide to College, Andrew Roberts (a very thoughtful guide to what is important about college and learning)

The Secrets of Top Students: Tips, Tools, and Techniques for Acing High School and College, Stefanie Weisman

Making the Most of College: Students Speak their Minds, Richard J. Light

College: What it Was, Is and Should be, Andrew Delbanco

Being a Parent:

I'm Going to College – Not You! Surviving the College Search with Your Child, Jennifer Delahunty

The iConnected Parent: Staying Close to Your Kids in College (and Beyond) while Letting them Grow Up, Barbara K. Hofer and Abigail Sullivan Moore

The Parents We Mean to Be, Richard Weissbourd

Beyond the University: Why Liberal Education Matters, Michael Roth (president of Wesleyan University)

Excellent Sheep: The Miseducation of the American Elite and the Way to a Meaningful Life, William Deresiewicz

Mindset: The New Psychology of Success, Carol Dweck

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WEBSITES

Searching for Colleges and Data about Colleges:

www.cappex.com College matchmaker – aggregates data so you can plug in GPA/test scores and match against students who previously applied. Data segregates by accepted, deferred, rejected (Naviance also does this for Irvington students). Also suggests similar schools with quick links to school websites

www.Chegg.com Similar to Cappex. Was Zinch

<http://collegestats.org/> Online college search engine

www.collegemajors101.com Find the major that fits “you”

www.inlikeme.com College Admission and Student Aid Resource Hub (also “Admission Scoop”)

www.unigo.com A college search engine that also has scholarship information

<http://www.collegexpress.com/> College and scholarship matching service

www.collegeconfidential.com A controversial but useful resource about all aspects of the college process

<http://www.bestcollegefit.com/> College planning website from former dean of admissions at F&M

www.petersons.com, Schools & programs, scholarship and test prep information. From the folks who write the Peterson’s Guide

<http://www.collegeportraits.org/> Information and data about public colleges

www.collegedata.com College Data provides a comprehensive set of statistics for every U.S. college, including admission data, financial aid information, academic programs and student life.

nces.ed.gov/collegenavigator This site includes data reported by colleges to the U.S. Department of Education. Helps in finding majors and the number of students per major

<http://www.collegeresults.org/> From the Education Trust: an online resource for college graduation rates

<http://collegerealitycheck.com> From Chronicle of Higher Education. Compare colleges based on financial assistance, graduation rates, debt after graduation rates

<http://www.collegeresults.org/> From the Education Trust. Online tool to research graduation rates

<http://www.mymajors.com/> Website that recommends majors based on online assessment

<http://www.collegedata.com/> Online college advisor. Lots of information

bigfuture.collegeboard.org A website from the College Board (SAT) with information about finding colleges, making a plan, paying for college

<http://www.commonapp.org/> The website for The Common Application, used by over 700 schools

www.universalcollegeapp.com A new application for approximately 34 schools

Test Prep:

www.collegeboard.org Official website with information about all aspects of the SAT and Subject Tests

www.act.org Official website of the ACT with information about the test, prep, and registration

<https://www.number2.com/> online test prep

www.college-insight.org Information about affordability, diversity and student success

www.fairtest.org/ Information about test-optional colleges and universities

Paying for College:

fafsa.ed.gov The official government website for financial aid

<https://studentaid.ed.gov/sa/> Confused about loans? Use this government website to understand them

www.ticas.org Project on Student Debt. This organization raises awareness of rising student debt and gives information about financial aid

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www.thecollegesolution.com Lynn O'Shaughnessy's website about college affordability

<http://www.fastweb.com/> Scholarship site

<http://www.finaid.org/>The smart student guide to financial aid

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