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# The Ultimate College Decision Timeline

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Wherever you are in your high school experience, the idea of college can be overwhelming. Juggling all of the things that come in during your senior year of high school is a task in itself. Between keeping up with classes and homework, earning extra money at a part-time job, and maintaining your social life, you're probably feeling pretty busy as it is. You may not want to even think about all the questions you have about going to college, like:

*“Where will I go?”*

*“Will I be able to get in?”*

*“What kind of grades and test scores do I need?”*

*“Can I afford college?”*

Ok, so those are pretty tough. Fortunately, one common question all students have at some point is: “When should I start thinking about college?” Well that’s an easy one!

The answer, of course, is NOW. Whether you’re a freshman or a junior, whether you’re applying to Ivy League universities or your local community college, being proactive about college will give you the best chance at attending the school that’s the best fit for you.

You should begin planning your college decision timeline as early as possible which means that, come crunch time, you won’t have to scramble. Instead, you’ll be anticipating the steps ahead and confidently checking off the steps you have already taken.

And while there are steps you can take as early as your freshman year of high school, don’t get stressed if you’re already a junior or senior and feeling behind. Instead, get organized. Look at the timeline. Tackle tasks that you can catch up on, and make a plan for the steps ahead. For example, you can’t do anything to improve your sophomore year grades, but you can get involved in extra curricular activities and prepare for the ACT or SAT exams.

The following college decision timeline is a great start for students in any high school. Remember that if you need help along the way, you can always reach out to your school counselor, family, or the admissions office of the schools you’re interested in attending.

# College Decision Timeline—Checklist

Here is a handy checklist of the things you'll need to do before embarking on your college career. Later on in this guide, we'll take a closer look at each of these items.

## Freshman and Sophomore Year

- Work hard and keep those grades up
- Consider AP classes
- Consider Dual Credit Courses
- Find extracurricular activities you can stick with
- Schedule an introduction with your school counselor

## Junior Year—Fall

- Continue to do your best in your classes
- Take the PSAT Exams
- Seek out leadership positions in your extracurricular activities
- Start researching colleges/universities
  - *Create a list of important priorities for you (size, location, type of school, academic programs etc)*
  - *Talk to your school counselor*
  - *Attend college fairs and/or meet with college admission representatives who visit your high school*
  - *Begin following colleges on social media like their facebook and twitter accounts to get a feel for what's happening.*
  - *Outline the careers you think align with your interest and passion to help you narrow down a major.*

## Junior Year—Spring

- Start narrowing down your college choices
  - *Begin a list of your possible schools*
  - *Start thinking about cost and your family's budget*
- Research scholarships
- Start visiting campuses
  - *Attend campus visit days or open houses*
  - *Set-up a personalized visit / take a tour*
- Take the SAT/ACT

## Junior Year—Summer

- Finalize your list of schools with 5-7 schools that meet the most important factors for you.
  - *Include a "safety" school*
- Consider summer programs offered through various college campuses that includes engineering camps, writing camps etc.

## Senior Year—Fall

- Make a list of all of the deadlines for all schools on your list., including:
  - *Application deadlines*
  - *Scholarship deadlines*
  - *Financial aid deadlines*
- Retake SAT/ACT (if necessary)
- Prepare all materials for college applications including essays and recommendations if required.
- Apply for campus based and external scholarships.
- Request your high school transcript be sent to colleges on your list
- Send your final SAT/ACT scores
- Submit all applications to college

## Senior Year —Spring

- Fill out the FASFA and include all school FAFSA codes that you have applied.
- Wait for admission decisions
- Stay positive
- Officially accept an admission offer no later than May 1st
- Enjoy the rest of your senior year!

## Senior Year—Summer

- Take placement tests
- Fill out any additional paperwork or online forms you receive from your school. Talk with an Advisor and Register for Classes
- Attend orientation
- Start college!



## A Closer Look: The Ultimate College Search, Application, and Admissions Timeline

### Freshman and Sophomore Year

The idea that your academics and activities during freshman and sophomore years don't matter in college admissions is simply a myth. Many schools consider your overall GPA throughout your entire high school career, and some admissions departments even give greater weight to a given year's grades.

#### *To Do: Freshman and Sophomore Year*

**Work Hard and make good grades.**

Because every school weighs academics differently, and you'll likely be applying to a few, the safest bet is to start taking academics seriously early on. Fortunately, when it comes to good grades, there are plenty of extra benefits—you'll develop great academic habits and really get an idea of the subjects you're most interested in.

**Consider Advanced Placement or Dual Credit Courses**

Another excellent way to dig deeper into subjects you're interested in is to enroll in Advanced Placement (AP) courses. You may not get college credit for these courses until your junior or senior year, but college admissions look favorably on students who challenge themselves with AP courses. Plus, these classes will give you a taste of the more intense academic rigor of college.

Dual credit courses are another option that allow you to experience a college level class (and get credit) while you're still in high school. Ask your school counselor what AP and dual credit options your school has to offer.

**Find extracurricular activities enjoy and are passionate about.**

Extracurricular activities include sports, clubs, community service, music, theatre, and more. And while college admissions departments like to see a diverse range of interests, it's even more important to show them that you can stick with something—so starting an activity early on and keeping with it looks favorable as well as showing variety of interest. This helps a college or university view how you might contribute to the fabric of the campus community. Freshman and sophomore year is the perfect time to experiment with extracurriculars and find the ones you enjoy.

**Talk with your school counselor**

Getting in touch with your counselor and talking to him or her about your post-high school plans and timeline can be really helpful. Plus, you will probably need more help from your guidance counselor later on, so establishing a relationship early can only help you.

## Junior Year

Junior year of high school is one of the most critical periods in the college application process. This is when college becomes less of an idea and more of a reality. It's time to start making decisions about where you want to be and taking action to get there.

If you're in your junior year and haven't given much thought to college planning, now is the time. Start NOW on your tasks, play catch up where necessary, and commit to your timeline.

### *To Do: Junior Year—Fall*

#### **Do your best in your classes**

Your junior year grades matter. A lot. Don't let your GPA suffer as a result of having too much going on—falling behind will just add to the stress. Stay focused, stay organized, and don't be afraid to ask for help.

#### **Take the PSAT**

One of the most common regrets among college applicants? Not being prepared enough for the SAT and ACT. These tests are very different from the type of exams most students are used to, so they require some extra attention.

##### *Study. Don't make excuses; just do it*

Too often, students underestimate how much they'll need to study, and score much lower than they could have. Don't become an SAT/ACT statistic. There are many, many options when it comes to SAT/ACT prep—classes, online classes, one-on-one tutoring, study groups, and more. There are tons of free testing preparation so don't feel pressure to spend lots of money preparing.

##### *Plan your tests to make them as stress-free as possible*

Take a look at the testing schedule well in advance and choose a time and location that works for you. Decide which exam you will take SAT, ACT or both. Need help deciding when to take the SATs? Check out this link: [sat.collegeboard.org/register/when-to-take-sat](https://sat.collegeboard.org/register/when-to-take-sat) or help with taking the ACT at [actstudent.org](https://actstudent.org).

##### *Don't skip the PSAT*

The PSATs (the "P" stands for "Preliminary") are an excellent way to get a feel for the tests and figure out which areas you need to work on. Plus, the PSAT qualifies you for the National Merit Scholarship.

#### **Seek out leadership positions in your extracurricular activities**

Leadership roles prove that you're capable not only of working with others, but of leading others. They also demonstrate commitment and work ethic.

#### **Start researching colleges/universities**

This is a big one. Before you can reach your goals, you need to have clear goals in mind.

##### *Begin with the general factors of importance to you like: (size, location, type of school/ programs)*

Later on, you'll narrow it down much further. But these are great starting points.

##### *Size: Do you see yourself at a small or a large institution? Why?*

##### *Location: Are you considering schools across the country?*

##### *Type of school/ program: Thinking about a public university? A "specialty" college?*

##### *Seek help from your school counselor*



Your counselor might suggest a great school you haven't thought of, or give you the inside scoop on your top choices so far.

- *Attend college fairs and/or meet with college representatives who visit your high school*

These are great opportunities to ask questions and find out more about potential schools, as well as introduce yourself to admissions representatives.

- *Begin following colleges on social media*

Following a school on Facebook or Twitter not only gives you an idea of the type of activities and news going on there, it also allows you to make a personal connection with the school. Interacting with college representatives via social media (for example, asking a question or commenting on a post) helps you stand out as an applicant and can be valuable later when you try to make a face-to-face meeting. Just make sure you stand out for the right reasons: proofread any interactions before posting and make sure your public social media profiles don't portray you in a negative light.

- *Start thinking about career options*

No one expects you to have your long-term career goals planned out by your junior year of high school. But you should be thinking about it. Start brainstorming possible career paths, and do some research.

- *Volunteer!*

Volunteering is an excellent way to get a feel for a career. Talk to your school counselor about your career ideas so far, and see if there are any opportunities available in your area that seem like a good match.

#### **Start narrowing down your college choices**

It's time to move beyond the general questions and decide which schools are a possible match.

- *Begin a list of your possible schools*

This doesn't have to be your finalized list of schools to apply to and visit. But it should be the next step in actually picking your schools, beyond generalizations—which colleges seem like a good fit?

#### **Research scholarships**

With all of the resources available online, it's easier than ever to research outside (non-institution specific) scholarships and see what you need to qualify.

## A Closer Look: Junior Year (continued)

### *To Do: Junior Year—Spring*

**Start visiting campuses**

Touring the campus, meeting college officials and current students, and checking out the area can really help you decide which institutions are a perfect fit—and which aren't. There are a few visitation options:

*Campus visit day/open house*

You'll likely be notified of upcoming campus visit day options and open houses on social media or through email. These events often include walking tours of the campus, academic departments, and housing, as well as opportunities to meet with admissions and financial aid counselors.

*One-on-one visits*

In addition to the group campus visit option, you can try to make a personal appointment with a guide from admissions. It might feel a bit less relaxed than an open house, but could provide a more in-depth view of the school.

**Take the SAT/ACT**

**Continue to keep up your grades and extracurricular activities**

Your potential colleges are still paying close attention.

**Continue researching and narrowing down your list of schools**

**Check with your chosen schools about qualifying requirements for scholarships**

### *To Do: Junior Year—Summer*

**Finalize your list of schools**

Your finalized list should be based on what you learned during your campus visits, your online research, and your discussions with family members and school counselors.

*Include a "safety" school*

Of course, you want to end up at the college of your dreams. But it's important to have a "plan B," too. So make sure to apply to at least one school into which you are very confident you'll be accepted. Additionally you should have a well rounded list of schools that fit the criteria that matters to you most!

**Begin studying to retake the SATs/ACTs**

Most schools "Super Score" which means they will take the highest score in each section from each exam you took. So your score can never decrease!

**Consider summer camps on college campuses.**

Choosing to enroll in summer programs offered by a college or university can help you in deciding whether to keep a school on your list as you will gain an insiders view of services, support and student life on campus. It's a great way to demonstrate to a school your interest and to gain a deeper perspective.



## Senior Year

This is when it all finally happens. You'll actually apply to schools, hear back, and start getting ready to go.

### *To Do: Senior Year—Fall*

**Make a list of all of the deadlines for your schools**

You may be nearing the finish line, but organization is more important than ever. Mark your calendars and set reminders. It might be useful to use the calendar app on your smartphone or find a specialized college timeline app. Your list of deadlines should include:

- *Application deadlines*
- *Scholarship deadlines*
- *Financial aid deadlines*

**Prepare all the necessary materials for college applications including essays and recommendations if necessary.**

While not all colleges require you to write an essay, it can be a great way to stand out. Your essay is a great opportunity to show schools who you are beyond grades and test scores.

- *Make sure you understand what the essay is asking for, and that your essay provides it*

Sometimes applicants get so caught up in writing a captivating essay that the actual topic of the essay gets lost. It's also easy to lose grasp of the topic when you're using a modular approach and pulling material from other essays.

These kinds of mistakes could imply to admissions officers that you didn't understand the question, or are ignoring their requirements and sending the same essay to every school. Not a good impression. Your essay should be clear and completely relevant to the question asked of you. If you're pulling other material in, make sure it's framed to support the main topic.

**Retake SAT/ACT (if necessary)**

**Request letters of recommendation**

Although not all colleges require letters of recommendation, it's a good idea to request one from a teacher or a guidance counselor anyway. Letters of recommendation are another way in which you can make sure your application stands out in the crowd—which is why it's so important to choose the right people to ask for your recommendation and give them enough time to write a great letter on your behalf.



- *Don't ask family members for letters of recommendation. Instead, ask:*
  - Teachers
  - Coaches
  - Guidance counselors
  - Bosses
  - Pastors
  - Adults who know you through volunteer work, activities, etc.
- *Give your letter writers enough time and warning*

Recommendation requests are usually handled online, although an early warning never hurts. Your recommenders will appreciate the extra time to write a better letter on your behalf.
- Apply for outside scholarships**

School-specific scholarship applications will be part of your financial aid package.
- Request your high school transcript be sent to your colleges**

Do this ASAP. You don't know how long your high school will take to send them, especially as the office becomes more flooded with transcript requests. Make sure your school counselor provide the college with the necessary information needed like class rank, diploma type and completion of any end of course assessments.
- Send your final SAT/ACT sores**

If you didn't specify your schools when you took the test, you'll have to pay to send them now if they are not listed on your highschool transcript. This an easy way to save on score sends if your scores are listed on your transcript (check with your school counselor)
- Finalize your essay**
- Apply to schools**
  - *Use online applications*

Applications are almost always done online now, but that doesn't mean you'll have to complete them all at once. Instead you can save your progress and log back in later to complete. Don't rush. Give yourself enough time to complete each section carefully. [Click here for a detailed checklist on how to complete the Common App](#)

### **To Do: Senior Year — Spring**

- Fill out the FASFA and send it to your schools**

The FASFA can be completed online, but it is something you'll probably need to do with your parents (their tax information is needed). If you need help, the FASFA website itself is a great resource. If you have additional questions, you may want to set up a meeting for you and your family with your guidance counselor.
- Wait for admission decisions**

Schools have different policies, but notifications usually come through mail or email, sometimes just with a notice to check your account on the school's website.

  - *Stay positive*

Getting a rejection letter from your top-choice school can be devastating, but keep in mind that many, many students don't get into their top pick. There are still plenty of other schools out there and one is the perfect fit for you.

## A Closer Look: Senior Year (continued)

**Officially accept one of the offers (most schools have deadlines in May)**

If you're struggling with a decision, or are unsure about the financial aid being offered from each school, seek help before you accept an offer. Meet with your school counselor and parents, or request a meeting with the financial aid department at your potential school(s). Take advantage of Admitted Student days that can help you make a decision. It is best practice to provide schools with your intention to enroll regardless of whether they require a tuition deposit. You should inform schools that you do not plan to enroll once you have made your final selection.

**Enjoy high school graduation!**

### Senior Year—Summer

**Fill out any additional paperwork or online forms you receive from your school. Talk with an Advisor and Register for Classes**

These could include forms pertaining to your meal plan, housing and roommate selection, and more. You will also need to set-up time either during orientation or before to talk with an academic advisor to discuss your short-term and long-term plans for course selection.

**Finalize financial aid package and accept aid**

**Attend orientation**

Arrive well-rested and ready to soak up as much information as possible. Check out clubs and extra-curricular activities.

**Start college**

Congratulations, you've made it!

## Start Your College Search Now

If all of this seems like a lot, that's because it is. There's a lot to do to prepare for finding, applying to, and going to college, but if you need it, help is never far away. If you have any questions about the process—whatever stage you're in—the admissions team at Indiana University–Purdue University Fort Wayne (IPFW) would be happy to answer them. Just shoot us an email at [ask@ipfw.edu](mailto:ask@ipfw.edu) or give us a call at 260-481-6812. And, consider following us on Twitter [@IPFW\\_Admissions](https://twitter.com/IPFW_Admissions) or Facebook at [ipfw.admissions](https://www.facebook.com/ipfw.admissions).