

FRESHMAN YEAR

9th grade: Everything is new, and the seniors look so old and wise. The first months of the first year of high school can be the most confusing and challenging in the entire four-year experience. Keys to success are keeping up with the classroom work and the homework. If a student does fall behind, getting help to catch up is vital. Here's a checklist of some of the things that need to be completed as a freshman.

Students

Classes: Request a list from the counselor's office of the approved classes that meet the requirements for a four-year college, university, community college and technical school.

Begin to make a plan: Make an appointment and visit with a school counselor to create an academic plan for each of the four years of high school. Students should complete this even if they are unsure about their plans after high school. Like all plans, things may change but it is better to have a plan and change it than to not have one.

What success looks like: Set personal and attainable goals for grades and academic achievement. Seek various in-school assistance for challenging classes, including peer tutoring or visits with teachers who can provide guidance.

Beyond the books: Talk to teachers or older students about extracurricular activities, including sports, music, drama, media or other activities offered by the school. At most schools, there are teams, clubs and activities for everyone. It's important not to shy away from interesting activities simply because other students may have more experience.

Community service: Explore opportunities to volunteer at charitable organizations. Many of these organizations may already be affiliated with the school, while others may be reached through volunteering websites such as United Way, YMCA, National City Public Library, SPCA or other Animal Shelters, etc.

- Volunteering offers the rewards of helping others and also rich life experiences that can be used as a part of a college application or financial aid essay.
- Many districts and private schools in the county have a minimum number of hours of community service as a requirement for graduation.
- Here are some things found in a 2008 survey of admissions officers throughout the United States to understand the role community service played when applying for college:
 - Passion and consistency are critical
 - One or two visits every week for a year to a local community center trumps a week helping in a disaster zone. Time spent is more valuable than money raised.
 - While raising money is "admirable and impressive", admissions officers are looking for evidence of face-to-face service.
 - Community service ranks high
 - While a student's GPA and SAT scores are most highly valued, community service ranks higher than reference letters and other criteria.
 - All community service is good
 - Volunteering on your own is just as valuable as becoming a member of an organized service organization.

Parents

Start with saving a dollar: While many parents may have started the savings process before high school, it is never too late to start a 529 College Savings Plan. The state offers a long-term savings plan called ScholarShare, which falls under the national "529 Plan" College Savings Plans network. It is open to any U.S. resident over 18 with a Social Security number or tax ID number. Regular deposits or direct deposits can be set up for the account, and any earnings grow tax-deferred. Savings must be used for direct school expenses.

SOPHOMORE YEAR

10th grade: Knowing their way around and figuring out the rhythm. In the second year of high school the focus on academics increases as many colleges weigh the grades in the sophomore and junior year more heavily. The high school campus will be a familiar place, but the academic demands will increase.

Students

Classes: At the beginning of the year, make an appointment with an academic counselor to review the progress made during 9th grade and check it against the goals. Additionally, make sure the classes selected for each semester continue to work toward the college plan.

Time management: As both academics and activities converge to occupy more time, it is important to have a weekly schedule that ensures everything gets done — and not at the last minute. While there are several software tools that can assist in this effort, nothing beats a simple dry-erase board in the student's bedroom or study area where he or she can keep a weekly calendar of what's due and when.

Looking ahead to Advanced Placement: Most schools offer Advanced Placement classes. These give students who are academically strong in that subject area the opportunity to learn at an accelerated pace, increase their GPAs and earn college credit. These classes are not for everyone, as the pace of learning is very quick. If appropriate, students should work with their counselors to develop an AP road map that includes sophomore, junior and senior years.

Summer is coming: During the spring, students should talk to their counselor about the options for summer school (not available in all districts). Many students take advantage of the session to recover from a failing grade, improve a grade that didn't meet expectations or get ahead by taking a future class early.

Parents

It is never too early: In 2009-10, more than \$154 billion was awarded to undergraduate students. That's an average of \$11,500 per student, including \$6,000 in grants, reports the College Board. Sophomore year is a great time to get on the Internet, buy a printed guide or talk to an expert about grants and scholarships. Often, your student's unique background, skills or interests may qualify them for aid.

JUNIOR YEAR

11th grade: Acting like they own the place. The third year is the most crucial for most students. If they can show their accomplishments in key academic areas they will put themselves in the best position come college application time.

Students

Classes: By now, students should be very familiar with their counselor and have a firm grasp on what areas to focus their energies. A review with their counselor remains a good idea.

PSAT: If students have not already taken the PSAT, they should sign up for the test to be administered in October. According to the College Board, "The PSAT includes the same types of critical reading, math, and writing skills as the SAT." Scores on the PSAT are not sent to colleges, but are used in determining whether or not a student is eligible for a National Merit Scholarship. Once the scores are returned in December, students and their parents should develop a plan to improve weaker areas. (Please see the section on SAT and ACT test preparation for advice and tips.)

ACT, SAT and AP tests: Students, with guidance from their counselor and parents, will need to plan ahead for spring when the SAT, ACT and AP tests will be administered. Decisions will need to be made about which tests will be taken and when.

To visit or not to visit: There are many schools of thought about how many college and university campuses a student and their parents should visit and the right time to begin the process. The right answer, of course, depends on each family. One key to making the visits count is to go beyond the scheduled tours to take the time to talk to students on campus. Ask tough questions like, "How many of your classes are taught by teaching assistants?" and "Which dining hall do you avoid?" Balancing the information the school provides in the formal portion of the tour with answers from those who are living it daily helps to provide a clearer picture.

SAT / ACT preparation: As detailed in the chapter on Page 6, there are many options to select from when preparing for standardized tests including the SAT and ACT. Late winter and early spring of junior year are ideal times to select a strategy and begin the process.

Parents

The service academy option: If one of the possibilities under consideration by your student is applying to one of the five United States service academies, junior year is the time to contact your local congressional representative for information. He or she will be able to detail the eligibility requirements and the screening process to become a candidate.

SENIOR YEAR

12th grade: All about tomorrow (and don't the freshmen look so young?). As they say in all the action movies, senior year is "go time." Here is a month by month breakdown of what needs to be done.

SEPTEMBER

Classes: Double-check with your counselor that all classes for each semester meet the career, college or major admission requirements.

College applications: Students should be visiting the websites of the colleges and universities they are interested in attending to determine application deadlines and requirements. (The dry-erase board in the bedroom is a great place to write these dates.)

Essay time: A visit to the college's website will provide information about the essay. September is a good month to begin this process.

Recommendation letters: Not all colleges and universities require or accept letters of recommendation, but many do. September is a good month to identify the teachers, coaches, mentors and others who can write strong recommendations for the student.

OCTOBER

Essay: Essays should be completed, edited and proofread several times this month.

Scholarship applications: These should begin to be submitted in October.

NOVEMBER

Applications: Deadlines for many schools, including UC and CSU are this month

Recommendations: Obtain letters of recommendation. (Some colleges have specific forms they require.)

Financial aid: Begin to review the FAFSA application (fafsa.ed.gov). Obtain PINS from pin.ed.gov.

Athletes: To play college athletics requires certification by the NCAA. Review their site at NCAA.org for details on how to get certified.

SAT / ACT: This is the last month to take these tests for the CSU system.

DECEMBER

Applications: Many private colleges and universities have deadlines this month.

Financial aid: Complete the FAFSA worksheet to prepare for online submittal in January.

SAT / ACT: This is the last month to take these tests for UC admission.

JANUARY

AP exams: Register for AP exams with the school's test coordinator.

Financial aid: Complete the online FAFSA application. The filing period begins January 1 and runs to March 2.

Transcripts: If required, request seventh semester transcripts to be sent to colleges.

ELM and EPT requirements: If attending a CSU school, January is the first opportunity for the Entry Level Math Test (ELM) and the English Placement Test (EPT). Students may have fulfilled these requirements with SAT or ACT scores. While a student can wait for their AP test scores - it is a risk because they are released after the early May deadline and applicants who do not fulfill this requirement will not be able to enroll.

FEBRUARY

Community colleges: Application process begins this month.

Housing: Follow campus guidelines to reserve housing in your selected school.

MARCH

Financial aid: Begin reviewing financial aid packages offered by the accepting schools.

APRIL

Decision time: Return the 'intent to register' forms of the selected school and decline offers from others. Deadline is May 1.

Community Colleges: Register for summer classes at community colleges.

MAY

AP tests: Tests are offered this month.

JUNE: Graduate!