



College Direction

December 2009

www.collegedirection.org

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December 2009

The "Major" Decision

Underclassmen—
Review your PSAT report with your advisor and map out a plan for test preparation

Schedule SAT/ACT testing dates

Seniors—File any additional college applications before deadline dates.

5th—SAT Reasoning and Subject Exams

12th - ACT and ACT With Writing Exam

January 2010

Seniors – apply for a pin and then complete and send the FAFSA any time after Jan. 1st. Apply online at www.fafsa.ed.gov

Seniors – search and apply for scholarships that match your qualifications

Seniors – File any additional college applications

23rd – SAT Reasoning and Subject Tests

The thought of spending more than \$150,000 on a college education is scary enough, but what can really send parents over the edge is when their child wants to major in history or philosophy. Sure, it's fun to learn about the Russian revolution, but what can you do with that in the real world?

Parents of students who are headed for an engineering or nursing program may feel less anxiety about their children's job prospects. But how do you send your child off to get a liberal arts education and not worry about her future?

If a student is contemplating law school, she can major in any subject as an undergraduate. Similarly, future medical students, as long as they take the required biology, chemistry, physics and math courses, might choose to major in art history or psychology. In fact, gaining an understanding of human behavior could make a candidate more attractive to medical schools than the pure science student.

Students who plan on a career in business don't always need to major in business. They will probably go for a Master's in Business Administration, and MBA programs often prefer students with the broad perspective of a liberal arts education, as well as a couple of years of work experience.

What about students who have no intention of going beyond a bachelor's degree? While liberal arts majors may not seem marketable, these graduates bring valuable analytical, communication and organizational skills to the workplace. Employers need

people who can approach problems with an open mind, research solutions, write reports, and make presentations. Since people no longer work in one job for a lifetime, having these kinds of transferable skills can be extremely helpful. Combine those skills with a couple of internships, which offer real work experience, and liberal arts graduates should be well-prepared for the job market.

While parents worry that their children will pick impractical majors, students are often more distressed that they don't know what they want to major in, and that anxiety makes it difficult to enjoy their studies. College administrators know that most students will change their majors, often several times. That's why most colleges don't expect students to declare a major until the end of sophomore year, after they've had a chance to take courses in different subjects.

That's also why students shouldn't over-emphasize the importance of a major in their college search or final selection. Sure, if a student wants engineering, it's important to make sure that college offers engineering. But students who look for the best psychology department might miss out on colleges that are a better fit for them. They can find very good psychology programs at many colleges, and the reputation of the department is actually more important at the graduate school level.

If a student chooses to major in a subject she's passionate about, and attends a college where she's happy, she'll be more likely to perform well and gain confidence. That's a great first step on what will likely be a long and winding career path.

Colleges for Artists

Do you have a passion for painting, drawing, or designing but feel unsure about how you can turn your love of art into a career? Students interested in the visual arts may choose to pursue their passion either at a specialized art institute or as an art major at a more comprehensive college. Art schools generally award a Bachelor of Fine Arts (B.F.A.) degree, while liberal arts college grads usually earn a Bachelor of Arts (B.A.) Understanding the benefits as well as the drawbacks associated with each type of college is important in determining the educational path that best fits you.

A specialized art institute is most appropriate for those individuals who truly wish to immerse themselves in art. Most art schools are located in big cities where their students can have easy access to the artistic community. B.F.A. programs train their constituents for art-based careers; students may prepare for a future in fashion, auto or interior design, videogame development, animation or the graphic arts.

It's important to consider, however, that studio art classes require hours of hard work and students at art institutes have little time or opportunity to get the breadth of education that is possible at a liberal arts college.

At the art institute, you'll start with foundation courses such as basic design and history of art, and will have an opportunity to focus on your area of concentration during the later part of your studies. The emphasis of each art institute differs, even within the same media such as painting or sculpture. You'll want to carefully check each program's philosophy before committing to attend. Art institutes do not offer the variety of extracurricular clubs, sports, and activities that most college students seek and expect. Dorms also tend to be pretty basic so try to come for an extended visit before making a final decision.

If you're interested in focusing on art but still want to have opportunities to explore other

interests, consider pursuing an art major at a liberal arts college. Often, it is your other interests that serve as inspiration for your art work. The exposure to a variety of issues and ideas will help you to grow and mature. Career preparation is not the primary focus of B.A. programs. Over half of your education is in areas other than art, with substantial study in the humanities, social sciences and physical sciences. Typical programs for studio art majors include foundation courses in the arts including work in sculpture, painting, drawing, and photography, as well as classes in the history of art and modern art.

Since upper level students concentrate in a specific medium, you'll want to check the college catalogue to see the breadth of classes offered in your preferred field. Although students in Bachelor of Arts programs do not get the intensity of experience that B.F.A. graduates have, they do benefit from the more rounded college-life experience available at a comprehensive institution.



Art Studio at a Comprehensive University

Whether you choose an art institute or apply as an art major at a more comprehensive university, your art portfolio is likely to play a determining factor in the admissions decision. First, contact each art school or university that you're considering and obtain information about their portfolio requirements. Some schools may require original art, while others may ask for slides or digital portfolios. The content required may also vary from school to school. Give yourself enough time to prepare a customized version of your portfolio for each college you're considering. The content required usually will include observational art—drawing or painting from real life, and personal art—work done outside the classroom that reflects the artist's own interests and choice of media, and may also include a "home exam" - a specific subject required by that institution.

An extended visit to each type of college (include time to sit in on classes and perhaps stay overnight) will help you to determine if the BFA or BA in fine arts is right for you.

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Focus on Finances: The FAFSA and the SAR



The Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) is the basic form that students must file in order to qualify for Federal (and often also State) financial aid. Evaluated by the U.S. Department of Education,

the FAFSA is used to determine a student's *financial need*. You must file the FAFSA even if you only seek grants or subsidized loans. Some colleges will only consider students for merit scholarships if they have completed a FAFSA application.

Complete the FAFSA as soon as possible after January 1st each year. Forms are available at your high school guidance office, college financial aid offices, or online at www.fafsa.ed.gov. Online application is preferred. Follow directions carefully; errors in filling will slow down the process or make you ineligible for aid.

To complete the FAFSA, you'll need copies of your parents' and your tax returns for the preceding year, as well as social security numbers and other demographic information. Financial records, such as information about assets including stocks, bank accounts, and real estate and businesses, will also be needed. Young men over 18 must be registered

with Selective Service to qualify for aid. Print and keep a copy of the completed form before you submit it.

Two to three weeks after completing the online form (or four to six weeks for the paper form) you'll receive a *Student Aid Report (SAR)*. The SAR reports an *expected family contribution (EFC)* – the amount you and your family are expected to contribute to your first year of study. The difference between the EFC and the total first year cost of attendance equals *established need*. The SAR will also tell you if you qualify for a Pell Grant – gift money provided for students with the highest established need. Check the SAR for accuracy and make any necessary corrections. Colleges you've applied to receive a copy of your SAR at your request.

The SAR is used by the college financial aid office to build a financial aid package for each accepted student. Some colleges will meet all of your established need while others will only have funds to partially meet established need. The financial aid package you receive will most likely offer a combination of grants (gift money), loans, and work study. You are free to accept any part of the package you wish. A new FAFSA must be filed each year and students must qualify again for college financial aid.

Test Prep

When it comes to taking the SAT or ACT, "failure to prepare is preparing to fail". Or, as Louis Pasteur said, "Chance favors the prepared mind." Let's take it as a given that you'll want to prepare for upcoming college admissions exams; how can you best use your time to maximize your scores?

Begin by considering your learning style. Do you learn best in small groups or in one-on-one tutorials? Do you prefer the interaction of larger, heterogeneous classes? How disciplined are you? Can you set a study schedule for yourself and keep to it over the course of several months or do you need the help and encouragement of an advisor or instructor? Next consider finances. Professionally led prep courses can be quite costly; how much money can you commit to preparing for these exams? The answers to these questions will guide you to the preparation that's right for you.

All students should start by getting, and carefully reading, a copy of the free test bulletins produced by the College Board (SAT) and/or ACT. Chock full of test-taking tips, strategies, and test information, these bulletins are available in your school's guid-

ance office or can be downloaded from the test company websites. Also get a copy of a sample test and take it at home under simulated test conditions. Free on-line practice is also available on the web at www.act.org and at www.collegeboard.com.

Cost-saving ways of preparing include using test guides, available for \$10-\$50 at bookstores or free at your library, low-cost computer programs, or on-line prep. SAT/ACT software provide diagnostic testing and guide you to a study program that will strengthen your skills. More expensive, professional test prep programs include small-group or individual instruction by local instructors, or nationally known prep programs like Kaplan and Princeton Review. If you choose this method, be sure to ask about the number of hours of instruction, the training of the instructors, how students are grouped for instruction, and past results.

Practice and preparation will result in higher scores, but the very best preparation for college admissions tests comes through the habit of reading for pleasure and active participation in challenging academic classes throughout high school.



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Getting Involved in High School

So many choices, so little time. Sometimes, students make the mistake of selecting activities by what they think will impress college admissions officers. Believing it “sounds better” they may choose to work on the school newspaper when they’d really prefer designing the lighting for school plays. You’d do well to choose your activities by following your interests instead of trying to impress.

Although some students are very focused early on (“I’ve always wanted to be a veterinarian and therefore I got involved in the Animal Welfare Group”), most students should use the early years of high school to explore and try out a variety of extracurricular clubs and activities. You might try writing for the school newspaper, join the debate society, or get involved in a team sport; in short, participate in some activity that catches your interest. Keep

in mind, however, that extracurriculars should not consume so much of your time that you have difficulty in keeping up with your school work.

If you start the exploration process early, you’ll have a good idea of what type of activities interest you as you progress through high school. By tenth or eleventh grade, you can begin to concentrate on those few you really enjoy, increasing the time of your involvement and taking on positions of leadership and responsibility. Ultimately, colleges are looking for depth of involvement – they seek a well-rounded incoming class, not a well-rounded student. Every university needs a student body with diverse interests; they seek people passionate about and skilled in an activity. Always remember that your studies must come first – unless you’re truly a star-performer, no glowing resume will make up for lack-luster grades and test scores.

Website of the Month: collegeportraits.org

CollegePortraits is a new website created by two non-profit public college organizations. Over 300 public colleges and universities have already submitted their college portraits—basic information about each college presented in a way that will allow the user to easily compare differ-

ent institutions. Each portrait includes some information not otherwise easily accessible, such as retention rates, student satisfaction, future plans of graduates, and campus safety information as well as the usual type of data available through most guidebooks and websites.

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