



# College Direction

February 2010

[www.collegedirection.org](http://www.collegedirection.org)

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## February 2010

Juniors – Begin your college search

Juniors—Map out dates and prepare for spring SAT and/or ACT exams

Seniors – Contact colleges to be sure your applications are complete. Send mid-year grades if required. Update colleges with any new information that might affect admission

**6<sup>th</sup> – ACT and ACT plus Writing (may not be available in NY)**

## March 2010

Underclassmen—Make plans for a productive summer. Investigate summer programs, jobs, internships, and opportunities to visit college campuses.

Juniors – Create an initial list of colleges

Juniors—Prepare for spring SAT/ACT exams

**13<sup>th</sup> – SAT Reasoning Exam**

## The Value of AP Courses

If you ask college admissions officers how they make decisions, most will tell you the first thing they look at is the rigor of the student's curriculum. For selective colleges, this means Advanced Placement (AP) courses, which give high school students the opportunity to do college-level work. With competition for college admission increasing every year, many students fear they won't be accepted without five or six AP courses, and when it comes to the most selective colleges, they are probably right.

A student's curriculum is evaluated in the context of her own high school, so if ten AP courses are offered and a student has only taken one, admissions officers at competitive colleges will wonder why. But if a high school only offers a couple of AP courses, students can't be expected to take classes that don't exist, and they would not be at a disadvantage in the admissions process.

Students often earn an extra point in AP classes, making a "B" in an AP course equal to an "A" in a regular class when the high school GPA is calculated. Colleges may give special consideration to AP and honors courses in admissions decisions, but the way they treat these courses varies. Many colleges recalculate the GPA, and use an unweighted GPA.

At every college information session, a parent will ask, "Is it better to get a "B" in an AP class or an "A" in a regular class?" The admissions officer answers, "It's better to get an "A" in an AP class," and everyone moans. It is true that students who are applying to the most prestigious schools need a stellar transcript, since the average GPA at admission to those schools is well over 4.0. But there are many fine schools that

accept students who have just one or two AP courses and good but not great grades.

Beyond admission consideration, students who have successfully completed several AP courses often find they are well-prepared for a college workload. AP courses can also give students a head start on college credit, if they do well on AP exams. Most colleges award credit for scores of 4 or 5 on an AP exam, and some schools grant credit for a score of 3. A student who has taken five AP courses in high school could conceivably start college with a semester's worth of credits. In theory, that student could graduate a semester early, saving thousands of dollars in tuition. But most students stay in college the whole four years, and use their AP credits to place out of introductory courses. Students also have the flexibility to double-major or take a lighter class schedule while doing an internship.

Clearly, there are benefits to taking AP courses, up to a point. Preparing for college is important, but so is preserving mental health. Students should take AP courses in the subjects they are strongest and most interested in, and not worry about taking every AP course offered at their school. Someone who loves English and history but struggles with math and science doesn't need to suffer through AP Physics.

Admissions officers like to see intellectual curiosity, but they also want students who will contribute to the college community. That means making time for extracurricular activities, community service or other interests. While it's important to take on academic challenges, students who also spend time discovering and pursuing their passions will be attractive to colleges.

## Colleges for Engineers

At a time when lawyers are applying for unemployment benefits and hedge fund manager may not be a smart career goal, the projected demand for engineers may offer a more secure future. That may be one reason that enrollment in engineering programs is increasing.

If you care about saving the environment or alleviating human suffering, engineering could be a rewarding career choice. These are the people who create safer cars, and develop new imaging systems that enable doctors to provide earlier and more accurate diagnoses.

They find ways to utilize alternative energy sources and help provide access to clean drinking water, improving the quality of life for everyone.

You don't have to be a technical genius, but you do need to have some aptitude for math and science. If you're thinking about studying engineering in college, you should take math and science every year in high school. Ideally, students will have taken calculus and physics while in high school, but it's not required by every engineering school. Taking AP and honors classes also helps you prepare for the challenge of a college engineering program.

The engineering curriculum is rigorous, and coursework usually starts during freshman year. Engineering programs often include hands-on learning and internships. It is important to know that you want to study engineering when you are applying to college, because not every school offers engineering. Also, if you decide after freshman year that you want to study engineering, it will be difficult to complete the degree in four years. That's why a number of colleges offer summer programs that give high school students an overview of engineering careers. (You'll find over a hundred summer science and engineering programs at [www.EnrichmentAlley.com](http://www.EnrichmentAlley.com).)

There are more than 25 specialties in engineering. At a big university that has a school of engineering, you can major in mechanical, chemical, civil, electrical or another engineering specialty. Some smaller liberal arts colleges offer a more general engineering major.

Another option for students who want both a liberal arts college experience and an engineering degree is a 3/2 program. You spend three years at a liberal arts college, where you complete general education requirements, the math and science prerequisites for engineering, as well as the requirements for a liberal arts major. If you have maintained the required grade point average, you go on to an engineering program at a university for two years. You end up with two degrees, a B.S. or B.A. from the liberal arts college and a B.S. in engineering from the university. Columbia University is one of many colleges that offers these dual degrees.



Columbia University offers a 3/2 Program in Engineering and Liberal Arts

More women are studying engineering, and there are organizations that support women entering the profession, including the Society of Women Engineers (SWE) and Women in Science and Engineering (WISE). There are also summer programs especially designed for young women who want to explore engineering.

Even if you don't want to work as an engineer, the curriculum provides great training for many other fields. You develop analytical, problem-solving and communication skills as you work with teammates on projects. Graduates of engineering programs go on to medical, law and business schools, where their analytical and problem-solving skills are valuable.

Learn more about engineering programs and careers at these websites:

[www.EngineerYourLife.org](http://www.EngineerYourLife.org),  
[www.careercornerstone.org/](http://www.careercornerstone.org/),  
[www.engineeringk12.org/](http://www.engineeringk12.org/)  
[www.TryEngineering.org](http://www.TryEngineering.org).

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## Focus on Finances: Understanding & Comparing Financial Aid Packages



Notice of financial aid awards generally arrive within a few days of the college's acceptance notification. The total award usually consists of several different types of aid.

- Grants or scholarships are *gift aid*—money that does not need to be repaid. Think of this as a discount on the sticker price of that college. The more desirable a student is to a particular college, the higher the percentage of gift aid is likely to be. Thus, the merit of the student helps to determine this part of the package, even if the award is need-based aid.

- *Self-help* makes up the rest of the financial aid package. This may include both loans and work-study opportunities. Loans may be subsidized and their interest deferred until after graduation, or may be unsubsidized. Borrowers of unsubsidized student or PLUS (parent loans) may need to begin repayment while the student is still in college. Work-study provides opportunities for students to earn money while in college through part-time, on-campus employment.

Any part of the financial aid package may be accepted or rejected. It's entirely up to you. When comparing aid packages from several colleges, look at the total amount that you will be expected to pay towards your education rather than at the amount of the award.

### Ideas For a Productive Summer

How you spend your summers can influence your admission to college. While summer activities will not compensate for mediocre grades and poor test scores, careful planning can tip the scales in your favor. Let's look at the kinds of experiences that can make a difference.

Colleges across the U.S. offer summer programs for high school students. In some cases, students take regular college summer courses for credit alongside college students, and participate fully in campus life. Often, the high school students live together in supervised dormitories, and participate in special activities and seminars designed for them. You can earn three to eight college credits in programs like those offered by institutions such as Harvard, Syracuse, Brandeis, Cornell, Brown, Ithaca College, and UC Santa Barbara. Shorter programs offering intense study in just one area, often focused on careers, are also available. You can learn about Veterinary Medicine at Tufts, study Marine Science at the University of Miami, investigate military careers and engineering at the U.S. Air Force Academy or Naval Academy, work on your portfolio at Skidmore, or engage in scientific research at Boston University. Non-credit enrichment courses that also provide students with the experience of living on campus are offered to high school students at schools like Barnard and Columbia. Attending a college's summer program probably won't influence your admission to a particular college, but your willingness to spend part of your summer vacation in serious learning indicates your level of commitment and thus may affect admissions. Good grades in your summer courses and a glowing letter of recommendation from your instructor are also

a plus.

If you have an idea about your future career or an interest in a particular subject, spending the summer learning more about these can pay off in both experience and as a topic for your personal essay. Try for a paid position or a voluntary internship as a way to get a first-hand look at a possible future career. If you don't need the money, unpaid internships often provide more in the way of learning experiences. You might investigate law careers at a local attorney's office or shadow a lawyer at the State Attorney's Office. You can discover journalism through an internship at your local newspaper, or by working for a periodical or at a local radio or TV station. Researchers at area hospitals or universities may welcome your presence and help in their laboratory. The Smithsonian Institution in Washington, DC offers internships to high school students from across the nation in a myriad of fields. Search for summer programs at [www.EnrichmentAlley.com](http://www.EnrichmentAlley.com).

Interesting or unusual volunteer work can also provide real opportunities for personal growth as well as become the focus of a unique essay. Teaching adults to read through a literacy program, giving sailing instruction to disabled youngsters, working with abused children, helping to build a house for a low-income family, or teaching computer literacy to the elderly will teach you patience and compassion and allow you to give back to your community. Whatever you choose to do, do more than just hang out. Colleges look to fill their student body with interesting, motivated young adults. By making good use of your summer vacation, you become a more attractive candidate for admission.



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## Extended Time Testing

Students who receive extended time to complete school-based tests and assignments may also be eligible for extra time on standardized tests such as the SAT, ACT, PSAT, and AP exams. Approval may be granted for a variety of reasons including documented learning disabilities and ADD, physical disabilities such as vision or hearing impairments, some physical handicaps, and certain medical conditions. Students approved for extra time may receive anywhere from 25% to 100% of extra time to complete these exams.

The College Board Service for Students with Disabilities reviews all applications for extended time on the SAT Reasoning and Subject Exams, PSAT tests, and AP exams. Students who believe that they may be eligible for extended time should see their high school counselor as early as freshman year to begin the approval

process. Documentation will be required, so it is important to begin the process early. Once granted, the student is eligible to receive extended time for all of these College Board tests throughout high school. See the College Board website at [www.collegeboard.com](http://www.collegeboard.com) for more information.

ACT Services for Students with Disabilities require students to apply for extended time for each exam they plan to take. Forms are available at the guidance office and require documentation of disability through testing performed within the last three years. More information is available at [www.actstudent.org](http://www.actstudent.org).

Although students with disabilities are not required to disclose to colleges that they received extra time on exams, it may be desirable for them to do so. Discuss this issue with your college consultant.

## Website of the Month: [www.collegeanswer.com](http://www.collegeanswer.com)

This is presented by SallieMae, the Student Loan company. Tabs direct you to areas such as *Preparing*, *Selecting*, *Applying*, *Paying*, *Deciding*, and *Financing*. *Applying* leads you through the process, describes the qualities colleges seek, and links to Inside Admissions reports. *Deciding* offers help in understanding acceptance and award letters, shows you how to evaluate offers of financial aid, and discusses final decision making. There's even an online Award Analyzer to compare the financial aid packages you receive. *Financing* has information on college savings plans, school costs, scholarships, and the financial aid process.

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