



# College Direction

October 2009

www.collegedirection.org

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## October 2009

Review test materials  
& take PSAT either  
10/14 or 10/17

### 10<sup>th</sup> – SAT Reasoning and Subject Tests

### 24<sup>th</sup> – ACT and ACT plus Writing

Attend area college  
fairs and meetings

Meet with college  
reps visiting high  
school

Seniors - Continue  
work on applications;  
complete Early  
Decision/Early Action  
applications;  
complete CSS Profile  
if required

Submit "rolling"  
admissions  
applications ASAP

## November 2009

### 7<sup>th</sup> – SAT Reasoning and Subject Exams

Seniors – File Early  
Decision/Early Action  
applications

Work on remaining  
college applications

Register for a PIN at  
[www.fafsa.ed.gov](http://www.fafsa.ed.gov) if  
you'll be applying for  
financial aid

### 30<sup>th</sup> – Applications due for University of California colleges

## How Colleges Make Admission Decisions

It's the question that tortures students and parents alike. How do colleges decide who gets in?

The academic record is most important, and that includes rigor of the curriculum, grades in college preparatory courses, and standardized test scores. Tip factors, which for students with similar grades and test scores could influence the decision either way, include recommendations and essays, and even demonstrated interest.

Involvement in activities helps if a student has shown commitment and increasing responsibility. Joining four clubs in senior year doesn't do it. Long-term involvement in one or two organizations is the way to go.

While admissions officers say that the transcript is more important than test scores, there are so many students with SAT scores above 700 on every section that even a student with 4.3 GPA and six AP courses would still have a tough time being admitted to the Ivies and other elite colleges without high scores on the SAT or ACT.

Many admissions offices recalculate GPAs, using only academic courses, eliminating classes like physical education, band, and life skills. Some schools award an extra point for AP courses, but many schools do not weight grades and recalculate the GPA on a 4.0 scale. Other colleges use whatever GPA is on the transcript. Most schools will look at the trend, so that a student whose grades improve each year will be viewed favorably.

Highly selective colleges may not require physics, calculus or four years of the same foreign language, but so many applicants do have these courses that a transcript without them will suffer by comparison. Even a few "C" grades on a transcript

greatly reduce the chance of admission at these selective schools. Not because the student isn't capable of doing very well at the college, but when there are thousands of applications without a "C," why wouldn't they choose those students? There are certainly students who are admitted with less than perfect transcripts, but they will have some other edge, whether it's winning the Intel Science Talent Search or being a talented musician or athlete.

While the most competitive public universities, including Berkeley, University of Michigan and University of Virginia do holistic review, looking at the whole student, and considering both academic and non-academic factors, admission to many state schools is by the numbers. Grades and test scores matter, extracurricular activities are unimportant, essays and recommendations not required.

Liberal Arts colleges don't normally consider a student's choice of major in the admission decision, and the same is generally true when applying to the arts and sciences schools at many public institutions. In certain majors like performing arts that require auditions, or engineering, applicants may be competing against others for spaces in those programs.

Administrators at each school make decisions about priorities for their freshman class, and they may want to increase enrollment from different parts of the country, recruit more first generation students, or find a tuba player for the marching band.

There are aspects of college admission decisions that are out of a student's control, and that can be frustrating. Decisions may seem arbitrary and unpredictable, so it is important to apply to a range of schools. But a solid high school record and well-done applications should result in many good college choices.

## Colleges for Scientists

Scientists are people who constantly ask “why”. Their area of interest might focus on living things (biological sciences) or on the physical world (physics, chemistry, and other physical sciences), but the need to find answers to the *whys* is common to all scientists. If this describes you, you’ll want to choose a college that fits you both as a person and as a science major.

Science majors who plan on doing original research will need a minimum of a master’s degree and will probably want to continue their studies through the Ph.D. Thus, in choosing a school, you’ll want to consider the types of undergraduate institutions that best prepare students to obtain their Ph.D. At first glance, large research universities, like the University of Michigan, UCLA, MIT, and the University of Texas at Austin might seem to provide undergraduates with the best opportunities since so much cutting-edge research goes on at these institutions. In terms of sheer numbers, these institutions do produce the largest number of graduates with bachelors degrees in science and engineering, as well as the largest *number* of students going on to pursue doctoral degrees in these areas. But a recent report by the National Science Foundation (NSF) looked beyond these numbers to discover which institutions actually sent the highest *percentage* of their graduates on for advanced degrees.

According to the report, the top eleven colleges with the highest percentage of graduates earning doctorates in science and engineering were Cal Tech, Harvey Mudd College, MIT, Reed College, Swarthmore, Carleton, the University of Chicago, Grinnell College, Rice, Princeton, and Harvard. Although several of these are mid-sized or bigger, the majority would be classified as small and/or liberal arts colleges. What happens at places like Swarth-

more, Carleton and Grinnell that encourages the development of scientists? The answer here is quality of the undergraduate experience. These are institutions that focus on the undergraduate; colleges at which underclassman have numerous opportunities to work closely with faculty members and engage in real research. Such students often co-write papers or present their research at scientific conferences. Because students at smaller institutions build strong connections with faculty members, they receive excellent guidance in pursuing further education or get career advice from their faculty mentors. Therefore, prospective science majors can feel comfortable about attending smaller liberal arts colleges if this type of college more closely fits your personality and preferred style of learning.



Reed College, Portland, OR

The NSF report also looked at which institutions actually produced the largest number of undergraduates who went on for Ph.D.’s in science and engineering between 1997 and 2006. Not surprisingly, this “top ten” list included many very large institutions. In order: UC Berkeley, Cornell, the University of Michigan, the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, MIT, Penn State University (University Park), Harvard, the University of Wisconsin at Madison, the University of Texas at Austin, and UCLA. Obviously, undergraduate students at these institutions found themselves also well-prepared for graduate education. Those future scientists most likely to flourish at a large research institution are students who are proactive in seeking out opportunities to do undergraduate research, and who build relationships with faculty members. That’s harder to do at big schools, but certainly possible.

No matter what your choice of major, in selecting your college look beyond the obvious and seek out those places that are the best fit for you. Once there, actively pursue the experiences that will help you on the road to your educational goal.

*Should future scientists look to large research institutions or would they be better served by smaller liberal arts colleges?*

## Focus on Finances: College Savings Plans (529 Plans)



A 529 Plan is a tax-advantaged savings plan designed to help families save for future educational expenses. Withdrawals from these plans remain free from federal taxes as long as

the money is used to pay qualified educational expenses and many states provide the same benefits regarding state taxes on withdrawals. Each state has their own 529 plan, and determines its own investment options and structure. Although investors are free to participate in any state's plan, there may be other tax advantages in investing in your home state's 529 offerings.

529 plans include both prepaid tuition plans and savings plans. Prepaid tuition plans (also known as guaranteed savings plans) are currently available in 13 states and allow for the pre-purchase of tuition

### Good Students—Bad Essays

You might think that students who earn excellent grades and score well on standardized tests would have no trouble writing an effective college application essay, but these high achievers often struggle with their essays.

Part of the problem is that they get mixed messages. Writing an analytical essay for your history teacher requires facts, complexity and proper grammar. Students are often taught a five paragraph method that focuses on introducing a thesis, supporting it with examples, and providing smooth transitions. That model works well for an analytical essay, but not for the kind of reflective, personal essay you need to write for college applications. No wonder students are confused.

Many students see the essay as their one chance to "wow" admissions officers and stand out in a very competitive applicant pool. For high-achieving students who have always been able to follow directions, work hard and get the results they wanted, the college application process may be the first time they can't control the outcome.

The stakes feel so high that it's easy to be paralyzed by performance pressure. If the essay doesn't come easily, the anxiety is intensified, making it even more difficult to think clearly about what to write. Students need to know that application essay prompts are designed to be challenging, and that most of their peers are also struggling with them.

For this generation, reflective time has been rare. From an early age, kids have schedules packed with

based on today's rates that is paid out at the future cost when the beneficiary is in college. 529 savings plans are based on the performance of the underlying investments, usually mutual funds. Most 529 savings plans offer a variety of age-based investment options where the underlying investments become more conservative as the beneficiary gets closer to college-age. With 529 plans, the account holder retains control of the money, and beneficiaries can be switched from one family member to another. You can also invest substantial money in these plans—many states allow over \$300,000 per beneficiary. Adults who are considering returning to school can also set up a 529 plan for themselves.

Want to learn more about 529 plans? Visit [www.savingforcollege.com](http://www.savingforcollege.com) to read about these plans as well as other college savings options. The site also offers college cost calculators that will help you determine future college costs.

organized activities. In high school, many students have AP classes with many hours of homework, sports practice, community service, SAT preparation, and jobs. If your life is so programmed that you've never had time to stop and think about who you are apart from all of your activities, it's not easy to shift into essay-writing mode, especially under pressure.

There isn't one right answer to an application essay prompt. That can be frustrating, but also liberating. There are many ways to write a great essay, and you only need to find the one that works for you.

The best essays convey intellectual passion and insight, while also being personal. Give the reader a reason to want you to be part of this college community. Don't try to describe your entire life in 500 words. Think of the essay as a snapshot, and focus on one thing.

You don't need the usual introductory paragraph. Students often write an introduction stating a thesis, like they would for a history paper. There's no need to state a thesis. You do want to have a point, but it can be implied. The first paragraph can often be cut short, so the reader gets to the more interesting part faster.

Your tone should be honest, conversational and vivid. This isn't the time for formal academic prose. You don't need to prove you know big words. Avoid overly complex construction. Remember that the reader will have stacks of applications to read every day. You can make her job easier by being clear and concise; a happy reader is a good thing.



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## Using the Common or Universal Application

Seniors who have begun applying to college are probably struck by just how much time is consumed putting all that information into the correct spaces on their college applications. Happily, the job of applying to a variety of colleges is simplified by using the Common or the Universal Applications. These two general applications are very similar; the Common Application is accepted by 392 institutions while the Universal Application is used by over eighty colleges and universities. Users complete one basic application and the data will reappear for each additional college selected. Some colleges on each list also require applicants to complete their own college-specific supplement as part of the application process; in most cases both application and supplement

are submitted at the same time.

Visit these application websites at [www.commonapp.org](http://www.commonapp.org) and [www.universalcollegeapp.com](http://www.universalcollegeapp.com) to view the list of colleges accepting each type of application. In many cases, you'll find the same college (such as Harvard and U Penn) appearing on both lists. Select the application that includes the largest number of colleges on your final college list and register at that site. You might even find that you'll need to complete both of these applications to apply to most of the colleges on your short list, but you'll notice that they are very similar in format, greatly simplifying the process. Submitting applications electronically also cuts down on incomplete applications. Make applying to college as user-friendly as you can with the Common and Universal applications.

## Website of the Month: [www.greekspot.com/college news](http://www.greekspot.com/college_news)

You can get a good idea about the issues that are important on any college campus by reading a number of issues of their college newspaper. The newspaper will give you an insiders view of campus life—learn about student involvement (or apathy), the political climate, the importance of Greek life, the role of sports on

campus, and just what issues matter to the students at that institution. This is a great way to judge how the college culture fits you. Greekspot maintains a directory of college newspaper links that will lead you to the college newspaper at most of the colleges you may be considering. Check it out!

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