

Answers to Frequently Asked Questions in College Admissions

1. Don't limit your school options.

While it's exciting to have a top school in mind, if your child only wants to apply to one institution, encourage her to broaden her perspective. "Ultimately, students are going to be successful at a number of different types of colleges," says Jay Murray, director of Admissions at [Post University](#) in Waterbury, Connecticut. "Plenty of schools will offer the kind of academic opportunities that each student is looking for, as well as give her the chance to grow socially and intellectually." Instead of targeting one specific school, find out what your child is looking for and research places that will fit those needs: Does she want to be a big fish in a small pond or attend a school with thousands of students? How far does she want to be from home? Does she see herself in a traditional campus environment? By identifying what she's truly seeking, your teen will be more open to exploring a variety of schools.

2. A so-so SAT score won't necessarily hold your child back.

While some undergraduate institutions do have minimum SAT score requirements, many do not. For most schools, standardized test scores are just one piece of the puzzle that college admissions officers look at. "Four years' worth of grades is a far better predictor of how someone's going to perform than a three-hour Saturday test," says Patrick Winter, senior associate director of Admissions at the [University of Georgia](#) in Athens, Georgia. "We've admitted students who had average test scores but performed really well in high school and took challenging classes; that tells us that they're performing above and beyond their abilities. It's when we see students with mediocre grades and strong test scores that it's a red flag." He explains that these students may not be working to their full potential, which makes them less desirable candidates. Encourage high school students to challenge themselves academically with their course load, and to prepare thoroughly for the SATs—but not to lose hope if they aren't pleased with their results. Consistent participation in extracurricular activities and school clubs also appeals to colleges; they are eager to admit students who will bring curiosity, interest and leadership to their campus.

3. Students should use their application essay as a chance to show their personality.

"The essay is where students can distinguish themselves and enhance all the other information that's already on their application," says Winter. "They shouldn't restate what's already obvious based on their grades or teacher recommendations, but rather use it as a place to show who they really are." According to Melanie Mickelson, vice president of Enrollment Services at [Wilkes University](#) in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, students should aim to focus on one thing that is important to them. "If you've had a life changing event, that's great, but most people haven't." She recommends students write about a person who has inspired them, like a family member or a teacher. Or write about a class they love, an important Eagle Scout project they worked on or recently adopting a pet. Colleges want to know who you are, so students should write as if they are talking to a real person and avoid laundry lists of achievements and accomplishments as well as making excuses for less-than-stellar grades.

4. Think long and hard before applying early decision.

If your teen has his heart set on one school in particular, be sure it's a good fit before he applies early decision, which will bind him to that school. Though it may seem like accepting an offer early on will make the process less stressful, if he's committed to a specialized program, but decides later on to change his major (which most students do, according to admissions officers), he'll end up being tied down to a school that isn't such a great fit after all. "Early decision is for students who absolutely, positively know where

they want to go—and who, at 17 or 18, knows that?” asks Murray. He explains that applying early decision also limits your child's ability to compare financial aid packages. “By targeting one particular school, families are essentially taking away their option to shop around for different financial assistance packages.” Students who have a favorite school in mind and are eager to make their college plans should consider applying early action, which still provides advance notification but doesn't lock them in. However, these students should have strong grades and test scores, since the early action applicant pools tend to be very competitive.

5. Make the most of your campus visits.

It's important to make every effort to visit each school that your child is interested in. Not only will you get a feel for campus life, but you'll be expressing your interest in the school as well as have an opportunity to ask important questions. “Don't go and ask questions that you could easily find answers to in a university brochure or on the Web,” advises Murray. “Ask questions that are really going to provide solid information about the institution, like: ‘What percentage of students who apply early action enroll?’ ‘How many students study my major?’ ‘What types of resources are available to students in my major?’” By delving deeper, you'll get much more out of your visit than if you just follow the masses on a walking tour. Joyce Ritz, assistant director of Undergraduate Admissions at [Loyola University Maryland](#) in Baltimore, also recommends asking if there are opportunities to sit in on lectures as well as spend time driving around the surrounding town or city. “Oftentimes the outside of campus is a great extension of college life and could help you make a decision.”

6. Set up an interview.

Aside from the essay, an interview is another way for a student to convey his or her personality to admissions officers, which is why Murray recommends actively seeking them out. “Even if the school your child is considering doesn't offer them, see if they conduct alumni interviews. Students should take every opportunity to put themselves in front of someone who might be in a position to give them the thumbs up.” Because one-on-one talks can be a source of anxiety for teens, Winter recommends setting up mock interviews to help them prepare. (It's a good idea for students to practice with adults who aren't their parents, in order to get a true outsider's perspective and feedback.) “We look for authentic answers from students, so we would discourage too much ‘coaching,’ but a parent or adult can help a student think about how to elaborate on a certain topic or let them know that they tend to say ‘um’ a lot,” says Anna Follensbee, senior associate director of Undergraduate Admissions at Loyola University Maryland. Some sample questions she recommends adults ask students are: Why is this school a good match for you? What's your favorite class in high school? What activity has been most meaningful to you and why? And when it's the student's turn to ask questions, be sure that your son or daughter has done ample research about the school. Follensbee says that she's always impressed with queries that begin with, “I was reading about your...”

7. Don't bank on getting off the waitlist.

If your child's top school puts him on the waitlist, unfortunately there isn't much you or he can do to get off of it. According to Murray, most schools don't rank their waitlists, which means that there isn't a numbered queue of students waiting for a spot to free up. Instead, “schools will typically go to the waitlist to fill a specific need, like if they need more biology majors, for example. As a student or parent, you can't ever be ahead of the curve because you don't know what they're looking for.” He explains that whenever

families call asking what their chances of getting off the waitlist are, he tells them that it's in their best interest to apply elsewhere. "Don't wait for us; make sure you're covered." Because it's very rare to get off the waitlist, Murray recommends moving on. Worst-case scenario? You get accepted and lose your deposit at another school.

8. Don't hesitate when it comes to asking for financial aid.

Worried that checking the financial aid box will make admissions officers think twice about considering your child? "When making a decision, we focus on a student's qualifications and ability to be successful at the school—not on their financial need," says Murray. By checking the financial aid box on the application, you'll open the door to "many options to help pay for college through institutional merit scholarships, need-based financial aid and outside scholarships," says Follensbee. But keep in mind that scholarships and financial aid will first go to students who have strong grades and test scores relative to the applicant pool, so consider applying to schools where your child will rise above the other applicants and therefore get the best aid packages.

9. Lose the silly email address!

"Very often we come across students with fantastic grades, test scores and extracurricular activities, and then notice that they have an email address that's completely inappropriate," says Winter. "That tends to communicate a bit about who they are." He advises that students avoid this by registering for a very standard email address—first name, last name, etc.—and using that for all college-related correspondences. In the same vein, encourage your teen to clean up her Facebook and Twitter accounts—colleges often check them out to get a better sense of what each applicant is like.

10. Show interest in a school early and often.

Take advantage of college fairs and other opportunities to collect information about different schools—many institutions will keep track of the students who seek out information, updating their files every time prospective students make a campus visit or take a tour. According to Murray, "it definitely helps to know how interested a student is in your school." But keep in mind that your son's or daughter's demonstrated ability to be successful at the university (their grades, test scores, extracurricular activities, etc.) is paramount. "Aside from showing a genuine interest in being a student at the school, the best thing a teen can do is complete the admissions requirements within the stated deadlines."