

4 Year College Checklist

Training for your ideal career does NOT begin when you step onto a college campus.

There are things you can, and should do at every point in your High School career to prepare yourself for College or Vocational School, as well as your Career. Your High School Guidance Counselor can provide you with all the information you need to apply for colleges or vocational/trade schools including deadlines. This list can be a great supplement to what your Guidance Counselor recommends and put you on a path for success!

Freshman Year

- **Find your passion!**

Identifying your perfect career begins with identifying your personality. You'll be happiest in a career that "fits" your personality. A creative person will not enjoy balancing numbers all day. A person who thrives on social interaction will not like spending the entire day alone. A person who loves to solve complex problems will not enjoy trying to persuade others. Now is the time to understand how God "wired" you. The sooner you know "why" you like certain things, the sooner you'll be on the path to identifying careers that "fit" you, because ultimately, those will be the ones you will LOVE.

- **Develop good study habits and a strong GPA NOW!**

All 4 years count, and if your career choice requires you to go to college, the difference between a 4.0 and a 3.2 High School GPA could literally mean tens of thousands of dollars. Have fun, but work hard!

- **Identify AP/IB/dual-credit options to save time and money at college**

Getting college credits early and for little or no cost is fantastic, but it's important to have a clear understanding of how these will be useful if you do go to college. Not every AP/IB/dual-credit class will transfer and count as a Gen Ed at your chosen school, or apply for your specific major, so investigate this before you take them.

- **Join at least one activity (sports, clubs, volunteering, job) and get deeply involved**

These will be highly valued both by colleges, and also prospective employers, especially if you engage at an early age then continue to grow and expand into leadership roles. But remember that deep involvement in 1 or 2 activities is worth far more than shallow involvement in many.

- **Start a running list of all of your achievements and activities**

Activities and achievements will not count if you can't identify them. Keeping searchable (chronology, organization, and role) list that includes your accomplishments, awards, dates, and people you worked with and is frequently updated is the best way to remember them later. But focus on the specific things YOU did. Being a "team player" is great, but if every accomplishment is "we" did this, then how will anyone know what YOU did? Don't be a glory hog, but don't bury your contributions in the word "we".

- **GUARD YOURSELF!**

Social media posts last FOREVER. Be aware that every prospective employer WILL be able to see what you wrote, even as a High School Freshman. Treat every post like your mother and pastor will read them, and that you have signed your name to each.

- **Avoid getting into trouble**

It may seem fun and attractive to hang out with certain people at this age, but getting a criminal record will always haunt you. Show discernment and integrity in all that you do.

- **Begin building relationships with teachers, business leaders, & people at church**

Many colleges will require one or more letters of reference. Approaching someone you've known for 3 weeks and asking them to write a letter of recommendation is wrong! Build and maintain relationships now.

- **Identify your available finances for school NOW!**

Talk to your parents right now about how much they are willing and able to contribute to your training. Do NOT assume you can just take out loans, that is absolutely the WORST way to begin your life and it will enslave you and impact every aspect of your life. Learn what your price range is now. Granted, some schools will have a massive price tag but offer huge scholarships, but if your total assets (with you working) is \$85,000 for 4 years, do not look at a school that "costs" \$350,000 but will offer it to you for *only* \$200,000. I cannot emphasize enough how devastating student loans are.

Sophomore Year

- **Take the PSAT/NMSQT**

Most think of this as just a “practice” test for the SAT, but it is the NMSQT part of this that is important. If you become a Finalist in NMSQT many schools will offer you a full 4-year ride. Even semi-finalists can get decent scholarships. This test is normally given at little or no cost. But don’t just take it - study for it. Though it’s an “aptitude” test, there are ways to prepare and you should do so.

- **Begin exploring careers that fit your personality**

Identifying a goal right now is a great way to cast a vision. Knowing what you are striving for will not only be rewarding, but will inspire you. There are resources (parents, counselors, teachers, online services, Free Career Match, etc) that can help you identify careers that “fit” you. There are also many research tools which tell all about the day-to-day activities and requirements for each profession. Explore the different branches of that career. You can also speak to someone who works in that field to get a feel for what it TRULY is like. Seek out job-shadow opportunities to see firsthand and up-close what the job, and environment is like.

- **Increase the scope of your role(s) and your responsibilities in your activities**

Demonstrating growth in every area of your life is important. It shows you are ambitious and able to adapt and take on more responsibility. Seek those opportunities in your activities and groups you are involved with.

- **Continue documenting your accomplishments and contributions**

- **Begin identifying what type of training your perfect career requires**

Not every job requires a 4-year degree, but some do. Whether your career requires a 4-year school, Community College, Vocational or Trade School, the military, or certification, start exploring what is required and compile a list documenting what your “must-haves”, “nice-to-haves”, and “absolutely don’t want” are for your training environment. Your preferred career will dictate which institutions will best prepare you, but you will likely be in that environment for years. Identify the other aspects you want, or don’t want including location, type (on-campus, commuter, online), and concerns (dorm rooms, political environment, etc). If (and only if) your career requires a 4-year degree, then visit 2 or 3 local campuses – take a tour, see the classrooms, dorms, cafeteria, etc. to get your “feet wet” and begin to “dream”.

- **Get a job!**

Not only to begin saving to help contribute for your training, but also because it will teach you invaluable skills including responsibility, time management, showing respect, and how to get along with others in a stressful environment. It also speaks volumes to prospective employers about your work ethic and initiative by getting, (or not getting) a job at an early age. Also, many employers, even fast food and the like, offer college scholarships for their employees.

Junior Year

- **THIS is the year for you to significantly narrow your career search**

Forget about people who say: “Oh, just go to college and you’ll figure it out when you’re there!” That is COSTLY (money and time) and downright foolish. Learn BEFORE you go, and become single-minded, focused, and passionate about your career goals. This will pay huge dividends at 3:00 am when you are cramming for your Thermodynamics or P-Chem final. Engage in serious discussions with your parents, counselor, or anyone who has sound, complete knowledge about what these careers are like, and how you can learn more about them.

- **Remember to ALWAYS put the “horse-before-the-cart”**

You do **NOT** pick a school, then a major, then a career. The order is the order for a reason:

CAREER → MAJOR → COLLEGE.

Any other is a recipe for disaster. Changing majors or dropping out of school can cost you years and tens of thousands of dollars. It also reflects poorly on your ability to plan and follow through on those plans.

- **Nail down your finances for college, vocational, or other training paths**

Have a serious discussion with your parents about how much they will contribute for your training. There is no use looking for a car at the Maserati dealership if all you can afford is \$10,000. Live within your means now or you will not only regret the extreme burden of debt, but cultivate bad habits for the rest of your life.

- **Focus on schools that are “perfect; almost perfect; or nearly perfect”**

Don’t get distracted by “prestige price tags”. Every time someone says: “This is a GOOD school” ask: “according to who?” It doesn’t matter if they have a good football team, or your Aunt Jackie has heard good things about it. Nor does it matter if US News & World Report rates it as #6 (by the way ALWAYS look ONLY at undergraduate rankings). The ONLY person or company whose opinion matters is your prospective employer. Caterpillar pays top dollar for Mechanical Engineers. But why would they hire a Mechanical Engineer from Stanford who is unfamiliar with earthmoving equipment, does not know Caterpillar, and probably won’t like living in Peoria when they have a great relationship with Bradley? Or why would they hire an engineer from a “prestigious” school whose reputation is for Law, or Liberal Arts? So why would you pay (or borrow) hundreds of thousands to have a “prestigious name” on a diploma that sits in a drawer?

- **Visit campuses, community colleges, or training centers, but do so with a purpose**

Not just to see how beautiful it is on campus when the leaves are changing, but to visit the dorms, the classrooms (I recommend sitting in on 1 or 2 classes), the cafeteria, the restaurants, and the stores. This is where you may live for 4 years. Also pay attention to the size of the campus (that beautiful 15 minute walk in Spring is a whole lot different when it’s -20F). And don’t forget to find out if the campus is safe.

But above all it is imperative that you check with their Career Planning Department and find out their percentage of graduates with your major who get work IN THEIR FIELD within 6 months of graduation (needs to be 90% or higher). Also, talk to the Department Chair for your major and find out which companies they have relationships with (including internships) and what the school does to bring you into contact with them for recruiting. Relationships in 2025 are more important than ever, even in just getting an in-person interview. Remember, you are going to school to get a job – period!

- **Identify your ACT/SAT goals**

For some schools you won't get in the door with less than a 32. For others, if you get a 25, not only will they take you, they'll give you thousands of dollars in scholarships. Once you know your goals take advantage of the resources available, both free, and for a cost. The ACT website offers advice and free practice exams. There are books, video lessons (usually free), local services that offer to boost your test score by a certain amount (usually charge \$200 or less). Of course if you MUST get a 32+ there are some very expensive services that you can use. But DON'T pay tons of money to go from a 28 to a 31 when a 25 will do. Likewise, plan on taking your ACT at least twice – your best score is the one that colleges will count.

- **Continue taking AP/IB/dual credit courses as long as they align with your goals.**

- **Build your portfolio! THIS is how you demonstrate your true ability**

This isn't the 1980's anymore. You don't sit through boring lectures, figure out how to get good grades, then show your diploma and expect someone to give you a job. You are competing with hundreds, if not thousands of applicants from all over the world. Nobody cares if you got an A in Chemistry I or Philosophy. They care about what you can do for them NOW! You have to prove to them that you can "hit the ground running" because they don't have time to hope that you blossom into a valuable employee. They have hundreds of applications on their desk, most with the same or better GPA. You need to SHINE and distinguish yourself. Start now, and build on that foundation. You have to demonstrate, not only "soft skills" of responsibility, leadership, and tenacity, but also the "hard skills" associated with their industry:

- For technical students: programming, robotics, design work, creative tasks
- For business-minded students: marketing plans, entrepreneurial pursuits, & leadership roles
- For artists & creators: build a portfolios of your work (paintings, videos, music), participate in showings, or perform in concerts.
- For ALL: service projects, or initiatives that demonstrate capability, growth, and leadership

- **Apply for scholarships**

Many open during junior year. Even small amounts can add up. Besides, if you can spend 40 hours applying for scholarships and walk away with \$5,000, that's like working a job making \$125/hr.

- **Continue updating your record of achievements, jobs, volunteering, & leadership**

Senior Year

- **Buckle up! This is when the “rubber meets the road”**

Things will begin happening very quickly now if you are planning on going to a 4 year school. Stay on top of things. There are many things that will have to happen in your Fall Semester regarding tests and school visits and applications that your Guidance Counselor will tell you about, but I will list a few more here:

- Finalize your career selection (yes.... it's not only possible, but necessary to KNOW your career goals. You cannot, and should not jump into a car and start driving if you don't know where you're going!)
- Finalize your choice of schools – and I can't emphasize enough these choices should be: “perfect; almost perfect; and nearly perfect”, as defined by: your career; their placement record; and their relationship with employers.

This nonsense about “**Reach, Match, Safe**” is exactly that... **NONSENSE!**

There IS a perfect school for you – it begins with identifying which school will give you training valued by the companies you would want to work for in the location you want to be. A small Marketing firm in Central Illinois is NOT looking for an NYU graduate. An automobile company is NOT looking for an MIT graduate to design bumpers. There are literally thousands of schools - find the ones that will give you the solid, quality training that you need with a track record of placing their graduates in jobs in their field AT A PRICE YOU CAN AFFORD.

Why apply for a so-called “Reach” school (however *they* define that)? What does that even mean? Does that mean you're not really smart enough to succeed there, or you can't afford the tuition, let alone the “weekends on The Cape” that all your BMW-driving “friends” will do? Is THAT considered success? To be miserable for 4 years just so your relatives can say: “My niece Suzy is going to Yale”?

“Match” is the only one of these 3 that matters. But more than “match”, it's also about “fit”. This is different for everyone, you must figure out what it is for you. It could be the campus size or location, the number of students, the climate, proximity to home (ability to commute), the dorms, the political environment, the religious affiliation – there IS a perfect school and the likelihood is that it is NOT what your neighbors, or relatives say you should go to.

As for “safe” schools, I don't even know what that means. Are these schools nobody wants to go to but they'll take your money and hand you a worthless piece of paper? Why???

Perfect; almost perfect; and nearly perfect... THOSE are where you should apply.

- **Re-take your ACT if needed to get into your preferred school**
- **Identify who you'll ask for letters of recommendation and ask if they're willing**

- **Finalize (by Oct 1) schools you are truly interested in, and that you can afford**

This is about your future, and how you will spend the next 40+ years. Do NOT leave it up to chance. Ensure that you get the training you need at a price you can afford. Below you will see that many schools offer “early action” (often Nov 1). First come, first-served, and you’ll get a decision in time to change course if needed. But it takes time to pull together your application packet. Finalize by Oct 1 to give yourself time.

- **Put together a list of dates for deadlines for each school**

Many schools offer “early action”. If you apply by Nov 1 or Dec 1 you will get a decision by mid-January. Programs for some popular careers like X-Ray Technician, Dental Hygienist, or Diesel Mechanic fill up fast. Talk to your HS Guidance Counselor for details, but know that applying for these typically involves many tasks including:

- Filling out your FAFSA (even if you won’t qualify for aid, many require it)
- Writing essay(s)
- Having someone review your essay(s) – quality counts
- Getting letters of reference (allow each person 2 to 3 weeks)
- Assigning that school to receive your test scores and transcripts
- Filling out your application (most have a charge)
- Sending out your entire package in time to meet “early action” deadlines

- **Put together a spreadsheet with the dates you applied and the responses you’ve received**

- **Apply for scholarships – lots and lots of scholarships**

It has been said that your primary job as a High School Senior should be finding as many scholarships as you can. It is “free money”, but takes work and effort.

There are at least 10 excellent sites (like Fastweb) that I list on my site for general scholarships, but each school, and sometimes each department within that school will also have specific scholarships. As I mentioned before, employers, labor unions, churches, civic organizations, and individuals in a certain niche offer all kinds of scholarships. They are out there, but you need to find them. And don’t overlook scholarships offered for particular demographics including race/ethnicity background, disability, gender, etc.

- **Contact your (accepted) schools’ Financial Aid Offices**

While most schools will publish academic scholarships based on GPA (e.g. if you have a 3.8 unweighted we’ll give you \$12,000/yr), most won’t talk about the “full financial aid package” until you’ve been accepted. Schedule a meeting with each accepted school’s Financial Aid Department, but do NOT fall victim to this: “Oh, our Cost of Attendance is \$90,000 but 86% of our students pay less than \$20,000. Suppose you’re one of the 14%? A great many of those are “need-based” which you may or may not qualify for.

Besides, more often than not they are including loans in those numbers, and I cannot think of a worse way to begin life than by carrying debt, especially massive debt. There are ways to graduate with little or no debt and have wonderful & respected training. I am happy to help you find those if you are interested.

- **Put together a list of criteria for how you will decide**
Determine ahead of time, if you receive acceptance letters from multiple schools, how will you choose between them? Having an objective list will take away the anxiety and expedite your ability to inform them of your decision.
- **Consider taking one final visit to each of your “finalist” schools**
If your criteria list doesn’t make it clear which school is “perfect”, then taking one final visit to each will – but do so with a specific eye on what will tilt the scales in their favor.
- **Choose your school and inform them that you are accepting their invitation**
This begins the process of “onboarding” (there will be LOTS of software packages to sign up for, there is a need to choose a dorm and possibly a roommate, and so much more).
- **Put together a packing list**
Plan early so you can catch sales on things. Also, work with your roommate to decide how you’ll get “common things” (trust me, you don’t want 2 refrigerators in a 16’x12’ dorm room!).
- **Celebrate — you did it!**
Now finish your HS career strong, continue earning money up to and after leaving for college, and enjoy these last few months with your High School friends!

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The above list is not meant to be intimidating. Rather it is meant to not only identify those things that are needed, but also demonstrate the gravity of this decision.

You are likely about to spend 2 to 8 times more than I did for my first house back in 1987. The decisions you make will impact the rest of your life. TAKE IT SERIOUSLY!

But this will also be one of the most incredible times of your life. Prepare early, then ENJOY!