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Demystifying College Admissions and Aid

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June College Checklist for Juniors

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This week, The Choice is publishing its monthly Counselor's Calendar, which is intended to keep students on track during the college admission process.

This installment focuses on juniors. (Seniors, your June checklist was published on Monday.) We've asked Kristen Learner, the director of college counseling at The Benjamin School in Palm Beach Gardens, Fla., and Jeffrey Wong, a college counselor at the school, for admission advice for the class of 2014. — Tanya Abrams

High school graduations, N.B.A. finals, the first days of summer and the last days of school make it easy to get wrapped up in fun and festivities. However, this month also offers many opportunities for rising seniors to continue the college admission process.

Juniors, here is your college admission checklist for June:

Resist the Lull

With summer break just around the corner, June can be a tough month for juniors. Warmer weather, classes coming to an end and the sweet promise of sleeping past 7 a.m. can combine to lull you into an early case of senioritis.

Do not succumb! During the final days of classes, you are putting the finishing touches on a high school transcript that will make its way into the hands of college admission officers in the fall.

Finalize Your Senior Schedule

Colleges look to admit students who are entering their academic prime. As such, your senior year schedule should be your most rigorous to date.

A solid academic program that challenges you and puts you in a position to succeed — and, hopefully, includes a foreign language — will go a long way in the college admission process. Seek the advice of your 11th-grade teachers, your counselor, your parents and perhaps even a college admission officer to create the best possible schedule.

Ask for Teacher Recommendations

Recommendation letters from one or two teachers of core academic subjects allow admission officers to go beyond your grades and standardized test scores and learn more about you, your learning style and your academic abilities.

As your junior year concludes, think about 11th- and 12th-grade teachers who can describe your academic abilities and performance. Who knows you best? Ask these teachers if they are willing to write a letter in your support. If they hesitate, consider asking someone else.

Begin Your Summer Plans

Colleges want to know how you spend your summers. While sitting by the pool, watching reruns of "Gossip Girl" or playing Madden 2013 provide a bit of well-deserved downtime, this is not what you want to list on the extracurricular section of your college applications.

Whether your plans include a summer job, an internship, camp, travel, classes, community service or all of the above, it is time to swing into action.

Evaluate Your Testing Plan

As you pause between junior and senior years, summer is a good time to evaluate your standardized testing plan.

Do you prefer the ACT or the SAT? Are your scores higher on one of the tests? Do any of the colleges you are considering require subject tests? Remember: More than 800 colleges and universities do not require standardized testing as part of the admission process. Visit www.fairtest.org for a list of these institutions.

Start Writing Your College Essay

Your high school transcript is the initial criterion used to evaluate your application, but the college essay is a chance to introduce yourself to the admission committee. This is your opportunity to tell them who you are, what you value and what they would not know about you from the rest of your application.

While it is not necessary to complete a final draft in June, it is a good idea to start writing your essay in the summer, when you don't have school essays and projects hanging over your head. The five new Common Application essay prompts are now available and are a good place to begin thinking about what you will write.

Fulfill Specific Requirements for Athletes and Artists

Are you thinking about pursuing the arts or playing a sport in college? If so, your application process may include a few additional components.

If you are an athlete, use this time to create an athletic résumé and collect highlight film footage. Artists should find out what their prospective colleges require and use this time to prepare an art portfolio or, if applicable, select a piece to perform for auditions.

Visit College Campuses

Summer is a great time to visit college campuses. The green quads may not be overflowing with students and the campus centers may look a bit empty, but most admission offices employ a number of summer tour guides who are eager to show you around and tell you all of the reasons they selected their college. Their availability allows you and your parents to hit the road and truly discover what you are looking for in your college experience, all without missing important high school days.

While information sessions and tours are a must, be sure to spend some unscripted time exploring, which can be just as helpful in learning more about college communities. To avoid campus confusion and prepare for the "why would you like to attend our college" questions, take notes and keep a journal.

Consider How You Will Pay for College

Now is the time to talk to your family about paying for your college education. Don't be scared away by the listed cost of attendance. With financial aid, the most expensive institution can often become the most affordable.

Consider using the FAFSA4caster, which will help you estimate your eligibility for federal financial aid. College and university net price calculators will give you a better sense of what you will be expected to pay. The financial aid officers at these institutions are also a great resource. Having these important conversations now will ensure that your financial aid process is off to a strong start.

Read, Relax and Recharge

The fall will be very busy, and you want to make sure you return to school ready for all that senior year will require of you. Summer is a great time to move forward with the college admission process, but it is also an important time to recharge and spend time with family and friends.

Make time for yourself and the activities you enjoy. Senior year will be here in no time, so enjoy your time off, finish your summer reading and be ready to start strong in the fall!

This post was prepared in consultation with the Association of College Counselors in Independent Schools, a membership organization.

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