

10 Ways to Jumpstart College Planning

Ready, set...

It's amazing, but decisions you make as early as 8th grade have a huge effect on your college career. They affect how soon you'll go to college, how good the college you go to will be, and even whether you'll go to college at all.

1. Get involved

Getting ready for college isn't all work. Find something you really like doing, then dive into it. Maybe you're drawn to sports, student council, music, art... you get the picture. You'll develop skills and be more appealing to colleges (they like students who'll add something to campus life).

2. Do the work

If you expect to go to college later, expect to study now. No one can do it for you. Don't talk the college talk – "I'll go to college to get a great career" – without walking the walk.

3. Take challenging courses

Colleges look at your grades, sure, but also at how difficult your courses are. They want to see that you've challenged yourself. Plus, if you pursue advanced courses, such as AP[®], you may be able to get college credit.

4. Get help

Having trouble in a class? Many schools have peer tutors, students in upper grades who'll help you (for free). Talk to teachers or counselors – let them know you want extra help.

5. Read

Read at least 30 minutes every day, beyond study and homework. Read what interests you – magazines, novels, whatever. People who read more know more. And when you take PSAT/NMSQT[®] and SAT[®] tests, knowing more will really pay off.

6. Don't delay

You take the PSAT/NMSQT as a junior (or even as a sophomore). So you have a few semesters before then to take the solid math and other courses that get you ready.

7. Get the college-bound facts

How do you know all the right moves to get into college? Ask someone who's done it. Get to know your counselors. Ask a career planner at a local college, or a trusted teacher. Do Web research.

8. Involve your family

When parents or guardians haven't been to college themselves, they may think they can't help you. That's not true. They can talk to counselors and help you stay on the right path.

9. Look for a mentor

If you don't find support at home, look for other adults who can lend their enthusiasm and help make sure you succeed. You might look to a counselor, a teacher, or someone else you trust.

10. Confront personal roadblocks

If you have a problem that's really getting in the way of schoolwork, try to sort it out. Talking to friends helps, or look for an adult – parent, coach, nurse, counselor – who can offer advice.