

# 3

## Chapter 3: College Visits, Interviews, and Demonstrated Interest

### The College Campus Visit

Visiting a college campus is among the more helpful ways to determine whether you want to spend several years there. Walking the campus and interacting with current students can provide a perspective on the school not captured in written materials or on the website. Most students do not start visiting colleges until their junior year of high school, often corresponding to a winter or spring vacation, though some students may begin earlier than that. As you discuss this option with your family, be cognizant and realistic about the time and fiscal resources at your disposal. If you are only able to do one round of visits, sometimes saving those until your senior year when you know you've been admitted is the wisest choice.

#### *In-Person Campus Visits*

Most college and university admissions offices offer a variety of on-campus opportunities for prospective students and their families to explore and gather information. Even if you are not able to travel extensively to visit colleges, attending visits at institutions closer to home can provide helpful exposure to different types of schools, even if you are not specifically interested in that college. Not every college will offer the same type or breadth of visit experiences, so your first stop should always be the admissions website of the specific schools you're considering visiting to see what's available. Most colleges require or strongly recommend that visitors sign up for a session prior to coming to campus, though some can accommodate walk-in visitors. While visiting colleges while school is in session is ideal, visiting in the summer will still provide you with a valuable sense of the campus and surrounding area. As with most facets of the college process, you, the student, should be taking the lead on identifying the colleges you want to visit and signing yourself up for events—this is one of many opportunities to demonstrate agency and autonomy.

- **Campus Tours:** Typically led by a current student, campus tours allow you to walk the grounds and see the facilities a school has on offer up close and personally. Tour guides will usually provide a broad overview of academic, extracurricular, dining, and housing opportunities and are, of course, open to questions along the way. If there is a certain area of campus that is not covered on the tour (i.e. athletic or theater facilities), you can always ask if you can visit them on your own time. Take advantage of your time with a current student; even more so than admissions counselors as they are the resident experts on the actual student experience! As you move through campus, be sure to check out bulletin boards or digital monitors displaying announcements and upcoming events—this is a great way to get a sense of what’s happening on campus and what students care about. Prospective students should always be in the driver’s seat of asking questions and interacting with the tour guide.
- **Information Sessions:** Many colleges that have great numbers of prospective students visiting their campuses each year have instituted group information sessions to provide accurate information to several prospective students and their families at the same time. They are often led by a member of the admissions staff or students who work in the admissions office and provide a broad overview of their specific admissions and financial aid review process, academic programs, campus life, and more as well as an opportunity to ask general questions. Combined with campus tours, group information sessions are excellent resources to use in researching and evaluating colleges.
- **Attending a Class:** Some colleges may offer the opportunity to sit in on a class during your visit, which provides a unique and tangible window into the academic experience. Instead of only hearing about the academic values and approach the college takes, you get to see it play out in real life surrounded by potential future classmates. If this is an option, be sure to be flexible with the admissions office when scheduling. They may not be able to provide a class perfectly aligned with your area of interest, as they have to work within the confines of the current academic schedule, but any exposure to the teaching and learning that’s happening on campus can be helpful data.

- **Prospective Student Events:** Many colleges also hold large visit days specifically designed for prospective students and their families. Sometimes called open houses or preview days, these events combine the regular visit offerings (campus tours, information sessions, classroom visits) with enhanced opportunities for research and engagement. Some include panels with current students or faculty members from specific disciplines, admissions and financial aid workshops, and more.
- **Lunch with a Student:** If given the opportunity, it can be great to grab lunch on campus with a current student. Not only does this give you an idea of the school's meal plan and offerings, but it also gives you unstructured, non-evaluative time with a current student to talk in a more relaxed atmosphere. Even if this isn't a formal option through the admissions office, it is worth asking if you can still eat in the dining hall on your own and sample the food!
- **Overnights:** Some colleges may offer the opportunity for prospective students to do a full shadow day and overnight stay hosted by a current student when visiting campus. In many ways, an overnight provides the most unfiltered visit experience—you're essentially navigating the authentic life of a current student with the support of your host. For some populations, such as recruited athletes, an overnight may be required.
- **Meet with an Admissions Counselor:** If you still have specific questions after your tour and information session, some admissions offices will allow you to meet individually with an admissions counselor on staff. Different from a formal interview, this is an opportunity for you to ask them questions, not the other way around. Do not think of this as a necessity or something to do to improve your chances of admission if you do not have anything additional to ask; these are usually informal, unstructured conversations that have no bearing on your admissions process.

### ***Fly-in Opportunities***

An increasing number of schools are beginning to offer fully funded visit opportunities, typically specifically for students from underrepresented and/or low-income backgrounds, where the university will cover the cost of travel, accommodations, and meals for the duration of your stay. If offered, college admissions websites will provide details on how to apply or put your name on an interest list and any associated requirements and deadlines. Since these programs are fully funded, they are often competitive and may require an extensive application process.

## ***Virtual Visit Opportunities***

Since not every family has the time, budget, or flexibility to visit campuses in person, increasingly there are virtual ways to visit campus from the comfort of your own home. Many of the in-person options listed above have a virtual version available. Some options may be pre-recorded and can be watched on your own time, while others might be live events. For live virtual events, you will sign up on the same area of the admissions website as you would for an in-person visit. Be sure to make note of any time differences between where you'll be logging on and what time zone the event is being hosted in so you don't miss it accidentally. Some colleges also partner with one another to provide virtual sessions together so prospective students can hear from multiple schools at once. Just like with in-person events, the admissions office will be able to see if you miss a virtual event, so be sure to only sign up if you're confident you'll be able to attend.

## ***Off-Campus Engagement Opportunities***

In addition to visits and events hosted on campus and virtually, there are also a variety of opportunities for engagement in person, but off campus.

- **On-the-Road Information Sessions:** Many colleges will host information sessions in cities and towns across the country as a part of their recruitment travel, providing the same information as they would on campus, but in a more accessible, convenient location to applicants who live farther away. At times, colleges might even partner to conduct these on-the-road information sessions together, so prospective students can hear from and ask questions of multiple schools in a single event.
- **High School Visits:** Throughout the fall and sometimes spring, admissions counselors from most colleges travel to high schools across the country and provide prospective applicants with the same information as they would on campus, but in the comfort of your own high school. Sometimes, though not always, the admissions counselor visiting will be the staff member responsible for the initial review of your application, as many admissions offices divide application review by geographic territory. High school visits are an easy and convenient way to get information, explore colleges you may never have heard of, and ask important questions along the way. Your counseling office will keep a calendar of upcoming visits and will have their own policies and processes for who is allowed to attend visits and when.

- **College Fairs:** One way to interface with a large number of colleges at once is to attend a college fair. At these events, which can range in size from a handful to hundreds of colleges, admissions counselors will set up their own table or booth that prospective students and families can visit to receive information, get on mailing lists, and ask questions. These events are typically more fast paced than others, where you only have a few minutes at most to chat with the admissions representative to ensure every attendee can get their questions answered. College fairs may be hosted by high schools, community-based organizations, non-profits, or regional or national organizations, such as NACAC (read more about NACAC's National College Fairs in Chapter 4).
- **Case Studies:** Case Study events are a more focused engagement opportunity where students and/or parents and guardians participate in a mock application review committee, typically overseen by current admissions counselors and/or high school counselors. As a participant, you will be tasked with reviewing a series of fake applications and agreeing on an admissions decision with your fellow committee members with guidance from your facilitator(s). Case studies can provide helpful insight into general admissions review practices, though it's always important to keep in mind that each individual college has its own process and set of criteria that may not be universal. Case studies can be hosted by colleges, high schools, community-based organizations, non-profits, or regional or national organizations like NACAC.
- **Portfolio Review or Pre-Screen Days:** For fine and performing arts applicants, colleges or organizations, such as NACAC, host events devoted to providing feedback on the required creative components of your application, whether that's an artistic portfolio or a monologue you are rehearsing. Most of the time these events are organized like college fairs, where you can approach specific colleges' booths or tables for a quick feedback session. Some events may provide more comprehensive programming like panels with artistic faculty on the review committee or creative workshops.

## The College Interview

In addition to the engagement opportunities listed above, some colleges also offer the opportunity for a one-on-one interview. Though some interviews are purely informational in nature, most of the time admissions interviews are evaluative. You can find out whether or not a college offers interviews, and whether they are recommended or required, on their admissions website. Even if they are not required, strongly consider taking advantage of interview opportunities when they're available—they are one of few moments in the admissions process where your voice and personality are on full display.

Admissions interviews can be conducted by a current student, an admissions staff member, or a graduate of the institution. Typically, there is not an advantage to interviewing with one of those options over another, and some schools limit your interviewer options specifically to students or graduates. If the interview is an important part of the college admission at a college, all interview types will be given equal weight and all interviewers will be trained and prepared to represent the institution.

An interview with a senior staff member, such as the Dean or Director of Admission, is not essential. If you are considering colleges that strongly recommend or require an interview, be sure to research when and how you sign up for those opportunities or if the opportunity is assigned to you by the admissions office.

**Interviews allow you to showcase your talents, interests, curiosities, and personality to a welcoming and receptive audience.**

It is natural to be nervous or apprehensive given their evaluative nature, but try to reframe interviews as an opportunity for them to get to know you beyond what is written in your application, where you have a limited capacity to express yourself. As cliché as it may sound, and you will hear interviewers echo this sentiment regularly, admission interviews really are supposed to be a conversation, not an interrogation. Interviews allow you to showcase your talents, interests, curiosities, and personality to a welcoming and receptive audience. It is just as much an opportunity for you to ask probing questions as it is for them. For a list of sample interview questions, see Appendix A.

## ***Interview Etiquette***

Though admission interviews are rarely formal events, there are still guidelines you should follow to demonstrate a level of seriousness and maturity in an interview setting:

- **Prepare.** You will almost certainly be asked why you are interested in the school at which you're interviewing, and providing a detailed, authentic, and specific answer requires prior research. Do not go into an interview setting having only just learned about a school, make sure you can answer the "why this college?" question ahead of time. This is one of the many areas in which your extensive research will come in handy!
- **Be on time.** Whether your interview is in-person or virtual, be sure to leave plenty of time to be punctual. For virtual interviews, try to find a quiet place where you won't be interrupted or distracted.
- **Turn off your cell phone and any digital devices to avoid interruptions.** If you're interviewing virtually, be sure to mute pop-ups or notifications.
- **Dress appropriately.** You do not have to dress formally, but presentability is important. If you are interviewing virtually, make sure your background is appropriate.
- **Answer questions completely and thoroughly.** It is okay to ask for a moment to collect your thoughts after a question has been posed if needed. Don't be afraid to admit you don't know something. Avoid a simple 'yes' or 'no' response—the interviewer shouldn't be working harder than you to gather information.
- **Lead with kindness.** Show appreciation to those supporting you, from the receptionist to your family to the interviewer.
- **Be proud.** Interviews are an opportunity to highlight your strengths and skills. This may take practice if you're not used to talking about yourself, especially in a praiseworthy way. Be mindful of boastfulness though, and avoid comparisons to other students. This interview is about you, no one else.

- **Don't be scripted.** It is encouraged and beneficial to practice and prepare for an interview by talking through your potential answers to commonly asked questions. However, your answers should not sound scripted or robotic in the actual interview—that means they're not experiencing your genuine personality. If you are interviewing virtually, do not have your answers to questions written out next to you off camera. It will be very obvious to your interviewer if you are reading from a prepared script.
- **Ask questions.** Have a few questions ready for your interviewer, as this is an opportunity for you to learn as well. Coming with no prepared question may unintentionally send the message that you are not that invested in their school. When possible, leverage the expertise of your interviewer's experience—if they attend or attended the college, ask them about their experiences, their pros and cons, and what they wish they'd known.
- **Say thank you,** both at the end of the interview and in a follow-up thank you email.

It is worth noting the admissions interview is designed for the prospective applicant. Parents, guardians, or other family members should not expect to sit in or be a part of the interview process, whether in person or virtual, and insisting on doing so could be to the detriment to the student's application. There is often an opportunity for parents and guardians to ask questions after the interview has been conducted.

## Asking Thoughtful Questions During Visits and Interviews

An important piece of advice to remember when asking questions during a campus tour, information session, interview, college fair, etc., is to prepare ahead of time and really consider what information you are seeking. In these venues, there is such a thing as a good and bad question, and much of how it is categorized has to do with the thought and intention behind it. In general, avoid the following types of questions:

- **Questions that can be answered on the website.** If you're genuinely wondering about the student-to-faculty ratio, average class size, or whether or not a college has a Biology major, that is all information that can be easily found through a few minutes of research online. These are not valuable or helpful questions to ask in a structured visit setting, as they demonstrate to the recipient that you haven't done your due diligence or do not care to.

- **Questions too broad for a succinct answer.** With questions like this, sometimes it takes a simple reframe to remind yourself of the information you're really seeking. Instead of asking "how is your psychology program?" (what admissions counselor will ever say, "it's bad, thanks for asking!") think about what specifically you're curious about learning about in their psychology program. Do you want to know about hands-on, practical opportunities in the department? Try "when can undergraduates start conducting research with a professor?" or "what internships have psychology students had in the past?" instead. Even if your admissions counselor or interviewer doesn't know the answer, the specificity of those questions make it far easier for them to follow up with you once they've tracked down the answer.
- **Questions focused on rankings or other flawed methodologies.** Inquiring as to why a college isn't ranked more highly or isn't as seemingly prestigious as others reveals a level of superficiality or materialism that most admissions counselors aren't interested in engaging with.
- **Questions comparing institutions.** Similar to questions about rankings, asking admissions representatives to compare themselves to their peer schools or other schools in the same geographic area is uncomfortable and rarely necessary. Oftentimes, you can determine which schools might be a better fit for you without tasking your admissions counselor with that work. Admissions counselors respect their colleagues at peer institutions and know that every school has something unique and important to offer; it's not their job to minimize another school in favor of their own.

## Demonstrated Interest

In addition to the core factors of an application review process (to be covered in Chapter 7) some colleges use what is called "demonstrated interest" as another evaluative factor in their review processes. Depending on the college, demonstrated interest could have no impact or a substantial impact on an applicant's ultimate admission decision, so it is important for prospective students to be informed about demonstrated interest and who tracks it. It's worth noting, however, that no amount of demonstrated interest can guarantee an acceptance or outweigh an academic record that does not meet a given school's admission criteria.

### ***What is demonstrated interest?***

Demonstrated interest refers to the practice of colleges and universities tracking how much an applicant has officially engaged with their school. For schools that rely on demonstrated interest as an evaluative metric, they believe that a prospective student who has engaged with them at a higher level will be more likely to enroll if admitted. In other words, high engagement sometimes means a higher likelihood of being admitted, since colleges ideally want to admit students who will ultimately enroll (also known as yielding). Colleges that track demonstrated interest may be wary of applicants whose first-ever engagement with the college is the submission of their application. Even if every other facet of your application is appealing, if you've never engaged with the institution despite many opportunities to do so, they may wonder if you'd ever actually enroll.

### ***How do I know if a college tracks demonstrated interest?***

It depends on the college or university! Some colleges are explicit on their admissions websites that demonstrated interest plays a role in their review process, while others are not as transparent or forthcoming. It is absolutely appropriate to ask admissions counselors if their school tracks demonstrated interest if you cannot easily find the answer yourself. There are also websites that keep lists on which colleges track it and how important it is, but it is also important to double check if you're reading from a reliable, updated source. Typically, larger institutions and more selective institutions do not track demonstrated interest, but that is not a universal rule.

### ***How do I demonstrate interest?***

Demonstrating interest is often a natural byproduct of doing intentional and deep research—you may already be doing it without realizing. It should not be treated as simply a box to check. The following are examples of productive and purposeful ways to demonstrate your interest while also receiving valuable information and insights in the process:

- **Join the mailing list:** Every time you enter your contact and demographic information into a form for a college or university, that interaction is logged in their system. Typically, the first way students get information from colleges is by signing up for their mailing list, which gives you access to all of their email and print content for prospective students, and, as a byproduct, is one of the first ways to officially demonstrate interest.

- **Attend an official, live visit or event:** Unlike pre-recorded content, live information sessions or Q&As (whether in person or online) require you to sign up to attend. If you visit a college’s table at a college fair or go to their session when they visit your high school, you will typically be asked to fill out a contact card. If you are unable to attend a visit at your school or in your area because of a conflict, let your admissions counselor know about the conflict and that you wish you could be there. Showing up or logging in to these events is a way to demonstrate interest.
- **Interview:** When offered, interviews are a solid demonstration of interest, especially when they are optional. This shows you are going above and beyond the minimum admissions requirements and have a high level of investment in that institution.
- **Read and engage with email content:** Believe it or not, admissions offices can not only track whether or not you’ve opened their emails, but also if you’ve engaged with the content within the email. Did you click on any of the provided links? Watch any of the included videos? They’ll know. So, if you’re archiving or deleting all of their messages, that may have the unintended consequence of signaling a lack of interest to their admission office.
- **“Why Us?” Essays:** Many colleges will ask you to write an essay on why you’re interested in their school. The specificity, care, and intentionality that goes into your response is, for colleges that track it, an important demonstration of interest. Have you gone beyond surface-level criteria and articulated what specifically about that school makes it a good fit for you and you for it? As stated before, if you can’t execute an effective answer to this question, you either need to research more deeply or consider eliminating the school from your list.
- **Optional Essays:** Some colleges offer the opportunity to write optional essays as a part of your application. You can still submit the application without completing them, but think of the message it sends to them if you bypass that opportunity. To them, it may be interpreted as you not being invested enough to take the time to write the essay, and therefore not invested enough to eventually enroll. In general, optional is rarely ever authentically optional when it comes to college admissions, with the exception of standardized testing (more to come on that in Chapter 5).

- **Apply Early:** When colleges offer early admission plans, whether it's Early Action, Early Decision, Rolling, or any combination thereof, some state that applying earlier in the process improves your chances of being admitted. This is another example of demonstrated interest. For many colleges that offer a binding Early Decision plan, applying with the explicit, stated intent to enroll if admitted is the ultimate display of demonstrated interest. Since many families may need to weigh and compare financial aid packages, Early Decision should never be used as a means to demonstrate interest alone, but rather as a thoughtful result of conversations with your family and counselor.
- **Contacting your admissions counselor:** Intentional communication with your admissions counselor can also fall under the demonstrated umbrella. Keep in mind, this is not an invitation or encouragement to contact your admissions counselor regularly just for the sake of demonstrating your interest—that can actually be detrimental to your process at some schools. Rather, if you have specific questions that haven't been answered through your research process and other engagement opportunities, reaching out to your admissions counselor is a solid next step. These emails should be thoughtful and purposeful, not just emailing for the sake of checking a box. If a college isn't visiting your high school or is your first choice but they don't have an Early Decision option, those might be circumstances in which it's appropriate to reach out as well if they do track demonstrated interest.

### ***What should not be considered demonstrated interest?***

Moderation is a good approach to demonstrated interest. Purposeful and authentic engagement is what admissions offices are looking for. Just because admissions offices may track your interactions with them does not mean that you need to sign up for every engagement opportunity they offer. You do not need to email your admissions counselor daily, nor do you need to ask to interview a second time because you're excited about the school. You do not need to wait in line for 45 minutes at a college fair just to let the admissions rep know you're interested. Again, if you're approaching the research process thoroughly and responsibly and discerning whether a college meets your particular criteria, you will demonstrate an appropriate amount of interest. Don't overthink it and, if you have questions, ask your school counselor how best to approach this part of the process.

# 6

## Chapter 6: The Parts of an Application File

When you submit an application to a college, an electronic application file is created under your name, which becomes home to the application itself and all other supporting documentation. The main part of an applicant's file is based on quantitative data, while other parts provide important qualitative factors about your time in high school. The key to success in building your application file is to research the specific requirements laid out by your colleges of interest. Most institutions are very explicit about what they want and what they don't want as a part of your application—this is your opportunity to demonstrate that you know how to understand and follow directions.

**Application:** The application itself is the foundation of your admission file. It usually includes basic biographical and demographic information, such as your birthday, address, race and/or ethnicity, educational background, information about your family and more. Depending on which application(s) you fill out, there may be additional sections for you to complete, which are included below.

**Academic Record:** Your curriculum, courses, and grades are the foundation of your admissions review. While there are many nuanced factors that often go into rendering a final admissions decision, the primary question admissions counselors must answer is whether or not an applicant will be able to be academically successful at their institution. If they cannot answer that question affirmatively, the other components of an application cannot compensate for a transcript that does not meet an individual institution's academic standards. Each admissions office will have their own criteria and expectations when it comes to academic performance in high school, including grades and the level of rigor a student pursued.

- **Transcript:** Regardless of a college's admission policy, the most important factor in an applicant's file is their academic record in secondary school, also called a transcript. This will include all courses you've completed and the associated grade and amount of credit you earned in the course (if your high school issues grades).

Most high schools will calculate a grade point average (GPA) on a given scale (4.0, 5.0, 100, etc.), which provides a cumulative statistical summary of your academic performance and is updated any time official grades are issued and added to your transcript. Additionally, some high schools may provide both a weighted and unweighted GPA, with the weighted GPA providing extra points toward the average for grades earned in rigorous courses, such as honors, AP, accelerated, IB, and more. When high schools do not calculate grades or a GPA, they often provide admissions offices with narrative feedback from each of your teachers to contextualize your performance in their class. Some high schools may also provide a class rank, which assigns the students in a graduating class a numerical order based on academic achievement, though many schools have moved away from this practice.

- **Trends & Trajectory:** In general, colleges prefer a steady rate of performance over inconsistent spurts of academic performance; but if the entire record cannot consistently be at your best possible level of performance, the next thing is to show steady improvement from year to year, otherwise known as an upward trend. While typically all four years of high school factor into your review process, most admissions offices view your courses and grades from junior and senior (when available) year as most indicative of your potential success at their institution, since classes become more challenging as you move through high school. When you apply and what decision plans you choose will dictate whether an admissions office will see any official grades from your senior year. For more information about application plans and deadlines, refer to Chapter 7.
- **Curricular Rigor:** Some institutions may simply require students to meet a minimum GPA requirement to be admitted, while more selective institutions may have higher and more extensive academic expectations of applicants. The more selective (competitive) a college is from an admissions perspective, the more likely they are to expect that you have both pursued and succeeded in a high level of rigor in your academic program. How rigor is defined depends on what types of courses and curricula your high school offers. If, for example, your high school offers an Advanced Placement program, more selective colleges will likely want to see that you've challenged yourself beyond the standard curriculum

and enrolled in AP courses. The same is true for students with access to honors-level classes, International Baccalaureate programs, high school-designed advanced study programs, and more. Your level of rigor will only be reviewed in the context of what you have access to at your high school; you will not be penalized or disadvantaged for not enrolling in classes that don't exist at your high school. The important thing to remember is that enrolling in rigorous classes is counterproductive if you are not able to keep up and be successful. This is why it is necessary for all students to find the appropriate academic balance that suits their individual needs and supports their success.

- **School Profile & Report:** Most colleges require high school counselors to submit a School Report and School Profile alongside every student's application. These documents provide important information and context about your high school, including curricular offerings, special programs or tracks, the size of your graduating class, and sometimes GPA and standardized testing distributions. It is up to the discretion of the high school what is and is not included on these forms. The ultimate purpose of them is to ensure admissions counselors are informed on what your high school offers academically and extracurricularly and a broad profile of the current senior class.

Academic success alone does not guarantee or ensure admission into more selective colleges, as they often have more qualified applicants than they do space in the admitted class. Those colleges have more flexibility to rely on the other, qualitative factors (included below) of the application when choosing which applicants to admit.

**It is worth noting that the vast majority of colleges and universities in the U.S. accept the majority of their applicants and do not have extensive or prohibitive expectations when it comes to course rigor or grades.**

The attention that is given to the most highly selective institutions in the U.S. can easily warp your perspective into thinking that being admitted is a herculean feat at every college, when the truth is quite the opposite. In fact, NACAC's research shows that universities across the US have become less selective over the course of the last decade. The focus on prestige, rankings, and perceived reputation can often leave students feeling discouraged and as though they don't have any path to higher education. Whatever your grades and level of rigor in your academic program, there are more than likely hundreds of colleges ready and willing to welcome you to their admitted class. As much as you can, try not to buy into the idea that prestigious = better, since rankings and name recognition tell us next to nothing about how fulfilled, happy, and supported any individual student would be at a given institution.

**Essays:** Most colleges and universities, though not all, will also require you to submit written reflections that provide the admission committee with a larger window into your life—also known as college essays. Essays are the main opportunity in the application process for your voice, values, and personality as an applicant to truly be on display. While essays also allow colleges to assess your writing abilities, their primary purpose is to tell the admission committee something in depth about you and what you care about that isn't captured in another part of the application. Admission essays come in two main forms: The Personal Statement and College-Specific Supplements.

- **The Personal Statement:** When people refer to the college essay, this is the writing piece they're talking about—the Personal Statement. This is a general, longer-form essay about you; it should not be tailored to specific colleges. Unlike the academic writing you may be used to, this essay is written in the first person ("I" statements are okay!) and is less formal in nature. There is no necessity for a thesis statement or supporting evidence paragraphs—this isn't a traditional five paragraph essay. While you should always still proofread carefully, the structure, flow, and tone are much more personal and casual, while still maintaining appropriateness. You have the flexibility and freedom to write about any topic of your choosing, so long as the final product tells the admissions committee something about you, what you care about or value, how you spend your time, a meaningful experience you've had, how you've contributed to the communities you belong to, etc.

Some applications will provide you with a series of prompts to choose from, which may be helpful in brainstorming workable topics. Choose a topic or approach that feels genuinely meaningful to you. Your topic should always be focused and specific. Avoid the temptation to talk about every activity or experience you've had in high school in your Personal Statement. It should not serve as a narrative resumé. Rather, it provides you an opportunity to write in-depth about a specific topic or experience of significance to you.

The strongest personal statements are ones written from a place of authenticity, in your own voice. Instead of asking yourself "*what does that admissions committee want to hear?*", ask instead "*when they finish reading my application, what do I want them to know about me?*" Remember, colleges want to admit you, not someone you're trying to be or an identity you're trying to project.

- **College-Specific Supplements:** In addition to the general Personal Statement, some colleges may ask you to write essay responses to prompts of their choosing, which are called supplements. These prompts can change from year to year, are unique to each college, and allow colleges to ask more targeted questions to gain insight into specific aspects of you that they care about. These essays are typically shorter than the Personal Statement, around 100-350 words a piece, but that does not mean they should be taken any less seriously or given any less effort than the Personal Statement. It can be tempting to rush through these prompts given their smaller word limit, but admissions counselors are paying attention to the time and care you put into these. Remember, these are the questions that colleges have deemed important enough to add to their applications—if they’re important enough for the college to ask, they’re definitely important enough for you to answer thoroughly, sincerely, and effortfully.

Supplement prompts can take a variety of forms, some more straightforward and some more creative. As discussed in Chapter 2, many colleges will choose to ask some version of “*Why This College?*”, which will charge you with providing a thoughtful, personal, and specific articulation of why you think that college is a good fit for you and vice versa. This is an example of a supplement where your initial research will really come in handy. Avoid talking about the general criteria that may have initially put the college on your radar—size, location, weather, reputation, etc., as those are likely unifying draws for all applicants. Refer back to the notes you’ve taken throughout your research process and pull out those unique, specific tidbits and examples about the college that really resonated with you. That will make for a stronger, more memorable essay, as opposed to run-of-the-mill, boilerplate responses. This essay should be so specific and tailored to the individual school that it can’t be recycled from college to college. As referenced in Chapter 3, for the colleges that track demonstrated interest, a “*Why This College?*” is a key opportunity for them to assess your level of interest.

Other common supplement prompts may ask you to expand on your academic area of interest or one of your extracurriculars, to discuss a meaningful or significant part of your identity, or to reflect on how you have contributed to your community. Additionally, colleges may have required essay questions for special programs, such as an Honors College, to which an applicant can apply directly.

Some colleges take a more creative route with their supplement prompts. Some examples include:

- *If you could teach a college course on a topic of your choice, what would you choose and what would be included on the required reading list?*
- *Is there a particular song, poem, novel, or other work of art that you find particularly inspiring?*
- *If you could work on a social cause or movement that is important to you and impacting your community, what cause would you choose and how would you address it?*
- *Share a food dish that has helped to inform and shape your identity.*
- *You're presented with a block of marble and asked to create something that tells the viewer something important about you—what do you carve?*
- *What songs should your admissions counselor listen to while reviewing your application? or In the movie of your life, what song is playing when the credits roll?*

What is important to remember with creative supplemental prompts is that there is rarely ever a “right” or “wrong” answer to these questions, as long as your contribution is appropriate. The purpose of these types of questions is to get a better sense of your personality by allowing you to be creative. As with all things in this process, authenticity is key here. If they ask what you've been enjoying reading lately, don't say *Beowulf* if you've never read it (or have and didn't enjoy it) just because you think it might sound impressive. Admissions counselors know they are reading applications submitted by high school students, so they are expecting answers that are typical of a high school student's experience.

**Extracurricular Involvement:** In addition to your academic record and essays, your involvement in activities can be a significant supporting credential in this process. Most applications will give you the opportunity to provide a snapshot of your extracurricular involvement in high school with a brief description of your role and responsibilities. This can include membership in clubs and organizations, athletics, fine and performing arts, part-time employment, community service and engagement, familial responsibilities, hobbies, and more.

While it can be tempting to think that more is better when it comes to activities, in reality most colleges are looking for depth and intentionality in your activities, not breadth. Consistent, sustained involvement in activities that you genuinely care about is what you'll hear most admissions counselors recommend. An extensive list of activities in which you were sparsely involved will not read as more impressive. Just like your essays, your activities list should not be built around what you think admissions offices want to see, but rather should be a genuine reflection of your interests and values.

On the application itself, activities should be listed in order from most meaningful and/or time consuming to least. In other words, the activities that take up most of your time and/or are most reflective of your interests should go at the top of the list and you can work your way down from there. Be as specific as possible with your descriptions in the limited space you're provided. Another common misconception is that you need to have been the president/leader/founder/captain of every activity in order to be admitted to college. While genuine, demonstrative leadership is certainly valuable, there are always ways to build and display strong leadership skills without holding a formal title. Avoid the inauthenticity and disingenuousness of seeking out leadership positions solely for the sake of your college applications. Again, consistency and sustained commitment to your real interests allows your high school experience to be defined by meaning and purpose, not by potential college outcomes.

When considering activities to add to your list, remember to think outside the box. Many students may not have the flexibility or resources to join organizations or activities with extensive time commitments or costly membership fees. That is why the definition of "activity" is quite broad in this context. It can include a part-time job, extensive family responsibilities like babysitting or caring for an elderly relative, cooking meals, household chores, etc. If you spend most of your time pursuing your interests in an unstructured setting, that counts as well. When in doubt, consult with your high school counselor.

**Letters of Recommendation:** Many colleges will require you to submit a certain number of letters of recommendation to support your application. What is most important is to follow the explicit directions provided by individual colleges on what type and how many letters of recommendations they accept. This is another area where more isn't always better; exceeding or ignoring their directions can be counterproductive in your review process.

These letters typically come in five forms, included below:

- **Counselor/School Recommendation:** Most colleges will require a letter of recommendation or statement of support from your school-based counselor. You can think of the counselor letter of recommendation as a floodlight. The purpose is for your counselor to provide a broad narrative of your academic, extracurricular, and social-emotional experience throughout high school. Counselor letters are also often used to provide context to any part of your application that may need further explanation. For example, if you missed a few weeks of school due to illness or you had a loss in your family and your grades dropped slightly as a result, your counselor can provide that explanation in their letter so admissions counselors understand the broader circumstances in which you were learning at that time. Admission officers are aware that a school counselor may not always have the capacity to write a lengthy letter on a student's behalf. This is another area where you as an applicant will not be penalized based on what's available at your specific school.
- **Teacher Recommendations:** Many colleges will request 1-2 letters of recommendation from your classroom teachers. Unlike the floodlight counselor recommendation, teacher recommendations serve as a spotlight on you in an academic setting. Your teachers will speak to your presence and contributions in the classroom, work ethic, time management, ability to collaborate with your peers, and more. Generally speaking, it is recommended that your teacher recommendations come from junior year teachers, as they have taught you most recently for a complete school year prior to the application process, so can speak most relevantly to your current academic strengths and areas for growth. Some colleges may specifically request one letter from a STEM teacher and one from a Humanities, Social Studies, or World Language teacher in order to get the most well-rounded view of you as a student.
- **Creative Recommendations:** For students applying to fine, visual, or performing arts programs, you may be required to provide an additional creative recommendation from a teacher or mentor in your designated field of study. These recommendations will focus largely on your talents and potential within that specific creative realm.
- **Outside Recommendations:** Some colleges also accept additional, outside recommendations in addition to counselor and teacher letters of recommendations. Outside recommendations typically come from mentors or other significant adults in your life, such as a coach, religious leader, boss, supervisor, etc. The most important thing to

remember with outside recommendations is that the writer should actually know you well. That may seem obvious, but there is sometimes a temptation to have an alumnus or other well-connected person to a specific university write a letter on your behalf. Again, this is only helpful if that person has a longstanding relationship with you. If you are meeting them for the first time to discuss them writing you a letter, that's a good indication that said letter will likely not have any measurable positive impact on your application. Be thorough about reviewing directions from colleges about outside recommendations and whether or not they accept them in the first place.

- **Peer Recommendations:** Though far less common than the letter types listed above, a handful of colleges will ask you to have a peer (a friend or classmate, not family member) submit a recommendation on your behalf as well. Specific instructions typically accompany these requested recommendation letters.

**Test Scores (if applicable):** Most colleges in the U.S. have made the submission of the SAT and/or ACT optional. If submitted, the SAT and/or ACT are an additional quantitative factor on top of your academic record for admissions counselors to consider alongside the rest of your application. For more information about standardized testing policies and terminology, see Chapter 5.

It is worth noting that test-optional and test-free policies typically do not apply to English language proficiency testing requirements. For more information on English language proficiency testing, see Chapter 14.

If you are submitting standardized testing, it is your responsibility as the applicant to determine how each college on your list wants to receive your scores. Some colleges require that you send your testing officially via your College Board or ACT account, which comes with an associated fee unless you have qualified for a fee waiver. Others may accept self-reported test scores, which can often be included on your application or uploaded into your application portal after you apply at no additional cost. Check the admissions websites for each college to determine whether they require official score reports or will accept self-reported scores.

**Self-Reported Academic Record (SRAR) (if applicable):** An SRAR (or SSAR if you're in Florida) is exactly what it sounds like—a form that requires students to self-report their courses and grades from high school. Some colleges require you to complete an SRAR in addition to having your counselor send an official transcript. If the SRAR is required, your application will not be reviewed unless you complete it, so it is important to be aware of which schools on your list, if any, require it.

**Interview (if applicable):** Some colleges offer evaluative interviews either on an optional, recommended, or required basis. Like your admissions essays, interviews provide the admissions office an opportunity to get to know you, your personality, your interests, and your values better on a personal level. In most circumstances, it is advised to take advantage of interview opportunities when offered, even if they are listed as optional or recommended but not required. Discuss these options with your counselor if you are unsure. For the colleges that track demonstrated interest, an interview is a key opportunity for you to demonstrate interest. For more information about demonstrated interest and interviews, see Chapter 3.

**Creative Portfolios, Prescreens, and Auditions (if applicable):** For fine, visual, and performing arts applicants, you may be asked to submit a creative portfolio or participate in a prescreen and/or audition process as a part of your review. Not all colleges require the submission of a supplemental portfolio, but those that do often have extensive and specific guidelines and expectations for you to follow. It is important to identify portfolio and/or audition requirements early in your research process, since these requirements are often time consuming and demanding. If a college does not require a portfolio submission, be sure to check their website to see if they will accept one as an optional submission. If they explicitly state that they do not accept these types of submissions, do not send them.

**Additional Information (if applicable):** Some applications have an optional writing section usually titled Additional Information. Unlike the Personal Statement and supplements, the purpose of Additional Information is to provide necessary or illuminating context to your application. Not dissimilar to the function of the counselor letter of recommendation, this allows you to inform the admissions committee of any disruptions or challenges that may have impacted your high school experience. Even if your grades did not suffer as a result of said circumstances, providing them with this information can be helpful as they evaluate your application. This can include physical or mental health struggles, family or social issues, learning differences, family relocations, and more. This section should not be used for a second Personal Statement. Consult with your counselor if you are considering including anything in the Additional Information section.

## Who Submits What In The Application Process?

There are two main sources who submit the components of an application file to colleges and universities: you, the applicant, and your school-based counselor.

Who Submits What?		
Application Component	Student/ Applicant	Counselor
Application (including essays, activities list, and additional information)	✓	
Transcript		✓
School Report & Profile		✓
Letters of Recommendation		✓
Standardized Testing	✓	
Financial Aid Applications	✓	
Creative Portfolios/Auditions	✓	

While not every college will require or accept each piece listed above, you can see that admissions offices are asking for components that give them as well-rounded and comprehensive a view of you as a student and community member as possible. A broad overview of how application files are actually reviewed is included in Chapter 7.

## Types of College Applications

**The Common Application:** An online application platform that allows a student to fill out one standardized (common) application form and submit it to more than one college. Over 900 colleges and universities accept the Common Application. When applying with the Common Application, students will fill out the core, standardized portion of the application, which is sent to every college to which you apply through the platform. Additionally, specific colleges are able to add custom Member Questions and Writing Supplements, which will require you to provide more information on your academic and extracurricular areas of interest and, for some colleges, additional supplemental essay questions. You can learn more and create an account at [commonapp.org](http://commonapp.org).

**The Coalition Application:** Similar to the Common Application, the Coalition Application allows a student to fill out one application form and submit it to more than one college. The application platform is a service of the Coalition of Access, Affordability, and Success, which also offers a set of free online college planning tools that help students learn about and prepare for college. More than 150 colleges accept the Coalition Application, some of which also accept the Common Application. You can learn more and create an account at [coalitionforcollegeaccess.org](http://coalitionforcollegeaccess.org).

**School/System-Specific Applications:** Some colleges or larger university systems, such as the California and Texas public colleges, have created their own applications. For some, such as the state of California, Georgetown University, and Massachusetts Institute of Technology, this is the only way in which you can apply. For others, they may offer their own application in addition to accepting the Common and/or Coalition application. For colleges that accept applications from multiple sources, there is typically not an advantage or benefit to choosing one over another, but it is also worth checking the school's admission website to confirm if they have a preference. Some colleges may incentivize the use of their specific application by waiving application fees or providing an accelerated review process.



**Some colleges may incentivize the use of their specific application by waiving application fees or providing an accelerated review process.**