

Public/Private. Do you have a preference for public or private school? Public schools tend to have more students from that state than private schools – is that a plus or a minus?

Housing. Do you want to live on campus all four years? Would living off campus in the surrounding area be affordable? Is it more expensive to be on campus, relying on the school's housing and meal plan?

Social life. Do you want to attend a school with prominent Greek life? Do you want a school that has more of a social scene on campus or off campus? How do you like to spend your weekends? Do you want your peers to come from similar geographic areas, share political/religious views, or be of the same gender/race/ethnicity as you? Do you want to go to a place that prides itself on a diverse student body?

Food. Do you require specific dietary or religious needs? Does the quality of the school's dining halls make a difference to you?

Athletics. Is a strong school athletic program important to you? Do you want a lively, sports-crazed atmosphere? Are you uninterested in or put off by sports?

Extracurriculars. Are there certain clubs or extracurricular activities that you want to join? Do you want to play intramural sports?

Finances. How much can your family or you realistically afford to spend per year on your college education?

Before you decide on colleges that best match your family's financial preferences, you should think deeply, consider all of these questions, and sketch out the characteristics of your *ideal college experience*. Then look to the many financial resources that are out there that could make that experience a reality.

We will discuss matching personal preferences with what colleges have to offer and the process of creating the college list in Chapter 4.

Chapter 3: Standardized Tests

No matter where you want to apply, you'll likely have to submit test scores for at least one standardized test. The reality is that standardized tests are often a significant component of an application and a comparison of your scores vs. accepted students scores should be a factor as you make a college list (Chapter 4). With thousands of applicants from around the world, standardized tests offer an imperfect way to assess academic ability. Always keep in mind that these tests don't determine how 'smart' you are, just how good you are at taking that particular test, and — as with anything — you'll get better the more you study.

The requirements for standardized tests depend on the school. Many schools require an SAT or ACT score, and many either suggest or require SAT Subject Tests as well. Over 850 schools pride themselves on not requiring standardized test scores, like those on [this list](#), so make sure to see if the school/s you want to attend ask for the SAT/ACT. Assuming you take a standardized test, many students take the SAT/ACT more than once, largely to improve their score. [Research](#) has found that more than half of students improve their scores when taking a standardized test for the second time. As you start making your college list (Chapter 4), learn the standardized testing requirements for each college on your list.

ACT and SAT

The two major standardized tests for college admissions in the United States are the ACT and the SAT. Most schools will require one or the other, but never both. Neither test is regarded as more impressive or “legitimate” than the other.

The tests, however, do cover slightly different topics and use different structures. [Kaplan](#) offers a nice breakdown of the differences between the two tests. Notably, the ACT has a science section, while the SAT does not. The tests are designed to stay pretty constant in terms of what each test includes. However the SAT was recently [changed](#) significantly. We recommend taking practice tests of both, and seeing which fits you best.

If the price for either test is a barrier, there are fee waivers accessible via both companies’ websites, and many schools offer a free testing service. Testing is held around the school year and dates vary annually, so head to either test’s website to check when the tests are being offered and when to sign up. Register for the test early, as registration closes a good time ahead of the actual test. You’ll be required to submit a photo using the online tool and to bring a photo ID on test day. These tests are typically offered every month or every other month. The testing dates are available on the [College Board website](#) for the SAT and [ACT website](#) for the ACT.

SAT Subject Tests

Find out if your schools ask for SAT Subject Tests. Most schools suggest two or three SAT Subject Tests when applying. These exams test, as their names suggest, a specific subject and are best taken at the end of the school year, right around the time when you’re studying for other final exams or AP exams (if you have them), so that you can draw on that knowledge. Again, study options abound, and we recommend you do some prep work since these tests, like all standardized tests, have a high degree of predictability. Due to your ability to change your test performance in a sitting, we highly recommend studying for whichever test you take; yes you can study, and yes it is effective.

Preparation

If you’re choosing between taking a prep class or using a book, we’d go book every time as it increases the amount of time you spend actually solving problems. It’s a lot like weightlifting. Sure, you can pay for a fitness coach, but only the number of reps you do will make you put on

muscle. Make sure to practice taking timed tests – limited time is one of the hardest parts about the SAT and ACT. That said, if you are stuck on a concept or need a more structured study routine, an SAT tutor or regular SAT study course could help boost your score.

We recommend using a preparation book written by the makers of the test because those books most accurately reflect the questions and format of the actual tests. The SAT is written by the College Board, so for a flavor of the test check out [“The Official SAT Study Guide”](#). The ACT is written by ACT, Inc., so for that test we recommend [“The Real ACT Prep Guide”](#). Other prep books could provide additional tips that the makers of the tests might be hesitant to provide, such as how many probability questions you can expect on the math section, or why you should skip hard questions, or why standardized tests are flawed to your advantage. Princeton Review’s [“Cracking the ACT”](#) is one of our favorites.

If purchasing prep books presents a financial challenge, go to a local bookstore or school/public library, and use the preparation books there. Many schools and local libraries have a college prep bookshelf so take advantage of them. You can always ask to borrow books from friends or classmates. You could even create a study pool for the standardized test of your choice. There are tons of online resources for standardized tests as well. [Khan Academy](#) and [YouTube](#) are two excellent resources for standardized test preparation. Additionally, thorough SAT/ACT information, tips, and practice problems can be accessed through the [Silverturtle’s Guide to SAT and Admissions Success](#).

When you do practice problems or take practice tests, the focus should be on trying to improve. No one needs to know your practice scores, and you aren’t trying to impress anyone. If you are unsure about a question and guess correctly, don’t just forget about it! After each practice test you take, go back and review any questions that you guessed on, got wrong, or had any doubts about. The more you reflect on your practice tests, the more you can identify your weaknesses and do better next time. For example, if you go over your math sections for the ACT/SAT, you might notice that you need to work on geometry more. Focusing your efforts on where you have room to improve will help you achieve the best possible scores.

Submitting your Scores

For the ACT and SAT, you can take both tests more than once and can usually just report your highest total score to the school, referred to as your ‘superscore’ – your highest possible score in each section of the test. If your top reading score is from a March test, and your top math score is from a June test, you’ll have to send the entire test scores for both tests. The colleges will tabulate your ‘superscore’ by recording the best scores of each subject. Although ‘superscoring’ may seem like a good idea, enabling you to really focus in on one subject, it isn’t always: some schools, e.g. Pomona College, the UC schools, or Sacred Heart University, will require you to report all your test scores. Therefore, if you report that you’ve taken the ACT nine times and did poorly on eight of them, the admission committee will also see this record.

Both the ACT and SAT provide score submission options, where test takers can write in colleges where they'd like to send scores before they take the test, sometimes for free or reduced cost. The free side of this is great. That said, the danger is that if you bomb a standardized test, that score is sent straight to the college you want to impress; if you don't select the college then it won't, but you'll have to pay for submitting your score later via the online tool where you also registered.

In summary, see what tests your schools ask for, write them down in a spreadsheet (see Chapter 5), and then start studying for the tests that you need to take, one subject at a time. Your goal in testing is to get these tests out of the way with good scores ASAP so that you can devote time to the more nuanced portions of the application instead of having to be worried about retaking your standardized tests.

Chapter 4: Creating a College List

As the timeline stated, students should start finalizing their college list by the beginning of their senior year. The 'fit' of what a student wants from college and what the college provides is a huge part of a fulfilling college experience. College rankings can be helpful in finding colleges to which you may want to apply, but there is no 'fit' element to them. Thus, it would be unwise to simply rely on college rankings to apply to schools. The first step in creating a college list is to reflect on what you want out of the college experience. Make a list and write this down. We had you ask some of the important questions surrounding your ideal college experience in Chapter 2.

Now it's time to match your ideal college experience to what different colleges have to offer. Think about what you want and then use the following resources to find out where you'll find the best college fit. Dive deeply into learning what each college is like and figure out whether it matches what you want from your college experience. In addition to the resources below, the Additional Tools section includes a brief questionnaire created by Roy Gamse and published by the Washington Post to help you think about what type of schools interest you.

1. [The College Board College Search](#) - A college search engine in which you can apply filters to a list of colleges to find ones that best match your preferences.
2. [The Fiske Guide to Colleges](#) - A guide of over 300 colleges that provides a straightforward insider look into colleges. If purchasing the book is difficult, we'd recommend skimming or reading the book at a bookstore over several days.
3. [Niche](#) - A website that allows you to get ratings on dorm quality, food, and social life through students submitting their own feedback. As students submit the scores, you will get imperfect information, since students will likely be biased. With that in mind, you might still get some useful insight.