Surviving the College Application Process
By Kiki Sayre

College-bound high school juniors and seniors have a lot on their shoulders as they set out to navigate the college admissions process. Not only must these busy 16- to 18-year-olds find time to research and apply to a variety of higher education options, but some will have to compete with high-achieving peers from around the country--and world!--for a finite number of coveted slots at selective colleges and universities.

Still, with careful planning and deliberate pacing, students can turn what could be a stressful, anxiety-ridden time into an exciting process of exploration and self-discovery. The following six prescribed steps can help ease the process:

#1 - Prepare
Students can broaden their post-graduate opportunities simply by working hard and becoming involved in school activities throughout their high school careers--in short, by making the most of their high school experience. Taking rigorous courses (and doing well) and pursuing leadership opportunities in sports, clubs or student government will show colleges and universities that the student will likely make the most of the college experience as well.

As sophomores and juniors, students will want to take practice college tests to prepare for ACT and SAT exams. Students should also talk with a high school counselor to understand college entrance requirements that go beyond high school graduation requirements.

#2 - Explore
Beginning the conversation sooner than later with parents regarding expectations, finances and other circumstances that can influence the college search process can avoid problems down the road. Once the parameters are established, explore potential colleges by visiting campuses, meeting with admissions officers visiting the high school, attending college fairs and researching schools online. Start a list of colleges of interest.

#3 - Get Started
During the summer before senior year, students will want to build a list of schools (6-10 is usually sufficient) ranging from low-risk to high-risk in terms of how their academic credentials compare with the average admitted student to the college. For each school, they will need to determine application deadlines and what documents are needed (transcript, letters of recommendation, test scores, etc.). Students needing financial assistance will want to look closely at the financial aid sections of each college's website. They should also look into and apply for any scholarships for which they are good candidates.

#4 - Apply!
Many seniors will want to complete and send one or more of their college applications in the fall to meet "early action" or "early decision" deadlines, usually beginning November 1st. Early action acceptances are non-binding, while early decision acceptances require the admitted student to attend the college. The savvy students will complete their applications and arrange for their transcripts and other documents to be sent a few weeks before the deadlines to give them time to troubleshoot any snags that might unexpectedly occur. "Regular decision" deadlines begin around the new year, but, again, students will want to complete their applications in advance so that high school holidays do not interfere with getting their application components sent in time.

#5 - Nearing the Finish Line
Once applications have been sent, students will want to check email regularly, as well as open and read any correspondence from their schools. College admissions offices may contact them if pieces of their applications are missing or need clarification. Additionally, students seeking financial aid will have further deadlines to meet beginning as early as February.

#6 - Finale
Acceptance and rejection notifications arrive by the end of March. Now, students get to do the choosing! Several schools offer "Admitted Students Day," letting students and parents take a close, or final, look at what the college offers. The universal acceptance day for students is May 1st. Students will want to alert the schools they have been admitted to of their choice and pay the deposit where they decide to attend by this date.

Hopefully, the outcomes will be positive. And, having gone through the college application process, students will have formulated a well-defined plan for the future and gained the confidence to start turning their dreams into reality.

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