

**SARA** HARBERTSON

AMERICA'S COLLEGE COUNSELOR

**THE  
SUMMER CHECKLIST  
FOR  
COLLEGE  
ADMISSIONS**

Rising high school juniors and seniors should take full advantage of the summer months to get a head start on the college process. For juniors, it's all about exploring and getting your feet wet. For seniors, this summer sets the table for a successful school year. Here are five things to do this summer.

## VISIT COLLEGES

For rising juniors it's important to just get a flavor from a handful of college campuses. A great way to start the process is to visit a few colleges. You should plan to visit different types of schools too. Visiting a state university, a small liberal arts college, and a private university is a great way to get a sense of what sized institution you are looking for. Another option is to visit a few local options and a few schools a car ride, or maybe even a plane ride, away to see how you react to being close to home or farther away. Don't try to visit too many colleges the summer before junior year. You want to leave the majority of your college visits for later in junior year and going into senior year as many high school students change their minds about the types of colleges they want to apply to along the way.

Rising seniors can easily visit five to 15 colleges over the summer. Remember, your final list of colleges that you plan to apply to is usually pared down once you visit more campuses. You won't know which colleges to apply to unless you visit some or most of the schools on your list. Ultimately, you want to have as many visits done as possible before the start of senior year. Visiting campuses in the fall can be very inspiring because the entire student body is back on campus and there's a ton of excitement in the air. But the fall is also a busy time for seniors getting ready for their last round of standardized tests, filling out applications, and keeping up with their school work. Visiting another three to five schools in the fall of senior year is possible as long as you plan ahead.

### **SECRET #1**

No matter if you are a senior, junior, or even younger, sign in when you get to the Admissions Office. This will get you on their mailing list, and for colleges that use "demonstrated interest," the visit is a clear sign to them that you are interested—and that can help you get in when you apply!

## TEST PREPARATION

Juniors, it's not too early to get exposed to the required standardized tests you plan to take for the college admissions process. If you're not sure whether you will perform better on the ACT or the SAT, use the early few weeks of the summer to take a full-length practice ACT and a full-length practice SAT. Your local test prep company usually offers these practice tests free of charge. You don't need to do any preparation for the practice exams; just know how long each section is so that you can plan accordingly. Once you know which test suits you better, focus on that test alone and stick with it. Devote your summer before junior year to getting comfortable with the test. You may choose to take a test prep class, do individual study, or even start working with a tutor one-on-one. This preparation does not necessarily mean you should start taking standardized tests as soon as the school year starts, though. Unless you are a recruited athlete, and the college coaches are insisting that you take the fall ACT or SAT, hold off! You don't want to start taking these tests too early. I recommend taking the ACT or the SAT three times between junior and senior year—usually twice in junior year (winter and spring), and one final time the summer before senior year or fall of senior year. Taking these tests prematurely can put you behind the eight ball as most students taking fall standardized tests are seniors, and the test will benefit the more experienced student exponentially.

Seniors, if you are hoping to retake the ACT or SAT one more time this summer you can be very deliberate with your test preparation. At this point, you know what you need to work on. Home in on the section or areas you want to improve. If you are taking a class, working on your own, or working with a tutor, the secret is to take practice exams throughout your preparation. This will help you gauge your progress and help guide your preparation.

### **SECRET #2**

The more time you work on test preparation, the better your results will be. Start your prep in June or early July and continue to work on it throughout the summer.

## START WORKING ON THE ESSAY

For seniors, summer is a time when you can let your mind drift a bit. And that's exactly when you think of the most distinctive topics. Review the essay prompts on the Common App, the Coalition Application, or any institutional-specific application. But if it's a general essay or "personal statement," almost anything you choose to write about can fit into one of these prompts as long as the essay is ultimately about you.

The first step is to start writing topics down. Try to come up with five to ten special things, stories, characteristics, experiences about yourself. I call these things, "isms." Isms are the nuggets of your life that you don't usually talk about on a regular basis, but they make you who you are. You know you have a really good ism about yourself (and thus a really good college essay topic) when you realize that if you take that special ism away, you wouldn't be the same person. Here are a few of my isms:

*I'm really short (4'11" to be exact). Some people see this as a disadvantage. I've used it to my advantage every day of my life.*

*I was a latch-key kid growing up. My parents worked long hours and it was up to me take care of myself. It made me a resourceful and independent woman.*

*My dad was the only dad I knew who was proud to be a feminist. He believed women should have equal rights (and equal pay). Growing up with a feminist dad made my goals for my future different than my friends.*

*My favorite color is pink. Not light pink; hot pink. I got this love from my paternal grandmother. I've grown to love that color because it represents a powerful blend of intellectual engagement, a strong mind, and a pop of confidence.*

### **SECRET #3**

The most powerful essays are not about fancy trips, and they are rarely about monumental events in your life. Most students live "normal" lives without life-altering experiences. So, think less about, "I need to invent something or run a marathon this summer." And, think more along the lines of, "What do I do every day or what 'ism' truly defines me as a person that no one could write about it in the same way?" It's not about shock value; it's not about impressing others. It's about telling a story that sheds light on your innermost thoughts, values, and life opinions.

Once you have some really distinctive isms, decide which ism is the one you want to be defined by in your essay. Many times, admissions officers define you not by your name, but by your essay topic. If your extracurricular life is focused on one special area in particular, choose another topic! The Olympic-athlete who writes about the sport they play only shows one side of who they are. Choose something that is much less predictable, and is a topic that will be timely. In other words, if you were to pick up that essay 10 or 20 years later, would you still love it?

The best isms are easy to write about. So the next step, is to start writing ideas down. Ideas turn into sentences; sentences turn into paragraphs. And, before you know it, you have the beginning of a rough draft. A rough draft can be done in one sitting or over a few days or weeks. Once the first draft is complete, let it breathe. This means to let it sit for a few days without working on it. Return to the draft with a fresh set of eyes, and see how it reads aloud. As you move into the second draft, consider these important structural requirements:

- The final draft usually needs to be 650 words or less.
- Make sure to start your essay in a powerful way. Do not repeat the essay prompt as it will count towards your word limit. Just get right to it.
- Your essay should have an introductory paragraph, two to three paragraphs in the body, and a concluding paragraph.
- Your essay topic needs to be obvious to the reader. Remember, these admissions officers don't have time to re-read your essay if it's unclear.
- Every great essay topic has a hidden topic or hidden lesson too. That's the piece of your essay that shows your growth, adaptation, forgiveness, or strength.
- If you decide to write about another person or an experience, make sure the essay ultimately is about you. The person or experience can be your inspiration, but the admissions officer wants to learn something distinctive about you.

A few days or weeks later, you should have a strong third draft of an essay. Before school starts back again, show your essay to your guidance counselor, a teacher, or another trusted adult who knows you. Let them read the draft to ensure that it flows well and represents you well. They can give recommendations, but in the end it needs to be your own work.

## **SECRET #4**

Some colleges will require very little for their supplemental essays (no essays, even) while other colleges will demand a lot more effort and time. The most common supplemental prompts require a student to explore the college's website, programs, communities, activities, academic departments, and more in order to be able to connect specifically to that college. These supplemental essays take research and time to write, so be sure to carve out ample time.

**FILL OUT COMMON APP (OR OTHER APPLICATIONS)**

The Common App and most applications are usually available starting August 1st. If you do it right, it takes time to fill out these applications. There are many steps and sections to most applications. Even if you fill it out online in one sitting, you need to go back and review it for typos or inaccuracies. August is a great time to initially fill out the application(s). Once the school year begins, you will most likely need to make some small changes or additions to your sections. But the bulk of the busy work will be done before the school year starts.

**SECRET #5**

Be honest. Be accurate. Be thoughtful. The application is a reflection of your integrity. Don't over inflate your application. It's rare for a student to get away with misrepresenting themselves. Colleges seem to always find out.

 **APPLY TO ROLLING ADMISSIONS COLLEGES**

Many state universities and some private colleges use an admissions process called "Rolling Admissions," which means applications "roll" in throughout the academic year, and colleges will make decisions on these applications as they come in. Rolling Admissions colleges will fill their freshmen class until it's full. That could be at the beginning of the winter or into late spring. But your best chance of getting into a Rolling Admissions school is early in the school year.

Schools with a Rolling Admissions process usually make their applications available over the summer, and they typically allow students to start submitting their applications before the fall. If you can submit at least one Rolling Admissions application before the school year begins, you will be more confident in submitting subsequent applications. This will increase your odds of admissions as well!

**SECRET #6**

No matter how competitive a student is, it's a good idea to apply to at least one Rolling Admissions college, and to apply to that college as early as possible. Rolling Admissions colleges turn their admissions decisions around very quickly. They usually will provide an admissions decision four to six weeks after receiving a completed application—and sometimes even sooner than that. Every college-bound student gets a boost of confidence and encouragement when they get into their first college. If you get admitted in September or October, you have a guaranteed option no matter what happens with the rest of your applications.