

Preparing for a Highly Selective College

Which colleges are “highly selective”?

- The highly selective colleges generally admit about 10% to 30% of their applicants. According to the September, 2001, issue of Atlantic Monthly, the twenty most highly selective universities (based on percentages of applicants admitted) are Harvard, Princeton, Columbia, Stanford, Yale, Brown, Cal Tech, MIT, Dartmouth, Georgetown, the University of Pennsylvania, Rice, the University of California at Berkeley, Duke, and University of California at Los Angeles, New York University, Northwestern, Tufts, Cornell, and Johns Hopkins. There are, of course, many other highly selective colleges that rank very close to them.
- Some state universities such as the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, the University of Virginia, the University of Michigan, and the University of Wisconsin at Madison are very selective for out-of-state students
- The Military Academies are also very selective because of their academic, leadership, and physical requirements.

How do I get admitted?

Most selective colleges receive thousands of applications from students all over the world. To compete with these students, there are several basic things that students should do to enhance their high school transcripts and their application folders:

- Take as many honors courses as possible as part of a rigorous college preparatory schedule.
- Take AP courses. Take at least four years of a foreign language or two years each of two foreign languages.
- Earn mostly A's in college prep courses; rank in the top 10% of your class.
- Do very well on the ACT and SAT I and, if required, the SAT II.
- Have excellent recommendations, preferably from teachers you had in your final two years in high school.
- Write an outstanding essay. Have at least four adults (English teacher, counselor, etc.) review it.
- Demonstrate leadership qualities, community service, and a special talent (such as art, music, or athletics).
- Submit your application in a timely manner (not at the last minute!, being scrupulous about completing all forms neatly and as requested).
- Be prepared to do well in the (usually alumnus/a) interview, expecting questions such as, “Why do you want to attend this university? What do you feel you can contribute to the campus? What are your goals? What book are you reading now? What questions do you have?”

What else can I do?

- Sometimes a summer program you participated in, a business you started, a foreign country you studied or worked in, or an adversity you have overcome will set you apart from other applicants.
- Sometimes being a child of an alumnus/a, a National Merit Semi-finalist, or having an unusual major or hobby helps. A coach can ask that your application be reviewed with special consideration.
- Sometimes sheer luck can add points to your application. For instance, maybe a college is looking for students from your geographical area, or maybe they're seeking someone who plays the bassoon.
- College credits you may have earned while in high school can be very meaningful to admissions officers.
- Sometimes asking admissions statistics helps you know how to apply. Learn how many students are admitted to a particular college by Early Decision as opposed to Regular Decision. Some colleges accept the majority of their entering students through the early admission process.

What is my timeline? What can I expect in my senior year?

- Review college resource materials to determine which tests to take.
- Read college bulletins to be fully informed about admissions procedures.
- Determine whether or not you will pursue Early Decision (you commit to a college early if they accept you) or Early Action (you don't want to wait until April 15 to find out if you are accepted). Usually, the applications have to be in by November 1. If you are seeking Regular Decision, be prepared to submit those applications by December 1.
- Repeat the ACT and/or SAT in October of senior year. Most colleges like the additional scores.
- Prepare to be interviewed by the colleges' area alumni in the fall.
- Expect to endure a long application procedure. Create a system to track what you complete.
- Compose an outstanding essay. Ask your English teacher to help you.
- Gather recommendations; complete your resume.
- Be prepared to send in your mid-year grades if requested.
- File your FAFSA (Free Application for Federal Student Aid) forms by February 15.
- Await acceptance notifications and financial aid packages in early to mid-April. Negotiate the package, if necessary.
- Commit to a college by May 1.