



EMPOWERLY

# A Parent's Guide to US College Admissions



# Introduction

Our parents care about their children gaining fair access to a good future—and we do too. The higher education system in the United States is complex. Empowerly is here to help your student stay on track for the future they deserve. After all, every bright and dedicated student should have a fair shot at building a great career and life.

Based on our years of experience and research on the college admissions process, we've built you a starter kit for what you need to know! Without further ado, let's review a Parent's Guide to US College Admissions.





## Parents: Where to Start?

There are many sources of information you can choose from when researching the US college admissions process. The vast amount of info, however, makes it difficult to get a grasp on the overall process. That's what we're here for: to make your life a little simpler.

While we can't cover absolutely everything you need to know in a few pages, this is a strong starting point. Once you understand the major steps and requirements, then you'll be ready to start discussing the specifics.

Of course, if you have lingering questions—or a special circumstance that we haven't covered here—you may benefit from talking through your situation and goals with a college counselor. Empowerly's community is here to support you through the entire process, no matter your starting point. If you'd like to connect with a team member to discuss your college readiness and how working with Empowerly could level up your applications, [reserve your free time slot here](#).







## Terminology (Important Vocabulary to Know)

These are some of the common phrases that circulate in college admissions. Familiarize yourself with these key terms to jumpstart your college readiness.

### School vs. College vs. University:

While they have similar meanings, these three words aren't exactly identical. [Read more here.](#)

### Standardized Tests:

These are exams proctored by a large, unbiased organization that measures student proficiency on a national scale.

- SAT and ACT: [Read more here.](#)
- AP, IB, DE: [Read more here.](#)



## Financial Aid:

Virtually all students applying to college in the US are eligible to apply for financial assistance from various sources to help pay for their tuition fees.

- **FAFSA and CSS:** These are government-run applications for free financial aid. There are several types of financial aid, including scholarships, grants, and loans. [Read more here.](#)

## Extracurricular Activities:

These are the voluntary activities that students participate in outside of their classroom education. They can take many forms, including an internship, camp, club, sport, or competition. [Read more here.](#)

## GPA:

Grade Point Average is the way that American students keep track of their performance throughout high school. All class grades are combined and averaged by the total number of credits, to compute a number on a 4.0 scale.

- **Weighted vs. Unweighted:** Some difficult classes in high school will “weigh more” on a student’s total GPA. When the differences in difficulty are accounted for, a student could end up with a GPA higher than 4.0, which is known as the weighted GPA. The unweighted GPA simply reports the calculation on a 4.0 scale with no other adjustments. [Read more here.](#)



# The Anatomy of a College Application

There are several components that appear on almost every application you will submit. While individual colleges may request supplemental materials on top of these listed, you can count on needing to have these key things:

1. The application form itself
2. Your extracurricular resume
3. A personal essay(s)
4. Your high school transcript
5. Any test scores you wish to submit
6. Letter of recommendation(s)

Let's discuss each of these pieces, one by one.

First, you'll have the **application form** itself. This is much like a job application, where you fill in the necessary demographic information about yourself and highlight your overall profile as a student. Don't forget to fill in all the blanks, and double-check your spelling and grammar.

Second, you'll want to have an **extracurricular resume**. While you might not attach this document directly to your app, it will make your life much easier when you become a senior! Chances are, you will need to list out and briefly describe how you spent your free time outside of school. This information allows the Admissions Officers to get a better sense of your intellectual passions. Having all your records since 9th grade in one place makes filling in the application simply a matter of transferring the information to the right places.



Next, plan on writing several **personal statements**. These essays are intended to be your chance to use your voice in your application; you are writing directly to the admissions audience. Therefore, your writing style, quality, and maturity all matter greatly. Be mindful of your topic selection and try to demonstrate your best qualities as a student (without embellishing the truth).

Your **high school transcript** is an official document that records your class grades throughout high school. While some schools are more competitive than others, the learning environment and opportunities available to you are taken into consideration by colleges. Therefore, the context surrounding your academic performance is generally understood. Ideally, your transcript will show that you like to challenge yourself to learn and also work hard to master the material, therefore maintaining high grades.

Like your high school transcript, your **standardized test scores** must be official documents released by the exam's proctors in order to count. If you decide to take the ACT or SAT (or any other standardized tests which could strengthen your application), arrange to have your official scores sent to the proper colleges so they can verify your performance.

Finally, many college applications will request one or more **letters of recommendation**. These letters must be written by an adult who knows the student in some kind of academic or scholastic capacity. The most common recommenders are teachers or counselors. However, in some instances, athletic coaches, art teachers, or other important mentors who can speak to your child's work ethic and character may also be sufficient. Check the rules on how many and what kind of letters you may need to submit.







## Overall Timeline of Events

For an overview of how these events unfold on a typical student's timeline, [check out this Road to College map](#) and accompanying information!

What happens after you submit your application materials? Your application goes to the college's Admissions Office for consideration. You can read more about [all the different roles that come into play during this phase here](#).

After the individuals at the college have made their decision, all students receive their decision news: acceptance, deferral/waitlist, or denial. Once students receive this news, they can make informed decisions on where they wish to attend. Senior year (aka 12th grade in high school) can be a stressful time filled with many important decisions, like where to attend college, and how to afford it!

As a parent, support can look a few different ways. Encourage your student to follow his/her interests. Provide any additional information you think might be relevant. And remind your student to take breaks, in order to help him/her make rational and informed judgments.



## What NOT to Do

Okay, so you've read all that and made it this far—amazing! What are some things you should look out for in order to avoid? For further reading on this topic, [browse a list of common mistakes](#) on international student applications to see if any apply to you. You can also check [this list of warnings](#) to ensure you stay on the right track!

When in doubt, we recommend following Empowerly's **philosophy of best fit**. Essentially, this empowers students to become the best version of themselves they can be. That means:

- Selecting a college major that fits your student's strengths and passions;
- Finding a mentor or counselor who fits your student's working style;
- Choosing the college that will best serve your student's goals and needs.

In the end, finding the right fit is more important than a highly-ranked one simply for prestige. A good school will help your child feel secure and supported in his/her learning environment. That's what it means to find the best fit!



# Final Thoughts

The journey through college applications can be complex, especially for parents who are unfamiliar with the systems. However, Empowerly is here to demystify the process and give all students an opportunity to secure their best possible future.

If you're just getting started, we recommend reviewing [this guide on how parents can help](#) with the initial college search! If you're curious about more tips on how to support your college applicant throughout this critical time, check out [these tips on our blog](#).

As always, feel free to reach out with any questions. We are happy to work with you!