



The Sage School College Playbook
or: How to Find and Apply to the Right College for You

Introduction

This playbook is designed as an overview of the process of selecting and applying to colleges in one's high school years at The Sage School. There is no one, single formula or path for doing this, so please consider this document more of a jumping off point than an exhaustive blueprint. It is conceived as a checklist, though you may find that not every task applies to you, or that the order in which items are presented here needs to be modified for your circumstances.

(Vocabulary note: Throughout this document “school(s)” is used informally to mean “college(s) and university(ies). Any reference to grades 9-12 will be called “high school” or, of course, “The Sage School.” Also, by and large, a school with only or mainly undergraduates is a college, and a school with graduate students (law students, PhD students, etc. is a university.)

MAKING YOUR FIRST COLLEGE/UNIVERSITY LIST:

One of the most challenging and important steps of the college application process is creating the list of schools to which to apply. I recommend starting as early as you like, and probably not later than spring of 11th grade. Your first list should be relatively expansive and is really just a list of schools you want to research more. The result of that research (as well as personal reflection) will be a whittled down application list in the fall of 12th grade. Here's some advice on how to research and create that first list:

- The school (i.e. Nathan) has several copies of USA Today's annual College Guide magazine, which provides a brief, helpful, digestible overview of about 500 top colleges and universities nationwide. If you don't know where to begin, grab a copy and browse through it. Another worthwhile site is the Colleges that Change Lives: ctcl.org
- Having a list of schools that represent the “Right Fit” is key. Only apply to schools that you're willing to attend, and include at least one that has a high(er) (i.e. 85+%) acceptance rate as a “safety school” to fall back on. Look at the handout “The Right Fit” for factors to consider when creating this list of schools.
- Visit Campus, if possible: Getting on campus, particularly when school is in session, is among the best ways to determine if a school is right for you--pay attention to your gut feeling. A good way to visit campuses (in addition to the College Visit as a Spring Field Study in 10/11) is to wrap them into pre-existing travel plans (heading to NYC to visit family? Check out NYU, LIU, Bard, and Sarah Lawrence). A dedicated college trip to tour schools is also very useful if one has the ability.

- As you're looking at schools, consider the "Big Six" experiences identified by Gallup as being correlated with success in college, in work, and in life in general. Are these experiences available and accessible to students at a particular school? Ask students, professors, alumni, staff about how common these experiences are on campus. They are:
 1. A Professor who made them excited about learning.
 2. Professors who cared about them as a person
 3. A mentor who encouraged them to pursue their goals and dreams
 4. Worked on a long-term project
 5. Had a job or internship where they applied what they were learning
 6. Were extremely involved in extracurricular activities

- Communicate with Schools--Admissions Offices, Academic Departments, Student Groups, Financial Aid Office, etc.
 - Even casual contact can be beneficial to your application prospects, in addition to providing you with more information. Pay attention to how you're treated by college staff and your experience interacting with campus representatives. Think of questions that cannot be answered by examining their website, or simply write to say that you're excited to learn more and would like a brochure. Feel empowered to reach beyond the admissions office and make contact with professors or other staff members (coaches, club leaders, student organization heads, etc). Emails, phone calls, and visits to campus are all tracked by those schools under the heading "demonstrated interest," and this is highly valued by certain schools (e.g. Ithaca College).
 - Also ask about admission requirements in detail: a Sage School education is excellent preparation for the demands of college, but our offerings don't exactly match what colleges demand in every single instance. Creating a list early allows you to examine in detail what a school's admission requirements are and for you to understand how a student's transcript and other activities are preparing him or her to apply. Examples of special requirements include:
 - Example 1: Cal Poly. Since we do not offer AP and/or IB courses, Cal Poly wants to see prospective students take college coursework (online is great), particularly in the sciences.
 - Example 2: Certain highly selective schools require SAT Subject Tests in addition to the regular SAT or ACT, and those require preparation time. (Note: the ACT with Writing can in certain cases take the place of the SAT Subject Tests).
 - Example 3: Most art or design schools will require a portfolio of student work as a major component of the application; curating and/or producing this work can be time consuming.

Spring 11th Grade

- Work on your College/University List, described above.
- Sign up for and take Nathan's ACT/SAT prep Creativity Workshop class on Friday afternoons

- Register for a late spring (April, May, or June) date for the SAT, ACT, or both. Prioritize a date that allows you to stay in the valley and travel the shortest distance.
- Consider your Sage career and also your broader life experiences and brainstorm potential areas of post-high school study--major(s), career path, etc. Use these to inform your college list.

Summer after 11th Grade

The Summary: Use this time effectively--Work, Study, Learn, Experience

- Consider getting a summer job.
Work in a field in which you are interested is ideal, but any job that allows you to save for future college expenses is valuable. A minimum wage job you hate might even give you that little boost in motivation to get that post-secondary degree.
- Consider participation in a summer program.
If a certain college has struck your fancy, see what summer programs they offer for high school students. Think again about your interests and see what programs cater to those. Finding an organization (local or not) and volunteering is another good use of your time, as it can provide work experience, contacts, and real world knowledge and experiences.
- Read.
Read discriminately, read with focus, and count it as ACT/SAT test prep. Read well-regarded authors and publications in both fiction and nonfiction genres, and ask adults and teachers if you need help finding them. Look up words you don't know in the dictionary. Practice reading a single book or article for 30-60 minutes at a time. Reading on the internet makes this difficult (if not impossible), so choose your medium and setting carefully to maximize your success. This type of reading helps with vocabulary, grammar, and recognition of effective sentences and paragraph structures. Broader benefits include gaining information and cultural literacy.
- Visit College and Universities.
Again, if you are already planning to travel, a stop at a college or university can often be easily incorporated into your itinerary. Keep an open mind and pay attention to your "gut feeling" when making these visits. Essential to the process is keeping a written record of your visit--information gathered, reactions to the place, buildings, and people, first and last impressions, etc. It may seem like you'll remember everything, but schools have a pesky habit of blurring together. Please see separate "College Visits" document for more information.
- Talk to the adults in your life.
Whether or not you're traveling, you can ask older people about their post high school experiences. What colleges did they apply to? Where did they attend? What were their experiences like? Did they transfer? Why? If a person didn't attend college, what did they do? What advice do they have? It's not uncommon for high school seniors to construct a fantasy future around a particular school, a particular major, or a particular place, and if that fantasy doesn't become a reality it can be difficult. Hearing about others' life experiences will often highlight how the unexpected or unplanned changes in one's plans can often turn out to be blessings in disguise and help you prepare to make the most of whatever life throws at you.
- If you're unhappy with your spring/summer test scores, sign up for a fall date (preferably October or November)

- Go through a process of self-reflection, either one that you create or using a structure provided by someone else, such as Lisa Fisher’s “U-Map” from her book, *Admissions by Design*. (A copy is available from Nathan.)

Fall 12th Grade

- Open an account with the Common Application any time after August 1st; it’s not necessary but is used by many students.
- Sign up for Nathan’s Friday Afternoon College Counseling session.
- Fill out and submit the FAFSA as soon as possible after it opens on October 1st.
- If unhappy with spring/summer test scores, take ACT or SAT again in October or November (or December or perhaps even January).
- Take your College and University List and narrow it down to an Application List: You should not apply to any school (even a safety school) if you know you’re unwilling to attend. The length of this list will depend on the student, but for most, five to eight is a good number. At least one school should be a proverbial “safety school,” where your chances of acceptance are high. Decisions about what constitutes a safety school should be made at the family or family/college counselor/student level, as each case is unique.
- Once you have your application list, get organized. Make a master list of all deadlines and application requirements.
- Seek out interview opportunities at each school, whether in person or remotely.
- Approach teachers to ask for letters of recommendation. This should be done in September, and teachers should be given due dates that are both firm and realistic.
- Craft essays. Depending on the application, the personal essay can carry a lot of weight. Give this process enough time, and show drafts to friends, teachers, and parents for feedback.
- Supplemental Writing Prompts. Many schools require some (or many) supplemental writing pieces in the form of short essays. Though short, these again take time to craft and polish.
- Work hard in your classes. Your recommenders are likely to be current teachers, and we’re aware if you’ve taken your foot off the gas. Put in positive light, it’s fun and easy to write a letter about a student who is at the same time producing his or her best, most interesting, and highest quality work yet.
- Scour the websites of the schools you’re applying to. Ensure you understand exactly what is being asked of you in the application process. In essays, interviews, or general correspondence with admissions offices, demonstrate interest in and knowledge of the schools to which you’re applying.
- MEET ALL DEADLINES.
- Plan to apply for financial aid when you apply for admission.
- When in doubt, give the school a call.

Winter 12th Grade and Beyond

Depending on how the fall goes, you may still be filling out and submitting applications in the winter. Stay focused on the process and seek help proactively, as your in-school time will now be focused on planning and executing your Independent Trimester (ITri).

Whether or not you have already been accepted to any school, early in the new year (i.e after January 1st) is the time to be paying attention to financial aid needs. The basics of need-based aid (as opposed to merit-based aid) are summarized here:

Need Based Aid

College and Universities determine a student's financial aid need by starting with the Cost of Attendance (COA) of that school and then subtracting the student's and family's contribution ("Expected Family Contribution," or EFC). The result is the student's/family's financial need. The EFC is usually determined through one of two applications:

1. The Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) application is available at www.fafsa.ed.gov on October 1st of each year. Everyone should fill this out as soon as you are able to do so, since the money is distributed on a first come, first served basis. It requires current tax forms and prior tax returns, in addition to other documentation. You can always use estimates and then amend those numbers later, if necessary. Though this is a generalization, FAFSA tends to be used more by larger, public institutions.
2. The College Scholarship Service (CSS) PROFILE can be filled out at www.profileonline.collegeboard.org. Again, to make a broad generalization, the CSS Profile tends to be used by smaller, private institutions, and uses a different formula for determining the family contribution.

Beyond filling one or both of these applications, it is important to visit the financial aid page of the websites of the various schools to which your child has applied. It is common for schools to have a separate application (and separate deadline) for financial aid. It's important to submit these applications *even if you don't know if you have been accepted*, since many deadlines occur before regular decision letters have been mailed. Financial aid offices tend to be very responsive to questions and queries, so please contact them with questions that you have.

Some Thoughts on Gap Years

A gap year occurs when a high school graduate intends to attend college but chooses to wait to attend until a year after high school. A person who graduates high school in June of 2018, for example, would enroll as a first-year college student in the fall of 2019. Gap years are becoming increasingly popular for a variety of reasons, ranging from the need to work for a year and save money to a desire to take a break from school and do something totally different (like travel). Gap years can have wonderful benefits for some students, particularly if these attributes are kept in mind:

- Have a concrete plan of action.
Ideally, a gap year is about *taking advantage of an opportunity* rather than avoiding something. Create a plan that allows you to intentionally pursue an interest, goal, or particular experience.
- Make sure your plan is financially sound.
Gap year programs such as "Where There Be Dragons" exist in abundance and offer amazing experiences, but many are nearly, or equally, as expensive as college *but do not get you any closer to a college degree*.
- Consider study abroad as an alternative.

True, most often you'll need to wait until junior year of college, but the variety of study abroad programs available to most college students is amazing--from enrolling directly in a Spanish university to living on a sailing ship for a trimester--and crucially, they get you a semester or a year closer to graduation.

- Get into college now and defer (i.e. wait a year to enroll as a student).
Even if you're committed to taking a gap year, apply to and get accepted to at least one college in the fall/winter of your senior year and defer for a year. Deferment policies differ from school to school, but are easily explained by school admissions staffs. The dedicated time and support you enjoy as a senior at The Sage School simply will not be there a year from now, which can make an already daunting process more difficult. Knowing you already have a spot at a college you're excited about will make your gap year all the more enjoyable and fruitful. Also, going back to the first bullet point, some colleges may grant a deferment based on the quality of your plan for your gap year.
- With the growth in popularity of gap years, organizations now exist to provide more detailed info and help in planning. Two to look into are:
 - <https://gapyearassociation.org/>
 - <http://www.americangap.org/about.html>

Conclusion

The application process rewards diligence and organization, and if you can maintain those and a sense of humor, there's nothing to fear. If anything, finding the school that is right for you is the most difficult aspect of the whole process, since it relies on knowing yourself, how you learn, who you want to be around, and perhaps what you want to study--in short, it demands that you answer the question: Who are you and what have you been doing with your time? Do you have a habit of using your time and talents constructively, and will you continue to do so in college?

Applying to colleges is more tedious than difficult. Creating a checklist of everything you need takes some sleuthing and organization, and then you simply need to do all those things. Fill out a bunch of biographical info about you and your family in the application, as well as a description of your extracurriculars, work experience, and volunteer activities. Write an essay, request a transcript and some letters of rec, take the ACT or SAT, and maybe do an interview. It's about presenting and describing all the things you've *already done*: your life and activities over the past four to six years. Good luck, remember that you have support, and that it's worth the effort.