

SCHOOL DAYS

Strategies to help students on their path toward college admission

By Linda Dennis
and Lisa-Marie Richardson

The second semester of junior year is here—and the pressure is real. SAT, ACT, AP and IB exams are just around the corner.

Students are juggling rigorous coursework, extracurricular commitments, homework, and the planning and application process for summer programs, all while trying to maintain friendships and family balance. It's a lot.

Having a clear roadmap for what truly matters right now can make all the difference. With the right focus, juniors can not only work toward their academic and college goals (and increase their chances of admission) but also protect their well-being along the way. A thoughtful, strategic approach helps students stay motivated, confident and sane during this demanding stretch.

The following are some key recommendations to students for success.

Academics first

- Keep grades strong—junior-year grades are often the last grades colleges see before making decisions.
- Challenge yourself appropriately with honors, AP, IB or dual-enrollment

courses.

- Plan senior-year courses strategically to show rigor and alignment with your goals.

- Build strong relationships with teachers, especially those you may ask for recommendations.

Testing strategy

- Register for the SAT/ACT and create a realistic study plan.

- Even with test-optional schools, scores can strengthen applications and help with merit scholarships.

- Register early—testing centers fill quickly, and tests are not offered every month.

College research and planning

- Start building a college list with reach, target and safety schools.

- Research more than rankings: majors, campus culture, cost, outcomes and opportunities.

- Schedule spring college tours early—many fill up fast.

- Explore study-abroad or global programs if those interest you.

Activities and leadership

- Deepen involvement in a few meaningful extracurriculars rather than adding many new ones.

- Take on or solidify leadership roles in clubs, sports, work or community organizations.

- Explore interests through shadowing, self-study, internships, research or part-time jobs.

- Use the summer wisely—jobs, internships, volunteering and enrichment programs all count.

Resume and recommendations

- Create a resume or brag sheet listing activities and awards from ninth grade onward.

- Counselors may request this, and you'll need it for the Common App, UC, and state school applications.

- Identify teachers for letters of recommendation: ideally, one humanities teacher (English or history) and one STEM teacher (math or science)

Essays and applications

- Be aware that some colleges require or strongly recommend optional essays.

- Start reflecting on personal stories, interests, and experiences.

- Keep notes or a journal—it makes essay season much easier.

Financial planning

- Begin family conversations about college costs and affordability.



- Learn the basics of financial aid and FAFSA.

Plan Ahead

- Meet with your school counselor to review graduation requirements and goals.

- Create a rough timeline for testing, applications and college visits.

The public is invited to a complimentary College Planning Workshop from 6:30 to 8 p.m., Feb. 24 at the Calabasas Community Center.

The event will feature a presentation packed with practical, actionable guidance, followed by an open Q&A where parents and students can get answers to their most important questions.

Register ahead at collegeadmissionsteam.com/live-workshops.

Linda Dennis and Lisa-Marie Richardson are college counselors and cofounders of College Admissions Team.

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