



# Working with Your Counselor During the College Application Process

## Four Simple Tips

Completing the college application process can certainly be nerve-racking, for students and parents alike. By the time colleges have been selected, recommendations requested, essays written, and applications filled out, most families have hit the height of anxiety. Then, quite often, the unthinkable happens. You ask your school counselor to send out your transcript, and he informs you that it will go out within the next week. "That's not soon enough," you think to yourself. "It needs to go out tomorrow." The reality, though, is that counselors need a lot more than 24 hours to process college applications.

## A Counselor's Work

The American School Counselor Association recommends that the student-to-counselor ratio in schools be 250 to 1. The national average, however, is 478 to 1. This means that most counselors have many students they're trying to help. Counselors also have other duties on top of college counseling, including: helping students with academic, career, and personal issues; providing classroom assistance; administrative support; and more. In short, counselors are busy people.

Helping students apply to college is a priority for counselors. However, sending application packets along with recommendations and transcripts takes time. Plus, at peak application times, counselors can be inundated with requests to process college applications.

## Four Tips for Working with Your Counselor

So what can you do to make sure that your applications go out on time and that you keep your stress level to a minimum during this anxiety-filled process?

### 1. Be Responsible.

Ultimately, you want to go to the college of your choice. Because you have one counselor and that counselor has many students, take charge of the application process. Know your deadlines, keep in contact with your counselor, and perform the legwork necessary to get the job done.

### 2. Be Organized.

Make a chart to keep track of different colleges' requirements, and mark a calendar with your application deadlines. Have a separate folder for each application so you can keep materials organized and easy to access. Ask for recommendations in September, and write your essays well ahead of the deadlines.

### 3. Be Early.

In the case of college applications, on time might not be good enough. Essays, recommendations, and transcript request forms should all be completed and submitted at least two weeks prior to the application deadline. Counselors and support staff fill these requests on a first-come, first-served basis, so get in the line as early as possible. Most application packets are mailed, so don't forget to leave time for the U.S. Postal Service to deliver your application and for the college's internal mail service to process it. Finally, factor in some additional time for unanticipated errors and delays.

### 4. Be Relaxed.

Filling out college applications can be stressful. Try not to let it get you down. Make sure to go out and have fun with your friends; to take breaks when you need them; and to remember that, in the end, the college application process is just a series of steps you need to complete. Just focus on the tasks at hand.

The college application process can be stressful and exhausting—but it doesn't have to be. Organization, communication, patience, and reasonable expectations are the keys to making it a manageable and successful experience.



# What Selectivity Means for You

## Understanding Admissions Factors

College admissions officers across most of the nation report the same news: The number of applicants is rising, making admissions more competitive.

### Why Are Applications Increasing?

The increase comes from a surge in births during the 1980s. Children of the baby boomers are coming of age. Experts predict applications will continue to rise faster than openings at most colleges, through about 2010.

"Most schools are a little more selective than they were maybe 10 years ago," says Joan Isaac-Mohr, vice president and dean of admissions at Quinnipiac University in Connecticut. This can mean more pressure for students going through the application process.

### Benefits of Increased Selectivity

There's a silver lining. As Isaac-Mohr points out, increased selectivity means better students are going to all colleges, broadening your choice of schools with a high-achieving student population.

The number of applicants is rising, making admission more competitive. Ann Wright, vice president for enrollment at Rice University in Texas, agrees. "There are lots of schools where students can be happy and successful," she says. Both experts encourage students and parents to consider a range of schools, rather than focusing on a single institution.

Community colleges, for example, can allow you to spend two years improving grades or selecting a career focus before transferring to a four-year university. While you might be taught by a graduate student at a large university, teachers at community colleges are usually professors who primarily want to teach, not conduct research.

Smaller class sizes and more access to professors at small public or private colleges can be a boost to students, while some may prefer the energy and variety of a large university. It's important for you to determine your needs and academic interests and select 8 to 10 schools that make a good fit.

### The Levels of Selectivity

At one extreme are open admissions colleges. These schools require only a high school diploma and accept students on a first-come, first-served basis. Many community colleges have this policy. At the other extreme are very selective colleges. They admit only a small percentage of applicants each year. Most colleges fall somewhere in between.

- **Less Selective:** Less selective colleges focus on whether applicants meet minimum requirements and whether there's room for more students. Acceptable grades are often the only requirement beyond an interest in college study. The SAT® or ACT may be required, but test scores are usually used for course placement, not admissions. As many as 10 or 15 student apply for each spot at very selective schools.
- **More Selective:** More selective colleges consider course work, grades, test scores, recommendations, and essays. The major factor may be whether you are ready for college-level study. It's possible to be denied admission because of a weakness or a lack of interest in higher education.
- **Very Selective:** As many as 10 or 15 students apply for each spot at very selective schools. Admissions officers look carefully at every aspect of a student's high school experience, from academic strength to test scores. Since many applicants are strong academically, other factors—such as your essay—are critical. Although they receive a great deal of publicity, only a small number of colleges (fewer than 100) are this selective.

## What Are Colleges Looking For?

As you prepare application materials, it can help to know what schools are really looking for in the piles of paperwork.

Admissions officers evaluate applications in different ways, depending on how selective, or competitive, their college is.

### Admission Factors

Selective colleges consider these factors for admission:

- Courses taken
- Counselor/teacher recommendations
- Ethnicity
- Grades
- Application questions and essays
- Geographic location
- Grade point average
- Personal interview
- Alumni relationship
- Rank in class
- Activities outside the classroom
- Major/college applied to
- Admission test results
- Special talents and skills

There's no general agreement about which of these factors are ranked more important. However, most admissions officers place the most weight on your high school record.

### How Important Are Extracurricular Activities?

The significance of activities has been exaggerated. While schools do consider them, they're looking to see if you've shown a long-term commitment in one or two areas.

### Need-Blind Admissions

Most colleges have a need-blind admissions policy. This means they decide whether to make an offer of admission without considering your family's financial situation.

Other colleges are need-sensitive; they do consider your family's financial situation in the admissions process. These colleges know they can't satisfy the financial aid needs of all applicants. Some schools use need-sensitive admissions when deciding to accept a borderline student or to pull a student off of the waiting list.

### Matching Admissions Standards

As part of the college search, you should compare your academic and personal qualifications to those of students typically admitted to schools where you want to apply.

## ~College Application FAQs~

### Get the Inside Scoop on Applying to College

We asked two experienced college counselors to help answer students' frequently asked questions about the college application process.

#### **Do I have a better chance of getting in if I apply early?**

Nadine K. Maxwell: Many students apply early decision because they believe that there is an advantage to applying early and that their chances of being admitted are greater. Actually, this can vary from school to school and year to year, and may depend upon the applicant pool at the school where you are applying. Do your homework first and check to see what percentage of the students in the previous graduating classes at your high school were admitted early decision to a specific college or university. Are you qualified to apply as early decision? If you are, and this is a school you really wish to attend, then apply early decision.

#### **How much time should I give my teachers to write letters of recommendation for me?**

Mary Lee Hoganson: Teachers should always receive a minimum of two weeks notice, prior to the postmark date. Be sure to ask in a way that allows a teacher to decline comfortably if he/she does not have time to do an adequate job. For example: "Do you feel you know me well enough, and do you have enough time to write a supportive letter of recommendation for me to . . ." Give the teacher a stamped envelope addressed to the college, along with any recommendation form provided by the college.

#### **What is the Common Application? Should I use it?**

Mary Lee Hoganson: The Common Application has been developed by a group of colleges and universities that belong to the Common Application group. They accept this application in place of their own without any penalty. You fill it out once (on the computer is the easiest way) and then mail copies of the same application to any school that participates. Some of the participating colleges accept the application online and some have a supplement that must be submitted in addition. The Common Application and all information pertaining to it is available at [www.commonapp.org](http://www.commonapp.org). This is a great time saver—but remember to do a good job and proofread no matter what application format you use.

#### **How many times should I take the SAT® tests?**

Nadine K. Maxwell: How well did you do on the SAT the first time you took it? Some students are satisfied with their SAT scores the first time they take it. Students who have taken the PSAT/NMSQT® more than once and feel prepared to take the SAT often only take the SAT twice. Sometimes students will take it three times, but most students will take it in the spring of the junior year and the fall of the senior year.

**My SAT scores are very low and my grades are very high. Will this affect my chances of admission?**

Nadine K. Maxwell: While SAT scores are an indicator of success in college, admission staffs look at many different factors when making a decision about whether to admit a student or not. One of the main things they are looking for is to see if your high school academic profile indicates that you have the potential for academic success on their campus. What kind of courses have you taken? Have you taken rigorous courses such as AP® courses? Have you taken AP Exams so that there are scores to indicate how you may perform in a college-level course?

**My parents don't make a lot of money—will colleges hold this against me?**

Mary Lee Hoganson: Colleges should tell you whether or not they have a "need-blind" admissions policy. Those that do never consider ability to pay as an admissions criterion. Other schools, which are "need-conscious," may consider ability to pay, but only for a very small proportion of the admitted group. My advice always is: don't worry about this.

**I want to send additional material that I think will support my application? Is this okay?**

Nadine K. Maxwell: It depends on what you want to send. Most colleges and universities read hundreds or maybe thousands of applications, and they expect to find the information that they need to make an admission decision about you in their specific application form. It is okay to send an additional letter of information to explain something that cannot be explained on the application forms, but other items that students sometimes send are not helpful and may be viewed as trying to distract the admission staff from the actual application. Talk to your guidance counselor about any additional items that you are thinking about sending. Their knowledge and experience will be helpful to you in making this decision.

**How can I improve my chances of getting in off of the waiting list?**

Mary Lee Hoganson: If a college is your first choice, let the college know that—although the college ethically may not ask for this information. Write a letter to the director of admission expressing your continuing strong interest and updating the admissions office with any new information that reflects well on your ability to contribute to the quality of the freshman class. In addition, you may wish to ask your counselor to make a call on your behalf. Many colleges keep track of these kinds of contacts and students who are enthusiastic and persistent will get looked at first. Colleges want to admit students off the waiting list who they believe will accept the offer of admission.

**Do colleges really care about your senior year grades?**

Mary Lee Hoganson: Absolutely! Many colleges will not make a decision until receiving first semester grades. They expect to see a performance that indicates you are ready for college-level work. The college at which you make your enrollment deposit will ask for a final transcript at the end of the senior year. (Admission letters often contain something like, "Your admission is contingent upon your continued successful performance.") It is not at all rare for a college to withdraw an offer of admission when grades drop significantly over the course of the senior year. (I have a folder full of copies of these letters.)

## Early Decision and Early Action

If you find a college that you're sure is right for you, consider applying early. Early decision and early action plans allow you to apply early (usually in November) and get an admissions decision from the college well in advance of the usual spring notification date. You'll know by December or January whether you've been accepted at your first-choice college.

Sometimes, students who apply under these plans have a better chance of acceptance than they would through the regular admissions process. These plans are also good for colleges, because they get students who really want to go to the school to commit early in the process.

### Early Decision vs. Early Action

You should be aware of the differences between early decision and early action before sending in your applications. The exact rules may vary somewhat by college. Check with your counselor to make sure you understand your rights and obligations.

**Early decision plans are binding.** You agree to attend the college if it accepts you and offers an adequate financial aid package. Although you can apply to only one college for early decision, you may apply to other colleges through the regular admissions process. If you're accepted by your first-choice college early, you must withdraw all other applications. Usually, colleges insist on a nonrefundable deposit well before May 1.

**Early action plans are similar but are not binding, unlike early decision.** If you've been accepted, you can choose to commit to the college immediately, or wait until the spring. Under these plans, you may also apply early action to other colleges. Usually, you have until the late spring to let the college know your decision.

**Single-choice early action is a new option offered by a few colleges.** This plan works the same way as other early action plans, but candidates may not apply early (either early action or early decision) to any other school. You can still apply to other schools and are not required to give your final answer of acceptance until the regular decision deadline.

Application Type	Binding	Can Apply Early to Other Colleges	Can Apply to Other Colleges Under Regular Admissions
Early Decision	Yes	No	Yes
Early Action	No	Yes	Yes
Single-Choice Early Action	No	No	Yes

### Should I Apply Under One of These Plans?

You should apply under an early decision or early action plan only if you are very sure of the college you want to attend. Do not apply under an early decision or early action plan if you plan to weigh offers and financial aid packages from several colleges later in the spring. Also, you shouldn't apply early if it is advantageous to have more of your senior year work to show a college.

### Which Colleges Offer Early Plans?

More than 400 colleges offer an early decision plan, an early action plan, or both. Some colleges have chosen to discontinue their early decision and early action plans because they are potentially unfair to students who rely heavily on financial aid. There is a concern that students who apply early may be limiting their financial aid opportunities and feel forced to make a decision without adequate time to consider all aid awards available.

### Do Your Research

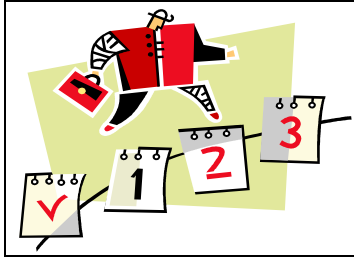
Before applying to an early decision or early action plan, research all your options to decide which college is the right one for you.

### Get Input

You do not have to apply early decision or early action; they are simply options you might want to consider. Talk with your parents about whether it is in your best interests. It's important that they understand there might be financial implications. Get advice from your high school counselor and other trusted advisors before applying to a college as an early decision applicant. Your counselor is a trained, objective professional who serves as your advocate in the college search process.

### A Last Word of Advice

In the fall, it may seem appealing to get the college decision over with, but you may find your goals changing as your senior year progresses. On the other hand, you may be confident of thriving at a certain college. If so, you're the type of student early decision was created for.



## *Three Steps to a Great College Essay*

### You, in 500 Words or Less

The college application essay is a chance to explain yourself, to open your personality, charm, talents, vision, and spirit to the admissions committee. It's a chance to show you can think about things and that you can write clearly about your thoughts. Don't let the chance disappear. Stand up straight and believe in yourself!

### The Essay Writing Process

Okay, boot up your computer and let's get to it. To write a college essay, use the exact same three-step process you'd use to write an essay for class: first prewrite, then draft, and finally, edit. This process will help you identify a focus for your essay, and gather the details you'll need to support it.

### Prewriting

To begin, you must first collect and organize potential ideas for your essay's focus. Since all essay questions are attempts to learn about you, begin with yourself.

- **Brainstorm:** Set a timer for 15 minutes and make a list of your strengths and outstanding characteristics. Focus on strengths of personality, not things you've done. For example, you are responsible (not an "Eagle Scout") or committed (not "played basketball"). If you keep drifting toward events rather than characteristics, make a second list of the things you've done, places you've been, accomplishments you're proud of; use them for the activities section of your application.
- **Discover Your Strengths:** Do a little research about yourself: ask parents, friends, and teachers what your strengths are.
- **Create a Self-Outline:** Now, next to each trait, list five or six pieces of evidence from your life—things you've been or done—that prove your point.
- **Find Patterns and Connections:** Look for patterns in the material you've brainstormed. Group similar ideas and events together. For example, does your passion for numbers show up in your performance in the state math competition and your summer job at the computer store? Was basketball about sports or about friendships? When else have you stuck with the hard work to be with people who matter to you?

## Drafting

Now it's time to get down to the actual writing. Write your essay in three basic parts: introduction, body, and conclusion.

- The introduction gives your reader an idea of your essay's content. It can shrink when you need to be concise. One vivid sentence might do: "The favorite science project was a complete failure."
- The body presents the evidence that supports your main idea. Use narration and incident to show rather than tell.
- The conclusion can be brief as well, a few sentences to nail down the meaning of the events and incidents you've described.

An application essay doesn't need to read like an essay about *The Bluest Eye* or the Congress of Vienna, but thinking in terms of these three traditional parts is a good way to organize your main points.

There are three basic essay styles you should consider:

- **Standard Essay:** Take two or three points from your self-outline, give a paragraph to each, and make sure you provide plenty of evidence. Choose things not apparent from the rest of your application or light up some of the activities and experiences listed there.
- **Less-Is-More Essay:** In this format, you focus on a single interesting point about yourself. It works well for brief essays of a paragraph or half a page.
- **Narrative Essay:** A narrative essay tells a short and vivid story. Omit the introduction, write one or two narrative paragraphs that grab and engage the reader's attention, then explain what this little tale reveals about you.

## Editing

When you have a good draft, it's time to make final improvements to your draft, find and correct any errors, and get someone else to give you feedback. Remember, you are your best editor. No one can speak for you; your own words and ideas are your best bet.

- **Let It Cool:** Take a break from your work and come back to it in a few days. Does your main idea come across clearly? Do you prove your points with specific details? Is your essay easy to read aloud?
- **Feedback Time:** Have someone you like and trust (but someone likely to tell you the truth) read your essay. Ask them to tell you what they think you're trying to convey. Did they get it right?
- **Edit Down:** Your language should be simple, direct, and clear. This is a personal essay, not a term paper. Make every word count (e.g., if you wrote "in society today," consider changing that to "now").
- **Proofread Two More Times:** Careless spelling or grammatical errors, awkward language, or fuzzy logic will make your essay memorable—in a bad way.

This article is based on information found in *The College Application Essay*, by Sarah Myers McGinty.



# College Essay Writing Tips



## Write an Effective Application Essay

A great application essay will present a vivid, personal, and compelling view of you to the admissions staff. It will round out the rest of your application and help you stand out from the other applicants. The essay is one of the only parts of your application over which you have complete control, so take the time to do a good job on it. Check out these tips before you begin.

## Dos:

### Keep Your Focus Narrow and Personal

Your essay must prove a single point or thesis. The reader must be able to find your main idea and follow it from beginning to end. Try having someone read just your introduction to see what he thinks your essay is about.

Essays that try to be too comprehensive end up sounding watered-down. Remember, it's not about telling the committee what you've done—they can pick that up from your list of activities—instead, it's about showing them who you are.

### Prove It

Develop your main idea with vivid and specific facts, events, quotations, examples, and reasons. There's a big difference between simply stating a point of view and letting an idea unfold in the details:

- **Okay:** "I like to be surrounded by people with a variety of backgrounds and interests"
- **Better:** "During that night, I sang the theme song from Casablanca with a baseball coach who thinks he's Bogie, discussed Marxism with a little old lady, and heard more than I ever wanted to know about some woman's gall bladder operation."

### Be Specific

Avoid clichéd, generic, and predictable writing by using vivid and specific details.

- **Okay:** "I want to help people. I have gotten so much out of life through the love and guidance of my family, I feel that many individuals have not been as fortunate; therefore, I would like to expand the lives of others."
- **Better:** "My Mom and Dad stood on plenty of sidelines 'til their shoes filled with water or their fingers turned white, or somebody's golden retriever signed his name on their coats in mud. I think that kind of commitment is what I'd like to bring to working with fourth-graders."

## Don'ts

### Don't Tell Them What You Think They Want to Hear

Most admissions officers read plenty of essays about the charms of their university, the evils of terrorism, and the personal commitment involved in being a doctor. Bring something new to the table, not just what you think they want to hear.

### Don't Write a Resume

Don't include information that is found elsewhere in the application. Your essay will end up sounding like an autobiography, travelogue, or laundry list. Yawn.

- "During my junior year, I played first singles on the tennis team, served on the student council, maintained a B+ average, traveled to France, and worked at a cheese factory."

### Don't Use 50 Words When Five Will Do

Eliminate unnecessary words.

- **Okay:** "Over the years it has been pointed out to me by my parents, friends, and teachers—and I have even noticed this about myself, as well—that I am not the neatest person in the world."
- **Better:** "I'm a slob."

### Don't Forget to Proofread

Typos and spelling or grammatical errors can be interpreted as carelessness or just bad writing. Don't rely on your computer's spell check. It can miss spelling errors like the ones below.

- "After I graduate *form* high school, I plan to work for a nonprofit organization during the summer."
- "From that day on, Daniel was my best *fried*."

## What to Do About Senioritis...Make Your Senior Year Count



Seniors have worked hard for three years, taking tests, completing projects, and preparing for college admission. When senior year rolls around, some students just want to get through college applications and relax before they head off to the college of their choice.

Also known as senioritis, taking it easy senior year may seem like a nice break, but is likely to do more harm than good. According to recent reports, incomplete high school preparation can contribute to academic problems in college.

- As many as half of all college students do not have adequate academic preparation, and are required to take remedial courses.
- More than one quarter of the freshmen at four-year colleges and nearly half of those at two-year colleges do not even make it to their sophomore year.

Not only does senioritis jeopardize your chances for success later on in college, it can also affect your grades—and college admission officers pay close attention to your performance senior year.

### Senior-Year Grades and College Admission

Many students mistakenly believe that prepping for college ends after the eleventh grade. However, the senior year—the entire senior year—is actually of particular interest to colleges.

### Applying

Many college applications (including the Common Application) require you to list your senior courses, including information about course levels and credit hours. It will be very obvious to the admission officers if you've decided to take the year off.

Many colleges also include as part of the application a form called the mid-year grade report. Your counselor completes this form with first-half grades and sends it to the colleges to which you've applied. It then becomes a crucial part of the application folder.

### **If You Are Accepted**

Many college acceptance letters include warnings to students such as "Your admission is contingent on your continued successful performance." This means colleges reserve the right to deny you admission should your senior year grades drop.

Mary Lee Hoganson, college counselor for Homewood-Flossmor Community High School, Flossmor, Illinois writes: "It is not at all rare for a college to withdraw an offer of admission when grades drop significantly over the course of the senior year. (I have a folder full of copies of these letters.)"

### **How to Make the Most of Your Senior Year**

Senior year is your opportunity to strengthen your skills and broaden your experiences, in school and out, to prepare for all of the challenges ahead. A successful senior year can help launch you on the path to a successful future.

### **Maintain a Challenging Course Load**

You should take the most rigorous courses available, and be sure to continue taking college-track subjects. Consider AP<sup>®</sup> courses, which can also earn you credit at many colleges.

### **Stay Active and Involved**

Your continued involvement in activities, sports, and volunteer work will help you stay active and focused throughout your final year. A great internship or career-focused job opportunity can help motivate you to start considering your career options. Meaningful and significant experiences will help prepare you to make informed decisions about your education and career goals.

### **Try out College Early**

If you're interested in pursuing a subject further, and have excelled at your high school classes so far, consider taking a class at a local college. This challenge can help you avoid sliding into an academic slump, and stimulate your interest in the possibilities of college.

Another option in many areas is middle college or early college high schools. These schools, normally located on community and four-year college campuses, allow students to spend their last two years taking classes in both college and high school. Early exposure to college classes introduces you to the rigor of college work while easing your transition from high school.

Sources: *National Commission on the High School Senior Year, The Lost Opportunity of Senior Year: Finding a Better Way - Summary of Findings, 2001.*

*Barth, P., Haycock, K., Huang, S. and Richardson, A., Youth at the Crossroads: Facing High School and Beyond. Washington, DC: The Education Trust, 2000*

## College Decision-Making Guide



### You Got "Fat Envelopes"—Now What?

If you've been accepted by more than one college, congratulations! Now you get to do the choosing. Here are some tips to help you make up your mind.

## Ranking College Characteristics

Do some soul-searching to figure out which of your colleges would provide the best fit for you. Which one offers the educational and social experiences you are seeking? Here is a list of factors you might want to think about:

- **Location:** Urban, suburban, or rural campus? How far from home?
- **Size:** How big is the student population? What about class size?
- **Mix of students:** Is the college coed? Are there students from all over the country, with different backgrounds and experiences?
- **Academics:** Does the college offer programs of study that interest you?
- **Extracurriculars:** Does the college have the types and ranges of extracurricular activities you are interested in?
- **Facilities:** Will you have access to labs, computing centers, and music, theater, or athletic facilities?

Rank these characteristics in order of importance to you and see how well each college matches up.

## Get Advice from People You Trust

Visiting a college's campus can help break a deadlock. It's up to you to choose the college you want to attend. Although this decision is ultimately a personal one, it never hurts to ask for advice from people who know you well and care about your future.

- **Talk to your parents:** Find out how each school's costs will impact the family's finances. Be patient with your folks—picking a college can be an emotional process.
- **Consult your advisors:** Ask your teachers, coaches, mentors, and religious leaders about their college experiences. Find out what they liked best and least about their college years—you might gain a new perspective on what to expect of the next four years.
- **Don't forget your counselor:** Meet with your counselor. Your counselor knows you well and has years of experience helping students with college decisions.

## Talk to Current Students

Get first-hand knowledge about what it's really like to attend a particular college from current students. Don't be afraid to ask frank questions—your future college will be home, school, and work to you for the next four years.

- Your counselor may be able to put you in touch with former high school students who are now attending your colleges.
- College admissions offices can also give you contact information for current students, advisors, and professors.

## Visit Campuses

Visiting a college's campus can help break a deadlock if you can't decide between two or more colleges. At this point, a campus visit is less about facts and figures than intuition and whether or not you click with a school. Ask yourself, "Will I be happy on this campus? Can I really picture myself here?" Get a good feel for the school by talking to students, sitting in on a class, and eating in a dining hall. Don't be afraid to trust your instincts.

## Compare Your Financial Aid Awards

If you receive offers of financial aid from more than one college, use the College Board's [Compare Your Aid Awards](#) tool to compare:

- Total amount of aid awarded
- Family share of costs
- Percentage of gift aid (grants and scholarships) vs. self-help aid (work-study and loans) for up to four schools, side by side

## Don't Rush Your Decision

Many colleges expect your final decision by May 1<sup>st</sup>, so you have about one month to make up your mind. It's understandable if you're tempted to make a snap decision, just to end the uncertainty and get the whole process over with. However, try to keep your options open in case circumstances change (e.g. your parents decide to appeal your financial aid package or you decide to change your intended major).

## Decide and Reply

Once you've made a decision, send in your acceptance letter. Don't forget to inform all of the schools that offered you admission of your final choice. You're holding onto someone else's spot. A simple letter thanking them for their consideration, but declining their offer, will do.

Remember, there shouldn't be pressure to find the perfect college. Any number of schools can be good fits and make you happy.