

When Is Too Early to Begin Planning for college?

At this time of year, parents of high school sophomores and juniors inevitably begin worrying about college preparation, often asking, when is a good time to begin planning?

The truth is that some families are preparing college wish lists with students as early as first grade. Fourth graders are taking campus tours. Recent new stories about college and career readiness programs in middle and even elementary schools have intensified the debate about how soon might be too soon to plan for life after high school. On the other hand, families who are motivated to seek assistance from college planning professionals often comment that they wished they had started the process sooner. They recognize that starting earlier is similar to building a house – the stronger the foundation the stronger the house.

In my experience as a college planner who frequently conducts workshops on college preparation – covering topics such as building an effective school list; understanding financial aid and devising smart plans to pay for school; and constructing a strong college application with stand-out essays and ACT/SAT scores – I've come to believe that it is never too soon to begin the process. The journey from middle school to high school senior is a fast one and a lack of preparation can really negatively impact the desired outcome.

At the end of the day, no matter when you start, you want to ensure your planning efforts accomplish two objectives: providing students with a wide choice of exciting college options, but at a price parents can reasonably afford.

So, as you begin navigating this everchanging and complex process, here are four key points to think about:

1. Great college planning starts with helping students explore their interests, paying particular attention to what they do best. This encourages them to establish high expectations for themselves, while also thinking critically about areas in need of improvement.
2. To keep college and career options open, students should also be encouraged to make smart choices about their course work in high school. Language and math courses may not be a student's favorite, but could be crucial for college testing (both the SAT and ACT) and acceptance criteria. They need to see the big picture so they can understand how taking rigorous courses impact their path through high school and beyond.
3. A rich resume can be a wonderful way to showcase a student's community service, internships, jobs, extracurricular activities like sports, dance, and band, etc. These activities can be instrumental to helping a student not only get into college, but earning merit scholarships to help fund college.

4. Remember too that even young children can at times articulate career and professional aspirations; begin engaging in conversations with them to get a sense of what they aspire to. You can then use this as a basis to choose the appropriate courses, internships, and extracurriculars that connect to a career path that interests them.

The process of planning for college can be a daunting one for both parents and students. However, engaging in honest conversations, encouraging students along the way, and seeking help when it is needed can lead to an outcome that will leave everyone feeling happy at the end journey.