INNOVATIVE COLLEGE PREP

GRADE-LEVEL PLANNING GUIDE

10th Grade: Discovering Your Strengths

Deepen your interests, show initiative, and start looking at colleges with curiosity

For: 10th grade students, their families, counselors and teachers

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Revised November 2026. General guidance only. Admissions policies and deadlines vary by college and change; always confirm with each institution.

Sophomore year: from trying things to choosing

In ninth grade you explored. In tenth grade you begin to notice patterns: what you are good at, what you keep coming back to, and what kind of learning environment helps you thrive. This guide helps you act on those discoveries without pressure to have everything decided.

1. Check your academic progress and course rigor

Start the year by looking honestly at your transcript. Your grades from ninth grade are already part of your record, and tenth grade shows whether you can build on them.

- **Review your ninth-grade results** with your counselor: Which subjects came easily? Which needed more effort? What changed your results?
- **Decide on rigor with intention.** Honors, AP, IB or dual-enrollment courses can reflect real interest and readiness. Choose them where you can do well and stay healthy. Taking every advanced course offered is not the goal.
- **Look ahead to junior year.** Many advanced courses have prerequisites. Ask now which tenth-grade choices keep options open for eleventh and twelfth grade.
- **Hoping to play a college sport?** NCAA Division I and II require a set number of NCAA-approved core courses with a minimum core-course GPA, so your course choices from ninth grade on matter. The NAIA uses different standards (such as GPA, test scores or class rank) and does not require approved core courses. Ask your counselor and check the NCAA or NAIA Eligibility Center early.
- **Protect your GPA.** A downward trend is easier to prevent than to fix. If a course is slipping, talk to the teacher in the first weeks, not after progress reports.

> **Be sure the plan fits your school.** Course names, weighting and sequences differ by school and state. Your counselor is the best source for what your school offers and how colleges will see it.

2. Identify developing interests and strengths

Strengths show up in what you do well, what you enjoy, and what others ask you to help with. Try these simple reflection prompts and write down your answers once each semester:

- Which class or project made me lose track of time, and why?
- What problem would I like to help solve in my school or community?
- What do friends, teachers or family say I am good at?
- What is something I want to get better at, even if it is hard?

Patterns matter more than labels. If your answers point to science, writing, building, caring for others, art, business or something else entirely, you can follow that thread through classes, activities and summers.

3. Participate in activities that mean something

Admissions readers look for commitment and growth rather than long lists. Tenth grade is a good time to **go deeper in a few places** and let go of activities you joined only to fill space.

- Keep what you enjoy and make time for it.
- Stay long enough to learn the work. Growth over time is a stronger story than constant switching.
- Count what is real: jobs, family responsibilities, religious or cultural activities, caring for siblings, self-taught skills and personal projects are all legitimate.

The ICP guides call a sustained area of focus a **"spike."** It is one useful way to think about depth, not a requirement and not a guarantee of any result at any college. Some students are known for one thing; others make an equally strong case through varied but consistent commitments.

4. Show initiative and impact

Initiative means starting, improving or taking responsibility, not just attending. Impact means something changed because you were there. Both can be small and local.

Instead of…	Try…
Joining one more club	Taking on one real task in a club you already enjoy, such as organizing an event or training new members
Logging service hours	Following a need you noticed: a tutoring session, a donation drive, a repair or a community garden
Waiting to be assigned	Proposing a small project to a teacher or coach, then following through and reflecting on what happened
Listing a title	Keeping notes on what you did, how many people or hours were involved, and what you learned

Keep numbers honest. If you cannot measure something, describe it plainly and specifically. Do not exaggerate.

5. Begin college exploration, gently

You do not need a college list yet. You do benefit from learning how colleges differ so that you can later say what matters to *you*.

- **Learn the vocabulary:** public and private, large and small, urban and rural, community college and four-year, residential and commuter.
- **Look at a few different colleges** online with a question in mind: What do students study here? What does it cost after aid? What support is available?
- **Use free, official data** such as College Scorecard and College Navigator, and note the data's year and scope.
- **Visit if it is convenient.** Walk through a nearby community college and a four-year campus even if you are not planning to apply. Visits do not need to be expensive.
- **Start learning about testing.** Colleges set their own testing policies, and those policies change. Learn what the PSAT, SAT and ACT are, and ask your counselor how and when your school offers them. A tenth-grade PSAT is practice: colleges do not receive those scores.

> **Rankings are one imperfect lens.** They do not measure fit, cost, support or your own goals. Start with what you want from college, then look at colleges that match it.

6. Plan for junior year

- **Courses:** Choose eleventh-grade classes with your counselor, balancing challenge and workload.
- **Summer before junior year:** Pick one meaningful experience (a job, a course, a project, community work). If you plan to take the SAT or ACT, the free official practice materials from College Board and ACT are a good place to start; paid test prep is not required.
- **Relationships:** Notice which teachers know your work best. Junior-year teachers often write recommendations, so strong effort in those classes matters.
- **Records:** Keep updating your activity record with dates, hours and responsibilities.

Sophomore-year checklist

Fall

☐	Review last year's grades and set one specific goal for each class.
☐	Meet with your counselor to review your course plan through senior year.
☐	Take the PSAT if your school offers it, as practice.

Winter

☐	Pick the two or three activities that matter most and consider a bigger role in one.
☐	Write down your answers to the strengths prompts above.
☐	Spend an hour exploring three very different colleges on College Scorecard.

Spring

☐	Choose junior-year courses with your counselor.
☐	Thank teachers who helped you and keep in touch.
☐	Make a rough plan for the summer.

Summer

☐	Complete one meaningful experience and write down what you did and learned.
☐	Visit a campus (any campus) with questions in hand.

My strengths and interests	What I might do next

Official sources: College Scorecard · College Navigator (NCES) · College Board BigFuture · ICP Sophomore Year guide

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