INNOVATIVE COLLEGE PREP

GRADE-LEVEL PLANNING GUIDE

11th Grade: Your College Admissions Action Plan

Research, test planning, recommendations and early application work, month by month

For: 11th 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.

Junior year is the year to act

Junior-year grades are among the most recent colleges see when you apply, and this is the year you build your college list, decide how to approach testing, line up recommenders and start thinking about essays and costs. It is a busy year, so a steady plan matters more than a perfect one.

1. Academic priorities

- **Keep strong effort in your core courses.** Junior-year grades are included on most applications, and many colleges also see your senior-year grades.
- **Take the most appropriate rigor for you.** Choose advanced courses that match your interests and your capacity, and plan senior-year courses that keep you challenged.
- **Meet your graduation and college-prep requirements.** Ask your counselor which course requirements your target colleges and your state's public universities list, and make sure your senior-year schedule satisfies them.
- **Seek help immediately** if a grade slips. Colleges notice improvement, and you will have more time now to fix problems than in the fall of senior year.

2. Research colleges and build a balanced preliminary list

Start with what you want, then look for colleges that offer it. Questions to answer first: What might I study? How big a campus feels right? Where am I willing to live? What can my family afford? What support do I need?

A balanced list usually includes colleges across a range of admission likelihoods, each of which you would be glad to attend and could afford:

Category	What it means	Questions to ask
Reach	Admission is less likely, even if your record is strong. A college that admits a small share of its applicants is a reach for everyone.	Do I want this college for specific reasons, not only its name? Can I afford it?
Target	Your record is similar to those of typical admitted students.	What programs and support appeal to me? What does it cost after aid?
Likely	Your record is above the typical range for admitted students.	Would I be glad to attend? Is it affordable, and does it have what I want?

Colleges publish information about admitted students (for example, in their Common Data Set), but these numbers describe a group, not you, and cannot predict an individual decision. Aim for a preliminary list of roughly 8–12 colleges by the end of junior year, then refine it in the fall. Use official data such as College Scorecard and each college's website, and note each source's year.

3. Standardized testing: verify current requirements

Testing policies vary. Some colleges require the SAT or ACT, some are test-optional, some are test-free and some require tests for certain programs or applicants. Policies change from one admission cycle to the next.

- **Verify requirements** for every college on your list, for *your* application year, on the college's official admissions page. Do not rely on older lists or word of mouth.
- **Decide whether to test** based on those policies, your preparation and whether a score would reflect your readiness. Ask your counselor how your school supports testing.
- **Plan time to prepare:** official practice materials are free. Many students test in the winter or spring of junior year and can retest later if it makes sense.
- **The fall PSAT/NMSQT** taken in eleventh grade is also how students enter the National Merit Scholarship Program. Ask your counselor when your school offers it.
- **Register early** through the College Board (SAT) or ACT, and find out about fee waivers if cost is a concern.
- Tests matter but they are not everything. Keep your stress in perspective.

Official sources: SAT registration · ACT

4. Activities: depth, leadership and impact

- Aim to deepen your involvement in the activities that matter most to you. Take on responsibility when you are ready and when it fits your interests.
- Leadership comes in many forms: organizing, mentoring, creating, working a job or helping at home. A title is not required.
- Write short, specific descriptions: what you did, how long, how often and what changed. Most application forms allow only a limited number of characters for each entry, so practice being concise now.
- Use the summer after junior year for something meaningful to you. It does not need to be expensive or far from home.

5. Plan teacher recommendations

- **Check requirements.** Many colleges ask for one or two teacher recommendations and a counselor recommendation; some accept more or fewer. Confirm for each college on your list.
- **Choose teachers who know you.** Think of academic teachers (often from junior year) who saw you work hard, improve, contribute or lead.
- **Ask politely and early.** Many students ask in the spring of junior year or early in the fall of senior year, following your school's process. Give recommenders plenty of time.
- **Help them help you.** Offer a short summary of your goals, activities and proud moments. See *Letters of Recommendation* on ICP for more.

6. Begin application and essay preparation

- **Learn the platforms.** Many colleges use the Common App or Coalition with Scoir, and some use their own forms or state systems. Each college decides which it accepts.
- **Brainstorm essay topics** over the spring and summer. Collect stories from your life that show your values and growth. Drafting a personal statement before senior year starts removes pressure.
- **Build your activity record** so you can copy accurate dates, hours and descriptions into applications.

7. Start financial aid research

- Have an open conversation with your family about what is affordable, whether loans are acceptable and what the student can contribute.
- Use each college's **net price calculator** (federal law requires most colleges that take part in federal aid programs to post one) to estimate what a family might pay after grants. The Federal Student Aid Estimator at studentaid.gov gives a rough idea of federal aid eligibility. Estimates are not offers.
- Learn about the FAFSA (Free Application for Federal Student Aid) at studentaid.gov, and ask whether your colleges also require the CSS Profile or their own forms. Confirm the dates for the year you will apply: the form for your enrollment year typically opens in the fall of senior year.
- Begin looking for scholarships through your school counselor, your state's higher education agency and reputable free sources. Never pay to apply for a scholarship.

Official sources: Federal Student Aid · College Scorecard · ICP Affordability lab

Junior-year timeline

When	Focus
Fall	Strong start in classes. Meet with your counselor about postsecondary plans. Take the PSAT/NMSQT if offered. Start a college research list and note what matters to you.
Winter	Review first-semester grades. Decide a testing plan and register. Attend college fairs or virtual sessions. Begin net price calculators for several colleges.
Spring	Take planned tests. Narrow to a preliminary list of roughly 8–12 colleges. Ask teachers about recommendations. Choose senior courses. Visit campuses if possible.
Summer	Draft a personal statement. Complete a meaningful summer experience. Review testing policies and application platforms. Update the activity record and prepare to apply.

Junior-year checklist

☐	Verified current testing policies for each college on my list.
☐	Created a preliminary list with reach, target and likely colleges, with costs checked.
☐	Identified two teachers and a counselor for recommendations.
☐	Brainstormed essay topics and started a draft.
☐	Talked with my family about college costs and aid.
☐	Updated my activity record.

My junior-year plan

Colleges to research	What I like about them	My next step

Testing plan	Teachers to ask	Essay topics to explore

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Revised November 2026. General educational information, not individualized advice; no admissions or financial aid outcome is guaranteed. Colleges set and change their own requirements and deadlines: confirm them on each college's official website.