

Excerpts from Commonly Asked Questions Concerning the College Application Process Montgomery Blair High School

NOTE: These questions are intended to supplement the material found in the student's Plan Book. Please review this information and visit the other links on the Career Center website for detailed information on the college application process. Also, access [the "Bridges" website](#) to see how you can research specific career interests and search for colleges that meet your criteria.

What factors should be considered when selecting colleges?

This can vary tremendously based on individual preferences. Some students only want to consider colleges that are in particular states while others prefer urban or rural settings or schools that have very specific programs that interest them. Here are some general guidelines to follow:

- Try to find colleges that have **majors** that interest you. The *Rugg's Recommendation* books are helpful because they list colleges by their strong departments and by level of selectivity. These reference books are available in the Career Center (Room 121).
- Think about whether you may be happier at a **large university** that offers a wide variety of majors and minors or whether you should consider the advantages of a **smaller college/university** with more limited course offerings but one that offers more discussion-based classes for the first two years and more chances to get to know faculty. For example, some smaller institutions do a great job of getting students into medical schools because students have a better opportunity for internships and personal letters of recommendation from their faculty advisors.
- Consider the differences among **urban, suburban, small town, and rural settings**. (However, for the large majority of students, location is less important than most high school seniors imagine because most of college life is centered on the campus itself and not in the surrounding communities.)
- What about **diversity**? You should consider a broad definition of diversity including geographic, racial, and ethnic characteristics. For example, a student who has grown up on a farm can be as different from a Blair student as someone from another country.
- **Where do most students live?** On-campus options may include theme dorms (substance-free, environmental issues, languages, etc.), suites, and apartments. Check to see if off-campus housing options require a car or if good public transportation is available. Be aware that if a significant portion of the undergraduates are commuting to class, there may be fewer planned weekend activities scheduled for residential students.

Why are college visits important?

After you've read all the literature, go and form your own opinions. You'll be surprised how much you can learn in a few hours. Try to visit colleges while students are in session. Late August is a good time because high schools have not yet started but many colleges have begun. Spring break also can be a great time to go. Some kids like to sit in on classes and spend a night in the dorm. Administrators usually need about two weeks to set this up. (Always call to make sure that a college is in session before you go.)

Get to the campus at least an hour before a scheduled tour so that you can walk around on your own before you listen to the presentations by the admissions staff. Go to the student union and listen to what the students are discussing. Are they talking about a wild party from last weekend? a political science lecture? a community service project? Pick up a student newspaper and see what the hot issues are on campus.

Try to ask specific questions of your student tour guide. For example, don't ask if the dorms are quiet, but rather "Where do you study?" If the guide says that he always goes to the library, that could be a clue that the dorms are loud. If he answers, "sometimes in my room, sometimes in the lounge, and sometimes in the library", that sounds more typical. Try the same strategy to find out about social life. A good question is "What did you do last weekend?" High school students are often surprised to learn that lots of college students might study until 10 pm on a Friday night before going out, or between the football game on Saturday afternoon and going out Saturday night.

Ask about campus safety issues. By law, campus representatives are supposed to volunteer this information, but not everyone does. Again, don't ask if the campus is "safe" but rather "Do you ever feel funny leaving a dorm at midnight and walking across campus?" or "Is there an escort service for folks who want to leave the library after a certain time at night?"

What roles do standardized tests play?

Although some colleges are not emphasizing standardized tests as much as they once did, the large majority of four-year institutions still require them. However, compared to twenty years ago, for most institutions it does not now matter whether you take the SAT or the ACT test. Both are administered several times during the spring, fall, and winter. You will need to register in advance to take these tests. You can register electronically by using a credit card or you can mail in the forms that are available in the Career Center. The websites are www.collegeboard.com for any of the SAT tests and www.actstudent.org for the ACT test.

There are differences in the two tests. The new SAT has three parts which measure critical reading, math (including both geometry and Algebra II) and writing. The ACT test is more content-based and the four sections measure English, math, reading, and science reasoning skills. The ACT provides a writing option that you should take if you are considering more selective colleges. If you are strong in science, English grammar, and have studied trigonometry, you may prefer the content-based ACT test.

Most colleges do not require SAT Subject Tests. However, more competitive institutions do, and, if they are required, you will need to check to see which tests specific colleges prefer. (The Career Center has a list of colleges that will accept the ACT test instead of a combination of the SAT Reasoning and the SAT Subject Tests.) It is possible to take up to three subject tests on the same morning but you cannot take the SAT Reasoning test and any subject tests on the same day. If you do well on any SAT Subject test, you should send in your scores when you apply even if they are not required because strong scores (600 or better) can help if you are a borderline candidate. The best time to take a subject test is in the spring as you are finishing the course. This applies to most specific subjects such as American History, Biology, etc. However, if you chose to take one in a foreign language, you can take it either in the spring of your junior year or in the fall of your senior year to maximize your proficiency.

How does need-based financial aid work?

Keep an open mind when you start to consider the “sticker prices” of colleges. Nationally, about half of all undergraduates qualify for some form of need-based financial aid. The largest program is administered by the federal government and is open to all US citizens and students studying here with a green card. The federal scholarships are based on the financial situation of your family. To apply for federal scholarships, you must fill out the Free Application for Federal Student Assistance (FAFSA) form. It is important to file it early (between January 1 and February 15 if possible) to maximize the likelihood that the federal government and the colleges where you are applying will give you a strong financial aid package. Aid is awarded in the form of grants (which **do not** have to be repaid), college-work study positions (jobs on campus while the student is enrolled), and loans (which **do** have to be repaid after graduation). The FAFSA form is available in a Spanish edition and there is a hotline in both English and Spanish that families can use for questions. In addition, help is available in January and February in the Career Center during lunch and after school to help students fill out their FAFSA forms electronically. There is a tremendous amount of information about financial aid websites including the one administered by Montgomery County Public Schools on the Blair home page (mbhs.edu). Go to “Career Center”, read the general notes, and then click under financial aid. Also check out the scholarships listed in Family Connections.

How does merit aid work?

Even after need-based scholarships have been awarded, there is also the possibility of additional merit-based awards. Merit scholarships can be obtained from state, private, or individual institutional sources. These awards can be based on academic achievements or particular talents, including athletic ability, artistic accomplishments, and community service activism. Institutional awards can vary tremendously by the selectivity level of the college. Obviously, a college where you might be an average applicant does not have much incentive to award merit-based aid, whereas another college with a lower profile might award substantial aid. For example, a recent student wanted to study engineering. He was accepted by the University of Pennsylvania and Villanova University. Penn (as an ivy-league university) did not offer him a dime for his academic achievements, but Villanova offered him a full scholarship, including tuition, fees, books, room and board for four years. When these situations develop, they are “good problems” because there are no bad alternatives. The student chose Villanova because (1) he had a younger sibling who also wanted to attend college one day, and (2) he thought he might have more opportunity to “shine” at Villanova and get more involved in research projects as an undergraduate. Either choice would have been a good one.