

# How to Get into College, Starting Now or It's Never Too Early, and May Not Be Too Late

*A guide for St. Joseph By-the-Sea Students*

The purpose of a college preparatory high school is NOT to prepare you for college.

Surprised?

There are no rehearsals for life. If you are waiting for your “real life” to start, we have news for you: it already has. The experiences you are having, the people you are meeting, the dreams you are dreaming and the things you are doing now are part of your “real life,” so make the most of them.

And the “purpose” of a school like Sea is to help you discover the wonders of this wonderful, terrible world, and the greatness you have within you. Our reason for existing is to help you find what you have to offer and what you have a passion for, and to help you make the most of that so that you can leave us, someday, and make the world different, better.

In the words of our mission statement, we are trying to help you discover what that Gospel message actually means, and what you have within you – spiritually, academically, athletically and socially – so that, as men and women who live their lives for others, you can help the “City of God” grow within the “City of Man.”

That said, we *would* like you to go to college. Why? Because we hope that by attending the best program in the best school you can find for you, you will continue that journey of discovery and hone those skills and make the most of your talents and abilities.

## **The basics of what college is**

First, what is college anyway? Or university? or both? or either?

After you are graduated from Sea you will probably “go to college,” as we Americans say. That’s the expression we have for getting your bachelor’s degree (bachelor comes from a Medieval Latin word for “apprentice” and has nothing to do with being unmarried). This is your basic “college degree”:

- usually a B.A., bachelor of arts, named for the original “liberal arts,” or areas of learning proper to a free (Latin “libera”) person, today it could be in almost any subject;
- sometimes a B.S., bachelor of science, in a science like Chemistry or, often, a pre-professional degree in something like Accounting
- there are others: B.B.A. (bachelor of business administration), B.S.N. (bachelor of nursing science), B.S. in Education (for some teachers), and so on.

These degrees generally take four years to earn. Students generally have to choose a “major” subject, and sometimes a “minor”: you get to pick your courses in college, but the college will specify that of all the many courses they offer, by the time you get your degree you must have taken so many courses in English, in Math, in Language, etc., and then something like 10 courses in your “major” subject, and something like 6 courses in your “minor” (these are just examples: every college is free to make its own rules about these matters; courses are often designated as being worth a certain number of “credits,” and the college will specify that you need to complete so many credits in each subject).

You may not be allowed by the college to pick your major until your sophomore year, or you might go right into a specialized program and have things laid out for you from the very first day of freshman year.

You might earn your bachelor’s degree at a place called a “college”: Wagner College, Amherst College, Caldwell College, Manhattan College (which, curiously, isn’t in Manhattan, but is in the Bronx!). A “college” usually specializes in this basic bachelor’s degree.

### **What’s a university?**

What’s this “university” stuff?

A university is a larger institution than a free-standing college. In fact, a university might be divided into a number of colleges inside of itself.

Universities tend to offer a wider variety of majors and of courses, and may even have a number of different campuses.

Some students prefer a small college, as it is more comfortable, and they feel more like a person with a name. Other students will feel claustrophobic, and choke in such a small atmosphere.

Some students prefer a university, with its wide array of activities, its big campus, and all of its many opportunities. Some students will feel like just a number in the crowd and be confused and frustrated by such a vast number of choices they have to make.

One is not necessarily academically better than the other: there are as many small colleges that are among the top 10 or 20 schools in the country as there are universities.

The question will not be which one is “best,” but which one is best *for you*.

One usual difference between a college and a university is graduate school. Free-standing colleges offer an emphasis on the bachelor’s degree. If they have graduate degrees at all, it is usually in just a very few subjects.

Universities, on the other hand, may have one or more colleges within the university for bachelor’s degrees, but the university will also have graduate schools that offers graduate degrees, like:

- the M.A., master of arts, usually in an academic subject, often earned by high school teachers in their subjects and by others in a wide variety of jobs, this usually takes two years to earn
- the M.S., master of science, sometimes given specifically for sciences
- the Ph.D., doctor of philosophy (philosophy here refers to the general “love of wisdom,” which is what the word means, and not to the specific subject of philosophy; “doctor” is the Latin word for “teacher”), the highest academic degree, this is often earned by scientific researchers, by college and university professors in just about any field, by psychologists and some other professionals; this can take anywhere from three to seven years to earn after a master’s degree.

### **Professional degrees, too**

Well, I want to be a lawyer, or a doctor, or a CPA. What college should I go to?

None. Or any.

Huh?

You can’t go to college to be a lawyer, or a doctor, or a CPA, but if you want to be a lawyer or a doctor or a CPA you have to go to college.

Many professions, like those just listed, require a “professional degree.” That means you must first go to college, earn a bachelor’s degree, and then apply to law school to earn a J.D. (from the Latin for “doctor of law,” which takes three or four years beyond college), or medical school to earn an M.D. (which takes four years, plus, depending on what type of doctor you want to be), or a program for an M.S. in Finance (which generally takes two years) to be a certified public accountant.

When you get to college and you begin thinking about a major, a faculty advisor will help you decide what to major in and which courses to take if you are planning a career as a lawyer, accountant, doctor, dentist, veterinarian, nurse, physical therapist or any one of dozens and dozens of other professions that require a graduate degree.

### **But how do I get into college in the first place?**

That's the big question for high school students.

To get into Sea you took a single test, the TACHS, and from that score you were admitted to Sea in honors, admitted in the regular course, or wait-listed.

Simple.

Getting into college is nothing at all like that.

When you come back to Sea in September of your senior year after summer vacation, you will have to have done a lot of research and have chosen a handful of colleges to which you want to apply.

For each you will have to make a case to the admissions officer of that college that of all the students applying (and some schools get 15 applications for every vacant seat in a freshman class), he or she should "spend" an empty seat on you.

An admissions officer has a certain number of seats, all sitting there empty, that are for next year's freshman class. It is his or her job to fill those seats with the very best, and to build, student by student, a class which will have certain contours, a certain flavor, a certain diversity of experiences or a shared commitment to certain ideas or goals or principles.

Every school, religious or secular, public or private, has a set of goals or values, a stated profile of what characteristics or experiences or beliefs that school intends that the ideal graduate possess, and therefore what characteristics a freshman should have at the start.

Competitive schools typically receive ten or fifteen applications for each seat in the freshman class. Of these applicants, half or more have the necessary qualities and abilities that would allow them to succeed at that school.

The admissions officer's task, therefore, is to narrow those eight or ten remaining applicants to the one who will be offered a seat.

How will an admissions officer decide whether you are right for his or her school?

Most good schools use a combination of most or all of the following:

- **high school grades**
- **tests**
- **academic extras**
- **extracurriculars**
- **student essays**
- **teacher recommendations**
- **student interviews**

We will discuss each in turn a bit later.

Based on all of these items above, an admissions officer for a competitive school, or a competitive program within a school, will try to answer four key questions:

- **Can this student do the work at our school?** – Is this student intellectually capable of meeting the demands of my institution, considering the student’s native intelligence and the level of learning and preparation they have received?
- **Will this student do the work at our school?** – Does this student have the commitment, drive, maturity, sense of responsibility, energy and stick-to-itiveness to make the most of their abilities in all of their courses, right through to the conferral of the degree?
- **What does this student *bring to my campus*?** – What makes this student special, unique, interesting, the best of the best? What makes them more creative or imaginative, than the student next to them? How will this student’s presence on my campus enrich the experience of those around him or her?
- **What will this student *take into the world from my campus*?** – If we “spend” this seat on this student, what should make me confident that they will take the best of this college or university and go out into the world and use it for the greater good? How have they shown that they are already a true scholar-in-training?

### **Let’s get specific**

#### **I. academics**

- a. Is the student from a challenging school, one that has proven that students have to work for the grades I am looking at, that has good teachers and a good track record of producing highly educated, reliably hard-working students?

- b. Did the student choose challenging courses? When offered a choice, did the student opt for the tougher course or the easier?
- c. Did the student get good grades in their courses? How did their grades compare with those of their classmates? A 95 is impressive, unless everybody got a 95, so what was this student's rank in class?
- d. Is the student consistent? Do they get great grades in only some subjects, the subjects they like, or are they mature enough to work hard in every subject they take?
- e. Does the student have a "rising record" rather than "falling record" - did their grades go up year after year, or are they going down?  
Colleges prefer students with great grades in all four years of high school. They will understand a weak freshman year followed by better sophomore and junior years. They are not interested in strong freshmen who stopped working as they got closer to college.

## **II. tests**

- a. the SAT, basically a test of intelligence, reading, math and writing skills, are used by many, though not all, colleges; they can be important, depending on the school, but are by no means the most important element for most: terrific SAT scores are usually a help, of course, but students have "aced" the SAT and still been turned down by most colleges because they had little else in their "portfolio"
- b. the ACT, an alternative to the SAT, more subject-knowledge-based, preferred by some colleges; students might be wise to take both the SAT and ACT, as some score better on one or the other
- c. SAT II - Subject Tests: these are designed to test the knowledge the student has in a particular subject; competitive schools want at least three of these, and they sometimes specify (at least one must be English; or one must be a foreign language; or, for an engineering program, they might demand a math and a science, for instance)
- d. APs: the Advanced Placement Tests, given at the end of an AP course, are graded on a scale of 1 to 5; some colleges will give actual course credit for having taken these; others will waive required courses; the most elite schools will do neither, but if a student has not taken a handful of APs during junior and senior year, those elite colleges will assume they chose easy courses and not even admit them in the first place

### **III. “academic extras”**

- a. A good college may have 15 applications for each seat; 10 of these students may have top grades, great SAT’s, terrific SAT-II’s and a handful of 4’s and 5’s on AP tests; so how do admissions officers narrow down the pool of applicants? Once they have the pile chopped down using the above measures, they want to find the truly special students, the unique or interesting ones. Does the student have a scholarship, from the high school or from another organization? Did they participate in some summer academic program, a competitive summer camp, a special student conference, a scientific research project, serve as an intern at a lab or museum or historical association, etc., etc.? Does this student have some experience or qualification that separates him or her from all the other “good students” out there?

### **IV. extracurriculars**

- a. Sports are included, but so are the arts, the sciences, languages, etc.
- b. How did this student stand out from the herd? There are a lot of football players, or a lot of actors in the school play. What makes this student different? Were they both a star football player AND an actor in the school musical for all four years, and a founder of the rifle team and editor of the newspaper...?
- c. How may this student enrich my own campus?
- d. Did the student show leadership (extremely important for colleges) by being entrusted by peers and teachers with an office in an organization or a task, or did the student have the creativity and maturity to found a new club or team?
- e. Did the student show true community service – not just the typical high school volunteerism, or something done clearly for the college application, but something impressive and real?
- f. Did the student have employment or were they involved in activities centered around writing? Colleges love student journalism, literary efforts, publication, etc.

### **V. student essay**

- a. Colleges desperately want students who can express themselves perfectly and maturely in writing. They also want to really understand applicants, and discover what is special about their personality, character, values, attitudes and abilities. The essay has become a crucial part of the application for many, many colleges – for some it is the most important part.

- b. Does this student have the ability to express himself or herself in a perfectly grammatically correct, maturely written essay using mature vocabulary well and wisely? Or is the essay overbearing, or full of misused words as the student throws the last two weeks of vocabulary test words into it, or is it immature and kiddy-ish?
- c. Does the essay express a quality of mind, intelligence, critical thinking skills, a depth of mind and a creativity and imagination appropriate to our university?
- d. Who is this student? The story the student tells, the choices they make in the essay, does this show me something about the student's values and character, about their possible future? Is this a truly special human being?

**VI. teacher recommendations**

- a. The college wants to know from two teachers who know the student well what that student will be like in class. Will the student be interesting and worthwhile to teach? Will professors look forward to mentoring the student?
- b. Is the student hard-working, reliable, responsible?
- c. Will classmates have their education enriched because of this student's presence in the room? Does the student raise the level of conversation, offer interesting challenges, thoughtful insights, unique perspectives?
- d. On a daily basis does the student improve his or her courses by participating in them?

**VII. interview**

- a. The interview, mandatory for some schools, optional for others, and not offered by some, can be helpful for the student.
- b. Does this student have enthusiasm for my school? After all, a college wants students who want to be there, and if two students are more or less equally matched, the college will offer admission to the one who expresses energetic desire for that school and a commitment to be there over a student who comes across as able to take it or leave it.
- c. Does the student have a mature bearing? Do they dress appropriately for an academic, scholarly, professional interview or do they show up either in stained tee shirt and shorts or conversely dressed as though they are about to go clubbing? Do they seem like true young adults or are they still immature "kids"?

- d. Does the student converse interestingly and maturely? Do they ask good questions?

### **So when do I start?**

Now.

All of these elements will be put together to build a profile of you. Obviously, the picture they show will be one that a student starts to paint with his or her first day of freshman year. If a student has a weak start to high school, so much the more is it imperative that they ramp up their performance as much as possible in the time they have left.

In the end, students need to remember that there is an element of luck in the process. Admissions officers will admit that even when they sort out all those applications, they are still left with more than one application for each seat. How do they choose between the two or three left? Sometimes there is a reason, sometimes there are uncontrollable variables (too many New Yorkers in this class, so a school decides to take the Nebraskan instead), sometimes it is just luck.