

College Prep Advice for 9th and 10th Grade Students

Compiled from experience by Mark Moody, College Counselor

Academics

Take care of the basics. Learn how to “do school” to your best ability.

Every semester is a new chance to show your best effort. Be aware that you’re building a record, and be aware that it tells a story over time. College admission officers look at trends in grades—an upward trend tells a positive story, even if you don’t feel like you started off strongly.

Colleges understand the difficulty of the curriculum at your school and factor that in when they look at your transcript; on the other hand, no matter what school you attend, you’re expected to perform to the best of your abilities as you build your high school record.

Stay in math classes for your entire four years in the high school, and take at least three years of lab sciences, social studies and foreign language. If you decide to drop one of these areas in your senior year, you should replace that block with a class in an academic area.

Don’t just focus on the areas that come easy to you—if you challenge yourself by taking classes outside your comfort zone, you’ll learn valuable skills for college, and become a better thinker.

Take your teachers’ advice on your course progression. Jumping over levels can delay the growth of your foundation of understanding, and impact your other courses if you are struggling in one area unnecessarily.

Get to know your teachers and learn how to talk with them. Don’t be afraid to ask for help or clarification! The more comfortable you become with your teachers now, the more successful you will be now, and in college—your professors will expect you to work with them and to take control of your own learning process.

Colleges would rather see balance, intellectual curiosity, and deep development of meaningful interests than a transcript with 8 or more AP’s or 4 HL’s connected to a stressed-out student.

Extracurricular Activities

Through academic coursework, athletics, music, art, community service, publications, clubs and other outlets at school and in the community, you have the chance to discover new interests and directions. Take risks, find something you really love, and invest as much of yourself in it as you can. Your activities, if meaningful— and the perspective you gain from them— are a key element in distinguishing you as a candidate for a college.

Colleges care much more about the **quality** of your extracurricular involvement than the **quantity** of activities.

Use your summers to explore new activities and enrich yourself in whatever way appeals to you.

Community service is valuable, but like anything else, if it’s done to check off a box or pad a resume, it will not be especially meaningful to a college admission committee.

"Purchased" opportunities are not particularly valuable to college admission officers, especially if they are not related to a larger theme of a passion or ability you have pursued throughout high school.

Being committed to a single activity and showing genuine, self-motivated leadership and growth in that interest or area is far more impressive and impactful than a long list of clubs that you joined, or an officer title alone.

There is no formula or recipe for getting into college; there are not specific categories of activities that you need on your list. Spend time in activities that come from your genuine interest. Definitely don’t give up things you love to add an accomplishment just for the sake of a new entry on a college application activities list!



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Community Life

Be kind to everyone you encounter at school and in your activities, and show your appreciation to those who help you along the way. It will make your life happier and you'll make things easier for yourself.

Speak up in class— participating actively helps your and your peers' understanding, and helps your teachers understand your relationship with the material, so that they can help you learn effectively. It's not everyone's comfort zone; push yourself to engage and it will get easier with practice. You'll also need to ask for recommendations—the more active, cooperative and positive you are, the better those letters can be.

Don't jeopardize your future by taking risky, inappropriate, or illegal actions. Think twice and take a moment to think if you feel like you are about to step over the line. It's a lot easier to focus on the positives when you fill out an application than to have to explain a red flag (like suspension, expulsion or arrest) on your record.

Make sure your actions reflect the person you are and want to be in the future.

Standardized Testing

Don't spend time thinking about college entrance tests or preparation before the end of your tenth grade year.

Don't let test prep take over your valuable time for studying and extracurricular activities. Identify your areas for improvement from practice, and work on them. If you seek outside help, look for tutors who talk about efficiency and maximizing your time in prep; you don't need to prep for more than a few months.

Test scores, when they are used, are less important in the big picture than the quality of your curriculum and performance in the classroom—as reflected by teacher comments, grades, and the knowledge you can articulate. Your class work and activities should always be the priorities in your schedule.

General Advice

Read! Read often and read widely—read as much as you can from different sources (fiction, non-fiction, daily newspapers, magazines, online publications and special interest forums, etc.) Reading is the best preparation for everything from writing to standardized tests. It builds empathy and it expands your understanding of the world and events.

Always give your best effort in all your classes and in all endeavors at school. If you are unable to because too much is on your plate, take something off.

The more you understand yourself, your strengths and the things that excite you, the better prepared you'll be for finding and applying to the right colleges.

In every situation, think about your actions and how they affect others.

Try not to listen to opinions about college that come in the form of gossip or speculation—keep an open mind, and when the time comes you will have plenty of great resources to help you find the right fit.

Doing more is not better! Quality is the goal in academics and activities. When the time comes, an application that radiates authentic interests and self-motivation to learn for the sake of learning is powerful. This mindset will also make it much easier for you to find and connect to colleges where you can continue to grow and thrive.

Take time to look around, to reflect and take stock of yourself along the way. Try to enjoy your years in high school, your time with family and your friends!

