

# GETTING STARTED - THE BASICS

## The Campus Visit

Like people, colleges and universities have “personalities.” Different schools emphasize different beliefs and values and put emphasis on different subject areas. Schools differ in the amount of attention, support, and aid they provide for undergraduates. The college or university you select will be your home for four years. It is important to pick one that will match your own needs and expectations. You should consider the following factors in selecting a college:

- Do you see yourself living in a big city or a small town?
- How far away from home would you like to go?
- Do you like to see familiar, friendly faces everywhere you go, or would you be happy as one of 5000 undergraduates?
- What subjects are you most likely to major in?
- What are the admission requirements and how much will it cost?
- Is there financial aid available?
- Are there scholarships available for academics and/or athletics?
- Do you have to live on campus? Are there dorms? Are there sororities and fraternities?
- Does the college provide meal services?
- Are there support programs for students with disabilities or first generation college students?
- Does the college have a English as Second Language (ESL) program?
- Do you want to play college athletics? If so, does the institution offer the sport?
- Does the college offer a wide selection of extracurricular activities?

Once you have an idea about the kind of school you would like to attend, it is time to search for information about colleges that match your needs and expectations. Write to at least three colleges/universities to request information. There are several ways to find out about perspective colleges without leaving your home or school:

- See your guidance counselor or Career Specialist for other sources of information.
- Use the Washington Occupation Information System (WOIS), Discover, or Career Cruisin' program in the Career Center to find schools that have features you would like.
- Search the Internet for Web pages of prospective schools. Considerable information is available through the Internet, including “virtual tours” of college campuses. One excellent source of information about schools throughout the country can be found at [www.collegeboard.com](http://www.collegeboard.com).
- Look up prospective schools in the College Handbook (available in the Career Center and in libraries), a valuable reference that offers many kinds of information about schools, colleges, and universities.

It is very difficult to get an idea about what a particular college or university would be like without going there, meeting some of the staff, talking with students, and walking the paths you will walk if you choose to go there. It is worth taking a day off from school, if necessary, to visit a prospective college. If you start planning and exploring your options early, however, you can avoid missing too much school for college visitations. Make a preliminary list of colleges you may want to visit. Some start in August, and it may be possible to get in at least one visitation during the summer. Plan to

take advantage of teacher workshop days and holidays in the early fall to visit campuses. Going to visit your grandparents or family friends? Think about whether there is a college in that area that you may want to visit. Once you have visited, it is time to apply.



# Applying for Admission

Most applications for admission to a college or university and for scholarships have similar requirements:

- A form that usually asks for general information about you (name, address, birth date, etc.)
- An official or unofficial transcript of courses you have taken and your grades
- Recommendations from one or more (usually two) teachers, counselors, or community members
- Lists of awards, activities, community service, offices held, etc.
- An essay
- A check to cover processing fees

## Application Form

*Many schools prefer students make application by using the on-line application.* If not, applications should always be filled out—*neatly*—in dark blue or black ink, or (if possible) typed. If you have just one copy of an application, it may be helpful to make a second copy to use as a draft. Fill in all the blanks, using “N/A” for “not applicable” if a question does not apply to you. If you need more space for categories such as “Activities” or “Honors and Awards,” you may attach a list or academic resume that provides more detail than you would be able to include in the application alone. In that case, write “See attached” in the appropriate section of the application to let the evaluators know where to find more information. Be sure to sign and date the application form.

Remember that the application form is likely to be the first thing evaluators will look at in trying to decide whether to offer you admission. First impressions are very important. Therefore, it is essential that you pay attention to details. Make sure that the form is neat and clean, that all words are spelled correctly, and that any corrections are virtually invisible. Following are some specifics about the application process.

- You may pick up an application to a Washington two or four-year public college in the Career Center.
- You must request applications for private and out of state colleges.
- You are responsible to know the due dates and deadlines for each college you are interested in attending.
- Your counselor must process all applications prior to mailing.
- Make a copy of the entire application and any additional documents for yourself prior to mailing the application.

## Transcript

An *unofficial* transcript is simply a copy of your transcript (classes, grades, and test scores). An *official* transcript is one that is stamped with a seal and signed by a school official. Official transcripts are generally provided in sealed envelopes and may be mailed directly from the high school to college admissions or scholarship committees. You can obtain a transcript of your grades from the counseling office, usually by filling out a request form. Allow two or three days for the transcript to be prepared.



# Applying for Admission

## Recommendations

Many applications require recommendations from teachers, counselors, or members of the community who know you well. Most adults who deal with high school students are happy to provide recommendations, provided that they have enough information to work with. When asking for a recommendation, give the person a resume or list of your achievements, activities, areas of specialization in school, goals for the future, employment history (including volunteer work), etc. If the application requires that the recommendation be sent directly by the author, provide him or her with a stamped, addressed envelope for convenience.

It is appropriate to ask the authors of recommendations give you two copies—one addressed to a specific college and the other addressed “To Whom It May Concern.” This allows you to make copies of the recommendation and use it for other applications. Keep copies of these letters—as well as certificates of achievements or awards, your resume, and other similar documents—in a notebook or “portfolio.”

## Awards, Activities, Community Service, etc.

Many schools and scholarship committees put a great deal of emphasis on your involvement in extracurricular and out-of-school activities. They are looking for someone who is not only likely to succeed academically but who is also a “well-rounded” person—someone who has a variety of interests and abilities and works well with others. In sections of an application asking for such information, be prepared to discuss in detail your involvement in athletics, clubs, youth groups, or other organizations. Be sure to list any offices you may have held or awards you and/or your team may have received.

## Essay

Almost all applications require at least one essay. The desired length of the essay may vary from one or two paragraphs to 800 or 1000 words (four pages), with a typical essay being about one page in length. The topic or theme of the essay is generally always given in the instructions.

Since most evaluators do not have the luxury of meeting applicants in person, the content of the essay is the means they use to form an opinion about an individual’s character, goals, ambition, motivation, and values. They can also tell a great deal by how the essay is written—whether it is neat, well organized, grammatically correct, and meaningful. (Use spell-check!) It is worthwhile to take time to ensure that the essay is interesting, accurate, and appropriate in terms of length and subject matter. Ask someone you know who is a good writer to read a draft of your essay before you print the final copy. Make sure your essay has a title and that your name is at the top. If the application asks you to choose one of two or more topics, make sure it is clear which question you have chosen to answer.

## Immunization Records

In recent years, many colleges and universities are requiring students have up-to-date immunizations and submit the appropriate documentation. Check with the institutions for specific requirements.

## Entrance Exams: The COMPASS, ACT and SAT

The COMPASS test is required for students entering community college. This is not an “admissions” test but rather a test designed to determine a student’s skills levels to assure proper placement in classes. Unless you are a running start student and have already taken the test, you will take the ASSET in March or April of your senior year.

The SAT and the ACT are national, standardized tests, at least one of which is required for admission to most colleges and universities and for consideration for almost all scholarships. For students who took the PSAT in their junior year and had high scores, the SAT may qualify them for consideration in the National Merit Scholarship program. Registration packets and information are available in the career center.

If you have not already done so in your junior year, plan to take the SAT (and/or ACT) **no later than the November test date** in your senior year. While these tests are offered several times throughout the school year, it is important to have the scores available for early application to colleges and for scholarship consideration. When registering for the SAT, ask to have the scores sent to all the colleges you have identified that you may want to attend.

REMEMBER, that a standardized test score is only one piece of information a college looks at when considering your application. So...don't panic. Admission officers may consider your grade point average, number and content of college preparatory courses completed, community activities, job, etc. Which test should you take? You may want to take them both as each tests different area.

ACT	
English 25%	Math 25%
Reading 25%	Science Reasoning 25%
No Analogies No Math Grid-ins No Penalty for Incorrect Answers	

SAT	
Verbal Reasoning 50%	Math Reasoning 50%
Analogies Math Grid-ins Penalty for Incorrect Answers	

Career Interest

No Career Interest

## Financial Aid

The term “financial aid” primarily refers to grants, loans, and work-study opportunities provided by colleges to students who have need for assistance. This need is determined by filing the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). **Virtually all college-bound students should file the FAFSA**, whether or not they think they may be eligible for need-based assistance.

Determination of eligibility is based on many factors, including number of children in a family, number of family members in college, age of parents, and many other considerations. It is impossible to guess without filing the form what a student’s eligibility may be.

### The FAFSA

FAFSA forms may be filed on or after January 1 of the year in which a student plans to enroll in college. Electronic filing over the Internet is recommended for accuracy and faster service. The forms are available in the Career Center starting in about mid-November and students are encouraged to get the form and begin gathering the required information so the form can be completed as soon as possible – on January 1. Information about government assistance for education and the FAFSA, as well as the electronic form, are available at the U.S. Department of Education Web site [www.fafsa.ed.gov](http://www.fafsa.ed.gov).

To complete the FAFSA on-line, students must have a pin number. You can get your pin number by going to [www.fafsa.ed.gov](http://www.fafsa.ed.gov) and follow the directions for obtaining a pin number. Allow at least one week for request to process and your pin number to be assigned.

***A word of caution:*** You may receive mailings from companies claiming to file the FAFSA for you and guarantee you scholarship assistance – for a price. You may find sites on line that offer the same services – for a fee. Don’t be fooled into paying for a service that you can get for FREE through your counseling office and Career Center. The first F in “FAFSA” stands for *free*.

### When to File

It is important to **file the FAFSA as soon as possible**—on or soon after January 1 of the year you plan to start college. Many kinds of financial assistance (grants, loans, work-study programs) are available through the Federal government, usually on a first-come, first-served basis. A FAFSA is also required for school-sponsored scholarships. It is strongly recommended you make a copy of everything you submit.

**Be sure to attend your school’s Financial Aid night and bring your parents.**

## Financial Aid – Frequently Asked Questions

**Q:** *How much does it cost to go to a Washington State college?*

**A:** Here are some general *estimates* based on expected costs for tuition, room and board, fees, books, supplies, transportation, and miscellaneous expenses:

- Public four-year college or university – \$14,000 - \$17,500 per year
- Private four-year college or university – \$29,000 - \$37,000 per year
- Community college – \$2,500 (for those living at home) to \$10,000 per year
- Vocational/technical school – \$3,500 (tuition and books only) per year

It is important to note that many private colleges and universities place considerable emphasis on making their schools affordable for all students. Federal and school funding may make an expensive, private college more affordable for some students than a public school. Do not base your decisions on which schools to apply to solely on apparent cost.

**Q:** *What kinds of financial aid are available?*

**A:** There are four basic kinds of aid: scholarships, grants, loans, and work-study programs. Scholarships and grants are “free” money, which does not have to be repaid. However, there is not enough of this “gift” aid to meet the needs of all students who require assistance. Usually gift aid is offered with loans and/or work-study funds, which are commonly called “self-help” aid.

**Q:** *How much financial aid will I receive?*

**A:** You may receive Federal financial aid equal to your “financial need,” which is determined by the Department of Education based on your FAFSA information. “Financial need” is the difference between the cost of education at a particular institution and the amount the family might reasonably be expected to pay. It is important to note, however, that many colleges and universities have sources of funding that are not “need based,” and many scholarships do not have financial need as one of their criteria.

In the final analysis, the amount of financial assistance you may receive can only be determined by being accepted to the colleges of your choice and applying for financial aid

through their Financial Aid Offices. The amount offered by various colleges can vary greatly. One recent graduate applied and was accepted to five colleges. The amount of financial assistance he was offered varied from 0 to a full-ride scholarship!

**Q:** *Do income tax forms have to be completed before completing the FAFSA?*

**A:** Having the federal tax return completed before completing the FAFSA can make processing of the FAFSA simpler and easier. However if necessary, estimated figures can be used in completing the application. If the estimated figures later differ from the actual figures, it will be necessary to correct the information on the FAFSA by contacting the Financial Aid Office at your college or university.

## Financial Aid - Frequently Asked Questions

**Q:** *Will an offer of admission by a school be coordinated with an offer of financial assistance?*

**A:** Not necessarily. Many schools offer admission long before they can make financial aid awards.

**Q:** *I am moving out of my parents' house and will support myself from now on. Do my parents still need to provide information on the FAFSA?*

**A:** Yes. Students under 24 years of age are considered dependent on their parents by federal law, no matter where they live. (There are some exceptions, as noted in the instructions for filing the FAFSA.)

**Q:** *My parents are separated or divorced. Whose information should be included on the FAFSA?*

**A:** Information should be provided for the parent you lived with most during the past 12 months. If you don't live with either parent or lived with both parents for an equal number of days, information should be given for the parent who provided the greater amount of support to you during the calendar year. The instructions for filing the FAFSA contain more detailed instructions.

**Q:** *What if my family has unusual circumstances or my situation changes after we have applied for aid?*

**A:** Contact the Financial Aid Office of the school you plan to attend. They can determine if the change will affect your eligibility for assistance. **(Do NOT send letters of explanation with your FAFSA.** Doing so will only delay processing, and the letter of explanation would be destroyed.)

**Q:** *What documents may the school request to verify the information on my application?*

**A:** You may be asked to provide documents to verify any item on the application. Make sure you and/or your parents keep a photocopy of completed federal tax returns and W-2s used to complete the application.



# Scholarships

Starting in November, the counseling department will announce periodically that scholarship lists are available. Pick up the lists, get the application forms, and apply for any scholarships that might be available through local clubs, businesses, and organizations. Each year, dozens of our students get some financial help for college through such scholarships. Remember, however, that **by far the most scholarship money comes directly from colleges and universities to students who have been accepted early.**

A wealth of information about scholarships is available in the counseling office and Career Center. Students should start applying for local scholarships only after college applications are in the mail.

## Where to Get Scholarship Information

The Career Center at your high school is the best source of information about scholarships. Listen to the bulletin announcements for up to date information and application availability. Scholarships, often funded by local clubs and organizations, are a great opportunity for many students, as competition will be restricted to students within a relatively small geographic area.

Numerous Web sites also provide information about scholarships. An individual student is likely to be eligible for only a few of these, however, and competition is fierce for a nationally advertised scholarship. Many students find that using Web sites to find scholarship information (except for specific colleges or universities) may waste valuable time.

**DO NOT, under any circumstances, pay anyone to provide you with scholarship information.** Every year, students and their families are tricked into paying huge sums of money to companies that claim to “guarantee” scholarships to college-bound students. All they really guarantee is information about scholarships—information that can be obtained free at your school or over the Internet.

## How to Apply for a Scholarship

Most scholarship applications will require similar information including:

- GPA
- SAT or ACT scores
- Class rank
- Specific courses taken in certain subjects
- Transcript
- Extracurricular clubs and activities
- Sports
- Leadership positions

You might want to make a detailed list of activities and accomplishments to use as an attachment to some or all of your applications. This is also useful for providing

information to prospective references.

## Scholarships

### How to Apply for a Scholarship – cont.

Many applications are available on-line. However, when filling out a paper application, use black or dark blue ink (or type it, if possible). If the application is long or particularly complicated, make a copy to use as a draft. Answer all questions carefully and completely. If a question does not apply to you, put "N/A" (not applicable) in the blank. If you make a mistake, take care to correct it very neatly. Check your spelling! If sentence or paragraph length replies are required, check to be sure that you have used good grammar and complete sentences. In this, as in many aspects of life, first impressions are very important!

Almost all scholarships will require that other documents be sent with them; specifically, an official transcript, an essay, and recommendations. Allow two to four weeks to collect this information before the deadline on which the scholarship is due. A form is available in the counseling office for requesting an official transcript. Allow two or three days to receive it. Think about people who know you well and would likely give you a good recommendation. Give these people (teachers, employers, family friends) a list of your activities and accomplishments so that they can provide specific information in letters they may write about you, as well as any specific instructions given for references in the scholarship materials. Write an essay that is professional and personable in tone and that addresses any specific subjects given in the scholarship instructions.

**Deadlines matter** - DO NOT fail to mail the scholarship application and related materials on or (preferably) before the postmark deadline. If you miss the deadline, your application will not be considered, and all your efforts will have been in vain. (If a scholarship form does not specify that the deadline is the day on which the application must be *postmarked*, assume that the application must be *received* by that date and mail the material several days in advance of that date.)

### **Writing “THE” Scholarship Essay**

The personal statement is YOURS. If it looks like Madison Avenue, the admission committee will probably assume that it is your mother's or father's or their secretaries' work. A "gimmick" essay rarely goes anywhere. The committee may be amused but not impressed with your candidacy. Write a serious essay, from the bottom of your heart, in the most mature manner possible.

More information about writing good scholarship essays is available in the Career Center and on the Internet.

### Asking for Recommendations

Be sure to allow as much time as possible for the people you ask to provide letters of recommendation (a minimum of two weeks). Provide a list of clubs you belong to, honors and awards you have received, offices you have held, etc., to make it easier for the writer make specific

comments about you. If the directions state that references are to send their letters directly to the scholarship committee, provide stamped, addressed envelopes for their convenience. Many references will provide you a second copy of their letter, addressed "To Whom It May Concern," for use in future applications. Keep these original letters in a safe place—a notebook or folder—as part of your application/employment portfolio.

## Writing “THE” Scholarship Essay

The length of a scholarship essay may vary from one paragraph (about 100 words) to several pages, the average being about one page. The instructions will almost always provide some guidance regarding content. Plan your essay to be close to the maximum length without exceeding it. The essay is often an extremely important factor to the committees that award scholarships. Following are “tips” for writing a successful essay:

**DO** start early. Leave plenty of time to revise, and write. You can improve on your presentation.

**DO** read the directions carefully. You will want to answer the question as directly as possible, and you’ll want to follow word limits exactly. Express yourself as briefly and as clearly as you can.

**DO** tell the truth about yourself. The admission committee does not know who you are. Even if you run into a committee member in the future, he or she will have no way of connecting your essay (out of the thousands he or she has read) to you.

**DO** focus on an aspect of yourself that will show your best side. You might have overcome some adversity, worked through a difficult project, or profited from a specific incident. A narrow focus is more interesting than broad based generalizations.

**DO** feel comfortable in expressing anxieties. Everybody has them, and it’s good to know that an applicant can see them and face them.

**DO** tie yourself to the college or scholarship. Be specific about what this particular school or scholarship can do for you. Your essay can have different slants for different colleges.

**DO** speak positively. Negatives tend to turn people off.

**DO** write about your greatest assets and achievements. You should be proud of them!

**DON’T** repeat information given elsewhere on your application. The committee has already seen it -- and it looks as though you have nothing else to say.

**DON’T** write on general, impersonal topics – like the nuclear arms race. The college or scholarship committee wants to know about you.

**DON’T** use the personal statement to excuse your shortcomings. It would give them additional attention.

**DON’T** use clichés.

**DON’T** go to extremes: too witty, too opinionated, or too “intellectual”.

## College Athletics & Scholarships

If you plan to participate in an intercollegiate sport you should consider the following suggestions.

- Discuss with your counselor, which schools have the academic or vocational/technical programs you want.
- Ask your coach at what level does he or she think you can play.
- Ask your coach if he or she will recommend you to several of the schools you are considering.
- Write to the coaches of the school(s) you are considering. Apply to several schools at your suggested ability level AND BELOW. For example: if your suggested ability level is NCAA Division IAA, apply to several of these schools plus other colleges that compete on a lower level (e.g., NAIA schools/community colleges). Keep in mind that most colleges DO NOT give full scholarships for sports. These are limited primarily to division IA & IAA schools, (U of W, WSU, EWU, and GU in the state of Washington.) Many colleges will give talent awards, or give the student preferred status with the financial aid office. These awards of preferred student's status could mean up to several thousand dollars, depending on the school. The counseling center has a list of schools that play ALL NCAA sports in every division.
- All student-athletes wishing to participate in NCAA Division I or II athletic programs must register with the NCAA Initial Eligibility Clearinghouse. The Clearinghouse must certify students who want to participate in NCAA Division I or II athletics. Clearinghouse certification forms can be picked up in the counseling center.
- ***See your counselor as soon as school starts your senior year for college athletic information and Clearinghouse registration information and deadlines!***