# College Applications 101: What to Know Before You Start

*An overview of application platforms, admissions factors, timelines, and key terms*

## Overview

Applying to college can feel overwhelming. Whether you're a sophomore just starting to explore or a senior finalizing your applications, this guide breaks down the key parts of the process to help you navigate what's ahead.

**You'll get a clear view of:**

✅ The basics of application platforms like the Common App and UC

✅ What colleges actually consider when reviewing applications

✅ How to figure out what matters most at the schools you're applying to

✅ Must-know terms that appear throughout the admissions process

✅ What to focus on each season from junior fall through senior fall

✅ Common myths that can lead students off track

Before you start writing essays or requesting recommendation letters, it helps to understand where and how college applications are submitted. That's where we'll begin!

## Application Platforms

Colleges use different systems to collect your information, essays, transcripts, and other materials.

Here are the most common ones:

- **Common Application (Common App)**: Used by more than 900 schools across the country. You complete one central application and submit it to multiple colleges. Each school can add its own short-answer questions or supplemental essays.

- **University of California (UC Application)**: Used by the nine UC campuses. You submit one application with shared Personal Insight Questions, and choose which campuses to send it to.

- **Coalition Application**: Similar to the Common App but focused on accessibility. Includes a digital locker to store documents over time. Accepted by about 150 colleges.

- **School-Specific Portals**: Some colleges, such as MIT or the University of Texas, have their own application systems. Requirements vary, so always check the admissions site directly.

💡 **Tip:** Create your accounts early, even if you're not ready to apply. It helps you get familiar with the system and avoid last-minute stress.

**Next let's talk about what colleges are actually looking at when you apply...**

## What Are Colleges Looking At in Your Application?

Colleges look at more than just your GPA. Admissions officers consider several academic and personal factors to get a full picture of your strengths, interests, and potential.

Here's what they typically review:

📚 **GPA and Course Rigor:** Your grades and the level of difficulty in your classes (AP, IB, dual enrollment, honors). Colleges want to see that you've challenged yourself and performed well.

💯 **Standardized Test Scores:** SAT or ACT scores, if submitted. Many schools are now test-optional, which means you don't have to include scores unless they strengthen your application.

✏️ **Essays and Personal Statements:** These are your chance to share your personality, experiences, and values. Admissions officers read them to understand who you are beyond your grades.

🖊️ **Letters of Recommendation:** Written by teachers or counselors who know you well. These letters provide insight into your character, work ethic, and impact in school or community.

📅 **Demonstrated Interest:** Some schools track whether you've visited campus, attended info sessions, or reached out with questions. This can help show genuine interest in attending.

🎭 **Extracurriculars and Leadership:** Activities outside the classroom, including sports, clubs, jobs, family responsibilities, and volunteering. Colleges look for depth and commitment, not just a long list.

## How to Figure Out What Your Colleges Care About

Every college has its own priorities. Here's how to figure out what they value most so you can tailor your application effectively.

- **Use the Common Data Set (CDS):** Search "[College Name] Common Data Set" online. Look for the admissions section. It lists how much weight each school places on things like GPA, test scores, extracurriculars, and essays.

- **Track Demonstrated Interest**: If a school tracks interest, visit the campus, attend virtual info sessions, or contact admissions. These actions may be recorded in your applicant file.

- **Read Admissions Blogs**: Many colleges publish blog posts written by their admissions staff. These often share what the school values and how to approach the application process.

- **Reach Out**: Email admissions representatives with questions. You can ask what they look for in a strong application. It shows initiative and helps you get clarity.

## Glossary of Must-Know Terms

Here's a breakdown of common admissions terms you'll see over and over again:

- **Early Decision (ED)**: You apply to one school early and agree to attend if admitted. If you're accepted ED, you must withdraw all other applications. Only use this for a clear first-choice school.

- **Early Action (EA)**: An early application option that is not binding. You apply and hear back early, but you don't have to commit. You can still apply to other schools and compare offers.

- **Rolling Admission**: A process where schools review applications as they receive them and send out decisions continuously. There's no fixed deadline, but applying earlier can help your chances.

- **CSS Profile**: A financial aid form used by many private colleges, in addition to the FAFSA. It asks for more detailed financial information and is used to determine school-specific aid.

- **Demonstrated Interest**: How some colleges measure a student's enthusiasm for attending. This can include visits, emails, event attendance, and engagement with admissions content.

- **Common Data Set (CDS)**: A public document that outlines a college's admissions priorities, GPA and test score ranges, and evaluation criteria. Great for research.

- **FERPA**: A federal privacy law. You'll be asked whether to waive your right to view recommendation letters. Waiving that right is common and signals to colleges that the letters were written honestly.

- **Letter of Continued Interest (LOCI):** A letter you send to a college if you're waitlisted, expressing your ongoing interest and any updates since you applied.

- **FAFSA (Free Application for Federal Student Aid)**: The primary form used to apply for federal financial aid, including grants, loans, and work-study. Required by almost all colleges, public or private.

- **Need-Blind**: A school that does not consider your financial situation when making admissions decisions. This is often paired with strong financial aid policies but isn't the same as meeting full need.

- **Holistic Review**: An admissions process that looks beyond test scores and GPA to consider essays, recommendations, extracurriculars, and background. Used by most selective colleges.

Now that you've got the language down, time to learn about the college application timeline...

## Basic College Application Timeline

Here's a breakdown of what to prioritize during each phase of your college prep journey. You don't have to do it all at once, just focus on the right things at the right time.

### 🍂 Junior Fall

- Start building your college list: Start with what you're looking for and find schools to match.
- Research admissions policies: Note test-optional policies, GPA ranges, and acceptance rates.
- Learn basic financial aid terms: Get familiar with FAFSA, CSS Profile, need-based aid, etc.
- Build relationships with teachers: Having strong relationships will be important for rec letters!

### 🌷 Junior Spring

- Visit campuses (in person or virtually): Take notes on what you like and don't to revisit later.
- Explore majors and potential career paths: Use tools like Loper, YouScience, or MyMajors.
- Start reviewing past essay prompts: Especially for Common App and UC PIQs.
- Prep for standardized tests: Decide if you'll take the SAT/ACT, create a study plan, and register.

### ☀️ Summer Before Senior Year

- Draft your personal statement: Aim to finish a strong draft of your main essay by early August.
- Create your application accounts: Common App, UC App, Coalition App, etc.
- Finalize your college list: Check for updates to application requirements and essay prompts.
- Build your activities list and résumé: Prioritize impact, leadership, and consistency.
- Ask for recommendation letters: Ask early to give them plenty of time and share a brag sheet.
- Consider early application strategy: Decide if you'll apply Early Action or Early Decision.

### 🍁 Senior Fall

- Submit Early Action or Early Decision applications: Most are due in October or November.
- Finish and polish essays + supplements: Get feedback and do multiple rounds of edits.
- Send standardized test scores (if required): Use your testing portal to send them officially.
- Request transcripts: From your counselor or your school's online system (e.g Naviance)
- Confirm rec letters are submitted: Follow up politely if needed.
- Track deadlines and requirements: Use a spreadsheet or Loper's App Center.
- Apply for scholarships: Start early! Many outside scholarships have fall deadlines.

**To wrap up, let's recap what you've learned and talk about what to do when you're stressed…**

## Final Words

### 📌 Key Takeaways

- *Understand your application platforms:* Make sure you understand where to apply (Common App, UC, Coalition, or school-specific portals) and set up accounts early.

- *Colleges evaluate more than just grades:* GPA, test scores, essays, activities, and context all play a role. There's no single "perfect" profile.

- *Not all colleges care about the same things:* Use tools like the Common Data Set and admissions blogs to learn what matters most at your target schools.

- *You don't have to do everything at once:* The process unfolds over time. Focus on seasonal priorities so you don't get overwhelmed.

- *Starting early helps reduce stress:* Learning the terms and steps in advance can help you avoid confusion and stay organized.

- *You can do this without a private counselor:* With the right resources and a solid plan, you can move through this process without one.

### 🤯 What to Do When You're Feeling Stuck, Overwhelmed, or Confused

Feeling overwhelmed is totally natural and it doesn't mean you're doing anything wrong. This process can be very complicated. Here's what to try when you're feeling stuck or confused:

- Check out Loper's resource library to find guides on topics from essays, financial aid, and more.
- Join Loper's [Discord server](#) to ask questions directly to our team of experts.
- Ask for help from someone who's done this before (a counselor, teacher, older sibling)
- Choose one small task to complete, like opening an app account or jotting down essay ideas
- Give yourself permission to take breaks! This process shouldn't consume your whole life.
- If you have the means, consider hiring a private counselor. There are many lower-cost options like [Cohort](#) and [College Contact](#).

If you're figuring this out on your own (whether as a student or a parent) you're not alone. Most people feel overwhelmed at the start. But once you understand the parts and the timeline, it all becomes more manageable. Use this guide as a reference, come back to it when you need clarity, and keep moving forward one step at a time. You've got this!