



# AAAHH, SUMMER

A time for high-schoolers to learn more about themselves, their aspirations and their ideal college experience

The summer is an excellent time to prepare for the college application process. First, it's an opportunity for students to further explore their passions and interests, which will help them to better understand themselves and their aspirations. As a result, they'll be able to choose colleges that truly represent strong matches for them academically and personally. Second, the summer is an ideal time to research colleges, whether by visiting campuses in the U.S., or taking advantage of information available online. In this article, we'll guide you on how to wisely use your summer to achieve both objectives.

## Learning more about yourself – and what you want from your college experience

Across the past few years, there has been a lot of media coverage on how it has become increasingly competitive to get into college, and that parents have started to over-prepare their children, sending them to the most expensive and impressive-sounding summer programs in exotic locations around the world. That's not really necessary. What colleges really value are students who spend time outside of school exploring areas that interest them. More important than the reputation of the program is that a summer activity shows a student's intellectual curiosity and allows him or her to learn about a topic more deeply and in a different way than is possible in school. For example, a student who is interested in science and medicine can volunteer at a hospital; a student who loves art can take painting or design classes at a local art school; a student who is considering a career in communications can intern at an advertising agency; a student who is a talented actor can join a theatre program.

It's sometimes difficult to identify your aspirations and interests as early as high school, so there's no need to devote an entire summer to a single activity. Summer is a great time to pursue varied interests. For example, many colleges in the United States offer residential summer programs for high school students that range from one to six weeks. So, a student could spend three weeks taking a class in literature or philosophy at a summer program such as Cornell's, and then the rest of the summer volunteering at a local nonprofit organization. Brown University offers non-credit summer classes as short as one week for students as young as the U.S. equivalent of 9<sup>th</sup> grade, to study areas as specific as biological illustration, stem cell research, and the mind-body connection.



Without making a major commitment, students can figure out if they would like to learn more about these topics, which will help guide the selection of classes in high school and future summer experiences – and ultimately majors and minors in college. The added benefit of a college's residential program is that a student can figure out if that kind of campus environment is appealing to them. For example, a summer spent at the University of Michigan, versus at a small, liberal arts college, can help narrow a student's choices when building his or her college list.

With three summers in between the years of high school, there are many opportunities for students to explore their interests in a variety of ways. Whether working at a zoo, spending a week at sea learning about marine biology, or studying political science at a university, there are hundreds of options for which students can sign up, or that they can create independently. These enriching summer experiences help teenagers develop themselves, their interests, and their goals – and provide content for interesting college application essays.

## Learning about colleges that represent the best match for your interests, goals, and personality

As students are discovering more about who they are and what they want in a college experience, it's important for them to learn about which colleges will provide a suitable environment. The media tends to over-emphasize the

importance of rankings, but the reality is that the “best” college for a student is where that student will be successful and happy. Different types of students will thrive in different types of schools, so it doesn’t matter what a school is ranked if the learning and social environment is not an appropriate fit for a student.

From an academic perspective, it’s important to ensure that the school offers an abundance of classes, research opportunities, and related clubs in a student’s field of interest. For example, students interested in psychology should look up the psychology department’s website at each college they are considering to see if the school offers a wide enough selection of electives and to read about the research being done by professors. Also, it’s essential to consider the size of school as that can dramatically affect a college experience: would you learn better in a smaller or larger class? Do you want to be in an environment where you are anonymous and students need to take initiative – for example when building relationships with professors? Or do you prefer to go to a college where even the introductory class sizes are kept small and students and professors know each other well?

From an extracurricular, social, and personal perspective, a college experience can vary widely, so it’s an excellent idea to spend time learning about the kinds of activities in which students engage outside of class. If an applicant is passionate about political issues, for example, he or she should inquire if the students at a college are socially aware, and if they get involved in learning about global matters. A talented singer may want to ask how many à cappella groups a college offers, and go on YouTube to see their performances. And on the weekends, it may be interesting to know if students stay on campus, if they go to football games every week, and how important is it to be a member of a fraternity or sorority to have an active social life. For students who do not want to spend four years limited to activities on campus, it may be important that the school is located in a vibrant town or city where there are local museums, restaurants and a diversity of neighborhoods to explore.

College websites are rich sources of information: beyond lists of student organizations, they often have student blogs, opportunities to chat with students, and virtual tours. There are also many third-party websites that provide interesting perspectives on a college, such as [www.unigo.com](http://www.unigo.com) and [www.collegeproowler.com](http://www.collegeproowler.com), which both provide student-written reviews of colleges.

The best way to learn about a college, however, is to experience the campus personally. To ensure enough time to go on the campus tour, attend the information session, and wander around the campus, allow for a maximum of two campus visits per day, assuming they are within a one-hour drive of each other.

When planning your campus visit, make sure to do the following before you arrive at the school:

- Register for a campus tour (if required by the admissions office)
- Register for an information session (if required by the admissions office)
- Find out if admissions officers will meet one-on-one with students for an “interview” (this policy varies by school).
- Request to attend a class (assuming classes are in session)
- Register for a program to stay overnight in the dorms with a student (if visiting during the academic year)
- Optional: schedule a meeting with a professor or advisor in your field of academic interest.

### Once on campus, make sure to do the following:

Strike up a conversation with a few students you see on campus, at the student center for example, to ask questions and get “honest” answers about issues that are important to you. Examples: How accessible are professors? How easy is it to register for popular electives? Is the social scene dominated by fraternities and sororities? Do students seem to care more for sports or the performing arts?

Explore the surrounding neighborhood: what kinds of restaurants and stores are nearby? How safe does it feel? Is it accessible to public transportation or do you need a car?

Visit the student union and eat in the cafeteria: how is the food? What is the atmosphere like? How are the students dressed? Could you see yourself being friends with the students? What kinds of postings are on the bulletin boards?

Read the student newspaper: what topics are covered? This will give you a sense of what issues are important to the students, for example if the students are socially and politically aware.

Immediately after the visit, write down your perceptions of the school, including as much detail as possible. When you’re visiting many schools, your experiences can start to blend together if you wait until the end of the trip to collect your thoughts. This information will also help you when answering college application essay questions about why you have chosen to apply to a certain school, as admissions committees like to read essays in which students can write about specific aspects of a school they experienced and why they appeal to them.

Finally, make sure to email or hand-write a thank you note to the admissions officer. Admissions officers do appreciate this. Because many students apply to a dozen (or more!) schools, admissions officers, beyond looking for qualified applicants, value applicants who demonstrate genuine interest for their specific campus community.

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