

PREPARE FOR THE COLLEGE APPLICATION PROCESS THIS SUMMER



The college application process can make the first semester of your child's last year in high school a tremendously busy and overwhelming time. However, taking advantage of the summer beforehand to prepare will ensure next fall is much less stressful; you have a lot more time now than you will once classes and extracurricular activities begin in September. With the following four recommendations, your child will start the school year with a well-researched list of target schools, a large chunk of the application completed, and a tangible, realistic plan for meeting each of the application deadlines!

1. MAXIMIZE YOUR COLLEGE VISIT EXPERIENCE

If you plan to travel to the states this summer, devote time to visiting college campuses. It's important to choose schools based on your child's personality and goals, rather than simply relying on the rankings and opinions of friends and family members. Thus, the college visit can be a very revealing experience, as you see how your child reacts to different kinds of campus environments.

To ensure your college visits this summer are very thorough (since living in Hong Kong makes a return visit challenging!), it's important to go beyond being a passive participant at the

organized tour and information session. Wander around the campus without a guide, and ask random students honest questions about the academic and social life. 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? How safe does the campus feel at night? You may find that you get different answers than those you received from the student tour guide or admissions officer. If it's not included on the tour, ask someone if you can visit the dorms and cafeteria. If you feel comfortable doing so, allow your child some time to explore the campus independently, as he or she may feel more comfortable asking students questions without parents in tow!

If possible, your child should schedule some time to meet with the admissions officer, which can also serve as an interview. It's ideal if your child can attend this meeting independently of you. Increasingly, parents are playing an overly active role in the application process, joining their children when they meet with admissions officers and asking questions on their behalf. College admissions officers frown upon "helicopter parents," and look more favorably upon applicants who clearly take the initiative in the college application process.

Immediately after the visit – ideally, in the car or at a nearby restaurant or coffee shop, ask your child to write down his or her perceptions of the school, including as much detail as possible. When you're visiting many schools, your experiences start to blend together if you wait until the end of the trip to collect your thoughts. Finally, make sure your child emails or hand-writes 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.

2. REACH OUT TO CURRENT STUDENTS AND ALUMNI AT YOUR TARGET SCHOOLS

Living in Hong Kong can make it challenging to visit as many schools as you would like. And even if you do have time to visit all of your target schools, there's always more to learn about the school's community and culture. Thus, communicating with current students and alumni is a fantastic way to add depth to your research.

First, recommend your child schedule conversations with any family member or friend who is a student or alumnus/alumna of a school. If you don't know anyone personally, the college admissions counselor at your child's high school will be able to put your child in touch with graduates of that high school who are current students at various colleges. Many college websites also list the contact information of student leaders of on-campus organizations, so your child can email a student who is involved in a club he or she would consider joining. When chatting or emailing with these students and alumni, ask similar, honest questions as you would when visiting campus, regarding the academic and social life. When speaking with alumni, inquire about the strength of the alumni network in terms of support with career advice and global reach.

Ensure your child makes and saves detailed notes on each conversation. Not only is this research helpful in the school selection process, but these conversations can be referenced when writing application essays on topics such as "why does X university represent the best fit for you?" You can differentiate yourself from the rest of the applicant pool by demonstrating commitment and genuine interest in the campus community, which can be accomplished by showing that you thoroughly researched the school before applying.

3. FINISH THE PERSONAL STATEMENT

Over 300 colleges and universities now accept the Common Application, which has made applying to multiple schools simpler. The Common Application form asks for a personal statement, which is sent to all of your target schools. However, many of those schools also request that applicants complete a school-specific supplementary application, which requires an additional essay (or sometimes more). So, the summer is an optimal time to encourage your child to complete the Common Application, including the personal statement. That way, when school starts again in the fall, only the supplementary applications remain.

Choosing a topic for the personal statement can be the most challenging part of the process. It's a good idea to write about a specific situation that shaped the development of the applicant as a person. However, beyond describing the situation, it's important to be reflective and analyze the lessons learned. Also, the personal statement is a great opportunity to add depth and insight to items mentioned in other parts of the application, such as a leadership role in an extracurricular activity, or a summer experience. Above all, the personal statement should differentiate the applicant in terms of character and interests, so the admissions committee can envision the unique contribution the applicant would have if he or she joined the campus community.

4. GET ORGANIZED BEFORE THE RUSH OF APPLICATION DEADLINES APPROACH

Because students now apply to so many schools, it's important to be organized, treating the process as you would a project at work. Assign a manila folder to each potential target college. In each folder, file all snail mail and brochures you receive from colleges; notes from college tours and conversations with students and alumni; printouts of all correspondence with the school; business cards of all representatives from the school you have met; and a list of deadlines and required essays. Then, buy a large wall calendar and write on it two sets of deadlines for each application: first, the actual school deadline and second, your personal deadline, weeks before the actual applications are due, in order to spread out the workload. Remember, many schools separate their applications in a few sections, each with different deadlines.

Finally, your child (and you!) deserve a reward for working so hard this summer and fall. Set milestones for completing various tasks such as writing the personal statement, and then treat yourselves to a special dinner or tickets to a concert, for example.

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