



College Planning



Understanding Applications

(NAPSA)—Whether starting the college application process early or jumping in late, free online planning tools, tips and resources are invaluable to students looking for ways to successfully complete their college applications. Among the options available to students, BigFuture™ (bigfuture.org) was created with the advice of real students and educators, and offers tips on common concerns such as how to get started if you are overwhelmed or are a procrastinator, how to finalize your application list, how to get a great letter of recommendation, and how to craft your application essays.

“The key to minimizing the stress of the college application process, whether you are starting as early as middle school or are a senior just beginning now, is to get and stay organized,” said April Bell, director of counseling at The College Board. “A step-by-step action plan will allow you to keep track of deadlines and various elements of a strong college application.”

BigFuture lets students create a personalized action plan that gives them expert advice on all the steps they need to take to apply to college. By answering up to five simple questions, students can create a plan that serves as a road map to guide them through school to college, advise them on what to do and when, and track their progress. Parents can also find action plans on the website to help guide their children as well



Image courtesy of The College Board.

Getting into college may be easier than many students realize.

as information on how to help pay for their child's education.

“A common mistake families make in selecting colleges is considering sticker price rather than net price, [which is] the published price of the college minus the gift aid that the student receives,” Bell said. In fact, most full-time college students receive some type of financial aid, and aid options vary by college. Students can get a personalized estimate from more than 300 colleges by using the College Board Net Price Calculator. They can also link to an individual institution's net price calculator by clicking on the “paying” tab on the school's profile page on the college search section of BigFuture.

BigFuture provides four key starter steps for students who are overwhelmed by the college application process or are starting late. They include a breakdown of the anatomy of the college application, an application checklist and important truths about applying to college, such as the fact that college admission isn't as competitive

as many students think. Fewer than 100 colleges in the U.S. are highly selective (i.e., they accept less than 25 percent of applicants) and close to 500 four-year colleges accept more than 75 percent of applicants. Open-admission colleges accept all or most high school graduates. BigFuture's college search feature provides comparative information on almost 4,000 college options.

Research shows that applying to at least three colleges improves your chances of successfully enrolling in college. “Also critical is the ability to narrow your list once you've explored all your options,” Bell said. “Most counselors recommend that students apply to five to eight colleges—more than that may not be the best use of time and resources.” BigFuture provides expert advice on finalizing your college list, including how to narrow, sort and balance your list, as well as how to take cost into consideration.

Two critical elements of a college application are the essays and the letters of recommendation. BigFuture provides “8 Tips for Crafting Your Best College Essay” and “3 Ways to Approach Common College Essay Questions,” as well as video tips from experts and real students and an analysis of a sample essay. Students can also learn “How to Get a Great Letter of Recommendation,” including specific tips on whom to ask and what to provide letter writers with in order to get the best results.