



College Planning Guide



Fall 2025 Edition

College Ready in 9 Weeks: A Counselor's Step-by-Step Guide

Get ready to empower your students as they embark on their college journey! This 9-lesson guide is designed to equip you with tools and strategies to guide students through self-discovery, college research, and early preparation. By breaking the process into manageable steps, you'll help them build confidence and stay ahead of deadlines.

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Lesson 1: Outlining the Process and Setting Goals



Objective

- Students gain a comprehensive understanding of the college admissions process, establish clear goals, and build excitement for the journey ahead.



Topics

- Provide an overview of the college application timeline and highlight key deadlines (testing, application submission, financial aid, etc.).
- Introduce types of colleges (e.g., community, private, public, liberal arts, HBCUs, MSIs, religious, research).
- Introduce the types of college applications (e.g., Common App, Common Black App, Coalition, direct-to-college).
- Introduce direct admissions platforms such as Appily Match.
- Introduce Appily Serve for students who may be considering military service.



Activity

- Students create SMART goals for the semester (e.g., researching colleges, improving SAT/ACT scores, etc.).
 - Examples: "Improve SAT score 100 points by August" or "Research 10 colleges by June."



Independent Work

- Draft a wish list of desired qualities in a college.



Mental Health Tip

- Encourage students to focus on one task at a time to avoid feeling overwhelmed.



AI Pro-Tip

- Use ChatGPT to create a guide of the different types of colleges or applications.
 - Sample prompt: List the different types of colleges and include three-sentence explanations of each.

Lesson 2: Self-Discovery and Strengths Assessment



Objective

- Students will identify their strengths, interests, and values.



Topics

- Explain the connection between self-awareness and college choices (majors, extracurricular opportunities, campus culture).
- Discuss how interests and values align with potential college majors and careers.



Activity

- Take a free, online strengths, personality assessment, or college major quiz.
- Create a free college profile on Apply.
 - Students who create a profile using the following link are automatically entered to win the \$5,000 Meet Apply Scholarship: apply.com/hello.



Independent Work

- Complete their Apply preferences and high school academics.
- Research 3–5 colleges that match criteria on their wish list.



Mental Health Tip

- Encourage celebrating small wins. Ask students to share about a recent accomplishment they're proud of to boost self-esteem and confidence.



AI Pro-Tip

- Ask ChatGPT to create personalized insights from assessment results.
 - Sample Prompt: Given the results of a strengths assessment (e.g., "good at teamwork" and "detail-oriented"), suggest 3 college majors and careers that align with these traits.

Lesson 3: Understanding Financial Aid and Scholarships



Objective

- Students will learn the basics of financial aid and scholarships.



Topics

- Explain key financial aid terms: FAFSA, CSS Profile, EFC, Pell Grants, subsidized vs. unsubsidized loans and the difference between need-based and merit-based aid.
- Teach students how to search for local, state, and national scholarship opportunities.
- Introduce tools such as net price calculators and Federal Student Aid Estimator.



Activity

- Create a preliminary budget for college (tuition, housing, other expenses).



Independent Work

- Use Appily's free scholarship database to research and apply for at least 3 scholarships for which they qualify.
- Bookmark the FAFSA Resource Hub.



Mental Health Tip

- Encourage students to talk openly about concerns and remind them finances are a common challenge.



AI Pro-Tip

- Use ChatGPT to create a guide of key financial aid terms.
 - Sample prompt: Define the following terms: "FAFSA," "CSS Profile," "EFC," "Pell Grants," "subsidized vs. unsubsidized loans," and the difference between "need-based and merit-based aid."

Lesson 4: College Research and List Building



Objective

- Students will learn how to research colleges and begin developing a balanced college list.



Topics

- Teach students how to use tools, such as Appily, to research and explore colleges.
- Discuss the importance of a balanced list and define likely, target, and reach schools with examples.
- Discuss factors such as retention rates, graduation rates, and student-to-faculty ratios.



Activity

- Build a balanced list of 8–12 colleges.



Independent Work

- Gather information on admission requirements, costs, and programs for the schools on their list.



Mental Health Tip

- Encourage students to focus on finding schools that align with their values and needs rather than focusing on external pressures.



AI Pro-Tip

- Use ChatGPT to create an example college list.
 - Sample prompt: Create a list of colleges with strong economics programs, small class sizes, and high graduation rates for a student with a 3.2 GPA.

Lesson 5: Preparing for Standardized Tests



Objective

- Students will understand the role of standardized tests and create a test prep plan.



Topics

- Discuss test-optional policies and the impact on admissions.
- Review SAT vs. ACT differences and scoring systems.
- Explore test prep resources (books, online courses, practice tests).



Activity

- Students create an SAT/ACT preparation timeline with milestones, if applicable.



Independent Work

- Schedule a test date and register, if applicable.



Mental Health Tip

- Offer guidance on recognizing signs of burnout and when to take breaks.



AI Pro-Tip

- Use ChatGPT to create an example test prep timeline.
 - Sample prompt: Make a 3-month SAT prep plan, including online resources and practice tests, for a student who has 2 hours per week to study.

Lesson 6: Drafting a Resume and Activities List



Objective

- Students will create a resume highlighting their activities and achievements.



Topics

- Explain how to format a high school resume (e.g., academics, activities, honors, leadership roles).
- Explain how to highlight nonacademic achievements (e.g., volunteering, hobbies, internships, etc.).



Activity

- Use ChatGPT ethically to draft their resume.



Independent Work

- Complete and finalize the resume and get feedback from a parent, counselor, or peer.



Mental Health Tip

- Remind students that their resume reflects their unique path and doesn't need to match anyone else's.



AI Pro-Tip

- Use ChatGPT to create a resume template.
 - Sample prompt: Create a resume template for a high school student that highlights their activities and achievements.

Lesson 7: College Essays and Personal Statements



Objective

- Students will explore essay topics and understand what makes a strong personal statement.



Topics

- Review successful essay examples.
- Review common essay prompts and [how to write the Common App essays](#).
- Discuss “show, don’t tell” and other storytelling techniques.
- Brainstorm [potential essay topics](#) through reflection exercises.



Activity

- Write an outline or introduction for their personal statement.



Independent Work

- Expand their outline into the first draft of their personal statement.



Mental Health Tip

- Remind students that their essays are a chance to tell their story and that there’s no “perfect” topic—what matters most is authenticity.



AI Pro-Tip

- Use ChatGPT to brainstorm potential essay topics.
 - Sample prompt: List 7 reflection exercises high school students can do to help them brainstorm potential college essay topics.

Lesson 8: Building Relationships with Teachers and Mentors



Objective

- Students will understand the importance of recommendations and start fostering connections.



Topics

- Provide recommendations on building relationships with teachers and mentors.
- Discuss what makes a strong recommendation letter and whom to ask to submit one for you.
- Explain how to write a “brag sheet” to share with recommenders.
- Provide tips on approaching teachers.



Activity

- Practice requesting a letter of recommendation.



Independent Work

- Identify 2–3 teachers or mentors they may consider asking for recommendations.



Mental Health Tip

- Remind students that it’s natural to feel nervous about approaching mentors and that most educators want to help.



AI Pro-Tip

- Use ChatGPT to create a brag sheet.
 - Sample prompt: Create a brag sheet template high school students can use for their college recommenders.

Lesson 9: Planning for Summer and Beyond



Objective

- Students will develop a summer plan for college preparation.



Topics

- Discuss free and low-cost summer programs, internships, jobs, job simulations, and volunteering.
- Highlight the importance of campus visits and virtual tours.
- Brainstorm ways to maximize the summer.



Activity

- Create a summer checklist (college visits, essay writing, test prep, etc.).



Independent Work

- Finalize and share the summer checklist with your counselor or parent.



Mental Health Tip

- Encourage students to set aside time for relaxation and hobbies during summer planning to maintain a healthy balance between preparation and personal well-being.

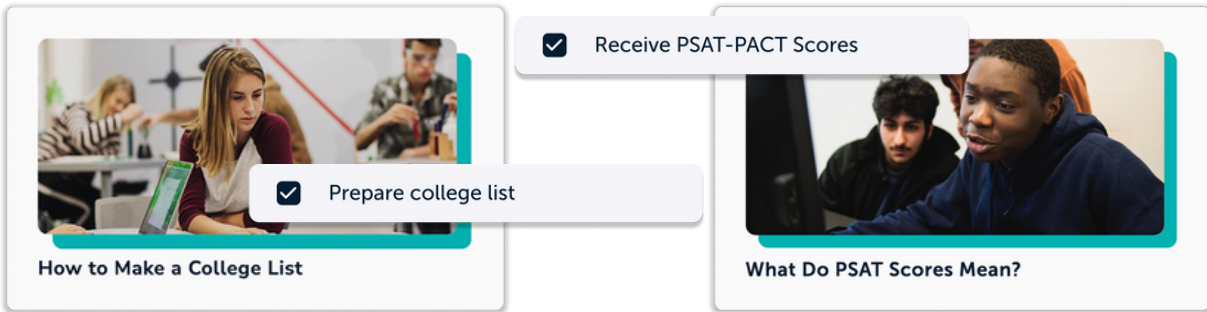


AI Pro-Tip

- Use ChatGPT to create a summer checklist.
 - Sample prompt: Create a checklist of summer activities a rising senior should complete to prepare for their college applications.

Looking for more guidance?

Check out Apply's four-year Digital College Planner for a personalized checklist to help your students stay on track.



How to Make a College List

Prepare college list

Receive PSAT-PACT Scores

What Do PSAT Scores Mean?

Meet Apply Scholarship!

Do your students want \$5,000 for college? The Meet Apply Scholarship is their chance to make it happen. And the best part? It's incredibly easy to enter and only takes a few minutes!

- ✗ No essays
- ✗ No resumes
- ✗ No transcripts
- ✗ No recommendation letters!

Your students just need to visit apply.com/hello to create a free account, and they're in the running!

Every student registration earns you a chance to win a \$250 gift card!