**Below is a general guideline of steps you should follow while preparing for college:**

* Prepare for college early. Vague advice, perhaps, but invaluable. Preparing early for your college education will help you position yourself to get into the college you want; making sure that you take the correct classes and get involved in activities that will help explore your options. It is recommended that you start as early as middle school and start using tools like [AZCIS](https://azcis.intocareers.org/materials/portal/home.html) to start exploring your interests and related careers. But even if you are already in your junior or senior year, you can still choose, apply, and get accepted to the college that's best for you if you plan carefully and do your research.

**Regardless of the grade you are in now, there are some general notes to remember and rules to follow:**

* Pay attention to deadlines and dates.
* Keep in mind that even though they may not be required for high school graduation, many colleges require at least three and often four years of math, English, science, and social studies.   Check their websites carefully to make sure you know what their specific requirements are.
* In addition to this, most colleges require at least two years of the same foreign language. This is beginning to change to three to four years at more prestigious institutions.
* Your grades are important but the difficulty of your coursework can also be a significant factor in a college's decision to admit you. In general, most colleges prefer students with average grades in tougher courses than students who opt for an easy A.
  + College admission officers will pay the closest attention to your GPA, class rank, college credit, AP courses, and scores on standardized tests.
* Many colleges use a holistic approach to admission now so participation in extracurricular activities is also a good idea in high school. Activities that require time and effort outside the classroom indicate a willingness to cooperate with others and put forth the effort needed to succeed. Volunteerism is also an important component; have you taken the time to contribute to your community in some way?
* Plan a career. Choosing a career and a corresponding major will help you decide which colleges are right for you. There are resources on our website to help you figure this out.  Check out our [Career Information](http://www.amphi.com/schools/irhs/counseling/career-information.aspx) page!
  + Don’t worry though if you really don’t know yet what you want to be when you grow up; many people don’t decide until they are actually in college and have taken a few classes.  After all, that’s why most colleges have an “undecided” major.  It just helps to narrow things down if you have a direction or an area of interest.
  + Counselors at IRHS work with students every year in the classroom using the guidance curriculum and are always willing to sit down and discuss things with students individually.
* Find the college that's right for you. Use the college search feature in [AZCIS](https://azcis.intocareers.org/materials/portal/home.html) or CollegeBoard’s [Big Future](https://bigfuture.collegeboard.org/college-search?navid=gh-cs) to find the college that best matches your needs.   Some important factors to consider are admission standards, majors offered, size, location, and cost.  Cost especially should be part of a family discussion so that students and parents are working toward the same goal with the same information.
* Visit the college(s) of your choice. Once you have narrowed your selection, arrange to visit the campus in person if at all possible.  Sign up for a tour or attend an event scheduled by the college to get a clearer picture of the school and to determine if it is a good fit for you.
  + If you can’t visit in person, [CampusTours.com](http://www.campustours.com/) offers virtual tours of many campuses and can give you an idea of what the college looks like.
  + It can be a great school, but if you are not comfortable there, it’s not the right one for you so it’s important to get a feel for the campus as best you can.
* Apply online. Many if not all colleges offer an online application on their websites.  The [Common Application](https://www.commonapp.org/Login) is used by over 600 colleges, so check to see if your schools are on the list and only fill out one application.
* Watch those deadlines!  Deadlines are NOT flexible in the application process.  If you miss it, you may not be able to apply, or will miss out on scholarship/financial aid assistance or even campus housing opportunities.
* Financial Aid is an ongoing process and you can start looking for private scholarships at any time.  Applications and deadlines for these are scholarship specific and students should look at each one carefully.  There are several websites that can be useful in this search; fastweb.org, finaid.org, and many others.  A list of some of these websites can be found on page 26 of IRHS’ [College & Career Preparation Guide](http://www.amphi.com/schools/irhs/counseling/college-and-career-preparation-guide.aspx) or on the [Financial Aid/Scholarship](http://www.amphi.com/domain/1228) page on this website.
  + IRHS counselors share this information with students during classroom visits as well as through our Twitter and Facebook accounts.   Like us on Facebook at **IRHS Scholarships and More** and follow us on Twitter **@IRHSCounseling** to get updates on scholarships that come through our office.
* You should look into school specific scholarships, student loans, and other financial aid options before you apply to a particular college or university, or at least as you apply. Since there is a great deal of financial aid available and since colleges are may be willing to work with you to put together a favorable financial aid package, money shouldn't be the primary concern when considering a college.  Money becomes a primary concern when students and parents are making the final decision about where the student will attend.  Please note taht many private colleges have more money to offer in the form of aid and can end up being more affordable than they first appear.
* The Free Application for Federal Student Aid ([FAFSA](https://fafsa.ed.gov/)) becomes available on October 1st of a student’s senior year and should be completed as soon as possible.  **Parents**, you will be using your prior year taxes to file now, so you may be able to use the IRS Data Retrieval Tool to make filing this even easier.  Aim to file the FAFSA as soon as possible after October 1st to maximize your student’s potential aid. Many schools will set a priority deadline (i.e. January 1st) so check their websites to be sure you know when it is. In this case the early bird really does get the worm.
  + You can access the [FAFSA4caster](https://fafsa.ed.gov/) on the lower right corner of the FAFSA website to get an idea of how federal student aid can help you pay for college.