College Prep Handbook

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Build a college plan around fit, affordability and a manageable application process. Requirements differ by institution, program and year. Verify deadlines directly with each school.

Compare options before applying

List the qualification or career you want, available programs, completion rates, accreditation or licensing requirements, location, support services and transfer options. Include community college, apprenticeships and other appropriate routes rather than assuming one path fits everyone.

Build a deadline calendar

School or program	Application deadline	Financial aid deadline	Required materials	Next action

Work backward for recommendations, essays, transcripts and any required tests. Ask recommenders early and provide accurate context. Keep copies of submissions and confirmation messages.

Understand the full cost

Compare tuition, fees, housing, food, transport, supplies and personal expenses. Distinguish grants and scholarships from loans and work-study. A loan is not a discount. Use the school's net-price calculator and verify award terms and renewal conditions.

Apply for aid through official channels

Use StudentAid.gov for federal aid information and the current FAFSA process. Do not share your account password with a paid helper. Deadlines and eligibility can change; check the official site and the school's aid office.

Prepare for independence

Plan where you will live, how you will get to class, how bills are paid and how to request academic or accessibility support. Learn the school's health, counseling, safety and conduct resources before an urgent need arises.

Decide and confirm

Compare written offers and total expected debt, not only acceptance letters. Confirm deposit conditions, housing availability and withdrawal deadlines before paying. Keep a backup plan if funding or housing does not work out.

Federal Student Aid · College Scorecard