

The college application process in the U.S.

A Pre-reading

1. Explain to a partner where you think your path will lead you after school. If you don't know the translation for a German term, describe it.
2. Discuss whether you think higher education in Germany provides people an equal chance to study and become what they want.

Are you an exceptional athlete? If that is the case, you may start receiving information about athletic scholarships from colleges as early as your freshman year of high school, when you're 14 or 15 years old. Sports is a path that some students take, but that is, of course, the exception. So, what does the normal road to college look like?

B Reading

On the right path

Remember that high schools in the U.S. are like a Gesamt- or Gemeinschaftsschule in Germany. Students of all academic levels attend the same school; however, within the school different kinds and levels of classes are usually offered. Whatever path a high school student is on – college or trade school bound – things start getting serious during their junior year of high school. Ideally, students will have met regularly with a guidance counselor to determine where their interests and strengths lie. After that, online programs can help students identify colleges that offer classes and degrees that fit their interests.

Once students have chosen their field(s) of interest and have used an online program, their information is passed on to colleges across the country. Pretty soon the high school student will start to receive old-fashioned mail from colleges – postcards, brochures, booklets, flyers – in their old-fashioned mailbox. All of these schools say they want you! That they have the best programs and opportunities for you! That they can provide you with the best education and so much more! Out of all those offers, a high school student ultimately has to pick one. However, there are a few more steps along the way before a decision is made.



The long journey to acceptance

A student may choose a college, but a college also has to choose the student. Hence, an application is necessary. In order to cover some of their costs, like offering information sessions or reviewing applications, colleges often charge application fees. The average is \$43 but can be as expensive as \$100. The fees are also in place to ensure that only students who are serious about attending a school apply there. Application platforms are available so that students can fill out one application that is accepted by different colleges and universities. However, in addition to the common information required, individual schools may have extra requirements, such as an essay. Experts advise allowing about six weeks to fill out applications. The summer between junior and senior year is a good time to do this. It's not the application form itself that takes so long, but rather gathering all the different documents required can be tedious and time-consuming.

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One such document is a standard admission test. Until recently, a lot of colleges required applicants to submit the results of a standardized test that measures literacy, numeracy and, optionally, writing skills. Two multiple-choice entrance exams are widely accepted – ACT and SAT. The test results are considered extremely important for college applications because they can count for as much as 50% of the admission decision. Therefore, a whole industry of prep classes and tutoring has evolved around the tests. However, due to the Covid-19 pandemic, many colleges have stopped requiring the standardized admission exam. It was too difficult to administer the pencil-and-paper exam during the pandemic. And since then, the companies which administer the tests have made several changes to the exam, including making it digital. Even if a college doesn't require this test score, students can still submit it with their application. This is especially advisable if the score is high. It costs between \$55 and \$85 to take one of these tests.



Colleges that don't require a standardized test score are still very interested in potential students' grade point average (GPA). Therefore, a high school transcript of a student's grades up until the time of application is required. This form is usually sent directly by the high school to a college. In addition to grades, a student's involvement in extracurricular activities is important to college admission officers. They want to know exactly which clubs, teams, and organizations high school students have been involved in so that they can judge which skills the student has outside of academic ones. Leaders, organizers, and innovators are welcome students on college campuses. Creativity, determination, and passion are valuable competences for college life.

In order to get to know a candidate even better, many colleges require applicants to write an essay. Composing a creative and convincing essay could take up a large portion of the six weeks a student has set aside for the application process. However, like with so many other parts of the application, plenty of outside help is available, from lists of prompts and topics to complete sample essays.

Letters of recommendation from teachers, coaches, pastors, and other adults must also be submitted in many cases. This is how colleges get an outside look at aspirants. Students should be sure to make requests for such letters early. A teacher is less likely to write a favorable review if they aren't given sufficient time. Deadline in two days? The answer could very well be no.

Another way to become acquainted with a high school student applying for admission is during an interview. Since it's fairly common for high school students to visit several prospective colleges, this is also a good time to schedule an interview with the admissions office. Such interviews can also be used when applying for scholarships, but we'll get into the financial side later. Visiting a college can be pivotal in making a decision about which college to attend. Did you feel welcome? Was the atmosphere right for you? Could you picture yourself walking around the campus, sitting in lectures halls, and fitting in?

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Money is always an issue

Even before the application has been submitted, the high school student has been accepted, and the student has reached a decision, it's time to start seriously thinking about financing your college degree. But not so fast – there's one more small detour that can be taken. After acceptance and signing on the dotted line, colleges might ask you to pay a small deposit. It's like a holding fee, a we'll-save-you-a-spot fee that's often non-refundable. However, if a student is still unsure about which school to attend, he or she might pay this enrollment or new student fee to more than one school. If an applicant is still waiting to be accepted by their number one ranked school, they may pay the \$100 to several hundred dollars to their number two school, too. If school number one works out in the end, then the other fees are lost.

It's more than likely that finances played a role in a student's initial decision about where to apply. Colleges provide information to prospective students about financial aid in the form of scholarships and grants, which don't need to be repaid, and loans, which do have to be paid back. Higher education in the U.S. is not cheap. The average cost for one year of college, which includes tuition, room and board, is almost \$26,000. The most expensive private college costs \$78,000 and the average private school about \$52,000. It's no wonder that students finish college tens of thousands of dollars in debt. And it's very understandable that any "free" money is more than welcome.

Scholarships are available for all kinds of skills and talents and from a plethora of sources. That after-school job at a fast-food restaurant that pays minimum wage? They could very well offer a scholarship. Skilled at e-sports? Apply for a scholarship. The colleges themselves, religious organizations, parents' employers, communities, the government, and philanthropic foundations all have "free money" that is awarded based not only on grades, athletic, or artistic ability but also on criteria such as background, gender, age, military affiliation, financial need, or physical disability. It literally pays to do some research and apply for multiple scholarships or grants.

The role of sports in the US education system should not be underestimated. A successful athletic program is seen as a sign of a successful college. As mentioned at the beginning, colleges do recruit promising athletes and lure them to their campuses with scholarships. Once a high school student has committed to a college and its sports team, it is not uncommon for there to be a "signing ceremony". The student will likely be wearing the college's team apparel as he or she signs a letter of intent. Colleges that belong to the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) even have an official National Signing Day, when high school seniors make their commitments. The sports news media covers these events, especially for athletes who will be playing collegiate football, in many cases with a full or at least partial scholarship.



Depending on a student's financial situation, they may also qualify for student loans. In most cases, these loans have low interest rates, which are set by Congress, and repayment is deferred until the student has completed their education. While most student loans are sponsored by the federal government, private loans are also available; however, the conditions are not as good. For example, most federal loans do not accumulate interest while the student is in school, but private loans do.

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Alternate routes

Even though about 35% of people in the U.S. have a college degree, many different paths are open to high school graduates. One such path may lead students to a technical college, also called a trade or vocational school. These schools usually offer two-year associate's degrees in technical skills for certain careers. Some examples of such careers include dental hygienists, electricians, plumbers, or computer technicians. After completing a degree at a technical college, a person can move right into the work force or continue their education at a college or university.

Community or junior colleges offer another educational stepping stone. Working professionals often take advantage of the classes offered outside of regular working hours to get job-specific certification or to complete a bachelor's degree.

Colleges and universities (the terms are now used interchangeably) offer four-year programs of study leading to the attainment of a bachelor's degree. Most of these institutions are so-called liberal arts schools, which means they offer studies in the humanities (languages and literature, the arts, history, and philosophy), social and physical sciences and mathematics. The goal of the generalist curriculum is to expose undergraduate students to a wide variety of disciplines and offer them a well-rounded education. This academic approach also gives freshmen time to adjust to college life with all its challenges and opportunities. Undergrads sometimes don't even know what they want to major in and don't declare their major until sophomore year.

So, whether someone is an athlete, an artist, or an academic, there's a college path available to all of them. The key is to start thinking about it early and take advantage of existing resources to make the process easier and less stressful.

C Tasks

3. Write definitions for these words:

- | | | |
|-----------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------|
| a) freshman | b) sophomore | c) junior |
| d) senior | e) guidance counselor | f) transcript |
| g) extracurricular activity | h) grant | i) tuition |
| j) room and board | k) bachelor's degree | l) liberal arts |

4. Search the article for US equivalents or similar things to these steps for attending a German university.

- | | | |
|----------------------|----------------------|-----------------------|
| a) N.C. | b) Studieninfotag | c) Studienbotschafter |
| d) hochschulstart.de | e) Orientierungstest | |

5. Find examples in the college application process that could lead to an inequality of access to higher education.

6. Why do you think traits like creativity, determination, and passion are important to colleges? And why might leaders, organizers, and innovators be so welcome at colleges?

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7. Compare the paths to college in the U.S. and Germany. Which aspects of each do you think are good/bad and why?

8. Read these quotes and write a short comment on each of them with some advice of your own or from the article.

A mother: "For me the most stressful part was trying to get our daughter to consider several colleges. She was stuck on one college, but I wanted her to see the other options."

A high school senior: "I didn't need any of the college counseling services at school because I've known for a year where I want to go. I thought the whole thing was pretty easy. It's my parents who were stressing about it. It was hard to remember all the deadlines, though."

A father: "I knew college was expensive, but what really shocked me was the price of room and board. It would be cheaper if our son lived at home, but we don't want to rob him of any part of the college experience."

A high school senior: "I hope I made the right decision. It's hard because how am I supposed to know what I want to do with my life. I'm only 18! I'll just give it a try and see what happens."

Parents: "Our son doesn't know what he wants to study. He decided on a college based on its reputation and what I like to call its 'coolness factor'. After he committed to a school and we made the first payment, he said maybe he'd like to major in international business. But this college doesn't offer that major."

A high school senior: "The most important thing for me was going to a college where I could play baseball. I'm good but not excellent. So, that made my decision easy. I'm going to the college that said I'm good enough for their team."

9. Do an internet search for "college essay prompts and topics". You will find hundreds, ranging from "describe a facet of your identity and its importance" to "recommend a book that is important to you" to "submit page 116 of your 200-page autobiography". Choose one topic or prompt you find and write an essay.

Here are some tips:

- your essay should be about something unique to you
- be honest, passionate and even personal
- be creative and think outside the box, make your essay memorable
- steer clear of popular choices, such as:
book: Harry Potter, famous person: Nelson Mandela, movie: Titanic
- don't try to stand the middle ground; adopt a stance and stand up for it

C Tasks

3.

- a) first year student at high school or college
- b) second year student at high school or college
- c) third year student at high school or college
- d) fourth year student at high school or college
- e) a professional who helps students with decisions at school
- f) a record of grades
- g) a non-academic activity at school
- h) money received for an accomplishment, needn't be repaid
- i) money paid to a school for education
- j) accommodations and food
- k) an academic degree after (usually) studying for four years and completing the required courses
- l) a more humanistic approach to education as opposed to science and technology

4.

- a) N.C. – not exactly the same, but similar: GPA, transcript, SAT or ACT score
- b) Studieninfotag – visiting colleges on your own
- c) Studienbotschafter – no equivalent mentioned, guidance counselor maybe has some of the same functions
- d) hochschulstart.de – online programs and application platforms are mentioned
- e) Orientierungstest – could be the online program mentioned or maybe the guidance counselor administers tests like this

5. The required application fees could make access to education unequal. If a college requires standardized test scores and students can't afford special tutoring, there is inequality.

6. These traits are typically associated with successful students and successful students are good advertising for colleges. These traits also help student life thrive and make the campus attractive to prospective students. Maybe the colleges like people who are leaders, organizers, or innovators because they will most likely be successful in the future. Again, this is good advertising, and the college can look forward to donations from successful alumni.