



2010 California College Guide

Getting into the college you want is a two- or three-year journey that requires self-reflection, research, consistent action, and making careful, informed choices. You can't do this alone, and you don't have to. Whether you're at the beginning of this adventure or close to the end, here three experts in college admissions from the Los Angeles area offer their wisdom and advice for reaching a successful outcome.

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Know Yourself

Before you even think about colleges, take time to identify your strengths, weaknesses, learning styles, and preferences. "We spend a lot of time with our 10th graders helping them to know themselves, which isn't easy for teenagers," says Canh Oxelson, upper school dean of college admissions at Harvard-Westlake School, a college-prep school in North Hollywood, Calif. "The better they know themselves, the easier it will be to come up with a list of schools that will be a good match." Do you need a lot of one-on-one time with teachers? Then UCLA might not be for you. Do you love playing football? At a smaller college you might start, but at USC you might never see the light of day, says Oxelson. "But then again, it might be important for a student to be part of that USC tradition. Maybe you already know that your learning style is best suited to a small classroom environment," he says, "or that you're fine with being anonymous in a 250-person lecture hall." These preferences should all play a part in finding the right college for you.

Do Extracurricular Activities That You Like

College admissions officers look at the whole picture of a student's life, and extracurricular activities give them a glimpse into who you are. Some kids try to pick an activity they think will be attractive to those officers, but this is a mistake, says Oxelson. "If you pick an activity you really want to do, you're more likely to distinguish yourself than if you choose one because you've heard that's what your neighbor is doing."

"We're not looking for a long laundry list of experiences," says Rosa Pimentel, associate director of undergraduate admissions at UCLA, "but we do look at a few experiences over time that show some development, show where they started demonstrating some leadership." Whether it's starting a singing club or working at a homeless shelter, choose an activity that is fun and interesting, and that you can stick with for a year or more.

"It's impressive when you can stay focused," says Jeannie Borin, MEd, president and founder of College Connections (www.college-connections.com), a consulting service in Los Angeles. One of Borin's clients, a teenage girl who liked photography, also had an

interest in doing community service. Borin suggested she exhibit her photography in a school, then donate the money from the sales of the photos to a local charity. “This way she was connecting her interests with the community,” says Borin.

Be Smart About AP Courses

Taking Advanced Placement (AP) courses will look good on your record, but be realistic about whether or not you can do well in them. “There are students who can handle one advanced class, but not four or five,” says Oxelson. “We want students to make a choice based on what they can reasonably handle. This is different for every kid and every subject area.”

“The number one criterion colleges look for is a challenging curriculum,” says Borin. “But I don’t recommend taking an AP class if a student can’t do well. Sometimes, regular or honors courses can have a more inspiring curriculum and can include more problem solving and inquiry.”

Still, there can be a great sense of achievement in doing well in an advanced class. “Advanced Placement classes challenge students, and can make them feel good about themselves,” says Pimentel. “Some students worry about protecting their grade point average, and to a degree that’s important. But most colleges and universities are not going to look only at AP courses, but other factors, too.”

Take the SAT or ACT More Than Once

In order to become familiar with the SAT (Scholastic Aptitude Test) or ACT (American College Testing), plan on taking it several times, suggests Pimentel. Doing this will help reduce the stress and anxiety most students feel about it.

Formally preparing for the test is a good idea, too. “You wouldn’t show up at a marathon without practice,” Borin points out. But, she adds, if you employ a tutoring company, choose wisely. “You want a company that uses actual test questions and where the tutors have firsthand experience in taking the tests themselves,” she says.

“Ninety percent of our kids do some kind of test prep,” says Oxelson. “We advise students to take the test more than once, depending on how they do, and how well their scores work with schools they want to get into.”

Remember, test scores aren’t everything. In fact, many colleges have decided to make them optional, and their admissions directors focus instead on essays and extracurricular activities.

Visit, Take Tours, Ask Questions

Your junior year of high school is the time to look at colleges and universities. You can get plenty of information online and from brochures, but visit as many as you can. “Have a picnic on the campus,” suggests Pimentel. “Or visit in the evening. Then come back when school is in session. Ask if you can take a tour given by a current undergraduate.” This can be a long and arduous process, but worth the trouble. You need to get the feel of a campus, its geography, and student community to make sure it’s a good fit for you.

Assemble Your List

Once you've toured lots of colleges, it's time to narrow the list. Don't assume that the bigger colleges and universities are the best options for you. **"Stanford, Berkeley, UCLA, and USC are very competitive and selective," says Borin. "But there are smaller private schools that are fantastic and that families might not know as much about, such as Chapman, Occidental, LMU, and Pepperdine."**

How many colleges should you apply to? "We recommend applying to eight to twelve, if chosen wisely," says Oxelson. Once you begin the application process, stay on top of gathering the necessary pieces. Every college and university has different requirements—be sure you are clear about what, where, and when to send in all the parts of your applications. "Don't miss those details," advises Pimentel. "Find out exactly what the requirements are."

Note: Because deadlines for applications to state universities were moved up last year in response to state budget shortfalls that prohibited the schools from absorbing as much growth in enrollment as usual, prospective freshmen are encouraged to obtain application deadlines and apply to these schools early.

Parents: Stay on the Sidelines

The whole family should be part of the college application process, but parents need to understand how to be most helpful. **"Parents can assist in planning college visits and in preparing the packets for the applications," says Borin. "They can find out when college reps will be in the area so the student can go meet with them." Parents should never call admissions offices, nor should they fill out applications for students or write their essays, says Borin.**

"You never want the parent to be more memorable than the child," says Oxelson. This will happen if the parent asks all the questions on the tours, he says. "It's like watching your child play soccer. You can bring your child to all the practices, provide the orange slices, and run up and down the sidelines, but you can't go onto the field of play." And, he adds: "If you get too involved, kids can resent it."

The parent's role is not to push the student toward one college or another, but to be supportive and encouraging in this important process. **"This is your child's last year at home," Borin says. "Make it a positive experience."**