



Destination: Higher Education

By Dr. Raymond J. Huntington

In many ways, the path to the right college or university is like a board game. Make the right move and you jump several steps closer to the institution that's right for you. Forget a step, and you can end up back at "square one." For students who have already met with guidance counselors, taken the SAT or ACT, and reviewed the offerings of several schools, the summer break offers some free time for visiting those schools. For those who are just beginning the process, it's also a good time to make a checklist of the steps that should be taken – and when. For example:

In **September**, students should be meeting with guidance counselors, talking through their academic and career interests and thinking about which institutions might be best suited to those interests. Students should also tap into the wealth of resources most institutions use to market themselves. Glossy "viewbooks," available by request, describe academic offerings and attributes ranging from athletic programs to career co-ops to the campus setting. College Web sites also offer detailed information on admissions, institutional offerings and – in many cases – virtual tours of the campus.

In **October** (and earlier if possible), most juniors and seniors should have the opportunity to attend college fairs at their school or a community site. Many institutions also send representatives on recruiting visits to secondary schools. Both options offer an opportunity to talk firsthand with knowledgeable sources about these institutions. Sophomores should also make sure to register for and take the PSAT, which is one of the best ways to check academic content knowledge and practice the test-taking skills that can be vital for success on the SAT.

In **December**, students should take a close look at their PSAT scores and determine which skills and knowledge they may be lacking. Uninspiring results

on the verbal and mathematics portions can be addressed through additional studying and test preparation courses. The best programs also help students strengthen their test-taking skills through practice using real SAT and ACT tests.

Students should sign up for the spring exams in **March** so they can take them in **April** (for the ACT) and **May** (for the SAT). May and **June** are also good times for requesting college applications and taking the SAT II, which offers a collection of additional exams to gauge knowledge in specific subject areas. Students who have already targeted prospective colleges should find out if these tests are required.

Here are some factors to consider:

Location

Rural colleges often offer pastoral campuses where the student body lives and works within a clustered setting. These environments usually offer fewer part-time jobs or internships for career experience, but they can be especially appealing to students who need plenty of quiet time for their studies. Urban schools that boast the "bright lights; big city!" quality can be a bit challenging for young people who have spent most of their lives in quiet, protected suburban or rural environments, but they usually offer more connections to the professional and business community, and more diverse friendships and new life experiences.

Size

Are you intimidated by the idea of sitting in a lecture hall with 300 other students and listening to a professor speak into a microphone? Or does it sound like an opportunity to meet lots of new people? At larger schools, many freshman classes are taught this way. Students should also consider the settings that made them most comfortable during high school. Smaller schools often allow more interaction with professors and easier connections to other students

with shared interests. Larger schools may be more suitable for students who tend to work well on their own and who want access to more courses.

Social Life

Campus visits are one of the best ways to learn about a school's social life and talk with the students. Current students who act as "campus reps" often conduct tours of buildings and grounds, but they also answer questions about the campus culture.

Admissions Requirements

Many schools require a minimum G.P.A. or class rank and a minimum SAT or ACT exam score. It's good to have these requirements in mind when your search is actively underway. Many schools also ask students to write an essay, which requires strong critical thinking skills that can be honed in and out of the classroom.

Students should also be aware of the many web-based resources that can guide the search and preparation process. One of the most useful is offered by the National Association for College Admissions and Counseling (NACAC) at www.nacac.com. Log on and you'll find great practical advice on the admissions calendar, college fairs, financial aid and much more.

While it's easy to become overwhelmed with the many steps that need to be taken, creating a calendar will help you stay on course, giving you plenty of time and opportunity to experience what can be one of the most exciting – and important – phases of your life. ♦

Dr. Raymond J. Huntington and Eileen Huntington are co-founders of Huntington Learning Center, which has helped children achieve success in school for 26 years. For more information, call 1 800 CAN LEARN.