Sophomore year is the smart time to get a jump start on the college process. Thoughtful planning and preparation can improve your credentials and college admission options. Starting early, with this list of 13 sophomore year action items, can help you achieve more success with less stress!

1 – Stay Focused on Academics
An impressive academic record – challenging curriculum and strong grades – is the most important admissions factor at the majority of colleges. Think twice before dropping a foreign language or enrolling in an easier math class. A rigorous class schedule shows intellectual curiosity, a willingness to challenge yourself, and that you are comfortable with hard work. There are compelling financial benefits, too. A strong academic record can lead to merit scholarships. Credits earned from dual enrollment, AP, and IB classes can cut college costs.

2 – Participate in Extracurricular Activities & Seek Leadership Experiences
If you haven’t done so already, 10th grade is the right time to become involved in activities and community service with “college appeal”. Seek out opportunities to develop leadership roles. Depth, not breadth, of experience is key. Most colleges prefer to see fewer activities, but ones that really interest you, where you are involved in a significant way. Evidence of passion, leadership, initiative, commitment and meaningful engagement is important. You may also want to consider an internship, research position, job shadowing opportunity or part-time employment in an area that interests you. Starting your own club, website, or community service project can show initiative, dedication and leadership.

3 – Take the PSAT in the Fall of Sophomore Year
A strong score on the PSAT / NMSQT exam taken in the fall of your junior year can lead to thousands of scholarships dollars. Many schools allow 10th graders to take a practice PSAT. The experience of taking the PSAT as a sophomore will give you a sense of what to expect on future entrance exams. Taking the PSAT also gives you access to the College Board’s My College QuickStart and MyRoad which provide personalized feedback, practice and college planning based on your test results.

4 – Set Up a College Admissions Email Account
If you don’t have one already, set up an email account to use for college admissions. Avoid user names that an admissions officer might find silly, inappropriate or immature. Gmail, with easy web access, is a good choice. You’ll often be asked for an email address when you attend university presentations, college fairs and when you register to receive scholarship and college admissions information.

5 – Keep a College Admissions Notebook & Folder
Keep a college notebook (a black and white composition notebook works well) for user accounts, passwords, notes and other information. Use your folder for copies of test scores, transcripts, college information, high school awards, honors, community service hours, etc.

6 – Meet With Your Guidance Counselor
If you haven’t done so already, schedule a meeting to discuss your high school game plan and to decide on junior year classes. Make sure you are on the right track to meet all graduation requirements. Ask about your class rank if your school provides rankings.

7 – Read, Write and Build Your Vocabulary
One of the biggest factors in strong performance on the verbal portions of the SAT and the ACT is independent reading. Enhancing your skills during high school will not only help you perform better on college entrance exams, it will prepare you for success in college. Regular reading of challenging articles and editorials (e.g. New York Times, Wall Street Journal, The Economist) in addition to studying vocabulary lists and signing up for “Word/Article/SAT Question of the Day” can have a significant positive impact.

Lynn’s Favorites:
• Official SAT Question of the Day from The College Board
• SparkNotes Test Prep and 250 Most Difficult SAT Words
• Berkeley Parents Network Vocabulary List
• Vocabulary Cartoons: SAT Word Power

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College Planning for High School Sophomores

- Essential SAT Vocabulary (flashcards) (College Test Preparation)
- Painless Grammar
- Word Power Made Easy

8 – Register for SAT Subject Tests, if appropriate
If you may be applying to colleges that require the SAT Subject Tests, and you are completing a high-level course in which a Subject Test is given (e.g. AP Chemistry, AP World History) consider taking the Subject Test at the end of the course, while the material is still fresh in your mind.

9 - Start Prepping for the PSAT, SAT and ACT
Most students score higher (percentile) on either the SAT or the ACT. Since both entrance exams are accepted at virtually every college (without preference), figuring out early which test you are better suited for can be extremely advantageous. It will give you more time to prep for the test on which you are likely to score in a higher percentile. Taking practice exams and becoming familiar with both tests is essential for making the right decision. Taking at least one timed full-length practice SAT and ACT can provide valuable insight. This strategy can be extremely helpful, even for those students who decide to take both the ACT and SAT. The College Board website offers a full SAT Practice Test. You can find ACT questions on the ACT website. The Real ACT Prep Guide contains three ACT tests.

Lynn’s Favorites:
- Official SAT Study Guide
- The Real ACT Prep Guide
- Dr. John Chung’s SAT Math
- Number2.com Question of the Day
- Increase Your Score in 3 Minutes A Day: ACT Reading
- Increase Your Score in 3 Minutes a Day: SAT Essay
- Increase Your Score in 3 Minutes a Day: SAT Critical Reading
- Vocabulary Cartoons: SAT Word Power

10 – Pay Attention to Guidance Announcements
Keep your eyes open for college nights, college fairs, presentations and information sessions offered online and in your local area. Your school’s guidance office may post them. College Fairs (usually held in the spring and fall) are a quick and low cost way (often free) to check out many schools (on the same day) and meet admissions representatives without traveling far from home.

11 – Start Exploring Colleges
You may have a clear image of your perfect-fit school or no sense at all. Visit some college websites and start thinking about what is important (to you) in terms of academics, size, prestige, location, cost, campus, activities, athletics and recreation. Take advantage of opportunities to join college mailing lists and request information from schools of potential interest. Jot down user names and passwords in your college notebook. If you are in the geographic area of a college that interests you, check it out. It’s best to visit when school is in session, but you can get a feel for a college almost any time. Often, your campus visit can be more valuable if you take an organized tour and attend an information session. Eating a meal on campus, chatting with undergrads in the student union, visiting a dormitory, and sitting in on a class can help you get a better feel for the college. When you visit, be sure to sign in at the admissions office. Some colleges give preference to applicants who have visited the campus.

12 – Review Your Online Persona
Examine your information on Facebook and/or other social networks. Consider updating or deleting content that might not be viewed favorably by college admissions officers.

13 – Use Your Summer Wisely
The summer between sophomore and junior years is the perfect time to prep for entrance exams and enhance your resume. There are many options to consider including: specialized academic programs and enrichment, study abroad, camps and athletic programs, volunteer opportunities, internships, a summer job.

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