

YOUR COLLEGE CONNECTION



The Roadmap to Admissions Success

February 2026

Seniors—

Fill out the [FAFSA](#) and [CSS Profile](#) if applying for financial aid.

Update colleges with new information.
Submit Letters of Continued Interest (LOCI's) for schools that have deferred you.

Juniors—

Check [College Board](#) and [ACT](#) for test dates and sites.
Map out dates and create a test plan for spring exams.

Begin your college search utilizing college websites, high school platforms, and information sessions.
Attend an in-person or virtual [NACAC Fair](#).

March 2026

9th-11th Grades—

Make plans for a productive summer. Investigate summer programs, jobs, and internships.

Juniors—

Create an initial list of colleges you are interested in. If possible, schedule in-person college tours during your spring break.

Course Registration: Making Smart Choices

Course registration can feel exciting, overwhelming, or somewhere in between. You're being asked to make decisions that seem like they matter a lot, and in some ways, they do. The good news is that you don't need a "perfect" schedule. You need a thoughtful one that fits you.

Start by understanding your graduation requirements. Every high school has specific courses students must complete to earn a diploma and be eligible for college admission. Checking in with your school counselor each year helps ensure you're on track and avoids last-minute surprises.

A strong schedule balances challenge and manageability.

Taking advanced classes can be a great idea, but only if you can handle the workload while maintaining solid grades and your well-being. Teachers are valuable guides; they know your work and can help you decide whether honors, AP, IB, or dual-enrollment courses make sense. Try not to be influenced by your peers. As you move through high school, your schedule should reflect gradual growth, not instant perfection.

Ninth grade is about adjustment and building strong habits.

Focus on learning how high school works and finding your footing academically. Complete core classes at a level where you can be successful, and don't feel pressure to take all the hardest options right away. Progress matters more than piling it all on at once.

Tenth grade often brings more exploration and a step up in challenge.

If ninth grade is going well, this may be the time to consider honors or AP courses.

Pay attention to prerequisites and keep experimenting with electives. Notice what feels energizing, what feels manageable, and what might be too much as activities outside the classroom increase.

Junior year tends to be the most demanding and requires careful balance.

This is when rigor, time management, and future goals all collide. Choose electives in subjects you enjoy or may want to study in college. Lean into your strengths while protecting time for rest and recovery.

Senior year still matters—so finish strong.

Meet with your counselor to confirm you're on track to graduate. It's important to finish strong if you're planning on postsecondary education. If you plan to apply to competitive colleges, this is not the time to drop rigor levels significantly, take a minimum schedule, or start underperforming. Colleges will look at senior year rigor and ask for mid-year grades! Take classes that are meaningful, develop skills you'll need to be successful in college, and help you transition to college-level work without a shock. Plan a schedule that keeps you challenged, healthy, and provides the balance you need to manage extracurricular commitments and the college application process.

Colleges look for steady growth, appropriate challenge, and consistency over time. Thoughtful planning, not perfection, is the goal.

College Admissions Strategies

Career Paths for Environmental Studies Majors

- Agricultural agent
- Animal scientist
- Aquarium or science museum director
- Biochemist
- Ecologist
- Environmental activist
- Environmental attorney
- Environmental consultant
- Environmental planner
- Environmental researcher
- Environmental scientist
- Forest ranger
- Government regulator
- Natural resource specialist
- Outdoor adventure educator
- Pollution engineer
- Range manager
- Soil scientist
- State park resource ecologist
- Toxicologist
- Waste management technician
- Wildlife biologist



Focus on Majors: Environmental Studies

If you care about climate change, clean water, protecting wildlife, or creating healthier communities, environmental majors offer real ways to turn that concern into a career. Students interested in preserving natural resources and addressing environmental challenges often find themselves choosing between two closely related majors: environmental science and environmental studies. While the names sound similar, the focus of each program is different, and the best fit depends on how you want to make an impact.

Environmental science programs are grounded in the natural sciences and focus on understanding how the physical world works. Students study biology, chemistry, physics, and earth sciences to investigate environmental problems and develop solutions. Coursework includes classes in ecology, geology, hydrology, atmospheric science, and environmental chemistry, combined with labs and fieldwork that provide hands-on experience. Because much of this work involves collecting and interpreting data, students also build strong technical skills, learning to use computer programs for data analysis, digital mapping, and geographic information systems (GIS).

Graduates work as environmental consultants, water quality specialists, wildlife biologists, conservation scientists, and sustainability coordinators. Entry-level positions are available with a bachelor's degree, though many research or academic roles require a master's degree or Ph.D.

Environmental studies programs take a broader, more interdisciplinary approach. In addition to studying natural sciences such as biology and geology, students explore social sciences and humanities, focusing on how human behavior, policy, economics, and culture shape environmental issues. Students might analyze climate policy, study land-use planning, examine environmental justice, or explore the ethical questions behind conservation and sustainability.

Coursework often includes environmental policy, energy systems, environmental law, economics, ethics, and urban planning. Because programs vary widely by college, students should carefully review each school's course catalog. Some programs lean heavily toward policy and advocacy, while others balance social science with applied environmental work.

Graduates pursue careers as environmental policy analysts, park rangers, urban planners, environmental educators, nonprofit program directors, and sustainability managers. Some positions are available with a bachelor's degree, while graduate study opens doors to specialized roles like environmental law or policy leadership.

Many students pursue double majors or combined degrees that blend both fields, allowing them to develop scientific expertise alongside policy and communication skills. This combination can be particularly valuable in careers requiring both technical knowledge and the ability to work with communities or policymakers.

Students interested in environmental majors can start preparing in high school by taking biology, chemistry, physics, environmental science, and math courses, including calculus or statistics. AP Environmental Science or AP Human Geography can provide valuable exposure. Volunteering with local conservation groups, participating in outdoor education programs, joining environmental clubs, or completing a science research project can help students explore their interests and build relevant experience.

Whether you're drawn to hands-on scientific research or to shaping environmental solutions through policy and social change, environmental science and environmental studies both offer meaningful ways to make a difference. The choice comes down to whether you want to focus on the technical side of understanding environmental systems or the human side of creating change through policy, education, and advocacy.

College Admissions Strategies

Financial Matters: Understanding College ROI



College decisions are being made in a very different environment than they were a generation ago. Costs have increased significantly, outcomes vary widely by major and institution, and families now have access to more data than ever before. As a result, return on investment, or ROI, has become a more common part of the college conversation.

ROI is not a single number in education, and it is not a verdict on whether college is “worth it.” It is a framework for understanding patterns and outcomes over time. When used thoughtfully, ROI helps families ask better questions rather than search for overly simplified answers.

The cost side of the equation is often the first place families focus. For an in-state public university, the average total cost of attendance over four years, including tuition, fees, room, and board, typically falls between \$110,000 and \$120,000, depending on the state; out-of-state, the average is \$183,000. At private nonprofit colleges, four-year costs are more commonly close to \$243,000, with wide variation based on institutional pricing and financial aid policies. At some private universities, the full, undiscounted cost can approach \$390,000 over four years. These figures, drawn from [College Board Data](#) and [Education Data Initiative](#) updated through 2024 and 2025, help explain why families are eager to understand what outcomes tend to follow such investments.

College costs can feel confusing because schools report tuition-only versus total cost, annual versus four-year figures, and national averages that often look very different from the price of a specific college.

One of the most important ways to think about ROI is across different timeframes, not just in the first job after graduation. [Research](#) estimates that individuals with a high school diploma earn roughly \$1.6 million over a full working career. Those with a bachelor’s degree earn closer to \$2.8 million on average, while individuals with a master’s degree earn about \$3.2 million. Professional and doctoral degree holders often earn \$4 million or more over a lifetime. These figures reflect long-term trends across large populations rather than guarantees for any one individual, but they help explain why college continues to show aggregate returns over time.

A student’s major choice is another factor often examined in ROI research because it’s one of the few variables that can be easily categorized and measured. Analyses using federal data show that earnings differences between majors at the same institution often exceed differences between colleges. However, majors do not map cleanly to careers, and many graduates enter fields that differ from their undergraduate major. Because labor markets are evolving and new roles continue to emerge, ROI data by major reflects past outcomes, not guarantee future results. Traditional ROI analyses focus on what can be quantified, but they do not fully capture transferable skills such as critical thinking, collaboration, and self-advocacy that influence long-term outcomes.

In a labor market that continues to evolve, ROI is shaped less by choosing a “right” major and more by

how well students develop skills that allow them to adapt over time, communicate, and solve problems.

ROI is also shaped by how students use their time in college. Federal data point to stronger outcomes for students who complete internships, participate in undergraduate research, or hold leadership roles, especially when those experiences are connected to career exploration. Two students with the same major and degree can graduate with very different outcomes, depending on access to opportunities and whether they took advantage of them. In this sense, ROI reflects not only the credentials earned but the experiences attached to them.

Although ROI is often discussed in financial terms, earnings alone do not capture every long-term outcome. Large national studies show that individuals with higher levels of education report higher average life satisfaction and emotional well-being over time. College completion is also associated with differences in health outcomes and life expectancy, influenced in part by job stability, working conditions, and access to healthcare. Surveys further suggest that college graduates are more likely to report meaningful work, stronger social connections, and a sense that their education helped them find opportunities aligned with their interests.

ROI data is useful because it highlights patterns across large populations and long time horizons. It can help families compare options and understand tradeoffs. What it cannot do is predict individual outcomes or define success for every student. Time, major, institution, experiences, and individual effort shape college outcomes. ROI helps frame the conversation, but the final decisions remain personal.

Taking the SAT or ACT in a Test Optional World

Over the past several years, hundreds of colleges have adopted [test-optional](#), test-flexible, and test-blind admissions policies. For many students, that shift has brought relief. For others, it has created confusion. If colleges don't require test scores, why take the SAT or ACT at all?

The reality is more nuanced. Test-optional does not mean test-blind, and for some students, submitting scores can still be an advantage. For others, skipping the test is the smarter choice. The key is understanding how scores are actually used and when they add value.

At test-optional schools, students can decide whether or not to submit SAT or ACT scores. If scores are not submitted, colleges evaluate the application only using grades, course rigor, essays, recommendations, and activities instead. While that sounds straightforward, admissions officers are still trying to assess academic readiness, and standardized tests remain one tool that some colleges view as important for evaluating potential success in college.

One advantage of submitting scores is that a strong result can reinforce academic ability, especially for students whose transcripts may not fully show their potential. A solid test score provides an external point of comparison. It's also important for families to understand that this is not a one-time, all-or-nothing decision. Students can choose to submit scores to some colleges and not others,

using them strategically where they strengthen the application and opting out where they do not add meaningful value.

It's also important to look at how test-optional policies play out in practice. For example, Duke University is test-optional, yet recent [Common Data Set](#) data show that roughly 85% of admitted students submitted SAT or ACT scores. That tells students that while scores aren't required, most successful applicants felt their scores strengthened their applications. By contrast, Northeastern University reports that closer to 40% of admitted students submitted scores.

Test scores can matter beyond admission. Some colleges use SAT or ACT results for merit scholarships, honors programs, and academic opportunities, even if they're test-optional. Policies vary by school, so skipping tests may unintentionally limit options.

That said, there can be real disadvantages to testing. Students with test anxiety, learning differences, or limited access to preparation may find their scores do not reflect their true abilities. In those cases, submitting scores can weaken an otherwise strong application.

The most important takeaway is this: choosing whether to submit test scores is not about gaming the system. It's about making a thoughtful, strategic decision based on where a student's strengths are and understanding that test scores are just one piece of a much larger picture.



Kelly Barnhardt
MS, CPC, ELI-MP

704.516.9907

kelly@collegeadmissions
strategies.com

www.collegeadmission
strategies.com