



Sophomore Year *Planning Guide*

A Practical Resource to Building the Academic and
Extracurricular Foundation for Selective Admissions

From the Admittedly Counseling Team
Led by former Ivy+ Admissions Officers

admittedly.co

A Practical Guide to Preparing *for Competitive Admissions*

Sophomore year is an interesting point in the high school journey for most families. On one hand, college applications still feel far away, but on the other, many of the decisions students make this year will shape what is possible during junior and senior year.

This doesn't mean sophomores need to know exactly where they want to attend college, what they want to major in, or what their application will eventually say.

They do, however, need to start building a **strong** foundation.

For students considering highly selective colleges, tenth grade is an important year for strengthening academics, exploring long-term academic interests more intentionally, and beginning to understand where those interests might lead. The goal is not to manufacture the perfect college applicant by age 15 or 16. It is to make thoughtful decisions now that create a stronger application later.



Academics:

The Foundation

Admissions officers evaluate a transcript within the context of a student's high school and the opportunities available.

They want to understand what courses were available, what the student chose to take, and how successfully they performed.

By sophomore year, strategic course selection is critical because it determines what will be available in Grades 11 and 12.

Examples:

- A student considering engineering needs to think about whether their current math sequence will position them for advanced Calculus and advanced Physics.
- A future pre-health student should be building a strong foundation in Biology, Chemistry, Pre-Calculus, and English.
- A prospective humanities student should be developing strength in advanced English, History, languages, and other rigorous electives aligned with those interests.

Think in Sequences, Not Individual Classes:

The important question is not simply, *“How many APs am I taking?”*
It is: *“Where is this course taking me next?”*

That means considering:

- Which courses are prerequisites for more advanced classes?
- Are you continuing the Core 5 courses: English, Math, Science, History/Social Science, and Foreign Language?
- Are you challenging yourself appropriately within what your school offers?
- Do your electives begin to support academic interests you may want to explore more deeply?

Highly selective colleges generally want to see rigor, but rigor without strong performance (i.e., A's) can work against you. Taking the hardest possible schedule and earning substantially lower grades does not automatically create a stronger transcript.

The goal is a challenging, sensible academic progression in which a student can succeed.

Keep in Mind:

Admissions officers receive information about your high school and its curriculum through the Common App's School Report or your high school's profile.

They have an **abundance** of historical data from previous applicants. They generally know which advanced courses were available to you. Course rigor is evaluated in context, which means students should make thoughtful use of the opportunities their particular school provides.



Extracurricular Activities:

Exploration With Direction

Freshman year was the right time to sample different activities, test new interests, and learn what actually holds your attention. Now, tenth grade is where students should begin making choices about which interests are worth continuing and which ones they are ready to leave behind.

That does not mean every sophomore needs a perfectly defined “spike” or future major. It does mean that continuing to collect activities without developing depth can become counterproductive.

Students should begin asking:

- *Which activities do I genuinely enjoy enough to continue?*
- *Where am I becoming more skilled, responsible, or involved?*
- *Which commitments no longer feel meaningful?*
- *Where could I create greater impact by investing more time?*



Dropping an activity is not necessarily a negative.

In many cases, narrowing your commitments allows you to spend more time on the experiences that matter most and begin developing the kind of depth that becomes increasingly important in junior year.

Depth Changes the Equation:

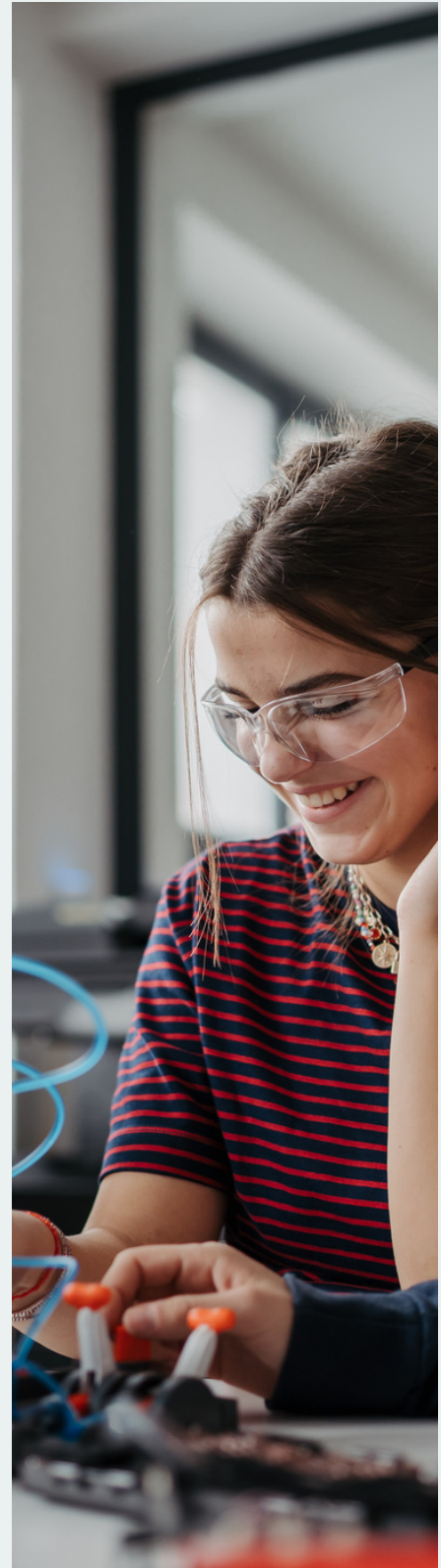
Imagine two students who both list robotics:

- One attends weekly meetings for three years.
- Another begins by participating, then takes ownership of part of the team's programming work, helps troubleshoot difficult builds, mentors newer members, competes at a higher level, and eventually helps lead a major project.

“Robotics” appears on both activity lists. The experiences and impact are completely different.

The same principle applies to music, research, service, athletics, debate, employment, coding, journalism, student government, and nearly any other extracurricular. The activity itself is rarely what makes a student stand out. What they do with it does.

By the end of sophomore year, students should ideally be pushing at least some of their strongest interests further. That could mean taking on greater responsibility in clubs and organizations, creating an initiative independently, competing beyond the school level, expanding a project into the local community, mentoring others, or finding another way to make a measurable contribution.



A Note on Leadership:

Leadership does not require a title.

Being named “President” or “Captain” can be meaningful, but admissions officers care more about what changed at your school because you were involved. A student who organizes a new initiative, improves how a team operates, mentors younger members, solves an important problem, or expands an organization's impact may demonstrate stronger leadership than someone who simply holds an official position.

Think less about the title and more about the **evidence** of ownership, initiative, and impact.

Thinking About Testing (*Without Letting it Take Over*)

Students can begin familiarizing themselves with the SAT and ACT and eventually use diagnostic or practice testing to determine which exam better matches their strengths. From there, families can develop a preparation timeline that leaves room for multiple testing opportunities before senior year.

But there is an important hierarchy here: Your transcript comes first.

Hundreds of hours of test preparation are not a worthwhile trade if a student's classroom performance begins to decline. Standardized testing is one academic signal. Grades and course rigor reflect years of sustained academic performance.

The best testing strategy fits around a student's academic life rather than competing with it.

Teachers & Counselors:

Start Building Relationships

Sophomores do not need to begin selecting recommendation writers. They should begin becoming the kind of students teachers will eventually be excited to recommend.

That means more than earning an A.

Participate thoughtfully. Ask questions. Attend office hours when appropriate. Respond well to feedback, and act on it. Help create a productive classroom environment. Allow teachers to see how you think, not simply what grade you earn.

The same applies to your school counselor.

Your counselor will eventually provide important context about your academic program, involvement, character, and place within your school community. A private admissions advisor should complement that relationship, never replace it.

Strong recommendations are usually the product of relationships built naturally over time.





What Should Be True by *the End of Sophomore Year?*

You do not need a finished college list or perfectly defined application narrative.

Ideally, however, you are ending tenth grade with:

- ☐ A thoughtful academic schedule through senior year
- ☐ Strong performance in increasingly challenging courses
- ☐ One or more interests you are excited to explore more deeply
- ☐ A purposeful plan for the summer after Grade 10
- ☐ An initial understanding of standardized testing and perhaps baseline PSAT/Pre-ACT scores
- ☐ Positive relationships with teachers and your school counselor

Most importantly, you should have options.

The Big Picture:

Build Options Now. Make Decisions Later.

Sophomore year is not simply a year to “get ready” for the college process. The decisions students make now begin shaping what their application can look like later.

Course choices determine which advanced classes will be available junior and senior year. The activities students continue, deepen, or leave behind determine where they have time to build meaningful involvement and impact. Summer plans, testing decisions, and academic interests all begin to compound.

You cannot go back during senior year and create two years of depth in an activity or change the academic sequence you chose in Grade 10.

That is why we believe this is such an important moment for intentional guidance. Students do not need to have everything figured out, but they should understand **which decisions matter now, which can wait, and where their current path is leading them.**

The goal is to enter junior year with direction, not questions you wish you had answered a year earlier.



If your family is ready to better understand where your student stands in the admissions process, we invite you to [apply for a complimentary strategy call with the Admittedly team.](#)

This initial conversation helps us understand your student’s goals and current profile, highlight important considerations and potential gaps, and determine whether Admittedly may be the right partner for your family moving forward.