



# A GUIDE TO COLLEGE AND CAREER READINESS FOR FAMILIES



PRODUCED BY THE UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA'S COLLEGE READINESS CONSORTIUM



# INTRODUCTION

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In today's world, a college degree is becoming a requirement for career-track jobs that pay a living wage and provide opportunity for promotion. College includes four-year colleges such as the University of Minnesota, as well as community and technical colleges where a student can earn a two-year associate's degree or obtain a certificate in a specialized career field or complete an apprenticeship.

Parents, grandparents, and other caring adults play a critical role in a student's education. This guide will help you support your student's preparation for college from preschool through their first year of college. It is based on research used in the development of Ramp-Up to Readiness™, a school-wide college and career readiness program designed to create an equitable opportunity to achieve social and economic mobility through higher education, whether it be at a two or four-year college, a trade school, or an apprenticeship. Ramp-Up to Readiness™ helps schools and programs prepare students for college and careers in five essential areas of readiness:

- **Academic:** The ability to succeed in first-year classes that earn credits at a technical college, community college, or four-year college or university
- **Admissions:** The ability to meet admissions requirements at a range of postsecondary institutions
- **Career:** The ability to identify careers that match personal, financial, and other goals and an understanding of the skills, credentials, and experiences required to succeed in those careers
- **Financial:** The ability to cover the cost of the first semester of study at a postsecondary institution through savings, loans, and financial aid
- **Social/Emotional:** The ability to set educational goals, make and monitor progress toward them, and create relationships with peers and adults that support academic success

The advice in this guide covers ways families can help students become college ready in all five areas.

For more information, visit [www.collegeready.umn.edu](http://www.collegeready.umn.edu) or [www.rampuptoreadiness.org](http://www.rampuptoreadiness.org).





# COLLEGE PREP FROM INFANCY THROUGH HIGH SCHOOL

**Support reading:** Reading helps develop vocabulary and is a fundamental skill for all learning.

- Talk to your student from birth.
- Point out words on signs to preschoolers.
- Spend 20 minutes or more each day reading to your student, or having your student read to you.
  - Older students should read on their own daily, but often still enjoy listening to adults read.
  - Visit a public library for books and magazines or to read a newspaper. Get a library card for your student. Many libraries also offers audiobooks.

**Remember, intelligence is not fixed:** Effort and persistence when facing challenges are important characteristics of a successful student.

- Encourage your student to be a learner.
- Praise your student’s effort, not just success, by saying things such as: “I like how you kept at that math assignment and tried different ways.”

**Help your student set goals:** Setting goals is good practice, and achieving goals increases motivation.

- Help your student set and achieve SMART goals about behavior, time management, and/or school:
  - **S**pecific
  - **M**easurable
  - **A**ttainable
  - **R**elevant
  - **T**imely

**Establish a set time for homework every night:**

- Turn off TVs, cell phones, and eliminate other distractions.
- Help your student check their homework to be sure it is done correctly.

### Stay connected with school:

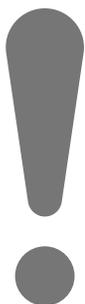
- Attend parent-teacher conferences and use your school's information system to stay informed about your student's progress and grades.
- If you have questions, contact your student's teacher.
- Encourage your student to use a planner and review it each night to know the upcoming assignments.
- Ask teachers or school counselors if your student is taking classes that will prepare them for college, and if your student's test scores indicate that they will be ready for college. If not, work with them to develop a plan.
- Support your student's extracurricular events.

**Encourage your student to seek help:** Learning when and how to get assistance is an important skill for college and life. It is better to get help early before a problem gets worse.

- If you think your student needs extra help, you or your student can ask a teacher or counselor about tutoring or other assistance available at the school.

**Start saving for college:** There are many ways to make college more affordable. Even the smallest savings add up if set aside regularly over a long period of time.

- Explore setting up a college savings plan and other savings ideas at [savingforcollege.com](http://savingforcollege.com).
- Complete a sample FAFSA (Free Application for Federal Student Aid) form to get an estimate of the financial aid your student might receive. You can find one at [studentaid.gov/aid-estimator](http://studentaid.gov/aid-estimator).
- Social Security numbers are not required to attend college, although they are required for all government financial aid. Some states do offer financial aid to undocumented students.
- Give strong consideration to attending college in state, which is typically cheaper than out-of-state options.



If no one in your family has attended college before, [www.firstinthefamily.org/resources/](http://www.firstinthefamily.org/resources/) might be useful. Also, the Minnesota Department of Education has many videos of parents and students of different racial, cultural and economic backgrounds explaining why they chose college. [www.youtube.com/user/MNDeptofEd](http://www.youtube.com/user/MNDeptofEd)



## COLLEGE PREP FOR THE MIDDLE SCHOOL YEARS (GRADES 6-8)

**Encourage your student to take school seriously and choose challenging classes:** Middle school subjects are important foundations for high school classes.

**Explore a variety of career interests:**

- Ask your student about activities that they enjoy, and explore related careers.
- Find a way to connect your student's dreams to attending college.
  - For example, if a student wants to be a firefighter, teacher, electrician, or fashion designer, mention that the road to those careers includes college.
- Visit [engage.youth.gov/career-pathways](https://engage.youth.gov/career-pathways) or [nasa.gov/audience/for-students/5-8](https://nasa.gov/audience/for-students/5-8) for fun websites to explore careers.

**Develop academic habits of success:** Developing organizational skills, learning how to get help from school staff, and building positive relationships are key college skills to begin developing in middle school.

- Check your student's planner each night.
- Help your student build positive relationships with peers who make good choices and are developing good study habits.
- Encourage your student to keep trying when a subject is hard.
- You can get better at anything with patience.
- Khan Academy provides many free tutorials at [khanacademy.org](https://khanacademy.org).



**Get involved in extracurricular activities:** Colleges look for well-rounded students who volunteer or are involved in school and community activities. Activities are also a great way to get to know other students or adjust to a new school.

- Sign your student up for a school or community club or sport.
- Encourage your student to take on a leadership position.
- Local colleges can have opportunities to enrich learning throughout the school year and summer.

**Learn about college costs and financial aid:** Become familiar with college costs and ways to cover those costs, including grants, loans and scholarships. Scholarships and grants do not need to be repaid. Many are based on family income.

- Check out the different types of aid at [studentaid.gov/understand-aid/types](https://studentaid.gov/understand-aid/types).
- Watch videos and find more information at [mnprivatecolleges.org/paying](https://mnprivatecolleges.org/paying). Videos are available in Spanish, Hmong and Somali.
- Get an early estimate of the financial aid your student might receive by using the planning tools at [studentaid.gov/aid-estimator](https://studentaid.gov/aid-estimator).

**Register for 9th grade:** Often students register for high school classes while still in 8th grade.

- Make sure your student registers for classes that will keep your student on track for college. Typically four-year colleges require:
  - 3-4 years of math
  - 4 years of English
  - 3 years of science(including biology and chemistry)
  - 2 years of a single second language
  - 4 years of social studies
  - 1 year of art (includes music)
- Keep advanced courses in mind. Students should take the hardest courses they can manage.
- Although the classes listed above may not be required for a two-year community or technical college, they are good preparation for all future college students.
- Encourage your student to take math, science, and technology classes because many jobs of the future are in these fields.



A student wearing a blue hoodie and black headphones sits on a concrete bench outdoors. He is looking down at a laptop on his lap with a thoughtful expression, his hand resting on his chin. A black backpack with red accents sits on the ground next to him. The background shows a brick building and trees with yellow autumn leaves.

# COLLEGE PREP DURING HIGH SCHOOL

## 9TH GRADE

**Establish a set time for homework every night:** Turn off TVs, cell phones, and eliminate other distractions.

**Grades count:** Often students think that grades in 9th grade classes don't count for college admissions. Not only do they count, success in those classes is the foundation for more challenging coursework later in high school.

- If your school provides online access to grades, track your student's progress regularly.
- If your student is struggling, contact the teacher or counselor to find additional help. Don't wait for the end of the semester.

**Get involved in extracurricular activities:** Colleges look for well-rounded students who volunteer, are employed and/or are involved in school activities. It can be a great way to develop leadership skills and explore careers.

- Help your student get involved in an activity at school or in the community.
- Keep homework a priority by helping your student develop time management skills.

**Register for 10th grade classes:** Registration can happen as early as January.

- Stay involved in the registration process to make sure your student is taking the recommended classes to be prepared for college.

**Complete a College Financial Aid Calculator:** This will give you a realistic estimate of how much your family is expected to contribute to college costs.

- Check out the free FAFSA estimator [studentaid.gov/aid-estimator](https://studentaid.gov/aid-estimator) to get an estimate of college expenses and find planning tools.
- Encourage your student to explore grant and scholarship options online and with their school counselor.

## 10TH GRADE

**Explore career interests:** Continue discussions with your student about activities they enjoy and brainstorm careers goal can help students be more motivated and see how the dreams for their future connect with school today.

- Your student can find careers that fit his or her interests by taking an interest inventory. One website that can help is [careeronestop.org/GetMyFuture](https://careeronestop.org/GetMyFuture).
- School counselors can discuss the type of college degree needed for careers of interest.

**Consider different types of postsecondary options:** There is a wide range of postsecondary options, including two- and four-year colleges, and technical college programs that often take fewer than two years to complete. With good planning, two-year college credits can transfer to a four-year college. For some majors, it may be best to start at a four-year college because of a required sequence of classes. For example, a student who transfers after two years at a community college often will need three more years of study to complete an engineering degree.

- Discuss with your student what type of college may be the right fit for the careers or areas of study that interest them.
  - Some other factors include: diversity and size of the student population, city size/location, and average high school GPA for incoming freshman.
- Three websites to help students explore colleges are
  - [engage.youth.gov/career-pathways](https://engage.youth.gov/career-pathways) (click on “evaluate educational options”),
  - [bigfuture.collegeboard.org/find-colleges](https://bigfuture.collegeboard.org/find-colleges)

**Explore scholarship options:** Students can explore websites for the different types of scholarships for which they might be eligible. While grades are often one factor, many scholarships look at the student’s special interests or skills, challenges they may have faced, being first in their family to go to college, or financial need. Choosing specific careers can lead to grants or scholarships, such as teaching in high-need fields in low-income areas. Parents can ask if their employer or union has scholarship opportunities.

**Register for 11th grade classes:** Your student should consider taking a class that offers potential college credit, such as Advanced Placement (AP), International Baccalaureate (IB), or Project Lead the Way (PLTW). Many states provide an opportunity to take actual college classes, such as Minnesota’s Post-Secondary Enrollment Option (PSEO) program.

- Talk to the school counselor to learn about options in your school and state.





## 11TH GRADE

**Consider taking the PSAT test:** It is offered in October and is good practice for the ACT and SAT tests. You can see how your student is progressing in academic readiness for college. Some schools offer the PSAT (or PSAT 10) in 10th grade.

**Take the ACT or SAT:** Many colleges are test-optional. This means that the ACT and SAT scores are not required when applying. Many students interested in four-year colleges still take the ACT and SAT to be considered for merit scholarships or to supplement their application. Test dates in April and June are good because students have completed most or all of their junior year classes.

- Register your student at least one month in advance. For dates and registration, see [act.org](https://act.org) and [sat.collegeboard.org/home](https://sat.collegeboard.org/home).
- Have your student participate in an ACT or SAT preparation class, which are often offered through school and community education programs. Both ACT and SAT offer free online prep, and Khan Academy offers free SAT prep at [khanacademy.org/sat](https://khanacademy.org/sat).
- Two-year and technical colleges probably will not require the ACT or SAT, but they may have other test requirements.

**Attend college fairs and visit campuses:** Visiting colleges and talking to admissions staff are good ways to see if a campus is the right fit for your student.

- For information on factors to consider, review the “Now Go!” section of [readysetgo.state.mn.us/RSG/Parent/Go](https://readysetgo.state.mn.us/RSG/Parent/Go). Your state may have a similar website.
- Consider whether the college has majors (areas of study) that fit your student’s interests as well as college size, location, and cost.
- Make appointments for information sessions and tours with a college’s admissions office.

**Continue planning for financing college:** Completing a free sample FAFSA (financial aid) form will help you get an estimate of the expected family contribution, and the financial aid your student might receive.

- Explore the financial planning tools and sample FAFSA at [studentaid.gov/aid-estimator](https://studentaid.gov/aid-estimator).
- Talk to a school counselor with your student and research scholarships online.

**If your student plans to play a sport in college:** Contact your high school coach to ask about programs and scholarships.

**Register for a strong senior year:** English, social studies, math, and science are important subjects to continue in 12th grade. Four-year colleges expect it and two-year community and technical colleges often require placement tests in math, science, and language arts. If students have skipped a year of instruction, they may do poorly on placement tests and have to take developmental courses that do not earn college credit but still charge tuition.

If possible your student should enroll in at least one class that offers potential college credit such as Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate, or career and technical education college options. Most students become more confident and prepared after taking a college-level course in high school.

## **COLLEGE VISITS**

College visits are very important to do before attending a college. Visit anytime beginning in 9th grade. Listen for answers to or ask the following questions:

- What is the college's graduation rate?
- Does the college offer your student's intended major?
- Are there learning communities where students with similar interests live in the same hall and take classes together?
- What types of honors courses and programs are offered?
- What kinds of academic supports are available on campus?
- How much time do students spend on homework each week?
- How much writing is expected? How much reading is expected?
- Do students receive prompt feedback on academic performance?
- Do students often work together on projects?
- What kinds of activities are students involved in outside of the classroom?
- What percentage of students study in other countries?
- What percentage of students do community service?
- How many students live on campus?
- Are faculty members accessible and supportive? Can students work on research projects with faculty?
- Are there online learning opportunities?
- What kind of internship do students do? Are they required?
- Is there a parent communication program?





## 12TH GRADE

**Avoid the senior slump:** Colleges consider the senior year course load when making admission decisions. In addition, seniors who skip math courses can lose skills and increase the risk of being required to take developmental classes in college. Students pay tuition for developmental classes but the classes do not earn credit towards graduation.

### **Last chance for ACT and SAT:**

- Check if the colleges your student is interested in requires the ACT or SAT.
- If your student did not take the ACT or SAT as a junior or would like a higher score, register for the October tests at least one month in advance.

**Determine application deadlines:** Many four-year colleges have November or December deadlines, while others allow applications until January, February or even June. Some community colleges will accept students until the start of school, but some programs have spring or summer deadlines or waiting lists. There may be other requirements, including placement tests.

**Submit applications:** Most applications are submitted online. Some four year colleges use the “Common Application” which can be submitted to multiple colleges at once. Some colleges will waive application fees for low-income families.

- Apply to at least three colleges:
  - Match school: one where the average GPA and ACT/SAT scores for incoming first-year students are about the same as your student’s
  - Stretch school: one where the GPA and test scores are a bit higher than your student’s
  - Safe school: one where the scores are a little lower
- If the application requires recommendation letters, make sure your student asks people to write letters at least three weeks before the due date, and preferably early in fall. They can ask counselors, teachers, employers, coaches, or leaders from volunteer activities.
- If a college your student applies to requires an essay, make sure they have a teacher or counselor who can review it. If not, you should review it and provide comments. Make sure your student revises the essay before submitting it.
- Monitor applications to make sure all of the required documents are submitted.
- Be sure your student reads and creates electronic folders for the emails that will come from colleges.

## **Complete an official financial aid form (FAFSA):**

- The official, free financial aid application is found at [studentaid.gov](https://studentaid.gov). The form is available starting in the fall. You will want to have recent family income information (e.g., tax forms) and your student's savings information handy.
- Attend any financial aid workshops offered by your school. At some events you can get assistance in completing the FAFSA.
- Encourage your student to apply for scholarships. Schools often have an organized process for applying for local scholarships, and students should participate.

**Decide where to go:** By April most colleges will have made admission decisions and provided information on financial aid.

- Compare schools based on the actual cost your student will have to pay after any grants or scholarships offered by the college are subtracted from the full tuition price.

**Apply for housing:** Complete the housing application, which may be due as early as March 1.

- Consider living and learning communities where students live on the same floor and take classes in common.

**Confirm enrollment:** Follow the directions in the acceptance letter for the school your student chooses.

- Often a confirmation fee must be sent to the school in spring. If the fee is a financial hardship, ask the college if they will waive the fee.
- Your student should tell the school counselor which college they plan to attend, and request that the final transcript and all college credit exam scores be sent there.
- Find out when tuition and room and board payments are due. Colleges usually allow installment payments, but you may have to ask for that option.
- Make sure your student is reading and responding to all information sent by the college. Orientation and registration may occur during the summer.

**If your student plans to play a sport in college:**

- Contact your high school coach to ask about programs and scholarships.
- Register at the NCAA Eligibility Center at [eligibilitycenter.org](https://eligibilitycenter.org).





**If your student has a disability:**

- Contact the disability services office to learn what kinds of documents are required.

**Plan for college expenses:**

- Help your student prepare a budget for college.
- Determine how much to spend on food, books and supplies, and entertainment.
- Most students will need debit cards. Make sure the bank you and your student choose has an ATM machine close to campus.
- A checking account is convenient for the purchase of books and other expenses. Most colleges will charge books to a student's college account, which is then paid by check, charge or debit card or online payments from bank accounts.

**Getting to college and moving in:** Students are provided a specific move in date, and possibly time of day.

- Air travel: Schedule flights in advance for the best prices.
- Train or bus: Find out how much your student can take as luggage.
- Car: Residence halls will have specific directions for unloading and moving in.

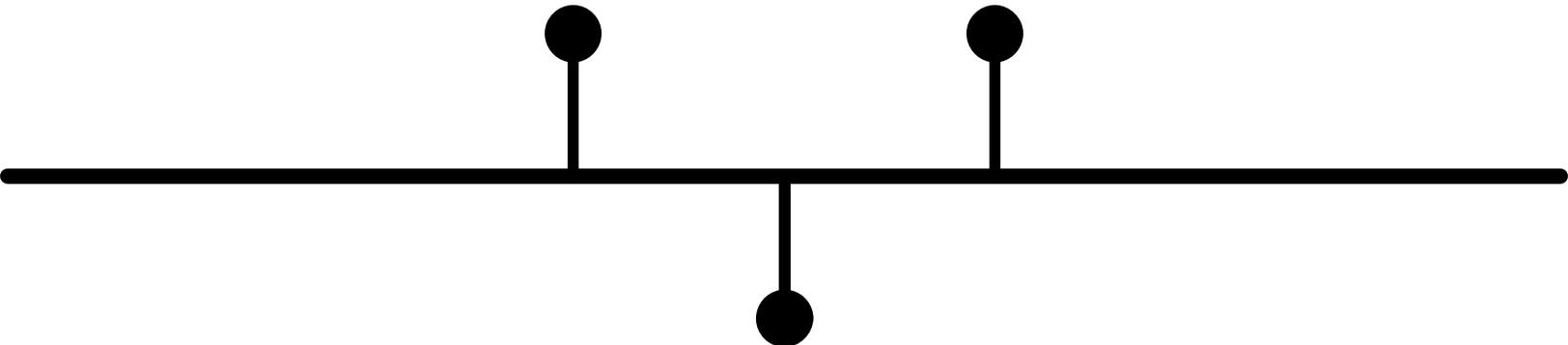




**Attend Student Orientation:** Student orientation is often a required event for students to attend during the summer prior to the start of the school year. It is a great opportunity for students to meet other new incoming students, get familiar with the campus, and most importantly register for classes. Many colleges also have family orientation. This allows families a chance to see the environment their students will be in for the next few years and hear what a typical student life will be. It is a great time to get your questions answered prior to the first day of classes. Remember to take pictures along the way as time will quickly pass by.

FIRST SEMESTER OF COLLEGE

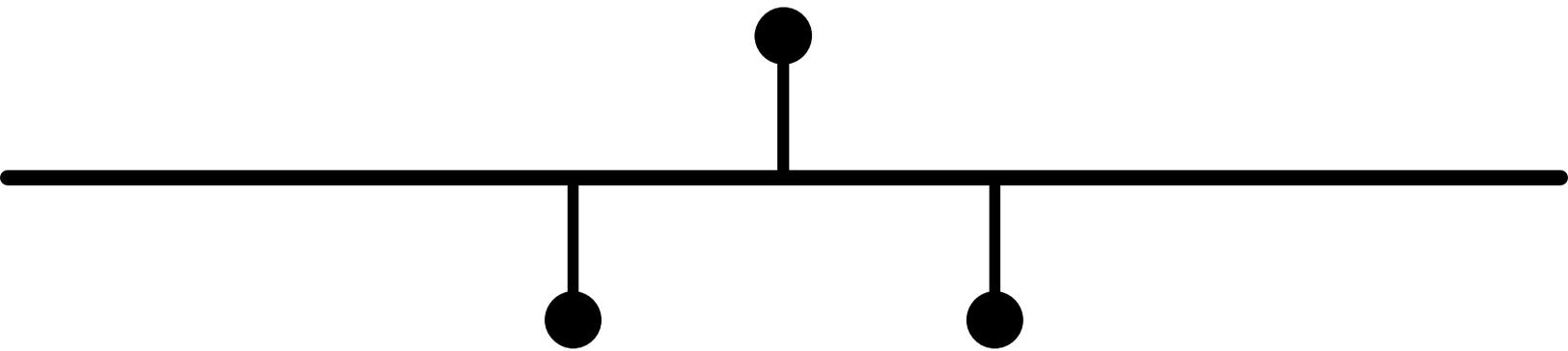
**Midterms:** For colleges that run on a semester, most college semesters are 15 weeks long. Between weeks 5-9 (October and November) students may have midterms. This can be a stressful time as exams, projects, presentations, and large writing assignments may be due. Some classes may have multiple weeks of midterms.



**Start of the school year:** The first couple of weeks is a transition period for your student. Students are still getting used to their schedules, finding their classes, and making new friends. Many colleges allow students to change their schedules within the first one to two weeks of school. After this grace period, students may find it difficult to add and drop new classes. Adding and dropping new classes may result in some financial consequences.



**Study Days:** After the last day of classes, students typically receive a couple of days to study for their finals.



**Registration:** Students register for next semester classes anywhere between the middle of the term to the end of the term. Students will work with their advisors to choose classes that will align with their interest and goals.

**Finals Week:** Finals week is after all classes have ended. Finals are often an exam, project, or paper. These are often an accumulation of what was learned throughout the term. Each class is assigned a day and time for their final. Once a student completes all of their finals, they can start their winter break.



## GLOSSARY

**ACT:** A standardized test used by many colleges as one factor considered in admissions. A student usually takes this test in winter or spring of their junior year.

**Advanced Placement (AP):** AP classes are taught in high schools by high school teachers who are trained to use a specific college-level curriculum. Students take an exam at the end of the course and many colleges will give academic credits to students based on their exam scores.

**Apprenticeship:** A training program that provides hands-on training alongside classroom instruction for skilled careers. Oftentimes students receive a certificate upon completion.

**Community Colleges:** Public colleges that provide two-year associate degrees. Students who plan to continue their education at a four-year college should ask about the transfer curriculum.

**Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA):** This is the application required by all colleges for student loans and grants. The application requires information about both parent and student income and assets, and must be completed each year the student is in college. It calculates the expected family contribution.

**Financial Aid:** Colleges will calculate financial aid based on the difference between the expected family contribution and the cost of attending a particular college. Financial aid comes in many forms, including:

- Pell grants: Federal money that does not need to be repaid, available to students with the highest need.
- State or college grants: Money that does not need to be repaid.
- Tuition waivers: A college may waive part or all of the tuition based on a student's talents or need.
- Work study: On campus jobs funded through financial aid.
- Scholarships: Money that does not need to be repaid. Colleges and many organizations offer scholarships based on a wide range of criteria.
- Loans: Money that must be paid back, usually with interest.

**GPA (Grade Point Average):** A GPA is the average of a student's grades, usually on a scale of 1 (D) to 4 (A) points. A class that earns more credits will count more heavily in the GPA.

**International Baccalaureate (IB):** IB classes are taught in high schools by high school teachers who are trained to use a specific college-level curriculum. Students take an exam at the end of the course and many colleges will give academic credits to students based on exam scores.

**Major/Minor:** Students select an area of focus in college, which is called a major. A student has to complete a designated set of classes to earn the major and graduate. Sometimes they select a second area of interest with fewer requirements, which is called a minor.

**Post-Secondary Enrollment Options (PSEO):** In Minnesota, high school juniors and seniors (and some sophomores) can take one or more courses at a public college without paying tuition and can earn college credit. Colleges have eligibility requirements based on class rank or test scores, so students should check with their school counselor to explore options. Other states have similar programs, although students may have to pay tuition.

**Project Lead the Way (PLTW):** Project Lead the Way classes are taught in high schools by high school teachers and provide hands-on, project-based challenging engineering courses.

**PSAT:** A standardized test primarily offered in 11th grade that is aligned with the SAT and can help a student prepare for the SAT. The results provide information about a student's knowledge, skills and interests, and can help assess whether a student is on track for college readiness. Some schools offer the PSAT10 in 10th grade.

**SAT:** A standardized test used by many colleges, particularly colleges with highly competitive admissions, as one factor considered in admissions. A student usually takes this test in winter or spring of their junior year.

**Technical College:** Colleges that provide specific career training that usually requires less than two years to achieve a diploma or certificate.







# College Readiness Consortium

**The University of Minnesota's College Readiness Consortium works to increase the number and diversity of students who graduate from high school with the knowledge, skills, and habits for success in higher education.**

The University of Minnesota is an equal opportunity educator and employer.

This publication is available in alternative formats upon request.  
Direct request to College Readiness Consortium, [collegeready@umn.edu](mailto:collegeready@umn.edu).

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