

## Next Stop: College!

by Ally Connell, a BCPS graduate

For most students, the last two years of high school are the most challenging. You have to keep your grades up while still juggling a job, car insurance and rising gas prices, your personal life, after-school activities and sports. In the midst of all these stressors lies the ever-dreaded college search.

Searching for colleges can be a scary thing. The idea of living away from home and having to do your own laundry and make your own lunches may be frightening. But going to college can be liberating, too. You finally get to step out into the world and be whoever you want to be and do whatever you want to do.

The college decision-making process begins in your junior year. All your life, you have been dreaming up ideas of what you want to be when you grow up, and more often than not, those ideas change monthly. This is the year when you have to narrow down your potential career options. Chances are that you will not be able to work toward becoming a doctor, aerobics instructor and zoologist all at the same time. Eliminate those occupations on your list that may be unrealistic or out-of-reach. Once you have your list narrowed down, you can begin the next step.

Talk to your school counselor about what you want to do with your life. Your counselor will help you find schools that have good programs or majors available to help you receive the education that you need to pursue the occupation you want. Go home and look up the schools that your counselor recommends and see if you can find any additional schools with similar programs or majors. Be sure to visit college-gear events, such as the National College Fair at the Baltimore Convention Center, and nearby colleges to get a better feel for what possibilities are out there. Try to bulk up your list of potential colleges so that you have more schools to choose from, as well.

The next step is to decide what you want in a college. You have to make some decisions here: *Do you want to live on campus or commute? Do you want to be at a large school or a small one? Do you want to go to a public or private school?* Think about the kind of environment that you want.. *Do you want to live in a rural area or a city? How far are you willing to go away from home?* These are only a few of the many questions that you have to consider when narrowing down your list of possible schools. Talk to your parents during this step and have them help you decide what you should look for in a school. Remember: Although moving to Hawaii for college may sound fabulous now, you might change your mind when you take into account the costs of going to college in Hawaii and flying home for holidays and summers.

Once you have eliminated those colleges that do not fit your criteria, go back to your school counselor. Talk with your counselor about each of the colleges on your list. Your counselor will help you narrow your list even more by telling you which schools might fit you best in terms of academic requirements. Speaking with college admissions

representatives when they visit your school can also be helpful in making sure a school is right for you. By now, your list should be no more than five to 10 schools.

At this point, if you have not already and/or you have recently completed your school's SAT prep course, you should take the SAT and check if any of the schools that you are interested in require other tests, such as the ACT or the SAT Subject Tests. Remember that you can take the SAT, the ACT and the SAT Subject Tests as many times as you want, and colleges will only consider your highest score for each section.

Between the end of junior year and the beginning of senior year, try to visit as many schools as you can. You gain a lot more knowledge about a particular school by actually seeing it in person and talking to current students than you do from taking the virtual tours that many colleges offer online. If your high school allots you a certain number of unexcused absences for college visits, use them!

Once you have visited most of your college choices and narrowed your list down further, begin the application process. Keep in mind that, the earlier you complete your applications, the better your chance of getting accepted and receiving scholarship money. You also have to consider which counselors and/or teachers you will ask to write letters of recommendation. Make sure that you choose teachers with whom you have good relationships and in whose classes you excelled.

After you submit your applications, verify that your colleges have received them and apply for financial aid, all you can do is wait. Some of your colleges may have rolling admissions, which typically means you will know if you have been accepted within two to three weeks of submitting your application. For most colleges, however, you won't hear back until spring.

Finally, when you receive your acceptance letters and your financial aid offers, consider the benefits and costs of each of your options. If one does not clearly stand out against the rest, simply review your options with your parents and your school counselor and settle on the school that you feel is best for you.

Good luck!

