

College Readiness: Seniors, Your Time Is Now



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- CommonApp & BlackCommonApp
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WELCOME FROM

DR. SMITH

A Message from Our
Leadership Team

NEXT SUNDAY

College Readiness
Session & Scholarship
Search Strategies
Sunday, August 23
7:00 PM CST
[Zoom Link](#)

Dear Seniors, Families, and Supporters,

Welcome to the August 2026 edition of the Your Next Steps-US newsletter. This issue is written for one group above all: **the Class of 2027**. Senior year has begun, and the next four months will shape where you go, what you study, and how much of it you pay for.

Here is the truth we tell every student we mentor: the students who get in — and get funded — are rarely the ones with the most talent. They are the ones who *started early*. And our seniors are already proving it — **28 students have submitted applications to three or more schools**, and it is only mid-August. That is outstanding. Applications opened August 1. Recommendation letters take weeks. Transcripts take days. Essays take drafts. Scholarships reward the students who apply first and apply often.

So this month we are handing you the full playbook. Inside you will find the eight steps of the senior application process, side-by-side guidance for CommonApp, BlackCommonApp, and ApplyTexas, a plan for finalizing your essays, exactly how to request transcripts and approach your school counselor, our assessment and 360 feedback process, and where to begin your scholarship search today.

Every link in this newsletter connects to a live tool on our site. Nothing here is theoretical — it is the same checklist our students used to earn a Rhodes Scholarship, full rides to Stanford, MIT, Howard, Columbia, and Xavier, and internships at Google, JP Morgan, Disney, and Raytheon.

You do not have to figure this out alone. Our team, our Champions, and our monthly sessions exist for exactly this moment. Bring us your questions. Bring us your drafts. Bring us your college list.

Let's get you admitted.

With confidence in your future,
Dr. Smith & The Your Next Steps-US Team

1500+
MENTEES

43
CITIES

29
COUNTRIES

>90%
SCHOLARSHIP SUCCESS

100%
FREE TO STUDENTS

•— THE SENIOR ROADMAP

Eight steps stand between you and your acceptance letters. Work them in order, start them now, and check them off on our [College Application Checklist](#).

1 Build Your College List

Choose 5–10 schools: reach, target, and safety. Use the match quizzes on our assessments page.

2 Create Your Applications

CommonApp, BlackCommonApp, and ApplyTexas accounts — all three are free to start.

3 Finalize Your Essays

Personal statement plus supplements. Expect three to five drafts, not one.

4 Request Transcripts

Submit requests to your counselor now — processing takes 5–7 business days.

5 Engage Your Counselor

Schedule your meeting in August, before their calendar fills in October.

6 Secure Recommendations

Ask two teachers and your counselor. Give them 4 weeks and a brag sheet.

7 Train, Test & Assess

AI training first, then diagnostic testing, then the official ACT or SAT.

8 Apply for Scholarships

Start with 10 applications this fall. Rolling deadlines favor the early.

WHY AUGUST MATTERS

Applications open August 1. Early Decision and Early Action deadlines land November 1 — roughly eleven weeks away. Between now and then you need finished essays, delivered transcripts, submitted recommendations, and a final college list.

Early Decision (ED) — apply by November 1, hear back in December, and the decision is *binding*. If admitted, you must attend and withdraw your other applications. Apply ED to one school only, and only if it is your clear first choice and the cost works for your family.

Early Action (EA) — also a November 1 deadline with an early answer, but *non-binding*. You may apply EA to multiple schools, compare offers, and decide by May 1. For most students this is the smartest option.

Regular Decision (RD) — the standard January 1–15 deadline with decisions in March or April. Non-binding, largest applicant pool, and you decide by May 1.

Pick one task from the roadmap above and finish it this week. Momentum is the entire game.

"Start early and apply often — most students miss opportunities simply because they waited too long."

— Your Next Steps-US Advising Team



**Eleven weeks
to November 1**

That is the entire runway between this newsletter and the first major deadline of your senior year. Print the roadmap above, tape it inside your locker or above your desk, and check off one step every week. Bring whatever you get stuck on to our next monthly session — that is exactly what it is for.

•— WHERE YOU APPLY

Three platforms cover nearly every school our students target. Most seniors use more than one — there is no conflict, and each one widens your options. All three are linked from our [Application Links](#) page.

CommonApp

One application, hundreds of colleges.

ACCOUNT SETUP

- Create your account and complete your profile

COLLEGES & MATERIALS

- Add 5–10 colleges
- Complete activities and essays
- Add recommenders, request transcripts

SUBMIT & TRACK

- Pay fees or apply fee waivers
- Review deadlines and submit

commonapp.org

BlackCommonApp

One app, one fee, dozens of HBCUs.

ACCOUNT SETUP

- Create your account and complete your profile

COLLEGES & MATERIALS

- Explore participating colleges
- Add schools and complete essays

SUBMIT & TRACK

- Submit applications
- Monitor updates and next steps

commonblackcollegeapp.com

ApplyTexas

Texas public colleges and universities.

ACCOUNT SETUP

- Create your ApplyTexas account

COLLEGES & MATERIALS

- Add Texas colleges
- Complete required essays

SUBMIT & TRACK

- Submit applications
- Monitor updates and next steps

applytexas.org



BUILD THE LIST BEFORE YOU APPLY

Before you touch an application, settle your list. We recommend 5–10 schools split across three tiers: **reach** schools that stretch your profile, **target** schools where your grades and scores match the middle 50%, and **safety** schools where you are comfortably above the range and the cost works without aid.

Not sure where you fit? Our assessments page links the college match quizzes we use with students, including the Scoir and Niche matching tools. Run both, compare the results, then bring the list to your counselor and to us.

One more rule: every school on your list should be one you would genuinely attend. A list of ten schools you love beats a list of twenty you tolerate.

FEE WAIVERS

Application fees should never stop you. CommonApp, BlackCommonApp, and ApplyTexas all offer fee waivers, and your counselor can approve eligibility. Ask — most students who qualify never do.

•— FINALIZING YOUR ESSAYS

Your transcript shows what you did. Your essay shows who you are. It is the only part of the application written entirely in your voice, and for students on the admissions bubble, it is frequently what decides the outcome.

The strongest essays we read are not the most dramatic. They are specific. A student who writes honestly about closing up her family's restaurant every night will beat a student who writes vaguely about "overcoming adversity" every single time. Detail is credibility.

A FOUR-WEEK ESSAY PLAN

Week 1 — Brainstorm. List ten moments that changed how you think. Do not filter for impressiveness. Circle the three you could talk about for an hour.

Week 2 — Draft badly. Write 800 words on your top choice without editing. First drafts are supposed to be rough; the goal is material, not polish.

Week 3 — Cut and sharpen. Trim to the word limit. Replace every general statement with a concrete one. Read it aloud — anything you would never say out loud comes out.

Week 4 — Outside eyes. Send it to a teacher, your counselor, and one of our advisors. Then proofread it three times, and once more backwards for typos.



"Colleges are not looking for a perfect student. They are looking for a real one."

— Dr. Smith

Do This

- Write about one specific moment, not your whole life
- Answer the actual prompt that was asked
- Use your own vocabulary and rhythm
- Show growth or a change in thinking
- Respect the word count exactly
- Tailor supplements to each school by name

Avoid This

- Restating your resume in paragraph form
- Thesaurus language that isn't yours
- Letting AI write it — admissions readers can tell
- Recycling one essay across schools unedited
- Naming the wrong university in a supplement
- Submitting a first draft on deadline day

Need a Reader?

Our advisors and Champions review student essays year-round at no cost. Bring a draft to a monthly session or reach us through the site.

yournextsteps-us.org/contact-us

Bring Your Draft September 21

Fall Planning & Essay Workshop · 7:00 PM EST

Come with anything — an outline, a messy first draft, or three competing ideas you cannot choose between. We work through real student essays live, and every senior leaves with specific notes on what to cut, what to expand, and what to say instead. Register through the site.



•— TRANSCRIPTS, COUNSELORS & LETTERS

REQUESTING YOUR TRANSCRIPT

Colleges require an **official** transcript sent directly from your school — a copy you print yourself does not count. The request is simple, but the timeline catches students off guard every year.

- Submit your request to the counseling or registrar's office **now**, not in October
- Allow **5–7 business days** for processing, longer near deadlines
- Confirm it is being sent to **each college** on your list, plus scholarship programs that require it
- Request extra copies — you will need more than you expect
- Check your application portal to verify each transcript was **received**, not just sent

If you attended more than one high school, request transcripts from every school. Missing records are the most common cause of an incomplete application.

LETTERS OF RECOMMENDATION

Most colleges ask for one counselor letter and one to two teacher letters. Ask teachers from junior year who taught you in a core subject and actually know your work.

- Ask **in person**, at least four weeks before your first deadline
- Give each writer a one-page **brag sheet**: your college list, intended major, activities, and two or three specific memories from their class
- Add them as recommenders in your application so the invitation reaches their inbox
- Send a reminder one week out, and a thank-you note after



Talking to Your Counselor

Come to the meeting with these five things ready:

- Your college list, in three tiers
- Your GPA, class rank, and test scores
- Your intended major or field
- Deadlines for each school
- Questions about aid and fee waivers

"Counselors carry hundreds of seniors. The students who get the strongest letters and the fastest transcripts are the ones who introduced themselves in August — not the ones who showed up on October 30th."

– Your Next Steps-US Advising Team





ASSESSMENT SPOTLIGHT: KNOW YOURSELF FIRST

COLLEGE FIT • CAREER ALIGNMENT • 360 FEEDBACK • ACT/SAT

Before you decide where to apply, find out what actually fits. Our assessment process gives you data instead of guesswork.

•— COMPLETE YOUR ASSESSMENTS

Every senior we mentor completes three alignment assessments. Together they take under two hours and they sharpen every other decision you make this fall — which schools make your list, what you write your essay about, and which major you declare.

College Alignment. Match quizzes that surface schools fitting your academics, size preference, and budget.

Career Alignment. Career quizzes built for teens, mapping your interests to real fields and salaries.

Personality Alignment. A personality profile that explains how you work, learn, and lead — language you can borrow directly for essays and interviews.

All three are linked on our [ACT/SAT Prep & Assessments](#) page.

The 360 Feedback Survey

The most revealing assessment we run costs nothing and takes a week.

- **Identify** 6–10 people who know you: parents, grandparents, friends, teachers, coaches, teammates, managers, coworkers.
- **Ask** each one: *What career do you think I would be good at doing? Why?*
- **Document** every response in a spreadsheet and look for the commonality.

The pattern that emerges is often the strongest evidence you have about your own strengths — and it makes an outstanding essay.

ACT / SAT Readiness

1. **Train** — start with the AI ACT/SAT Training App at training.yournextsteps-us.org
2. **Diagnose** — once you finish 4+ hours of training, send us an email and we will set you up for diagnostic testing using Test Innovators
3. **Review** — go through your diagnostic scores and identify your strengths and gaps
4. **Register** — sign up for the official [ACT](#) or [SAT](#)

"Students who complete the assessments write better essays. It is not a coincidence — once you can name your own strengths in plain language, the essay stops being a guessing game."

– Dr. Smith



•— SCHOLARSHIP SPOTLIGHT



"The scholarship search tool helped me find opportunities I never knew existed. I secured \$15,000 in awards for my freshman year alone!"

– RT, College Sophomore

Do not wait until spring. Many scholarship programs use rolling deadlines, which means the earlier applications are read against a smaller pool. Seniors who begin in August routinely out-earn equally qualified classmates who begin in January.

Our **Scholarship Search App** matches you to awards by major, GPA, location, background, and interest — and lets you track everything you have applied to in one place.

nextstepscholars.replit.app

TIPS FOR SCHOLARSHIP SUCCESS

- **Apply often.** Set a target of 10–15 applications this fall, then keep going.
- **Chase the small awards.** \$500 and \$1,000 scholarships have far less competition and stack quickly.
- **Tailor every application.** Show precisely how you meet the criteria the sponsor named.
- **Track everything.** One spreadsheet: sponsor, amount, deadline, requirements, status.
- **Reuse smartly.** Adapt your college essay rather than starting from zero each time.
- **Ask early.** Recommenders need weeks, not days.
- **Proofread twice.** Then have someone else read it once.

Remember that scholarships are not decided by grades alone. Sponsors fund community service, leadership, first-generation students, specific career interests, faith and cultural communities, and unusual life stories. There is money out there for who you already are.

Don't Forget the FAFSA

The FAFSA opens **October 1, 2026**. Complete it even if you assume you will not qualify — many institutional scholarships and merit awards require a FAFSA on file before they will consider you. Our October session walks families through it line by line.





MEETINGS, DEADLINES & YOUR ACTION PLAN

AUGUST - DECEMBER 2026

All sessions are virtual and free. Register through the site.

•— MONTHLY MEETINGS

ALL MEETINGS HELD VIRTUALLY AT 7:00 PM

AUGUST 23

College Readiness Session & Scholarship Search Strategies (7:00 PM CST)

SEPTEMBER 21

Fall Planning & Essay Workshop

OCTOBER 19

Financial Aid & FAFSA Prep

NOVEMBER 16

Application Review & Troubleshooting

DECEMBER 14

Year-End Celebration

Key Deadlines

- Applications opened: **August 1, 2026**
- Apply to at least **3 schools: August 30, 2026**
- Apply to at least **10 schools: September 30, 2026**
- FAFSA opens: **October 1, 2026**
- Early Decision / Early Action: **November 1, 2026**
- Regular Decision: **January 1–15, 2027**
- Scholarship applications: **ongoing**

•— TAKE ACTION TODAY

For Seniors:

- ☐ Create your CommonApp, BlackCommonApp, and ApplyTexas accounts.
- ☐ Finalize a college list of 5–10 schools across three tiers.
- ☐ Request official transcripts from your counseling office.
- ☐ Schedule your first counselor meeting this month.
- ☐ Ask two teachers for recommendation letters.
- ☐ Draft your personal statement — badly, then better.
- ☐ Start the AI training app and log your first 4 hours.
- ☐ Run your 360 Feedback Survey with 6–10 people.
- ☐ Submit 3 applications by August 30, 10 by September 30.

For Parents & Families:

- ☐ Put every application deadline on a shared family calendar.
- ☐ Gather tax and income documents ahead of the October 1 FAFSA.
- ☐ Ask the counselor about application fee waiver eligibility.
- ☐ Attend the FAFSA & Financial Aid session on October 19.
- ☐ Talk honestly about budget before acceptances arrive.
- ☐ Read essay drafts for voice — not to rewrite them.
- ☐ Register your student for our monthly sessions.
- ☐ Connect with a Champion in your student's field of interest.

QUICK LINKS

College Readiness yournextsteps-us.org/college-application

Application Links yournextsteps-us.org/application-links

ACT/SAT & Assessments yournextsteps-us.org/act-sat-prep-assessments

AI ACT/SAT Training training.yournextsteps-us.org

CommonApp commonapp.org

BlackCommonApp commonblackcollegeapp.com

ApplyTexas applytexas.org

Scholarship Search nextstepscholars.replit.app

You have everything it takes to succeed. The Your Next Steps-US team believes in your potential and is here to support you every step of the way — together we are empowering nearly 1,500 students across 43 cities and 29 countries. **Your next chapter starts now.**

Questions? Contact Dr. Smith — klyne@yournextsteps-us.org | yournextsteps-us.org