

# The College Whisperers

Westchester’s leading education experts — from college coaches and test tutors to athletics-recruiting consultants and admissions officers — give the inside scoop on SAT vs ACT, college essays, athletic recruiting, and more.

**BY LAURA JOSEPH MOGIL**



# As many parents already know, getting your child into the college of his or her choice keeps getting more and more challenging.

Recent statistics show a rise in the number of college applications due to various factors, ranging from the increased use of the Common Application to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. There has also been an uptick in applications to selective schools, resulting in intensified competition for limited spots. So, how do you navigate the complicated college-application process with your child? Here's what some of Westchester's leading experts in the field advise.

## Input From College Coaches

While many private and public high schools have college counselors and online resources (such as Naviance), some families opt for additional assistance in helping their child apply to school. General college coaches can assist with everything from putting together a list of suitable schools to developing and editing the defining essay (and other essays that may be required) on the college application.

According to Emily Haft Bloom, a Certified Educational Planner (CEP) who runs Athena College Advisors in Chappaqua, the admissions process has changed tremendously over the past 15 years that she's been in business. She says that colleges used to look for well-rounded students, but now they are veering more toward students who are "pointy." According to Bloom: "That means you are focused on a few different things but with depth. It's all about demonstrating a deep commitment or expertise in a particular interest."

Bloom usually starts working with students as early as their sophomore year of high school. She finds this is helpful in developing the student's curriculum when it comes to highlighting an area of interest. "For example, if a student is considering a STEM major, I'd suggest they talk to their school counselor about taking AP Statistics as an elective in their junior or senior year," says Bloom.

"Extracurriculars should be consistent and there should be context. For example, if you are interested in a topic like food science and would like to reduce food insecurity, then you should consider volunteering at a local food pantry or a soup kitchen, like the Community Center of Northern Westchester in Katonah," says Bloom.

As far as how many colleges to apply to these days, the answers from college



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coaches go up to as many as 15. Alan Sheptin of the Sheptin Tutoring Group in Chappaqua and Manhattan says, "Applying to nine or ten colleges is more than enough." Sheptin, CEP, has been in the test-prep and college-coaching business for more than 12 years and has a team of 25 tutors.

The key is a pyramid approach, with the student choosing to apply to a larger number of highly likely schools, some likely schools, and then a couple of schools that might be a reach (now often called "highly rejective").

Sheptin encourages students and their parents to open their eyes and consider something that may be outside the same 25 schools that everyone else is looking at. "For instance, one of the schools that I really like is a liberal arts school in Memphis called Rhodes College. I'm very impressed by what the school has to offer, and it has one of the highest acceptance rates for pre-med students getting into medical school. Many of the students at Rhodes are assisting in research at nearby St. Jude Children's Research Hospital," he says.

Another aspect students need to consider is whether they want to apply early decision (ED), in which they are committed to attending the school they applied to if accepted; or early action (EA), whereby students apply early but with a non-binding application. (In both cases, the due date is usually November 1, with a response from the institution by mid-December or early the following year.)

Students can also apply via rolling admission, a process in which colleges evaluate applications as they are received. Finally, there is the option to apply regular decision (RD), which usually requires materials to be submitted between early January and mid-February, depending on the school (with decisions back by mid-March to early April).

Jane Kurz Klemmer, CEP, who has run Klemmer Educational Consulting in Briarcliff Manor since 2008, recommends ED as the best way to go for the student who is certain about their first-choice college and ready to make a commitment. "There are potential drawbacks to be considered," she says. "The ED applicant may be forced to forgo the opportunity to compare financial-aid offers, and a generous aid package by another college could potentially save a family tens of thousands of dollars."

Klemmer says, "If the student needs time to boost their GPA with a strong senior-year first semester, an

early application may not work to their advantage, and waiting until the RD round would make more sense."

In the long run, most college coaches say the most important thing is for your child to find a college where they will be safe, happy, and walk out after four years feeling confident about their place in the world. "I don't want a graduate saying, 'Oh yeah, I went to Yale but I killed myself, and it was a horrible decision for me,'" says Sheptin.

## SAT/ACT Prep And Tutoring

While colleges give the most weight to high-school grades and the rigor of the student's classes, standardized-test scores on the SAT, ACT, and AP exams can also be important, especially for schools that are more challenging to get into. According to verbiage on bigfuture.collegeboard.org: "Many colleges are test-optional now, which means students don't have to submit SAT or ACT scores along with their applications. If your scores are higher than the average SAT scores, however, submitting them could show your strengths as well as your interests." In addition, the website points out that colleges may use the scores for placement or scholarships.

Most students will decide to take either the SAT or ACT based on their skill sets. According to Jill Harris, owner of Jill Test Prep, an SAT/ACT math and science tutoring service in Briarcliff Manor, "The ACT requires you to move quickly through the test, whereas the SAT is a little more thoughtful and allows you more time to answer your questions."

Harris often starts seeing students in the summer before their junior year and has them take a diagnostic test to see whether the SAT or ACT would work in their best interest. She teaches them strategies for taking the test and then gives them worksheets to practice any shortcomings. "For example, if they're having trouble with triangles, we'll focus on that in a session, and I will give them homework on that topic." Harris administers practice tests to prepare the students for the real proctored test. "The more practice the student does, the more they will feel prepared and less anxious to take the test," she says.

In addition to the math and science sections, the two additional ACT subjects are English and reading, with a perfect score on all four adding up to 36. Nina Auerbach, an SAT/ACT verbal tutor who



## Tips From Westchester's College Admissions Offices

### Kevin O'Sullivan

Senior Vice President of Enrollment Management and Student Affairs  
Iona University, New Rochelle

- Show demonstrated interest by contacting the admissions office to schedule a tour, spend a day on campus, sit in on a class, and/or meet with an admissions counselor.
- Keep track of deadlines. Use an Excel sheet or chart to map out application deadlines for the different colleges you are interested in applying to.
- Go to college fairs such as the New York National College Fair at the Jacob K. Javits Convention Center in New York City (March 10, 2024). The Southern Westchester College Fair is at the Westchester County Center in White Plains (May 1, 2024), and the Putnam - Northern Westchester Regional College Fair is at Putnam Northern Westchester BOCES in Yorktown Heights (May 2, 2024).

### Caitlin Read

Dean of Enrollment Management  
Purchase College, Purchase

- Colleges want students who are not just going to do well in their classes. They want the kinds of students who are going to contribute to campus life in some way, and students who are actively involved in their community.
- Take upper-level courses, particularly in the areas most closely related to what you want to study in college. AP and honors-level courses demonstrate there's an element of challenge in your schedule, and show a school that not only are you interested in a specific subject, but that you are prepared for college-level work.
- Be authentic when you write your personal essay, and make sure it is written in your own voice and expresses something that's unique about you. It should be showing rather than telling.

### Jennifer Gayles

Director of Admissions and Inclusive Outreach  
Sarah Lawrence College, Bronxville

- Have someone who doesn't know you read your personal essay. It doesn't have to be a college adviser; it could be a teacher or coach, or someone that you don't usually have direct personal contact with. That way you can get a more honest reaction and feedback.
- If you're utilizing the common application, remember to change the college name for each application. It doesn't look good when a student has entered the wrong college name.

runs Apple Hill Prep in Chappaqua, says, “I help my students prepare for the verbal aspects of the tests. Both the SAT and ACT involve grammar and reading-comprehension components.

“The gold standard of test prep materials is previously administered official tests. However, until students are ready to take practice tests, I use worksheets, commercial test books, as well as digital test-prep platforms to help students hone their reading skills and fill in gaps that they might have in grammar usage,” says Auerbach.

“Once a student has learned all the question types and content areas, they’re ready to sit down and take practice tests,” says Auerbach. “My approach is to do at least one or two timed, proctored tests to really prepare my students.”

As for the SAT, Harris notes it is now an entirely different test. “There is a very new SAT that is hot off the press,” she says. “We just had the last paper SAT this past December, and beginning in March 2024, all students will take the SAT as a digital test on a laptop or tablet.” The test also cuts its time limit from three hours to slightly over two, allows calculators for the entire math section, and reduces the length of its reading passages.

Collegeboard.org describes the current rendition this way: “The digital SAT is divided into two equal-length modules, and there is a 10-minute break between the reading and writing section and the math section. The first module of each section contains a broad mix of easy, medium, and hard questions. Based on how students perform on the first module, the second module of questions will either be more difficult or less difficult.”

Collegeboard.org reassures students that “Your score will reflect your achievement and skills based on your answers to questions in both modules.” Harris also points out that “you can’t get as high of a score if you never get the harder module.”

It’s also important to note that many colleges allow you to “superscore.” According to Harris, “If you take an ACT test and score high for math and didn’t do as well in English, you can retake the test; if you do better in English the second time around, you can submit scores from both dates, and schools will look at your highest scores for each section.” In order to superscore the SAT, students will also need to take the SAT multiple times and achieve a higher score on at least one section of the test on each subsequent test date. The

College Board will automatically combine scores from different test dates to give the highest possible superscore.

For those who can’t afford or don’t want to hire a tutor, there are many test-preparation books available for the SAT and ACT, such as *The Official SAT Study Guide* by College Board and *The Official ACT Prep Guide* by ACT. Additionally, online services like Khan Academy, Princeton Review, and Kaplan offer comprehensive test-prep materials and practice tests for both exams. Laura Wilson, who ran WilsonPrep in Chappaqua from 2006 until retiring this past June, also offers an online prep resource, the High School Daily Quiz ([highschooldailyquiz.com](https://high schooldailyquiz.com)), that provides daily practice questions.

### The Importance of AP Exams

Many students taking Advanced Placement (AP) courses in high school choose to take AP exams to submit to colleges, both to bolster their chances of getting in and to get college credit. Tim O’Brien of Ossining specializes in preparing students for AP American and European History. “I get very busy with students in March and April of their junior year as they prepare for the AP exams.”

PHOTO COURTESY OF EMILY RUBIN PERSONS

For AP European and American History, the format has not changed recently. The tests are each a little over three hours and include a multiple-choice section based on prompts (55 in total), several short answer questions, and two long essays.

O’Brien finds that students simply don’t know enough history to score high on the exam, so he spends time reviewing all the important names, dates, and facts in the subject areas. He also finds that students tend to need help writing essays that are clear and well documented.

Once students receive their AP score, the highest being a 5, they can go online and check to see if the colleges they are applying to will accept the score and offer class credits. “At Harvard, they’ll give you credit if you get a 5; others schools will give you credit if you get a 3. It just depends on each college’s standards,” says O’Brien.

### Athletic Recruiting

Among the local experts helping college athletes find the right fit at National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division 1, 2, and 3 schools is Geoff Stearns, president of Stearns Group Educational Advisory Services in Waccabuc. He says the sweet spot for starting with him is the middle of sophomore year; however, some families sign up as early as freshman year.

While Division 1 schools are known to have the best college athletes, especially in popular sports like football and basketball, both Division 1 and 2 schools allow for athletic scholarships.

“There is no such thing as an athletic scholarship at the Division 3 level; however, there are many highly selective colleges in this division. Division 3 schools such as Williams, Carnegie Mellon, and Johns Hopkins, recruit in a similar fashion as Division 1 schools, but students would only receive need-based aid,” says Stearns.

Stearns says highlight videos, game tapes, and participation in athletic camps are important venues for student athletes to showcase their talent. “If someone signs up with me, I have a commitment to them that their video will be evaluated by the proper college coaches or that they will be seen playing their sport in person,” he says.

Stearns examines the athletic-recruiting piece along with the best-fitting colleges (both academically and culturally) for each student, and sees where those two areas intersect. “Given that there are three different athletic divisions within the NCAA, navigating the right college fit and level of play for a potential recruit is



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President  
SKIP Coaching, Pleasantville

nuanced. For most of the families I work with, they are looking for the most selective college they can get their child into based on his or her athletic ability,” he says.

### Support for Students With Designated Learning Differences


Kids that learn in a different manner than the typical student are neurodivergent, a nonmedical term that describes people whose brains develop or work differently. Many of these students have ADHD, dyslexia, are on the spectrum, or have other learning differences, but they can also excel in college with the proper assistance.

Emily Rubin Persons is an ADHD life coach and president of SKIP Coaching in Pleasantville. “One of the most important skills for students is time management. They need to be able to look at their calendars and work backwards to determine due dates for such items as college applications and all the steps that need to be accomplished in completing the necessary paperwork.”

Persons says one critical note is that if a student receives time-and-a-half for testing as part of their 504 (a law that provides accommodations for people with learning differences) or IEP (Individualized Education Program), then they should use

it. “Many high school students don’t like the stigma of using time-and-a-half for class tests, but if they don’t use it, they will lose that accommodation when taking the SAT and ACT,” she says.

She notes when looking for schools, families need to ask a lot of questions about the types of services the school is going to offer to support students with learning differences. A good place to start is by looking online or visiting a school’s Office of Disability Services or Academic Support Center (the names vary). Services include extended time for taking tests, assistive technology, note-taking, and small-group exam settings.

Persons advises all parents to empower their children to make their own decisions as opposed to being “snowplow” or “lawnmower” parents, who she says “smooth the path and remove obstacles in front of their children to make everything easier for them.” According to Persons, “It’s important for parents to not do the work for their kids, but instead help the student handle the work independently because those life skills are necessary and take time to develop.” 

*Laura Joseph Mogil is a freelance writer residing in Briarcliff Manor. She has written for a variety of publications including Westchester Magazine, Westchester Home, Hudson Valley Magazine, and The River Journal. She is happy to report that she, her husband, and their two sons all survived the college application process.*



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