



January 2026

Seniors—

Fill out the [FAFSA](#) if you haven't already done so.

Search and apply for scholarships.

File any additional college applications.

Have mid-year grades sent to colleges, if applicable.

Continue to check your college portals.

Juniors—

Check the [College Board](#) and [ACT](#) websites for available test dates.

Create a test plan for spring SAT or ACT exams.

Look at [Fairtest](#) for a list of test-optional or test-blind colleges.

February 2026

Seniors—

Update colleges with any new information that might influence admission decisions.

Juniors—

Begin researching colleges online.

Attend virtual or in-person tours and information sessions.

The School Profile

When families think about college applications, they focus on essays, test scores, activities, and transcripts. But there's another document that plays a major role in how colleges understand a student's accomplishments, and most students never even see it.

It's called the School Profile, and it accompanies every transcript your high school sends to colleges. This one to two-page document provides an overview of your high school and is created and updated each year by the counseling office. Its purpose is simple: to give admissions officers a clear understanding of the high school environment from which a student comes.

Colleges don't evaluate applicants in isolation. They evaluate them in the context of their high school, and the School Profile explains what that context is. Think of it as a lens through which colleges view the transcript. Without it, admissions officers would have no way to know whether a high school offers 20 AP classes or none, whether a particular GPA is considered excellent, or whether a senior class of 60 has different leadership opportunities compared to a class of 600.

Most School Profiles include the same core information. They describe basic school details such as enrollment numbers, student-to-teacher ratio, and school type. They outline the curriculum and academic programs available, including honors, AP, IB, or dual enrollment offerings, and any limitations on access to these courses. They explain the grading scale and GPA policies, including whether GPAs are weighted and how class ranking works. They list graduation requirements so colleges understand what courses students

Must take. Many also include information about the school community, available opportunities like clubs or internships, and where recent graduates have enrolled in college.

Colleges rely heavily on this document. A student who takes two AP classes at a school that offers four is evaluated differently from a student who takes two at a school that offers twenty. The profile shows what "rigorous" means in that specific environment. It helps admissions officers determine whether a particular GPA places a student in the top 10% or is merely average. It reveals whether leadership roles are competitive or limited, and whether certain activities even exist at the school.

Most importantly, the School Profile helps level the playing field. Two students from completely different backgrounds should not be judged as though they had identical opportunities. The profile ensures colleges evaluate students on what they did with the resources available to them, not on what their high school did or didn't provide.

Students don't submit or interact with the School Profile at all. Counselors send it automatically alongside transcripts. If you're curious, you can often find your school's profile by searching your high school's name along with "school profile." Colleges use this document to understand the academic landscape you're learning in and to evaluate your choices within that context. What matters most is how you challenged yourself, given what your school offers, how you made the most of the environment you were in. Admissions officers are looking for students who have grown and pushed themselves within their capabilities.

Career Paths for Film Majors

- Producer or Director
- Social media strategist
- Development Assistant
- Editor
- Line Producer
- Content Producer
- Talent manager
- Independent Producer
- Film or media critic
- Archivist or media librarian
- Researcher or content analyst
- Multimedia artist
- Digital illustrator
- Screenwriter
- Playwright
- Podcast writer
- Entertainment marketer
- Publicist or PR assistant
- Promotions manager

Focus on Majors: Film & Media

When most people hear "film major," they picture a student holding a camera or directing a scene. But today's film and media programs cover far more than that. Colleges now offer majors in creative producing, film and media studies, digital arts, screenwriting, entertainment marketing, and even the business side of Hollywood. If you're interested in storytelling, whether through movies, TV, animation, social media, or something new, there's likely a program designed for your version of creativity.

One of the first things students learn when researching film programs is that no two schools define the major the same way. Some programs lean heavily toward theory and analysis, exploring how films shape culture, identity, and society. These are perfect for students who love dissecting what they watch and want to write, critique, or study media rather than produce it.

Other colleges focus almost entirely on hands-on production. Students spend hours filming, editing, writing scripts, designing sound, or creating animation. These programs often require students to apply directly to a BFA track and begin creative work right away. Schools known for this immersive experience, such as USC, NYU, Chapman, Emerson, LMU, and DePaul, often expect students to collaborate in crews and build a meaningful body of work by graduation.

Many film, production, and digital media programs require a creative portfolio in addition to the regular application. Depending on the school, this might include short videos, scripts, photography, storyboards, editing samples, or written reflections about why storytelling matters to you. Many of these programs also require students to write and submit additional essays after their original application is submitted.

Even when portfolios are optional, submitting something creative often strengthens an application. Students who think they might want to major in film

should start building work early through school projects, summer programs, or independent experiments shot on a phone. What matters most is not expensive equipment but curiosity, effort, and a willingness to take creative risks.

There are also hybrid paths that combine creativity with business and strategy. Some programs teach students how to produce films, pitch ideas, manage budgets, build marketing campaigns, or help artists promote their work. Others lean into digital storytelling, giving students experience in podcasting, YouTube production, streaming platforms, and social media content creation.

Because each college approaches film differently, students should think carefully about what part of the industry sparks excitement: creating stories, analyzing them, promoting them, or making sure they actually get made.

Depending on the program, students might take classes in film history, cinematography, editing, screenwriting, documentary storytelling, producing and budgeting, animation, sound design, or entertainment law and marketing. Some programs ask students to rotate through different roles, while others encourage them to specialize. Many graduates use their storytelling, design, communication, and tech skills in advertising, business, nonprofits, education, and other fields.

The entertainment world is competitive, but students who take advantage of internships, build portfolios, connect with mentors, and explore multiple aspects of media develop skills that transfer well beyond a film set.

If you're thinking about studying film, figure out what part of the creative process excites you. Do you want to direct, produce, write scripts, edit, analyze films, market them, or create digital content? Once you know your goals, you'll be better prepared to find programs that match your style and help you grow as a storyteller.



Financial Matters: Understanding Your Financial Aid Letter



You've opened the email, logged into the portal, and there it is: your student has been admitted and offered a financial aid package. Relief and excitement last about thirty seconds. Then you start scrolling. Numbers appear. Some seem promising. Others are confusing. Loans and grants blur together, unfamiliar acronyms pop up, and suddenly you're wondering whether this school is truly affordable or whether you're missing something important.

You're not alone. Financial aid award letters are notoriously difficult to interpret, largely because there is no required standard for how colleges present them. While schools follow general federal guidelines, they are free to format award letters however they choose. That means two colleges can offer very similar aid packages and make them look completely different on paper. Understanding how to read these letters is essential before making any enrollment decision.

A financial aid award letter outlines what a college is offering for one academic year. Most include some version of the school's cost of attendance, the types of aid offered, your student's Student Aid Index (SAI), and the remaining amount the family is expected to cover. The problem is that these elements aren't always clearly labeled or even fully included.

One of the biggest sources of confusion is how loans are presented. Grants and scholarships, which do not need to be repaid, are

often listed right alongside work study funds and loans that do need to be paid back. In some cases, the only clue that something is a loan is a small code such as "L" or "LN." This distinction matters because most financial aid offered nationwide comes in the form of loans, not free money. A package that looks generous at first glance may rely heavily on borrowing.

Another common issue is how colleges calculate and present costs. Many award letters underestimate the true cost of attending the school. Some list only tuition and fees, leaving out room and board, books, transportation, and personal expenses. Those missing line items can easily add \$15,000 to \$25,000 per year. Families often don't realize this gap until the semester begins and unexpected expenses start appearing.

To make sense of the numbers, it helps to understand two terms that often appear on award letters: net cost and net price. Net cost subtracts all financial aid—including loans and work-study—from the cost of attendance. Net price subtracts only gift aid, meaning grants and scholarships.

This difference is critical. Net cost can give the impression that the school is covering more than it truly is, because borrowed money is included. Net price is closer to reality. It reflects the discounted price of the college after free money is applied, but before loans. This is the number families ultimately need to plan for, whether through savings, income, borrowing, or a combination of the three.

You may also see your Student Aid Index buried somewhere in the letter. The SAI represents what the federal formula estimates your family can contribute. It is not financial aid, even though colleges may roll it into their calculations or remaining balance.

Because award letters rarely show the full picture, families should reconstruct the true cost themselves. Begin with

the school's full cost of attendance, ensuring it includes housing, food, books, transportation, and personal expenses. Then subtract only grants and scholarships. What remains is the amount your family must realistically expect to cover each year. The [NASFAA](#) comparison worksheet is a useful tool.

There are additional details worth close attention. Some colleges "front-load" financial aid, offering higher grants during the first year and less in later years. This can make a school appear affordable at the start, but far more expensive over time. Ask whether grants and scholarships are renewable and whether typical aid amounts change after the first year. If answers are vague, tools like the U.S. Department of Education's College Navigator can provide helpful context.

Private scholarships can also affect aid packages in unexpected ways. At some schools, outside scholarships reduce loans. At others, they reduce institutional grants. This practice, known as scholarship displacement, can significantly change the value of a private award. Always ask how outside scholarships are treated before assuming they will lower your out-of-pocket cost.

Finally, remember that financial aid offers are not always final. If a package doesn't reflect your current financial situation or seems inconsistent with offers from similar schools, you may have grounds to appeal. Appeals are most effective when they're based on documented changes or clear comparisons, not just disappointment.

Financial aid award letters aren't designed to make this process easy. But with the right framework, they become far less intimidating. The goal isn't just to see how much aid is offered—it's to understand what's free, what must be repaid, and what your family will truly be responsible for paying, both now and in the years ahead.

Avoiding Senioritis

High school seniors sometimes believe that because they have worked so hard throughout high school, they have earned the right to slack off in their senior year, especially in the last few months. By now, mid-year grades are on their way to colleges, and students may have already been accepted at their favorite school. Why not kick back and enjoy life? We refer to this syndrome as “senioritis.”

However, an offer of admission is conditional, and students are expected to maintain their academic performance throughout senior year. Every year, colleges around the country rescind admission offers, meaning a student’s acceptance is withdrawn after it has been granted, most often because final grades, behavior, or information reported on the application no longer meet the college’s expectations.

You are admitted to a college based on the information in your application. If there are any changes, you should notify the college. If you have dropped a class that was listed on the transcript you submitted to colleges, your application has changed. Colleges receive your final transcript during the summer, and you don’t want to find out in July that you no longer have a place in the freshman class.

It is much better to be honest and explain why you dropped the class or why your grades have gone down. If the drop in academic performance is severe enough to jeopardize your acceptance, admis-

sions officers can advise you on how to salvage your admission.

There’s another reason to keep working hard in school. It makes the transition to college-level work easier. That’s one of the advantages of taking AP, IB, or dual-enrollment courses if qualified, which require a high level of commitment throughout senior year in order to prepare for AP exams in May. The anti-slacker curriculum built into AP classes will help you adjust to college coursework more easily.

If you start procrastinating during senior year, it’s difficult to get back to good study habits when you arrive at college, where there will be distractions and no parents reminding you to finish your history paper before you go out for pizza with your friends.

While you do need to keep your grades up, making sure you have some fun will help you avoid burnout. Summer is less than six months away, and you will have plenty of time to play before you go off to college.

It’s not only lower grades that can torpedo an offer of admission. While spray painting the school gym might seem like a fun prank to you and your friends, a disciplinary issue can also mean the end of your college acceptances.

Students who keep senioritis under control will get their reward when they embark on the great adventure of college in just a few months.

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