Your Questions Answered!

At our first Cookies & Cocoa session of the year, sophomores submitted anonymous questions about the college admission process. Most fell into eight common themes—we've answered them all below.

How does the college counseling program work at Porter-Gaud?

- Porter-Gaud students are assigned an individual college counselor in the late spring of sophomore year, right around junior-year course scheduling. Throughout junior year, you will have more in-depth meetings with your counselor to discuss standardized testing, extracurricular engagement, building a college list, and future career goals. During the summer before senior year, you will be invited to application workshops at Porter-Gaud focused on writing college essays and navigating the Common Application. You'll continue working closely with your counselor throughout the summer and fall of senior year, and by Thanksgiving break, most seniors have already applied to at least one college.
- In the meantime, sophomores can direct any questions to Mrs. Brown.

How do admissions officers actually look at your GPA?

- Colleges care far more about your individual grades and the rigor of your coursework than they do about a single cumulative number. In fact, many colleges recalculate your GPA using only your core academic classes (math, history, English, world language, and science). Admissions officers can see how challenging your curriculum is because we send a Porter-Gaud School Report alongside your transcript.
- The University of Richmond does a great job of explaining how transcripts are reviewed here.

Do colleges really expect students to fill all ten activity slots on the Common App?

- Although the Common Application provides space for up to 10 extracurricular activities, you are not expected to fill every slot, nor do colleges require a minimum number of service hours. Some students dedicate most of their time to a single commitment (like a job or a club sport), while others balance multiple activities that require less time. Either way, admissions officers focus on *why* you chose to

spend your time that way and what it reveals about you. Look for opportunities to lead, collaborate, and explore your interests. Quality over quantity, always!

- Bucknell University provides a great explanation of activity lists here.

Are pre-college summer programs better than working a summer job?

- No single summer activity is inherently better than another—the most important thing is simply to stay engaged over the summer. You might get a job, volunteer, or attend a pre-college program at a university. If you are interested in a pre-college program, look for opportunities to dive deeper into your academic or extracurricular interests rather than chasing the most "prestigious" campus, as many summer programs hosted on college campuses aren't actually affiliated with the university.
- Don't hesitate to check in with College Counseling before applying to a program, or reach out to us for suggestions.

When should I start visiting colleges?

- It's never too early to start! If you have an older sibling in high school, tag along on their college visits—even if you don't think you'd be interested in those schools. Learning what you *don't* want in a college is just as valuable as learning what you do. If you have an older sibling already in college, ask about doing an overnight visit with them, or look for opportunities to add campus tours to existing family trips. Most official visits include an information session led by an admissions officer and a campus tour led by a current student. Try to do both if you can, though a self-guided tour is still worthwhile if you're just passing through town. Whenever possible, visit during the academic year so you can get a true sense of the student body, which you won't see during the summer or over school breaks.
- Meredith College offers Seven Tips for Making the Most of your Campus Visit here.

Do I need to take the SAT or ACT?

- While a wave of colleges went test-optional during the pandemic, many have returned to requiring test scores for admission. Several—if not most—of the colleges on your future list will likely require

them. We recommend that most students begin testing in the late fall of junior year: pick one exam, prepare for it, and plan to take it a few times to achieve your strongest score. Students in advanced math pathways or those pursuing athletic recruitment may start earlier, though that isn't necessary for most. There are many test-prep resources available both in-person and online, including free options like IXL. Overall, colleges still place the greatest emphasis on your day-to-day grades, so keep your primary focus on your schoolwork.

- This blog post by College Essay Guy sums this up well.

What do I write about for my college essay?

- While you don't need to worry about writing college essays just yet, several students asked how the process works. You will write one main personal essay of up to 650 words (a little over one page, single-spaced), which is sent to every college on your list. The topic is YOU! There are countless ways to share your story, and the Common Application provides several prompts to help spark ideas. Most students tackle this main essay first before moving on to supplemental essays. Supplemental essays are school-specific, so their topics, length, and quantity vary widely depending on your college list—some students write none at all, while others write more than ten. You won't know your exact essay lineup until colleges release their prompts for your application cycle and you finalize your list.
- You can view the current Common App essay prompts here.

What do I need to do if I want to be a recruited athlete?

- If you are interested in athletic recruitment, your first conversation should be with your current coach. They can give you a realistic evaluation of your athletic ability (NCAA Division I, II, or III) and recruitability. Based on their feedback, you will likely want to begin reaching out to college coaches to introduce yourself and share your times, stats, or highlight footage (depending on your sport), along with your academic and extracurricular profile (GPA, test scores, and resume). Keep in mind that strong academics matter greatly in recruitment and can make a coach much more likely to advocate for you in the admissions process.

- While College Counseling does not drive the recruitment process (you do!), Mrs. Brown is always happy to help you brainstorm college options, draft introductory emails to coaches, or review your resume.