YAFFED

YOUNG ADVOCATES FOR FAIR EDUCATION

COLLEGE 101

A GUIDE TO HIGHER EDUCATION FOR ULTRA-ORTHODOX AND HASIDIC YESHIVA GRADUATES

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College 101:
A Handbook on College Admissions

Provided by YAFFED: Young Advocates for Fair Education

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Writer: Adelle Goldenberg
Contributor: Jay Fishman
Editors: Miriam Frankl & Sarah Bronson

Disclaimer:

This guidebook was designed to be a resource for those wishing to pursue a college education. It is the result of significant effort and resources. While it is in no way exhaustive, we hope it will make the process of college application more manageable.

As you know, Covid-19 has seriously impacted all aspects of life, including higher education. There are significant areas that have been heavily impacted by Covid-19 and we would like to ensure that all those using this guidebook are aware and plan accordingly. Many colleges are opening their doors this year with significant changes being made to prevent the spread of the virus. Some are offering their students the option to engage in learning online. Others are instituting a hybrid model.

Access to testing such as SATs and ACTs may be limited or non-existent. Colleges may have other requirements in lieu of such testing. Some colleges may be using this moment to consider eliminating standardized testing requirements altogether.

The most important thing a prospective college applicant can do is to remember that, right now, most aspects of the application and admissions process are subject to change and these changes can happen rapidly. If you are at the application stage and are already beginning to prepare applications to specific schools, check their websites frequently to determine what, if anything, has changed about their processes, information from last week could already be outdated. If there are specific aspects of a school that are important to you, please continue to check regularly that you can access the programs that made you choose that school in a way that will satisfy your needs.

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact us at info@yaffed.org. If we cannot answer your questions, we will work with you to identify the appropriate point of contact.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

This handbook provides a concise overview of the college admissions process. It focuses on admissions to undergraduate programs that lead to a bachelor's or associate degree. These are the most basic form of higher education that students pursue after high school. The material is tailored specifically to individuals who:

- have a limited secular education
- were raised in insular communities in the New York and tri-state area (e.g. the Chasidic/ultra-Orthodox communities) and
- seek to attend college in the United States.

We, the authors and editors of this guidebook, came from ultra-Orthodox backgrounds and successfully navigated this process ourselves. Here we share knowledge we gained firsthand through our own experiences, struggles, and hard-won triumphs. We were inspired to write this guidebook in order to help others understand the complex process. We want you to overcome any initial obstacles that might otherwise discourage you from pursuing your dreams of higher education.

Chapter 2: Types of Colleges

There are many ways to categorize the institutions that provide post-high school education, and of course a school might fit into more than one category depending on the programs it offers. Here, we explain some of the most common terms used to describe the many colleges and universities out there.

Community Colleges

Because they are relatively simple to enter and typically have low tuitions, community college is a great starting point for many individuals who are interested in college. Students can obtain an associate degree in two years, and, if you choose, you can also prepare to continue on to a bachelor's degree program at a four-year institution. Most community colleges offer career programs where you can learn marketable skills.

Community colleges are two-year schools that are easy to enroll in. They are nonresidential, meaning students do not usually live on campus. Most often, students live with their parents or in an apartment of their own and come to the community college campus for classes.

Community colleges are very affordable, with an average yearly tuition of $3,000 in the tri-state area.

Community college can also be a great stepping stone toward transferring to a more selective university. If this is your goal, enrolling in an honors program and choosing courses that are academically challenging will help significantly with transferring later on.

Community College Pros:

- Easy enrollment: Usually all that is needed to enroll in a community college is a high school diploma or high school equivalency certificate (TASC/GED). No need to have a high GPA or to take an entrance exam. If you do not have a high school diploma or the equivalent, look into community colleges with programs that allow you to earn high school equivalency. For example, Rockland Community College (RCC) has a program where students can earn their New York State High School Equivalency with 24 college credits.

- Low Tuition: Community college is usually the least expensive option. Federal and state aid may cover full tuition if you are eligible (see page 8 for more information on the FAFSA application for financial aid), and living off campus and commuting to school is generally a more affordable housing option than a dorm.

- The option of transferring to another university after two years: Make sure that you talk with your advisor at the college to make sure you are taking courses that are likely to receive credit at a four-year school.

- Leadership opportunities: smaller schools often allow for greater extra-curricular opportunities and connections. There can be advantages to being a "big fish in a small pond."

Community College Cons:

- Lack of campus life: The campus community may not be as strong as it would be at a school where most or all students live on campus.

- Less flexibility in financial aid: Most community colleges do not have large endowments with which to fund scholarships.

Four-Year Colleges

Most schools that are not community colleges offer four-year undergraduate programs, and students graduate with a bachelor's degree. This might be a B.A. (Bachelor of Arts), B.Sc. (Bachelor of Science) or a B.Ed. (Bachelor of Education).

To attend a four-year college directly from high school, the minimum requirements needed to apply are high school transcripts or an equivalency diploma, and letters of recommendation from teachers. Most also require that you take either the SAT or ACT exam and write an essay.
Some four-year colleges have looser requirements. For example, CUNY (City University of New York) asks for high school transcripts, SAT/ACT scores and two letters of recommendation – but the letters can be from anyone, not just teachers.

Four-Year College Pros:

- Four-year degrees are more prestigious than two-year degrees.

- A bustling campus with many extracurricular activities.

Four-Year College Cons:

- A four-year college is usually more expensive to attend than a community college, and the costs may not be covered entirely by financial aid, even if your financial situation makes you eligible for full tuition aid. Therefore, attending a four-year college might require taking on out-of-pocket costs and/or taking out student loans.

What Can You Study at a Four-Year College?

Colleges differ in their curriculum offerings. Many have developed reputations for excellence in specific areas of study.

Liberal Arts Schools

The goal of a liberal arts college is typically to help you develop critical-thinking skills and a wide breadth of knowledge. These schools tend to place an emphasis on theoretical learning over practical learning. This usually means that there are very few courses (or none at all) that focus on business or technical skills.

For example, economics is considered a "social science" at a liberal arts college, and economics courses focus more on theoretical concepts than on direct practical application of the theories. You are likely to have a wide choice of courses in economic theory and few, if any, in accounting, finance or marketing.

Courses in literature, visual arts and performing arts are considered "humanities." At a liberal arts school you are unlikely to find, for example, courses in fashion design; but you might find a course on "Fashion as Art" or "The Renaissance and Its Fashions."

At a liberal arts college you will get a chance to explore new intellectual interests and gain new ideas for living and planning for the best possible future. In addition, many careers require critical thinking skills more than they require knowledge of a specific field of study.

Examples of schools that operate on this model are Amherst, Barnard, Bates, Colby, Dickinson, Franklin & Marshall, Harvard, Haverford, Swarthmore, Vassar, Williams, and Yale.

Regular

These schools have a mix of liberal arts and more practical courses/majors. That is, they would offer, for example, courses in both economics and accounting.

Most state schools operate on this model, as do many other mainstream universities. In New York, the state schools are known as SUNY - State University of New York.

Specialty

These are schools that offer specialized programs focused on one area of study. For example, the Fashion Institute of Technology and Parsons School of Design both offer degrees in fashion and art. Undergraduate business schools, such as the Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania, focus on business degrees. The University of Southern California's film school focuses on degrees in film production, editing and design.

Some schools are known for having general specialties or are known for excellence in specific fields. For example, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and CalTech have excellent STEM programs. (STEM stands for science, technology, engineering, and math.)

Specialty schools offer opportunities to develop skills in a particular field because they offer many, many classes in that field.

However, it can be tricky to choose a specialized school at a young age, because there is not that much room for a career change; one might have to transfer schools to explore other options.

State Colleges

There are schools that cater primarily to residents of their state. They are cheaper for in-state residents while providing high-quality academics and a well-regarded degree. (Out-of-state students can attend a state school, but tuition is likely to be more expensive.) In New York, these are schools in the City University of New York (CUNY) system and the State University of New York (SUNY) system:

- The CUNY schools are Brooklyn College, Baruch College, Hunter College, City College, Queens College and many community colleges.

- The SUNY schools include Stony Brook, Binghamton, University at Albany, University at Buffalo and many more.

CUNY and SUNY schools are located all over New York, and because some of them are in close proximity to ultra-Orthodox communities, many choose to attend these schools. It is common to start out at a community college like Kingsborough and transfer to a four-year college like Brooklyn College after two years.

However, some state institutions are commuter schools and lack adequate financial resources. This means that there would be fewer opportunities to build a community on campus.

Important notes:

- The CUNY ASAP program provides financial, communal and academic support to help students complete their associate degree.

- SUNY also has support programs, such as the Educational Opportunity Program.

Schools for Non-Traditional Students

Some undergraduate institutions serve those who are often referred to as “non-traditional” students: students who have taken time off after high school to work, join the military, or raise a family, or students who simply did not attend or graduate from high school for any reason.

Examples of this type of school include Columbia University's School of General Studies, University of Pennsylvania's College of Liberal and Professional Studies, Yale University's Eli Whitney Students Program, Harvard University's Extension School, Trinity College's Individualized Degree Program, and Smith College's Ada Comstock Scholars Program.

It is easier to get into these schools with lower SAT scores or missing application materials, and you will still have the opportunity to attend a prestigious university. However, these schools are sometimes considered "cash cows" for universities because they don't offer much financial aid and students typically end up paying large amounts of tuition money (which might require enormous loans). Also, there may be less access to the complete college experience such as living in the dorms, attending events with other undergrads, having access to dining halls and other resources that traditional undergrads do, and so on.

Ivy League Universities

The "Ivy League" refers to eight private schools that are known for their academic excellence and extremely selective admissions.

The eight Ivies are Harvard, Yale, Princeton, Columbia, University of Pennsylvania, Dartmouth, Brown, and Cornell. (Note that the Ivy League excludes many equally prestigious and equally selective institutions. For example, neither MIT nor Stanford are in the Ivy League, a fact that does not diminish their excellent reputations.)

The minimum requirements for application are SAT/ACT scores, high school transcripts/equivalency diploma, and letters of recommendation from two teachers.

The Ivies often offer extremely generous scholarships. The first five in the list above meet full-need, which means all expenses are covered, including food and housing, for those who need that level of assistance. Therefore, don't be turned off from applying just by the high tuition; you might find that if you are lucky enough to be accepted to an Ivy, it might offer a better financial aid package than a less expensive school.

The Ivies also offer vibrant campuses with many extracurriculars, an extensive array of support systems, and name recognition.

However, they have exceptionally low acceptance rates. Additionally, some have competitive academic environments and rigorous academic standards that can be stressful.

"Little Ivies"

"Little Ivies" are prestigious liberal arts colleges that offer generous scholarships and name recognition, and may be easier to get into than Ivy League schools. Some examples include: Amherst, Williams, Swarthmore, Colgate, Bates, Bowdoin, Haverford, Tufts, Wesleyan, Lafayette, Colby, Smith, and Mount Holyoke.

One advantage of these schools for most people is the size of the student body—usually ranging from around 1,000 to 10,000. While this is enough to offer a vibrant campus life, it is still small, particularly when compared to schools like Arizona State University that have 70,000 undergraduate students. At small school's students usually feel less anonymous and less socially overwhelmed and may have greater chances of participating in extracurriculars.

However, some people might prefer a larger school with more students. It is important to consider your personal preferences regarding a school's campus culture.

Chapter 3: Testing

To be admitted to college, you might have to take one or more standardized exams. Here is information about each one, with tips for success.

High School Equivalency Exam (TASC)

A high school equivalency is a recognized alternative to a high school diploma. The test measures the skill levels of prospective students in the subjects that are usually covered in high school; your score is meant to indicates college preparedness.

The TASC (Test Assessing Secondary Completion) is a high school equivalency exam given in 14 states, including New York and New Jersey. (It used to be called the GED). The subjects tested include science, math, social studies, reading and writing. Passing this exam might require at least a few months of study, depending on your level of prior education.

It may be helpful to take the TASC before any other standardized tests because it is fairly easy and can be good preparation for additional testing. To schedule the exam, follow this link to set up an account and register. The cost to register for the TASC is $50.

Tips:

- The Brooklyn Public Library offers free TASC prep classes.
- YouTube and Google can be helpful study tools, because you can watch other people work through problems.
- See the External Resources section for many more options on preparation help.
- For additional help and guidance regarding the New York State TASC, click on this link.

College Admissions Testing

There are examinations that attempt to predict how well students will perform in an upcoming academic setting. Most four-year colleges require the submission of a standardized test score – usually your choice of either the SAT or ACT – because they are comparing applicants from vastly different schools with varied levels of college preparation. These tests are administered by private companies, such as the College Board, and each school has its own standards of acceptable scores.

Some schools have dropped the standardized test requirement (see “Test-Optional Schools” below), but for students who went to high schools without adequate college prep, taking one of these exams is strongly encouraged.

ACT (American College Testing)

Pronounced A-C-T, this is one of the two main options for standardized tests that a prospective four-year college applicant may choose to take. The exam is divided into four sections: English, math, reading and science – along with an optional (yet strongly advised) writing section.

The ACT is graded on a scale of 1-36. The cost to register is $50 (without the writing section) or $67 (with the writing section).

SAT (Scholastic Aptitude Test)

- Pronounced S-A-T, the exam is divided into three main sections: reading & writing, math, and an essay section. The essay is optional but some schools do specifically ask for that score, so it's best to do all three sections if possible. **Note**: The SAT was completely changed in 2016. Therefore it is important to ensure that any study material you use is updated for the new version.

  The math and the reading/writing sections are each scored on a scale of 200-800; thus, the lowest possible score is 400 and the highest is 1,600 (the essay is scored separately). The cost to register for the SAT is $50; with the writing section, $65.

- Testing dates are typically on Saturdays. In order to be able to take it on a Sunday, applicants must register by mail and include a letter from an official religious leader confirming religious exemption. See more here.

Which exam should you take?

Only one admissions test score is needed; either the SAT or ACT. There is no need to take both. Schools generally have no preference as to which score is provided on the application.

You can get a sense of what to expect on each test, and which one is more likely to result in a higher score, by taking official practice tests at home for both, and seeing how you do. In fact, prep schools (private schools that prepare students for college) encourage students who have difficulty with the SAT to try the ACT, so it is worth the effort to take a practice test of both and see which one seems better for you.

When taking the practice tests, make sure to take into account the time limits for each section. Later, as you study for the exam(s), you can take more practice tests and see your scores going up.

Some students take both exams and only apply to schools with the scores of the test they performed better on. This is a great option if you have the time and financial resources to register for both. Notes for both exams:

- If taking the test is a financial burden, you can get a fee waiver when registering by demonstrating financial need. Look out for the "fee waiver" button when registering.

- Typically, prospective students start studying for these tests a year in advance of taking them.

- It is possible (and advised) to take the test more than once. This is how most people get good scores, but keep in mind that it doesn't look great to have taken it more than three times. However, some schools have "score choice," which means they want to see your highest score and it doesn't matter how many times you took the test. In short, it is okay to take the exams as many times as needed but think of three as an ideal ceiling.

- See "Chapter 8: External Resources" for free prep help.

What score do you need?

A Google search, and usually colleges' individual websites, will show you the average or median SAT and ACT scores for the schools that interest you. However, these are only averages – many students are admitted with lower scores. Most colleges take your entire application package into account: your grades or TASC scores, teacher recommendations, essay, interview, etc. in addition to your scores. Having lower-than-average scores should not discourage you from applying to competitive schools.

Test-Optional Schools

Some schools have made standardized test scores optional; they don't require you to submit an SAT/ACT score with your application. Examples include Bates, Bowdoin, Bryn Mawr, George Washington, Hofstra, Sarah Lawrence, Smith, University of Chicago, Wake Forest, Wesleyan, American, Bard, Brandeis, Drexel, Minerva Schools at KGI, NYU, and Pace University.

SAT Subject Tests

The company that creates the SAT also administers "subject tests" on 20 different academic subjects. You might consider taking the test in subjects you are good at – for example U.S. History or modern Hebrew – because a good score can boost your application, especially one between 700-800.

Most colleges do not require subject tests, and will understand if you didn't take them, but be advised that some schools – such as California Institute of Technology, MIT, and Rice University – do require subject tests, and others require or recommend them if you are trying to be admitted to a particular program or department. Here is a list of colleges that require subject tests, and others that recommend or consider them.

The best time to take a subject test is when the topic is fresh in your mind. For example, if you are taking a U.S. History regent in high school, consider preparing as well for the U.S. History SAT subject test. That way, you won't have to re-learn the information later.

Most of the study resources available for the SAT, such as guide books and practice tests online, at the library and in book stores, are also available for each subject test.

Note: Admission requirements are often different for transfer students. Even schools that require or strongly recommend subject tests for regular admission may not require them for transfer admissions.

Resources for Improving Your SAT/ACT Scores

Most people invest a lot of effort into studying for college admissions tests, be it with specialized tutors, courses, books or online practice tests. The following resources are available online and are affordable or free. The best way to prepare is to both take practice tests and study the skills and concepts you need to know.

Official Practice Tests

Official practice tests are issued by the same companies that write the exams, and are the best resources for gaining an accurate idea of what to expect on the actual exam on test day. We suggest taking a minimum of two practice exams, and if possible, take all of them.

- SAT 10 official practice tests
- ACT practice tests

Guidebooks

Companies such as Princeton Review and Kaplan have guidebooks for standardized tests that many students use to study and practice. These books are not published by the companies that administer the tests, so it's best not to rely only on one guidebook.

Khan Academy

Khan Academy offers amazing, free, online test prep for the SAT (as well as for many other standardized tests and courses). They are partnered with the College Board, the organization that creates and administers the SAT.

Public Libraries

Most public libraries have the latest study guidebooks, which can be borrowed for free by library cardholders.

- See "Chapter 8: External Resources" for information on how to obtain a public library card.

Chapter 4: Financial Aid

Financial Aid refers to funding available to help students cover college tuition and/or other expenses. Financial aid is available to students in need primarily through government programs (FAFSA, TAP, etc.), school grants or loans, and college scholarships through various organizations. Every school is different, and some have more generous financial aid packages than others.

Application Materials Needed to Apply for Financial Aid

FAFSA

FAFSA stands for Free Application for Federal Student Aid. It is the form you need to apply for financial aid from the government, which determines your eligibility for grants based on family income. It will also be used by the Financial Aid offices at the colleges you apply to, to help them determine your financial aid "package."

When you fill out the FAFSA, you will need to include your own IRS tax forms (if you have been filing them) as well as those of your parents (e.g. 1040, W-2) and all your Social Security numbers. If you cannot use your parents' tax forms, see the section on "dependency overrides" below.

CSS Profile (College Scholarship Service Profile)

A CSS profile is an online application created and maintained by the US-based College Board that allows college students to apply for non-federal financial aid. It is similar to the FAFSA, but asks for additional information about your family's assets such as real estate, and about various expenses you might have. Depending on the types of your family's assets, it can be a very simple process, or a more complicated one. Private colleges usually require submission of the CSS profile as part of applying for financial aid.

Your parents/guardians may be required to sign or complete the CSS Profile. If your parent or guardian is unable or unwilling to sign, there is a waiver for special circumstances, which may require a letter from a therapist or someone familiar with your situation to provide an explanation to the financial aid office.

If your parents are separated or divorced, schools might require the completion of two separate CSS Profiles from two separate College Board accounts. Click here for more information.

TAP

TAP is the acronym for Tuition Assistance Program. It is particular to New York State residents who are going to school in New York State, and will provide extra funding based on eligibility. The option of applying for TAP will be provided with an easy click following your completion of the FAFSA.

Types of Financial Aid

Need-Based vs. Merit-Based

Some schools provide need-based aid, which means that if your family is below a certain income threshold, the school will provide enough financial aid to meet the amount of money that you need to attend the college. The amount you need is determined by providing tax information and by submitting the FAFSA and CSS Profile.

Others provide merit-based aid, which is given because you have a particular talent or accomplishment that is attractive to the college. An example of merit-based aid would be an athletic scholarship (for playing sports well enough to be on the school's team), or an academic scholarship (for performing well in high school)

Examples of schools that provide need-based financial aid are Bowdoin, Columbia, Barnard, University of Pennsylvania, Princeton, Harvard, Yale, Stanford, Swarthmore, MIT, Caltech, Vassar, Colgate, Middlebury, Wake Forest University, Skidmore, Wesleyan, Carleton College, Reed College, and Davidson College.

Grants vs. Loans

Some schools give financial aid in the form of grants, which don't have to be paid back, and some give aid in the form of loans, which do have to be paid back. Many schools issue financial aid packages that are a combination of the two.

Be careful about taking out too many loans. They can be difficult to manage after you graduate from college due to high interest rates and very little opportunity for loan forgiveness. Make sure you have a plan for repayment and a clear idea of how many years you will be burdened by college debt.

National Scholarships

Many organizations provide college scholarships. Some are available for applicants who meet specific criteria, which are not always related to academics – you might be surprised. For example, a scholarship might be available to those who have volunteered in a particular field, or who are non-traditional students, or who are women planning to major in a particular subject. You can find these scholarships by doing research online, inquiring at the financial aid offices of colleges, and using other community resources such as your local library.

Some examples include Coca-Cola Scholars, the New York Times Scholarship, and Jack Kent Cooke Scholars.

Other Helpful Information

Fee Waivers

Most of the steps you need to take to apply to college, such as registering to take a standardized test or submitting the college applications themselves, involve fees. If the fees are difficult for you, look for a "request fee waiver" option at each step and follow the instructions. If you don't find one, call the company or institution directly or check their website to find out their fee waiver policies.

Dependency Override

If your family's tax information is not available, don't lose hope. When you complete the FAFSA you can ask for a "dependency override." Individual college financial aid offices also usually allow you to request an override. A dependency override is a power exercised by those reviewing your financial aid materials to overlook the financial situation of your parents when determining your aid package. Financial concerns should not stop you from applying to college. See "External Resources" for organizations that can assist with this process.

Need-Blind Admissions

In the admissions information for some colleges, you might come across the term "need-blind." This means that the admissions officers do not take into consideration, when deciding whether to admit you, how much financial aid you might need. Once you are admitted, the financial aid officers determine what sort of financial aid package they can offer you, based on the school's resources, and whether their aid is need-based or merit-based.

What if you don't get enough financial aid?

If you have your heart set on attending a particular school, and you are admitted but do not receive enough financial aid to attend, it is worth contacting the financial aid office of the college to ask them for a more favorable package. Colleges like to hear that you will certainly attend if you can; once they understand that their school is your first choice and you promise to enroll if you receive more aid, there is a possibility you'll get what you need.

Chapter 5: The College Application

College applications have a variety of components that you'll have to compile and submit in order for your application to be considered complete. We recommend that you create a chart or spreadsheet, showing all the colleges you are applying to, what materials they each require (which will be listed on their websites) and which of those materials you have submitted.

Application Form

Every college will request that you fill out a standard form with all your contact information, the name of your high school, what activities you have been involved in outside of school, etc. Some colleges ask unique questions related to the particular mission or culture of the school. Many use the Common Application, a form that you fill out just once and can submit to many colleges (see more about the Common App in Chapter 7). In both cases, take your time answering the questions and make sure everything is accurate, with no typos or other errors.

Counselor's Letter

Most high schools have a college advisor or counselor who submits reports to the colleges stating the merits of each prospective student, for example their leadership qualities, intellectual curiosity, perseverance etc. They might also include a note explaining poor grades at a particular time, for example if your grades slipped in 10th grade because of illness or a family emergency. Note that the counselor needs to have a relationship with the applicant and have advised him or her during several meetings in order to write a good letter.

- If you went to a school without a college counselor, contact the admissions offices of the schools you are applying to, and ask about waiving the requirement.

- An alternative to the counselor's letter is a letter from an official at a community-based organization who can attest to your character, ambition and family background. This holds the same weight as a counselor's letter.

- See "External Resources" for community-based organizations that can help with this letter, such as the Goddard Riverside Options Center.

Letters of Recommendation

Since admissions committees want to know how well you will do at their school, input from your teachers is an important component of the application.

- Most schools want to hear from at least two teachers. If possible, ask teachers from 11th or 12th grade to write yours.

- Some schools will accept letters from employers or advisers instead of, or in addition to, teachers.

Intended Major

Many colleges ask what field of study you plan to major in. It is best to specify an area of interest that you intend to pursue (e.g. Anthropology, Biology, Marketing), or a general field of interest (e.g. social sciences, STEM, business).

Colleges that place a lot of weight on the intended major will look for evidence that you will do well in the chosen field. For example, if you want to major in Math, they will examine your transcripts to see what level Math courses you have taken and the grades or scores you received. This applies especially to transfers.

However many colleges, especially those that do not require you to "declare" your major until your sophomore year, take your "intended major" with a grain of salt, and are mainly concerned with how well you will fit into the school. (It should go without saying that you shouldn't indicate a major that the school doesn't offer!)

Highly selective liberal arts schools (Ivy League and Little Ivies) may take a greater interest in an application that lists an unusual choice for a major, or a diverse mix of interests. For example, many students apply to study economics and computer science. Therefore, if you apply to study something less common, such as religion, philosophy, anthropology, astrophysics, neuroscience, or gender studies – and can provide evidence of your interest in that area of study – your application may stand out more. Obviously, it is unwise to apply to study a field in which you have no interest. However, if you have a variety of interests, consider putting down something more niche. It is also not set in stone -- most schools allow students to switch their major at a later time.

Personal Essay

Colleges want to find out two things from the application essay: how well you can write, and what makes you a unique, memorable person. Writing about personal experiences with *authenticity* and *vulnerability* can be a real advantage for admissions purposes. Most applications will provide a writing prompt, which gives guidance as to what information is required in a personal essay. In many cases, you'll be able to repurpose the same essay for several college applications. However, some universities give prompts that are too specific to do that, so you might have to write more than one.

Write with immediacy and make it focused. While it may be tempting to elaborate extensively on many years of your personal history, it's beneficial to try to keep it about a single point in time. Describing what life is like for you right now will help keep your essay hard-hitting. Another strategy is to choose a particular moment in the past, one that is unique to you and you alone, that molded you into the person you are today.

A Google search for excellent college admissions essays will yield a wide range of topics. Do not try to make yours sound like it was written by someone who grew up in completely different circumstances and with more advantages than you. For example, you might read about someone who volunteered one summer for a former U.S. president, or someone who learned important life lessons from being on a sports team. Since these experiences are not typically available for ultra-Orthodox students, your essay will sound different – and that is actually a good thing, because it makes you stand out.

It is essential that at least one other person (and preferably more) read your essay and give you feedback. Reach out to any college students or graduates that you know; many will be happy to provide feedback and proofreading.

See "Chapter 8: External Resources" for more assistance.

Supplemental Essays

In addition to a personal essay, many schools require additional (usually shorter) essays. Depending on the school, the prompts for these essays vary. A common prompt is "Why This School?" Doing some research about the school before beginning to write, visiting the campus if possible, and being as specific as possible will result in a good answer.

Interview

Selective schools often require or highly recommend an interview, either on campus with an admissions officer or closer to your home with a graduate of the college. Like the essay, the interview gives you a chance to show your personality.

Typical questions include: Why do you want to go to college X? What do you want to major in and why? Which extracurricular activities do you want to get involved in on campus and why? What's your favorite book? Why should school X accept you? What are your plans for the future?

Tips for a great college interview:

- Research the school. What majors does it offer? What extra-curricular activities are available? How large is the school? What aspects of the school's culture are highlighted on its website and in promotional materials?

- Prepare some questions about the school to ask of the interviewer, to demonstrate that you did your research and have a sincere interest.

- Wear something professional (but not overdressed).

- Be authentic.

- Send a thank you email to the interviewer following the interview.

- Google college interview tips. Here's one guide on acing college interviews.

Portfolios

In a few cases, a college will require or consider a portfolio, an addition to an application that showcases your skills. They are primarily required of students who are applying to art-related programs. In some cases, liberal arts colleges will give you the option of submitting a portfolio of written work (or something else that highlights your talents).

Colleges understand that not everyone has access to resources that enable them to hone artistic skills.

AP Classes

Advanced Placement (AP) classes are offered in many high schools across America in order to give their students advanced courses and the potential to earn college credit. They are typically not offered in ultra-Orthodox schools. College admissions departments understand that not every high school provides the same opportunities, and they will look at other factors, such as how well you did with the resources that were available to you.

Chapter 6: How to Decide Where to Apply for College

Each college application you submit will require money (unless you get the fees waived) and time. It is therefore advisable to make decisions early in the process about how many colleges you will apply to, and which ones.

Do as much research as you can about each school that interests you. Check out the list of majors they offer, find out whether the location is good, and read student testimonials, if possible. Schools also offer campus tours, which can be scheduled through their admissions office and are very enlightening about a school's culture and resources.

If things such as Jewish holidays or the availability of kosher food are important to you, visit or call the campus Hillel or student Jewish group as well – read their website and ask Jewish students at the school what it's like.

Factors to Consider

Safety Schools vs. Reach Schools

Based on the strength of your application and schools' acceptance rates, you will find certain colleges to which you are almost guaranteed to be admitted (your "safety schools") and others that are more selective, typically accept only higher scores and grades, and your chances of admittance are low or unclear (your "reach schools").

A school's acceptance rates and the average SAT/ACT scores of admitted students can be accessed with a Google search. There is a good chance that you will get accepted if you score above the 75th percentile for that school and the school has a solid acceptance rate (meaning, greater than 40%).

Statistics don't say everything about whether an applicant will get accepted or rejected. Sometimes schools reject students who are highly qualified. Some schools with extremely low acceptance rates will nevertheless accept students on occasion who score well below their typical SAT scores.

Here are examples of schools that are "safe" or "reaches" for most students. We recommend that you apply to some colleges from each section:

- Very Safe: community colleges in your area, such as Kingsborough Community College, Rockland Community College.

- Safe: state colleges and universities, and some private colleges, for example CUNY/SUNY, Brooklyn College, Hunter, Baruch, and Pace.

- Selective: some state colleges and private colleges. Examples: Dickinson, University of Rochester, Franklin & Marshall, Bates, and Colby.

- Highly Selective: schools that receive very many applications and accept extremely few of them. Examples: Stanford, MIT, Caltech, Ivy League colleges, and "mini Ivies."

Commuter vs. Residential Colleges

Commuter schools are those that offer little or no housing, and most students travel to school just for the classes. Examples include Baruch College (CUNY), UC Berkeley, and most community colleges. Students might live with their parents or rent private housing.

At schools with plenty of housing, most students live on-campus, and conduct their daily lives within the college's space. Examples: Cornell, Syracuse, University of Rochester, and Pace.

Among the colleges that offer residence in dorms, some have a "house system," in which students are sorted (or placed randomly) into different "houses." A house operates as a dorm, but is so much more. Essentially, students have one place to eat, sleep and hang out with friends. Ultimately, it's a place to come "home" to, since it cultivates a smaller, close-knit community within a school's larger student body. (An appropriate similarity is the Hogwarts houses in *Harry Potter*.) Many students consider this an important part of the college experience and apply mainly to small schools or those with house systems. Examples of schools with houses include Rice, Caltech, Yale, Harvard, and University of Chicago.

Financial Aid

A Google search of schools will let you know which schools are need-blind (meaning, they don't consider an applicant's ability to pay tuition when considering the application), which meet full-need and what their financial aid is like (e.g. grants, loans, on-campus jobs).

Some of the schools with the highest tuitions are also the schools with the most money at their disposal to give away as financial aid. So if there is a school that you love, don't cross it off your list just because the tuition is higher than you can afford; you might get lucky and be offered a generous aid package from them. That having been said, it is important to apply to more affordable schools as well, just in case.

Grade Deflation

Grade deflation is a process in which professors grade exams and assignments more harshly so that it is harder to get good grades, and is usually only applied in highly selective schools. Grade deflation is often accompanied by a more stressful school culture. The level of grade deflation isn't something you will find out from a school's brochure, but it is something you can research online and stay attuned to when visiting the campus and talking to current or former students. Some schools that use grade deflation: Princeton, Rice, Tufts, Wellesley, Boston University, Reed, UC Berkeley, Swarthmore, and University of Chicago

Personal Preferences

There are many other factors that could be important to you when deciding where to apply. For example, perhaps you strongly want to go to college in a warm climate, or near the ocean, or in a large city. Perhaps you don't like the idea of large lecture halls and want a smaller school with a good student-professor ratio. Perhaps you want to study a field that is offered by only a handful of colleges, or you look forward to getting an internship at an art museum or a hospital (and therefore need a school with museums or hospitals nearby), or you need a school with excellent services for those with physical disabilities. Perhaps you visited a campus and for some reason you can't explain, you feel "at home" there. Any of these (and many more) are legitimate reasons to apply to a school.

Learning About the Schools

There are many ways to learn more about colleges. Of course, there's no way to know everything about a school and what kind of match it would be before enrolling - but the following resources are a good start.

College Tours

Contact a school's admissions office to sign up for a tour of the school, sit in on some classes, and/or learn more about it from a current student.

Some colleges can arrange for you spend a night in one of the dorms. You might also be able to arrange this through friends who attend the school or, if Shabbat is important to you, through the Hillel.

Rankings

School rankings are helpful in finding the best colleges in a particular geographic area or the best colleges of a particular type. One warning though: each list uses its own set of criteria and weighs the criteria differently. So a college might be higher or lower on the list due to factors that may not be important to you, such as the success of the sports teams or the size of the college libraries (especially for schools in large cities with excellent public libraries). However, these lists are still great places to find out about colleges you may not have considered.

- U.S. News & World Report releases a list of the best colleges every year.
- Colleges That Change Lives has a list of lesser-known niche schools.
- There are also books like the *Fiske Guide to Colleges* that offer a more in-depth look at schools.

Talk to Current/Former Students

Ask them about the campus culture, class sizes, career services, and more. If you know them personally or through a friend, ask them for help with editing essays and for general application advice.

The authors of this manual are available to answer any questions and offer any help that you may need. Please email hasidiccollegeaccess@gmail.com to ask us.

College Finders

College Finder websites are tools that help students narrow down the list of colleges that may be of interest to them. Like the rankings, these are helpful, but don't place too much weight on them; for example, don't let them discourage you from applying to your dream school just because their algorithms think your scores are too low.

- College Board Big Future Tool offers the option to filter for schools by test scores, majors, learning environments, diversity and more.

- Kiplinger College Finder offers the option to filter schools by type, cost, size, admission rate, region and more.

Chapter 7: The Application Process

The college admissions process has many steps and involves lots of paperwork. We recommend that you keep careful notes (or a spreadsheet) showing what application components are required by each school you are applying to, their deadlines, and notes such as the email addresses of college alumni who interview you (so you can send thank-you notes). Create a calendar that includes things like registration deadlines for standardized exams and the FAFSA.

For students who do not have a high school diploma

The minimum requirements for application are a High School Equivalency (TASC), and a personal essay. Standardized test scores and teacher recommendations are optional at many schools.

(1) Take the TASC exam (formerly known as the GED)

(2a)To apply to two-year schools

- Research community colleges and other institutions that do not require standardized test scores, and decide which ones to apply to.
- Apply to these colleges.
- Submit the FAFSA.
- To enroll, you will need to provide documentation such as tax returns, social security number, and medical records.

(2b) To apply to four-year universities

- Take the SAT or ACT.
- Research the colleges that interest you and decide where to apply.
- Examples of four-year universities that do not require teacher recommendations are Stern College/Yeshiva University and the following CUNYs: Baruch, Hunter, Brooklyn, Queens, and City College.
- If you have your heart set on a school that requires teacher recommendations, call their admissions office for advice. If you have a TASC certificate they might accept letters from employers or advisors, or SAT subject tests that demonstrate your academic skills.

(3) Apply

Applications are often due almost a year before the intended starting semester. For example, if you plan to enter college in the fall of 2021, the school will likely start accepting applications in August of 2020, with an application deadline of January 1, 2021. Every school's deadlines are different so check their instructions carefully.

(4) Complete financial aid forms (See "Financial Aid")

(5) Wait as patiently as you can for admissions notices.

(6) Congratulate yourself and enroll!

For students who have a high school diploma

The requirements for application are SAT/ACT scores, two letters of recommendation, and a personal essay. The optional components are a letter from a school counselor, SAT subject tests, and AP scores.

(1) Take the SAT or ACT

(2) Assemble your list of schools

- Based on your SAT/ACT scores, apply to at least two safety schools and as many reach schools as you like. A greater number of applications may raise your chances of getting into a good school. We recommend that you apply to three safety schools, four schools that you are at least moderately confident about getting into and where you would be happy, and four to eight reach schools.

- There are application fees, but the Common App (and most individual colleges that don't take the Common App) will waive them if your financial need can be proven.

(3) Assemble letters of recommendation

Ideally, these come from teachers who taught you in a classroom setting in 11th or 12th grade, but they could be employers or anyone who knows you in an academic sense. If you cannot obtain letters from high school teachers, you can ask other advisors, mentors, or employers.

(4) Write a personal essay

- Focus on the topics in the application writing prompts.

- Ask for help with editing the essay. Write several drafts if necessary.

(5) Ask your high school to send transcripts to the colleges

Every school that offers state-accredited diplomas (such as a Regents diploma) is legally required to release your transcripts. Many Chasidic schools, especially the ones that don't offer Regents, are usually not fully accredited by the state (even if they have "transcripts"). This means that they may not be legally required to send your transcripts to colleges.

If your school is not legally required to release transcripts, you might have to take the TASC test and go to community college for two years OR take the TASC test and the SAT/ACT and apply to four-year universities. (Regardless, you can also try to explain the situation to colleges and they might overlook this requirement - this has worked before.)

(6) Schedule an interview and visit the schools if you can

Not all schools require an interview, but they are recommended because they give you an opportunity to demonstrate sincere interest in the institutions and to ask questions. Campus visits will enlighten you about a school's culture and environment in ways that are impossible from a brochure or a website. But if the travel logistics would be too difficult, don't worry about it.

A few terms to know

- **"Rolling admission"** means a college makes decisions about admitting applicants as the applications are completed, and lets you know relatively quickly whether you are admitted. This is in contrast to schools with one application deadline and one date when they send out all admissions notices.

- **"Early decision"** is an option if you know which school is your first choice and you intend to enroll there regardless of how much financial aid you are offered or where else you get in. The deadlines for applications are earlier, you get an answer earlier, and if you are admitted as part of the early-decision pool, you are required to withdraw your applications from all other schools. (If you are not admitted at this point, your application will be reconsidered along with the other regular-decision candidates.)

- **"Early action"** is an option at some high-tier universities. It is identical to early decision, except that if you are admitted, you are not committed to enrolling or withdrawing other applications. You may wait to see where else you get in and how much financial aid you get.

Reminders

You will need to ensure that the colleges receive all the required documents and scores before the application deadlines.

- Follow up with recommenders to make sure they submit their letters on time.

- Make sure that standardized test scores are sent before the deadline.
- Make sure transcripts are sent out ahead of the deadline.

Regular Admissions vs. Transfer Admissions

Transferring from one college to another is a good way for non-traditional students to earn a four-year degree. After studying at a community college for two years, or for two semesters at a four-year school, you can apply to transfer to a different, better school for your needs. Most schools accept transfer students, and unique stories especially stand out. It is often the best way to assemble a complete application if you did not have college prep in high school.

The transfer process is similar to the regular admissions process for incoming freshmen. The required two letters of recommendation are requested from college professors rather than high school teachers.

Once you have a certain number of credits (usually the equivalent of spending two years in college), high school transcripts and SAT/ACT scores are not required with a transfer application (although a strong standardized test score will surely help).

When transferring, check carefully with the new school regarding which of your previous college credits they will accept.

Application Tools

The college application process is almost entirely online now. Use the following technical tools to submit the necessary materials.

Common App

The Common App is the website through which college applications can be submitted for most schools. However, some colleges might use a separate application portal. Examples of schools with separate application portals include those in the University of California system (such as UC Berkeley), Georgetown University, and the University of Maryland.

The application fee for each college is $50-$125, but you can request a waiver for these fees.

Right before completing the application, the Common App will provide space to add additional information about yourself that is not yet reflected in other parts of the application. For example, the Common App only has room to add up to five siblings in the personal information section. If you have more than five siblings, they can be added to this “additional info” section.

CUNY Portal

Prospective students use the City University of New York website portal to apply to any school in the CUNY system. Simply follow all the steps on the "How to Apply" page.

While the Common App specifically requests letters of recommendations from teachers, the CUNY Portal will allow submissions from employers or advisors who know the applicant well.

Coalition App

In 2015, the Coalition App was created to highlight colleges that meet certain requirements such as sufficient financial aid to low-income students, solid graduation rates, etc. Many schools accept either the Common App or the Coalition App, but the Common App is most widely used.

Chapter 8: External Resources

Information is power. The more you research colleges, financial aid, the admissions process, and the SAT/ACT, the better positioned you will be for your future. Luckily, the New York area has many, many resources you can use to find out everything you need to know.

College Counseling

Goddard Riverside Options Center (*352 W 110th St, Manhattan*) - FREE
The Options Center is a nonprofit organization operating in Manhattan's Upper West Side. They offer free college counseling and can help navigate the application process.

Their weekly drop-in hours, when you can stop by to meet with a counselor and ask questions about higher education, are on Wednesdays from 2-3:30pm.

The Goddard Riverside Options Center also offers small scholarships every year.

The Door - FREE
The Door is an organization based in New York City that offers college advising and tutoring, among a variety of other resources. Their contact information can be found online.

CollegePoint - FREE
College Point is an online portal that specifically serves high-performing low-income students by providing a virtual (online) advisor. Advisors offer step-by-step individual guidance throughout the entire college application process. Your advisor can help you compile a list of colleges to apply to, prepare for interviews, edit essays, submit applications, and research and find scholarships.

Educational Institutions

Brooklyn College
Brooklyn College's BC Bound program allows students who have taken the High School Equivalency exam (TASC) to enroll as first-year students in the four-year college. They offer exclusive resources to students in this program, including tutoring and other workshops to ease the transition into college.

Touro College
Touro was established to offer higher education to the wider Jewish community and offers several different divisions that you may find useful.

Some of the options for Touro College:

- Machon L'Parnasa/Institute for Professional Studies. This school accepts students from all educational backgrounds (with/without high school equivalency, limited English proficiency) and is geared towards career preparation and advancement.

- School for Lifelong Education: their stated mission is to serve the academic needs of the Chasidic community; it caters to people with limited secular education.

- Lander College for Women

- Lander College for Men

- New York School of Career and Applied Studies, which serves students of all backgrounds.

Direct Services

Public Libraries - FREE
Public libraries provide easy access to standardized test prep books.

A library card is needed in order to check out books. Getting a library card requires:

- a government-issued ID or school photo ID/report card/any photo ID

- proof of New York State address (a letter to your home that is addressed to you)

The Brooklyn Public Library offers free TASC prep classes

Rockland BOCES - FREE
Rockland BOCES offers educational programs and resources specifically for non-traditional students in the Rockland County area. Some of their resources include free High School Equivalency (TASC) prep and ESL (English as a Second Language).

Chapter 9: Undergraduate Institutions That Have Recently Accepted Students from Chasidic and Ultra-Orthodox Communities

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These schools have recently accepted YAFFED-affliliated students from Williamsburg, Borough Park, Monsey, Monroe and New Square in either the regular or transfer admissions process. We hope this list will give you an idea of your possibilities.

Amherst College

Borough of Manhattan Community College

Brandeis University

Brown University

Case Western Reserve University

Columbia College, Columbia University

Cornell University

CUNY Baruch College

CUNY Brooklyn College

CUNY College of Staten Island

CUNY City College

CUNY Hunter College

CUNY Queens College

Emory University

Georgetown University

Harvard University

Johns Hopkins University

Kingsborough Community College

Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT)

Mount Holyoke College

Muhlenberg College

New York City College of Technology

New York University (NYU)

Pace University

Pomona College

Rockland Community College

Rutgers University

Sarah Lawrence College

School of General Studies, Columbia University

Smith College

Stern College for Women, Yeshiva University

SUNY Binghamton University

SUNY Broome Community College

SUNY Stony Brook University

Syracuse University

Tulane University

University of Maryland, College Park

University of Pennsylvania

University of Rochester

Wellesley College

Wesleyan University

Williams College

Yale University

Yeshiva College, Yeshiva University

Chapter 10: Conclusion and Looking Ahead

Your college admissions process will come with many challenges. Sometimes a student's first college application process doesn't work out. If that is the case for you, keep trying, and keep aspiring. On the other hand, you might get into top universities and then feel let down that you don't have anyone to celebrate with. Challenges are guaranteed - but just know that it will all be worth it.

Once you get to school, there will be brand-new challenges (yay!). Advice on the transition from an ultra-Orthodox environment to a college campus would take up an entire booklet of its own, but we can offer a few tips here:

- Academics: Do not be afraid to ask for help. Go to professors' office hours and email them with questions. Talk to your academic advisors. Utilize free tutoring.

- Social life: Get involved with clubs. Attend events outside of class.

- Self-care: Take care of yourself physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually. Utilize the available mental health resources.

Above all, remember to have fun; our research suggests you will have the time of your life!

On the next page, you will see a list of schools that have accepted students like you in recent years through all sorts of admissions cycles: regular admissions, transfer admissions, etc.

Feel free to reach out and ask any questions at hasidiccollegeaccess@gmail.com. We are all rooting for you!

How to contact YAFFED:

PO Box 1796
New City, NY 10956
646-350-0075
info@yaffed.org
www.yaffed.org

Young Advocates for Fair Education (YAFFED) is an advocacy group committed to improving educational curricula within ultra-Orthodox schools. We fervently believe that every child is entitled to a fair and equitable education that is in compliance with the law. Our work involves raising awareness about the importance of general studies education, and encouraging elected officials, Department of Education officials and the leadership of the ultra-Orthodox world to act responsibly in preparing their youth for economic sufficiency and for broad access to the resources of the modern world.

We encourage compliance with relevant state guidelines for education while maintaining respect for the primacy of Judaic studies and the unique cultural and religious values of the ultra-Orthodox community. Our mission is to ensure that all students receive the critical tools and skillsets needed for long-term personal growth and self-sufficient futures.