

HEARN CONSULTING

# The College Readiness Playbook

An academic approach to preparing every student for the college of their choice

**FOR STUDENTS & FAMILIES**

Bryan Hearn, Ed.D. · [www.hearn.consulting](http://www.hearn.consulting)

## The College Readiness Playbook: For Students & Families

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## Table of Contents

Introduction

### **PART I: The Academic Case for College Readiness**

Chapter 1: What College Readiness Actually Means

Chapter 2: What the Research Says

### **PART II: The Academic Readiness Roadmap**

Chapter 3: The Readiness Timeline — Grades 7–12

### **PART III: Standards, Assessments, and the Academic Bar**

Chapter 4: Understanding What Your Student's School Should Be Teaching

Chapter 5: Making Sense of Test Scores and Assessments

### **PART IV: For Students and Families**

Chapter 6: What Parents Should Know and Do

Chapter 7: What Students Should Know and Do

Chapter 8: The College Application as an Academic Exercise

Chapter 9: Your Personal Readiness Plan

### **PART V: Appendices and Tools**

Appendices A–G: Glossary, Resources, Checklists, and Planning Templates

## Introduction

This playbook is for you—the student preparing for college, or the parent helping them get there.

College readiness is not a mystery, and it is not about luck. It is about preparation—the kind of preparation that starts years before you fill out an application. The students who succeed in college are the ones who arrive with strong reading and writing skills, solid mathematical reasoning, the ability to think independently, and the habits of mind that allow them to manage their own learning. Those capacities are built over time, through the quality of education students receive from middle school forward.

This playbook takes an academic approach to college readiness. It is not primarily about choosing the right school, writing the perfect essay, or gaming the admissions process. It is about building the academic foundation that makes all of those things possible—and that makes college itself a place where you thrive rather than struggle.

I come to this work from a dual perspective. For over fifteen years, I have worked inside school systems—as a classroom teacher, an instructional leader, and a consultant helping districts improve the quality of their instruction. I know how schools work, what they get right, and where they fall short. I have also spent years working directly with students and families on the other side of the equation: test preparation, academic coaching, college essays, and admissions strategy. I have seen what happens when students are well-prepared—and what happens when they are not.

The playbook is organized in five parts. Parts I through III lay the academic foundation: what college readiness really means, what the research says about how students learn to read and think at a college level, and a grade-by-grade roadmap from seventh through twelfth grade. Part IV is written specifically for families—with practical guidance for parents and students at each stage. Part V provides tools, checklists, and a complete guide to the Hearn Consulting resources that support each step of the journey.

A companion version of this playbook—written for schools and districts—covers the same academic foundation from the systems perspective. Both versions are designed to work independently or together.

The goal is simple: help you understand what academic readiness looks like, give you the tools to build it, and connect you to the resources that make it practical.

**PART I****The Academic Case for College Readiness****01****What College Readiness Actually Means****It Starts in the Classroom, Not the Counselor's Office**

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When most families think about college readiness, they think about SAT scores, college visits, and application essays. Those things matter. But they are the visible tip of a much larger structure—one that is built over years of daily instruction, reading, writing, and thinking.

College readiness is an academic outcome. It means your student can read complex nonfiction and literary texts with genuine comprehension, analyze arguments, write clearly and persuasively, and apply mathematical reasoning to problems they have not seen before. These are not extraordinary abilities. They are what colleges expect on day one.

**What Colleges Actually Expect**

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Four-year colleges expect entering students to handle a specific level of academic demand:

**Reading complexity.** College courses assign texts that are longer, denser, and more complex than most high school material—drawing on background knowledge across many subjects.

**Writing volume.** College writing is analytical, evidence-based, and extended. Students write across every subject, not just English class.

**Mathematical reasoning.** Beyond computation, colleges expect students to interpret data, model situations, and reason quantitatively.

**Independent thinking.** College requires students to manage their own learning—to read without being told exactly what to look for, to ask their own questions, and to persist through difficulty.

**The Preparation Gap**

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Despite rising graduation rates, many students arrive at college unprepared for the academic demand. Roughly a quarter of entering freshmen require remedial courses—courses that carry no college credit and extend time to degree. Research from TNTP (*The Opportunity Myth*, 2018) found that students in many schools spend hundreds of hours per year on assignments that are not aligned to grade-level expectations. The problem is not that students cannot do the work. The problem is that they have not been given the opportunity.

This gap is not primarily an information gap or a counseling gap. It is an instruction gap—and understanding that is the first step toward closing it.

### **Why This Playbook Takes an Academic Lens**

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I come to this work from both sides. I have spent over fifteen years inside school systems—seeing how instruction is designed, what works, and where it falls short. I have also spent years working directly with students and families on test preparation, essay coaching, and admissions strategy. That dual perspective taught me something important: the students who succeed in college are almost always the ones who received strong academic preparation—not the ones who had the best admissions strategy.

This playbook focuses on the academic foundation because that is what matters most. Everything else—test scores, essays, applications—flows from it.

## 02

## What the Research Says

### Coherent Instruction Matters More Than Programs

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Education researcher Mike Schmoker has spent decades documenting a simple but powerful finding: the most important factor in student achievement is whether students receive a coherent, content-rich curriculum—consistently. In many schools, what a student learns depends heavily on which teacher they happen to get. In *FOCUS* (2011) and *Results Now 2.0* (2023), Schmoker argues that schools need a common set of essential content taught through what he calls authentic literacy: purposeful reading of complex texts, frequent analytical writing, and structured discussion. These three practices, applied consistently, produce the largest achievement gains the research has documented.

For families, the implication is clear: the quality of your student's daily instruction matters more than any program, test prep course, or extracurricular activity. A student who spends years reading complex texts, writing regularly, and thinking critically in class is a student who is being prepared for college.

### Background Knowledge: The Key to Reading

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One of the most important findings in how students learn to read is that comprehension depends on what you already know. Natalie Wexler, in her influential book *The Knowledge Gap* (2019), explains that the ability to understand a text is not just about 'reading skills'—it depends fundamentally on whether the reader has background knowledge about the topic. A student with deep knowledge of American history will comprehend a historical text far better than a student who has never studied the period, even if the second student is technically a 'better reader.'

This means that the content your student studies matters enormously. A curriculum that builds knowledge systematically across history, science, literature, and the arts gives students the vocabulary and context they need to read anything well. A curriculum that focuses only on reading strategies without building content knowledge leaves students underprepared for the kinds of complex, knowledge-rich texts they will encounter in college.

### Nonfiction Reading: The College Expectation

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The overwhelming majority of reading in college is nonfiction: textbooks, primary sources, research articles, case studies, and analytical essays. The academic standards recognize this, shifting the balance of reading in grades 6–12 substantially toward literary nonfiction. Yet many students reach high school having spent most of their reading time on fiction.

Grammar, syntax, and academic vocabulary also matter. The sentence structures in college-level texts are more complex than everyday language—embedded clauses, discipline-specific terminology, and sophisticated argument structures. Students who have been exposed to these patterns regularly are better prepared to handle them independently.

## High-Quality Materials Drive Learning

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Research shows that when schools use high-quality, standards-aligned instructional materials (called HQIM), students can gain the equivalent of months of additional learning. These materials are designed to expose students to the right level of complexity, build knowledge systematically, and ensure that every student has access to grade-level content—not a watered-down version.

For families, this is worth paying attention to. The curriculum your student's school uses has a direct impact on their preparation. You can ask your school what curriculum they use in ELA and math, and whether those materials have been reviewed for quality by independent organizations like EdReports.

## Acceleration, Not Remediation

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If your student is behind grade level in any subject, the research is clear: they are better served by continuing to engage with grade-level content while receiving additional support, rather than being pulled out for below-grade-level work. This approach—called learning acceleration—keeps students on track for readiness while filling in specific gaps through targeted help like tutoring, small-group instruction, or pre-teaching.

### KEY SOURCES REFERENCED IN THIS CHAPTER

Mike Schmoker: FOCUS (2011); Results Now 2.0 (2023) • Natalie Wexler: The Knowledge Gap (2019)  
• E.D. Hirsch: Core Knowledge Foundation resources • TNTP: The Opportunity Myth (2018) • Student Achievement Partners: Instructional Practice Guide • Achieve the Core: College- and Career-Ready Standards resources

**PART II****The Academic Readiness Roadmap****03****The Readiness Timeline—Grades 7–12**

College readiness is built over years, not months. This chapter maps the academic priorities, milestones, and decisions that matter at each grade level—from seventh grade through graduation. Use it as a planning tool to understand where your student is, what they should be working toward, and where the critical decision points are.

**Grades 7–8: The Middle School Foundation**

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What's happening academically. Middle school is where the trajectory is set. The priorities are building the stamina to read longer, more complex texts; developing the ability to write sustained arguments with evidence; reading nonfiction regularly; and solidifying the math foundations—number sense, proportional reasoning, algebraic thinking—that make high school math possible.

What to watch for. State assessment results in seventh and eighth grade are early warning indicators. A student who is not proficient in ELA or math at the end of eighth grade is entering high school at a disadvantage. This is the time to address gaps—through tutoring, additional practice, and conversations with teachers about what your student needs.

Building the foundation. Study habits, organizational skills, time management, and self-advocacy should be taught explicitly during this period. These are not 'soft skills'—they are the infrastructure that enables everything else.

**HEARN CONSULTING RESOURCES**

Executive Functioning Guide • Study Skills Guide — Available at [hearn.consulting/resources](https://hearn.consulting/resources)

**Grade 9: The Reset Year**

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What's happening academically. Ninth grade is the transition to high school rigor—and the GPA clock starts. Course performance in ninth grade is one of the strongest predictors of high school graduation and college enrollment. The priorities: build reading and writing capacity at the high school level, establish strong performance in Algebra I, and begin developing the independent learning habits college will require.

Course planning. Ninth grade is when to establish a four-year plan. Map the pathway through math, ELA, science, and social studies. Understand prerequisites for advanced courses. If your student is interested

in AP or IB courses later, some decisions made now—especially in math sequencing—will determine what is possible.

Assessment. The PSAT 8/9 provides an early baseline. These results, alongside course grades and state assessments, give you a data-informed picture of where your student stands.

## Grade 10: Building the Transcript

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What's happening academically. Tenth grade deepens the rigor. In reading, students should be engaging with complex nonfiction—primary sources, analytical essays, scientific articles. In math, Geometry or its equivalent continues building reasoning skills. This is the year where the transcript starts taking shape.

Course decisions. AP, IB, and dual enrollment decisions typically happen around this time. Consider: Is your student ready for advanced coursework? Is the school providing support for students in their first advanced course? Access to rigorous courses matters—but so does having the support to succeed in them.

Assessment. The PSAT 10 and Pre-ACT provide the first meaningful college-readiness benchmarks. Take these seriously as diagnostic tools—not just practice tests. Use the results to identify strengths and areas for focused preparation.

## Grade 11: The Proving Year

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What's happening academically. Junior year is the most important academic year for college admissions. Grades carry the most weight, course rigor is scrutinized, and standardized test scores become a factor. Students should be reading and writing at a college-preparatory level—engaging with complex, multi-layered texts and producing extended analytical and argumentative writing.

The SAT and ACT. Whether your student takes the SAT, ACT, or both, these tests measure the reading, writing, and mathematical reasoning that college demands. A strong score reflects strong preparation. Start preparation early in junior year (or the summer before), take a diagnostic first, and build a structured plan targeting weaknesses.

### HEARN CONSULTING RESOURCES

The SAT Playbook • The ACT Playbook • SAT R&W Complete Workbook • ACT ELA Complete Workbook — Available at [hearn.consulting/resources](https://hearn.consulting/resources)

The readiness check. By the end of junior year, you should have a clear picture of your student's readiness. If test scores, grades, or teacher feedback suggest gaps, this is the last meaningful window for intensive intervention before the application process begins.

## Grade 12: Execution and Transition

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What's happening academically. Senior year rigor matters. Colleges check final transcripts, and students who coast arrive at college having lost momentum. Maintain high expectations—especially in AP, IB, and dual enrollment courses.

The application process. The arc runs from early fall through spring decisions. Manage the balance between applications and coursework carefully—applications should not come at the expense of academic performance.

The college essay. The personal essay is where years of writing practice either pay off or do not. Students who have been writing regularly—analytical essays, personal narratives, reflective pieces—have the skills to produce an authentic, compelling essay. Start early, revise often, and focus on authentic voice over impressive topics.

### HEARN CONSULTING RESOURCES

The College Essay Toolkit • The Essay Revision Checklist • Before You Go • Now What? — Available at [hearn.consulting/resources](https://hearn.consulting/resources)

Financial planning. Understand the true cost of college, the difference between merit aid and need-based aid, how to use net price calculators, and how academic performance connects to scholarship opportunities.

**PART III****Standards, Assessments, and the Academic Bar****04****Understanding What Your Student's School Should Be Teaching**

You do not need to be an education expert to understand what good instruction looks like. This chapter translates the academic standards into practical language so you can assess whether your student's school is building the skills colleges expect.

**What the Standards Require**

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Most states have adopted academic standards that describe what students should know and be able to do at each grade level. In English Language Arts, the standards require students to read increasingly complex texts—with a shift toward nonfiction in middle and high school—write analytical responses using evidence, and build academic vocabulary. In math, the standards build toward algebraic reasoning, geometric thinking, and the ability to apply math in real-world contexts.

These standards are not arbitrary—they are designed to reflect what colleges and careers actually demand. A student meeting grade-level standards each year is a student building toward college readiness.

**How to Know If Your Student Is on Track**

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You can assess your student's academic trajectory by looking at three types of evidence:

1. State assessment results. Proficiency on state tests means your student is meeting grade-level expectations. Below proficiency is an early warning that the instructional experience is not building the skills they need.
2. PSAT / Pre-ACT results. These are direct measures of college readiness. If your student takes the PSAT in 10th grade and meets the college-readiness benchmark, they are on track. If not, there is time to intervene—but you need to know.
3. Grades in context. A strong GPA from a rigorous school means something different from the same GPA at a school with grade inflation. Look at grades alongside test scores for the full picture.

**Questions to Ask Your Student's School**

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What curriculum do you use in ELA and math? Has it been independently reviewed for quality?

How much nonfiction reading are students doing across their courses?

How often are students writing analytical, evidence-based responses?

What do state assessment results tell you about how our students are performing relative to grade-level expectations?

## 05

## Making Sense of Test Scores and Assessments

### State Assessments

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State tests tell you whether your student is meeting grade-level standards. Proficiency means the basics are covered; advanced performance suggests readiness for more challenging work. If your student is consistently below proficiency, this is a signal that something in their instructional experience needs to change—and the sooner you address it, the better.

### The SAT and ACT

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Both the SAT and ACT measure the reading, writing, and math skills that colleges expect. The College Board's benchmarks for college readiness on the digital SAT are 480 in Evidence-Based Reading and Writing and 530 in Math (out of 800 per section, 1600 total). The ACT's benchmark is a 22 composite score. Meeting these benchmarks means your student is well-prepared for introductory college coursework. Missing them means there is work to do.

These tests also test grammar, syntax, and conventions of standard written English—skills built through years of reading and writing, not through last-minute cramming. A strong preparation approach starts with a diagnostic, targets specific weaknesses, and builds skills over months, not weeks.

### PSAT and Pre-ACT: The Underused Early Warning

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The PSAT (given in grades 8–10) and Pre-ACT (grade 10) provide some of the most useful early data available. They tell you where your student stands relative to college-readiness benchmarks while there is still time to act. Ask your school whether they administer these tests—and if they do, review the results carefully.

### AP and IB Exams

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Scores of 3+ on AP exams and 4+ on IB exams demonstrate college-level mastery. These can earn college credit at many institutions. If your student is enrolled in AP or IB courses, strongly encourage them to take the exam—the preparation process itself builds college readiness, and the results provide valuable external validation.

### GPA: Necessary but Not Sufficient

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A strong GPA is important for college admissions, but it is not a complete picture of readiness. A 3.8 GPA from a school with rigorous, standards-aligned courses means the student has genuinely demonstrated academic strength. The same GPA from a school where grading is lenient may not. Pair GPA with test scores and the quality of coursework to get the real picture.

**PART IV****For Students and Families****06****What Parents Should Know and Do**

Your role as a parent in your student's college readiness is not to do the work for them. It is to understand the landscape well enough to advocate effectively, ask the right questions, and provide the support—academic, emotional, and financial—that allows your student to build their own readiness.

**Understanding Your Student's Academic Trajectory**

Most parents receive report cards, but few understand how to read them as readiness indicators. Here is what to look for:

**Grades:** Strong grades in rigorous courses are the best signal. But grades alone are not enough—you need to know whether the courses themselves are demanding enough.

**State assessment results:** These are an external check on whether your student is meeting grade-level expectations. If grades are strong but state test scores are weak, the courses may not be as rigorous as they appear.

**PSAT / Pre-ACT / SAT / ACT:** These are direct measures of college readiness. Take them seriously as diagnostic tools.

**Teacher feedback:** Ask teachers directly: Is my student on track for college readiness? What specific areas need attention?

**Grade-by-Grade Parent Action Items****Grades 7–8**

Establish consistent study routines and organizational systems

Monitor state assessment results as early warning indicators

Have the first conversations about college as a real possibility

Ensure your student is reading regularly—nonfiction especially

If your student is struggling in math or reading, seek intervention now—do not wait

**Grades 9–10**

Help your student create a four-year course plan  
Understand the prerequisites for advanced courses and ensure your student is positioned for them  
Review PSAT/Pre-ACT results as diagnostic data  
Advocate for appropriate course placement—not the easiest path, but the most rigorous one your student can handle with support  
Support the development of independent study habits

### Grade 11

Support structured SAT/ACT preparation—start early, take a diagnostic, build a plan  
Begin the college search with academic fit in mind—class sizes, support systems, four-year graduation rates  
Ensure your student maintains strong academic performance—junior year grades carry the most weight  
If test scores or grades reveal gaps, this is the last window for meaningful intervention

### Grade 12

Support the application process without taking it over—this is your student's story to tell  
Help manage the emotional arc of the admissions process  
Research financial aid thoroughly: FAFSA, CSS Profile, merit scholarships, net price calculators  
Ensure your student maintains rigor through the end of senior year—colleges check final transcripts

#### HEARN CONSULTING RESOURCES

Where Parents Fit In — A comprehensive guide for parents on supporting the college readiness process. Available at [hearn.consulting/resources](https://hearn.consulting/resources)

## The Advocacy Role

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You have the right—and the responsibility—to advocate for your student's academic experience. This means:

Asking the school about curriculum quality and whether materials are standards-aligned  
Requesting that your student be placed in the most rigorous courses they can handle—with support  
Asking for specific data on how the school's students perform on state assessments and college-readiness benchmarks  
Seeking outside support when the school's resources are insufficient—tutoring, test preparation, academic coaching

## When to Seek Outside Support

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Consider seeking additional help if:

State assessment results or PSAT scores are consistently below proficiency or benchmark levels

Your student is struggling with reading comprehension, writing, or math fundamentals

Grades are strong but test scores are weak (possible grade inflation)

Your student is heading into junior year without a clear test prep plan

The college application process feels overwhelming and you need strategic guidance

## 07

## What Students Should Know and Do

This chapter is written directly to you, the student. College readiness is ultimately something you build—not something that happens to you. Your teachers, parents, and counselors all play a role, but the daily work of reading, writing, thinking, and studying is yours.

### Owning Your Readiness

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The shift from middle school to high school—and from high school to college—is fundamentally a shift toward self-direction. In college, managing your own schedule becomes essential—professors do not send reminders about deadlines, and no one manages your day-to-day learning for you. The students who thrive are the ones who arrive already owning their academic habits.

That ownership starts now. It means:

- Taking responsibility for your grades, not blaming teachers or circumstances
- Choosing challenging courses even when easier options are available
- Seeking help early when you are struggling—from teachers, tutors, or academic support
- Building study routines that work for you and sticking to them consistently

### The Academic Foundation: Reading and Writing

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Reading is the backbone of everything. Every college course—whether literature, biology, history, or engineering—requires the ability to read complex material with comprehension. The best way to build this ability is to read widely and often, especially nonfiction: essays, journalism, historical documents, scientific writing. The more you read, the more background knowledge you build—and research shows that background knowledge is the single most important factor in reading comprehension.

Writing is how you prove you can think. In college, you will write constantly—papers, exams, lab reports, discussion posts. The students who succeed are the ones who can organize their ideas, make arguments with evidence, and write clearly under pressure. Build this capacity now by writing regularly in school and on your own: analytical essays, reflections, even journaling.

Grammar and syntax matter. The complexity of sentences in college-level texts—and in the SAT and ACT—requires familiarity with complex sentence structures, academic vocabulary, and standard written conventions. You build this through reading, not through grammar worksheets.

### Math Sequencing: Know Your Pathway

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Your math sequence determines what courses are available to you in high school and, by extension, in college. Understand your pathway:

Algebra I is the gateway. Strong performance here opens Geometry, Algebra II, and beyond.  
Algebra II is the college-readiness threshold in most frameworks. Complete it by junior year if possible.  
If you are interested in STEM fields, plan for Pre-Calculus and Calculus.  
If math is a struggle, seek support early—tutoring, extra practice, or summer preparation.

## Test Preparation as Academic Development

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The SAT and ACT are not tricks to be gamed. They measure the reading, writing, and math skills you have been building—or have not been building—over years. That said, strategic preparation makes a real difference.

Start with a diagnostic. Take a full-length practice test to establish a baseline. Use the results to identify specific areas of weakness.  
Build a structured plan. Work on weaknesses systematically over weeks or months. Short, regular practice is more effective than marathon cram sessions.  
Practice with real materials. Use official practice tests from the College Board (SAT) or ACT.org. Supplement with targeted workbooks for specific skills.

### HEARN CONSULTING RESOURCES

The SAT Playbook • The ACT Playbook • SAT R&W Complete Workbook • ACT ELA Complete Workbook — Available at [hearn.consulting/resources](https://hearn.consulting/resources)

## Executive Functioning and Study Systems

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The skills that predict college persistence are not just academic—they are organizational. Time management, planning, self-regulation, and the ability to manage multiple competing demands are what separate students who thrive from students who struggle.

Use a planner or digital system consistently—not sometimes, every day  
Break large assignments into smaller tasks with intermediate deadlines  
Practice spaced study: short, frequent review sessions outperform cramming  
Develop self-testing habits: quiz yourself rather than re-reading notes

### HEARN CONSULTING RESOURCES

Executive Functioning Guide • Study Skills Guide — Available at [hearn.consulting/resources](https://hearn.consulting/resources)

## 08

## The College Application as an Academic Exercise

### Building a College List with Academic Fit in Mind

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The college search is often driven by rankings, brand names, and campus aesthetics. Those things have their place, but academic fit matters more. Consider:

Class sizes and teaching style. Will you be in 300-person lectures or 25-person seminars? Both have value—know which environment suits your learning.

Academic support. What tutoring, writing centers, and academic advising resources are available? Every student needs these at some point.

Four-year graduation rate. This tells you whether students are actually completing their programs. A school with a low four-year rate may have structural issues that affect your experience.

Program strength. If you have a field of interest, look at the specific department—faculty, course offerings, research opportunities—not just the school's overall reputation.

### The College Essay

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The personal essay is not about impressing admissions officers with extraordinary experiences. It is about communicating who you are through authentic, well-crafted writing. The students who write the best essays are the ones who have been writing regularly for years—not the ones who attend a single essay workshop in the fall of senior year.

Key principles:

Authentic voice matters most. Write like yourself, not like who you think admissions officers want you to be.

Show, do not tell. Use specific details and moments rather than general claims about your character.

Start early and revise often. A strong essay goes through multiple drafts. Give yourself time.

Get feedback—but keep it yours. A trusted reader (teacher, counselor, coach) can help you improve—but the essay should sound like you, not like them.

#### HEARN CONSULTING RESOURCES

The College Essay Toolkit • The Essay Revision Checklist — Available at [hearn.consulting/resources](https://hearn.consulting/resources)

## Application Strategy

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Understanding the different application pathways matters:

**Early Decision: Binding**—if accepted, you must attend. Use only if you have a clear first choice and the financial fit works.

**Early Action: Non-binding** early application. Lets you hear back sooner without commitment.

**Regular Decision: The standard** timeline. Gives you the most time to prepare your application.

Build a balanced list: reach schools, match schools, and safety schools. And remember—where you go matters less than what you do when you get there.

## Financial Literacy for Families

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Understanding the financial side of college is not optional—it is essential:

**Net price, not sticker price.** Use each school's net price calculator to estimate your actual cost after aid.

**Merit aid vs. need-based aid.** Merit aid is based on academic performance; need-based aid is based on family income. Strong academic preparation directly impacts scholarship opportunities.

**FAFSA and CSS Profile.** File the FAFSA as early as possible. Some schools also require the CSS Profile. Missing deadlines can cost you money.

**Compare offers carefully.** Look at the full financial picture: grants (free money), loans (must be repaid), and work-study. A school that costs \$10,000 more per year costs \$40,000 more total.

## 09

## Your Personal Readiness Plan

Use this chapter to take stock of where you are and build a plan for where you need to go.

### Self-Assessment: Where Are You Now?

Rate yourself honestly in each area. This is not a grade—it is a diagnostic to help you focus your effort.

<b>Reading comprehension of complex texts</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> Strong <input type="checkbox"/> On Track <input type="checkbox"/> Needs Work
<b>Writing analytical/argumentative essays</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> Strong <input type="checkbox"/> On Track <input type="checkbox"/> Needs Work
<b>Math skills (at or above grade level)</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> Strong <input type="checkbox"/> On Track <input type="checkbox"/> Needs Work
<b>Study habits and organization</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> Strong <input type="checkbox"/> On Track <input type="checkbox"/> Needs Work
<b>Time management</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> Strong <input type="checkbox"/> On Track <input type="checkbox"/> Needs Work
<b>Knowledge across subjects (history, science, etc.)</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> Strong <input type="checkbox"/> On Track <input type="checkbox"/> Needs Work
<b>Standardized test readiness (PSAT/SAT/ACT)</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> Strong <input type="checkbox"/> On Track <input type="checkbox"/> Needs Work
<b>Understanding of college application process</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> Strong <input type="checkbox"/> On Track <input type="checkbox"/> Needs Work

### Goal-Setting Template

Set specific, measurable goals in each area where you marked 'Needs Work' or want to move from 'On Track' to 'Strong.'

**Academic Goal:**

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**What I will do:**

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**By when:**

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**Test Prep Goal:**

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**Target score:**

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**Prep start date:**

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**Application Goal:**

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**Schools to research:**

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**Essay first draft deadline:**

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## Your Hearn Consulting Resource Guide

Below is the complete set of Hearn Consulting resources, organized by where they fit in your readiness journey. All are available at [hearn.consulting/resources](https://hearn.consulting/resources).

Resource	Category	When to Use
Executive Functioning Guide	Academic Support	Grades 7–9: Build the organizational foundation
Study Skills Guide	Academic Support	Grades 7–12: Develop effective study habits
The SAT Playbook	Test Prep	Grade 10–11: Strategic SAT preparation
SAT R&W Complete Workbook	Test Prep	Grade 10–11: Targeted SAT reading/writing practice
The ACT Playbook	Test Prep	Grade 10–11: Strategic ACT preparation
ACT ELA Complete Workbook	Test Prep	Grade 10–11: Targeted ACT ELA practice
College Essay Toolkit	College Essays	Grade 11–12: Developing the personal essay
Essay Revision Checklist	College Essays	Grade 12: Refining and polishing essays
Career Exploration Workbook	Career	Grades 10–12: Exploring interests and career paths
Where Parents Fit In	Parents & Family	All grades: Guide for parent involvement
Before You Go	Transition	Grade 12: Preparing for the transition to college
Now What?	Transition	Grade 12: Second-semester senior year planning
First Session Workbook	Academic Support	Starting point for academic coaching

## PART V

### Appendices and Tools

#### Appendix A: Glossary of Key Terms

**ACT:** A standardized college entrance exam measuring English, math, reading, and science reasoning. Scored 1–36 per section with a composite average. College-readiness benchmark composite score is 22.

**AP (Advanced Placement):** College-level courses offered through the College Board. Scores of 3–5 on AP exams may earn college credit.

**Background Knowledge:** What you already know about a topic. Research shows this is the most important factor in reading comprehension—more important than reading 'skills' in the abstract.

**College-Ready Standards:** Academic standards designed to describe what students need to know and be able to do to succeed in college. Most state standards are based on this framework.

**Dual Enrollment:** Programs that let high school students take actual college courses for both high school and college credit.

**HQIM: High-Quality Instructional Materials:** curriculum that has been independently reviewed and found to be aligned to standards. Research shows HQIM can produce months of additional learning.

**IB (International Baccalaureate):** An international program offering rigorous high school courses. The Diploma Programme includes external exams scored 1–7.

**Net Price:** The actual cost of attending college after financial aid is applied. Use each school's net price calculator for an estimate.

**Pre-ACT:** A preliminary version of the ACT, typically taken in grade 10. Scores 1–35 composite. Useful as a diagnostic for identifying strengths and areas to improve before taking the full ACT.

**PSAT 8/9 and PSAT 10:** Preliminary versions of the SAT taken in grades 8–10. The PSAT 8/9 scores 240–1440 total; the PSAT 10 and PSAT/NMSQT score 320–1520 total. The PSAT/NMSQT in grade 11 also qualifies students for National Merit Scholarships. All provide diagnostic data aligned to SAT benchmarks and help identify areas to strengthen.

**SAT:** A standardized college entrance exam measuring Evidence-Based Reading and Writing (EBRW) and Mathematics. The digital SAT (launched 2024) scores 200–800 per section, 400–1600 total. College Board college-readiness benchmarks: 480 EBRW and 530 Math.

## Appendix B: Recommended Reading

The Knowledge Gap by Natalie Wexler (2019) — Why what your student learns in school matters as much as how they learn it

FOCUS by Mike Schmoker (2011) — What makes instruction effective, explained simply

The Opportunity Myth by TNTP (2018) — Why many students aren't getting the instruction they deserve

Achieve the Core ([achievethecore.org](http://achievethecore.org)) — Free resources on standards-aligned instruction

EdReports.org — Independent reviews of K-12 curriculum quality

College Board ([collegeboard.org](http://collegeboard.org)) — SAT practice, college search, financial aid tools

ACT ([act.org](http://act.org)) — ACT preparation resources and college readiness benchmarks

## **Appendix C: About the Author**

### **Bryan Hearn, Ed.D.**

Bryan Hearn is an education consultant with over fifteen years of experience in K–12 instruction and college readiness. He has worked as a classroom teacher, instructional leader, managing director at a national education organization, and adjunct professor—and he continues to work directly with students and families on test preparation, college essays, and admissions strategy.

Bryan's background bridges both worlds. He has led instructional improvement work across more than twenty school systems, designed curriculum and assessment frameworks, and coached hundreds of students through the test prep and college application process.

Bryan holds a Doctor of Education from Vanderbilt University. His research focused on instructional leadership and school improvement—the same evidence-based frameworks he now applies to helping individual students and families reach their academic goals.

Learn more at [www.hearn.consulting](http://www.hearn.consulting)

## Appendix D: Grade-by-Grade Readiness Checklist

Use this checklist to track your student's readiness milestones across each grade.

### Grades 7–8

- Proficient on state ELA and math assessments
- Reading nonfiction regularly (not just fiction)
- Writing multi-paragraph analytical responses
- Consistent study routines and organizational systems in place
- Math foundations solid (number sense, proportional reasoning, pre-algebra)

### Grade 9

- Four-year course plan created
- Strong performance in Algebra I and English I
- PSAT 8/9 taken and results reviewed
- Independent study habits developing
- Aware of prerequisites for advanced courses

### Grade 10

- PSAT 10 or Pre-ACT taken and results reviewed
- Course selection includes appropriately challenging courses
- Reading complex nonfiction regularly
- Writing extended analytical essays
- AP/IB/dual enrollment decisions made with data

### Grade 11

- SAT or ACT diagnostic taken; structured prep plan in place
- SAT/ACT taken (or scheduled) with target score defined
- Junior year grades strong and on track
- College search underway with academic fit criteria
- College essay planning begun

### Grade 12

- Applications submitted on time

- College essays completed and revised
- FAFSA / CSS Profile filed
- Financial aid offers compared carefully
- Senior year rigor maintained
- College transition planning underway

## Appendix E: College Search Comparison Worksheet

Use this worksheet to compare schools based on the criteria that matter for academic success.

Criterion	School 1	School 2	School 3
School name			
Four-year graduation rate			
Average class size			
Student-to-faculty ratio			
Academic support services			
Program strength in your area			
Net price (after aid)			
Merit scholarship available?			
Campus visit impression			
Overall fit rating (1-5)			

## Appendix F: Test Prep Planning Template

Test:  SAT  ACT

**Diagnostic score:** \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**Target score:** \_\_\_\_\_ Test date: \_\_\_\_\_

### Strengths (from diagnostic)

1.

2.

### Areas to Improve (from diagnostic)

1.

2.

3.

**Weekly Study Plan**

Day	Focus Area	Duration	Materials
Monday			
Tuesday			
Wednesday			
Thursday			
Friday			
Weekend	Full practice test (every 2-3 weeks)		

**HEARN CONSULTING RESOURCES FOR TEST PREP**

The SAT Playbook • SAT R&W Complete Workbook • The ACT Playbook • ACT ELA Complete Workbook — All available at [hearn.consulting/resources](https://hearn.consulting/resources)

## Appendix G: Complete Hearn Consulting Resource Guide

Every resource referenced in this playbook, organized by category with descriptions and recommended timing.

### Academic Support

Resource	Description	Best For
Executive Functioning Guide	Building organizational systems, time management, and self-regulation skills	Grades 7–10
Study Skills Guide	Evidence-based study strategies: spaced practice, self-testing, active reading	Grades 7–12
First Session Workbook	Starting point for academic coaching—goal setting, self-assessment, plan building	Any grade

### Test Preparation

Resource	Description	Best For
The SAT Playbook	Complete SAT strategy guide: structure, timing, content review, practice planning	Grades 10–11
SAT R&W Complete Workbook	Targeted practice for SAT Reading and Writing sections	Grades 10–11
The ACT Playbook	Complete ACT strategy guide: all four sections, pacing, content approach	Grades 10–11
ACT ELA Complete Workbook	Targeted practice for ACT English, Reading, and Writing sections	Grades 10–11

### College Essays

Resource	Description	Best For
College Essay Toolkit	Step-by-step guide: brainstorming, drafting, narrative development, revision	Grades 11–12
Essay Revision Checklist	Structured checklist for polishing and finalizing application essays	Grade 12

## Career and Exploration

Resource	Description	Best For
Career Exploration Workbook	Self-assessment tools for interests, strengths, and career pathways	Grades 10–12
Landing Your First Real Opportunity	Guide to internships, first jobs, and professional development	Grade 12+

## Students and Families

Resource	Description	Best For
Where Parents Fit In	Comprehensive guide for parent involvement in college readiness	All grades
Before You Go	College transition preparation—academic, social, and practical	Grade 12
Now What?	Second-semester senior year: maintaining momentum and planning ahead	Grade 12