COUNTDOWN TO COLLEGE

Nobody Is Coming to Plan This for You

A 10-minute read for students — from a student who found out too late

Read this even if college feels far away

Here's what I wish someone had told me at your age, with zero sugarcoating: the application you send at 17 is mostly built out of decisions you're making right now — which math class, which activities you stick with, which habits you build. I dreamed of MIT and found out what it actually required when there wasn't enough runway left. Not because I couldn't have done it. Because nobody told me the clock had already started.

This isn't a 'work harder' lecture. It's the cheat sheet I didn't have.

The four things that actually matter (in order)

- **An A in a real class beats an A+ in an easy one. The math track is the big one — Algebra I in 8th grade keeps every STEM door open. If you missed that, talk to your counselor about catching up NOW; it's fixable early and nearly impossible late.** 1. Hard classes, done well.
- **Colleges don't count your activities; they read your story. Three years going deep in one thing — with something real to show — beats ten clubs you attended. Pick what you'd do anyway and go further than anyone expects.** 2. Depth in one or two things.
- **PSAT in 10th and 11th (11th grade one = real scholarship money), SAT or ACT in spring of 11th. A few months of honest prep. Then done.** 3. One good test cycle.
- **The transcript starts immediately. Protecting a GPA is 10x easier than repairing one — future you is begging current you to just start strong.** 4. Grades from day one of 9th grade.

If your parents aren't involved (or don't get the system)

Then you're the project manager of your own future. Harder, but completely doable — students do it every year:

- Your counselor is your parent-substitute for this. Book a meeting, say 'I want to keep my college options open — am I on the right course track?' That one sentence puts you on their radar for everything: courses, fee waivers, scholarships, deadlines.
- Fee waivers exist for everything — SAT, ACT, and college applications are free if money is tight. Counselors hand them out; you just have to ask.
- Recruit one adult — a teacher, coach, older cousin, family friend — as your check-in person. Tell them your goal; ask them to ask you about it monthly. Accountability is most of what involved parents actually provide.

- If your parents don't understand the system, hand them the parent packet from Countdown to College — that's literally why we wrote it. Many parents want to help and just don't know how.

If you don't care yet — honestly, read this part

- You don't have to care about 'college.' Care about not letting 14-year-old you make permanent decisions for 18-year-old you. Taking real math and sticking with one activity costs you very little now and keeps every door open — including doors to things you haven't discovered you love yet.
- Whatever you DO care about — games, music, money, cars, helping people — has a path, and every path has requirements with deadlines. Trade school, music production, the military, starting a business: all of them reward people who found out the rules early. This was never really about college. It's about not getting ambushed by your own future.

Your next 30 days

- Week 1: write down 2–3 things you might want your life to involve. Bad guesses are fine — guesses can be tested, blankness can't.
- Week 2: look up one real requirement for one of them (search 'how to become a ___' or a dream school's admitted-student profile). Feel the gap while there's still time to close it — that feeling is the whole point.
- Week 3: talk to your counselor (use the sentence above).
- Week 4: pick your ONE thing to go deep on this year, and take one visible action in it.

> **The one-liner:** *You can't choose your future at 17 if 13-year-old you already gave the options away. Keep the doors open. That's the entire game.*