



Tech-Notebook for College Admissions



**Interactive Tools & Resources That
Save Parents Time and Reduce Stress**

DANNY RUDERMAN

SparkGrad

Tech-Notebook for College Admissions

By Danny Ruderman

Some nice words...

“Danny totally had my back and helped me express who I really was—no easy task in such a high-growth phase of life. I am forever grateful for Danny’s guidance.”

—Evan Spiegel, CEO & Founder of Snapchat

“Danny gave outstanding advice and was patient and kind with my daughter. If you’re looking to help get your child accepted into a top university, Danny would be your first choice.”

- Dylan McDermott, Parent

‘Thank you so much for all your guidance and support throughout Josh’s college search and application process. Ariel, Josh, and I really appreciate the honest candor and friendship you forged with Josh to allow him to feel safe and share his true feelings about his hopes and dreams for college. I still can’t believe he got in early decision to Penn!

- Jennifer Lechter, Parent

We can't thank you enough for shepherding, coaching, counseling, and cajoling Teddy through the college process! While we are obviously thrilled that Teddy got his desired ED outcome, we were also gratified how, along the way, you helped him home in on his interests and start to discover what makes him tick.

— Hadley Rierson, parent

"Without Danny, I wouldn't be in my dream school. Simple as that! He helped me find a program that revolves around my passion and will allow me to gain real-world experience before I graduate college. Danny was incredibly helpful not only with my application and essays but also with my mental health and stress throughout the process."

— Anna Sophia-Lotman, student

Danny. Thank you so much. We are so happy about Cat getting into her first choice.!!! We are also thankful for the time that you spent with her. She really looked up to you and learned a lot from you. I see how you are and I appreciate you. You have made a difference in a young girl's life. You're very good at what you do.

— Sheryl Hines, parent

“What I admire most about you is how you inspired Lizzy to start her Sprinkled Cookie company, and how you walked Brandon step-by-step through developing his Hole in Fun program. You are there for your students way beyond filling out essays and selecting schools. You inspire them, you make it fun and you are just the best. We love you!

— **Sara Brooks, parent**

“You probably won't remember me, but I took your online course when I was in 10th grade. Because of you, I decided to focus on my passion for entrepreneurship. Your advice to pursue a genuine interest rather than cramming in random activities had a profound impact on my ultimate acceptance into Cornell, which I will be attending in the fall.”

— **Shainna Orecklin, student**

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Welcome

Parents

If you're feeling overwhelmed by the college admissions process, you're not alone.

That's why this journal exists—to give you the tools, timelines, and tips you need to support your teen with confidence. Each section is designed to guide you through a key part of the process, with QR codes (or direct web links) that unlock even more personalized resources.

How It Works:

- Open the camera on your phone and frame a QR code to access interactive tools & resources (or just click the links below the QR codes).
- Use the note pages to jot down thoughts, questions, or to-do lists.
- Follow the tips and checklists to stay on track.

Welcome

Continued

Wait, who are you again? And why should we trust you?

My name is Danny Ruderman. For the past 20 years, I've had the privilege of helping thousands of families just like yours navigate the college admissions journey. Yet, every year, I meet teenagers who are more stressed, overwhelmed, and afraid they won't get into a "good" school. My goal has always been to show students that **being authentic and discovering their true interests** often leads to more acceptances—and a happier life.

My approach is often called revolutionary because it **challenges traditional beliefs** about how admissions works and why students get accepted. Families worldwide have trusted me to guide their children through this process, and I'm proud that my students consistently gain acceptance to great colleges.

As the first in my family to attend college and the third student from my public high school to be accepted to Stanford, I'm **committed to helping as many families** as possible discover the incredible opportunities.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Danny". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Creating a College List

Choosing colleges isn't about picking the 'best' schools—it's about finding the right fit. Scan the QR code or click the link to build a list based on your teen's personality & interests.

When starting a college list, it's helpful to have a student rank the qualities they think they might want in a college.

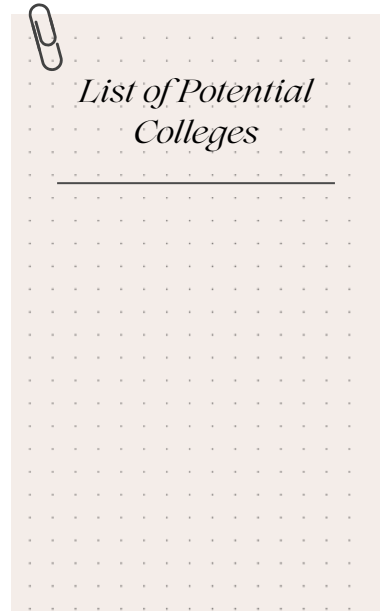
Of course, they likely don't know much yet, so their preferences will evolve.

However, simply getting them to think about colleges helps them start envisioning their future and encourages them to ask you questions. (Yay, engagement!)

See the next page for a list.



Or go to sparkgrad.com/list



You can type in the box above!

Creating a College List Continued

You can type on the lines below!

Please rank the qualities that are the most important to you in selecting a college. Give a 1 to the quality that is most important, a 2 to the quality that is the next most important, and so on, until you get to 13, which will be your least important quality.

QUALITY

RANKING (#1-13)

Geographical Location (example: West, Midwest, East Coast, South)	-----
Setting (example: urban, suburban, rural)	-----
Size (Number of students)	-----
Climate (example: warm, outdoorsy, has four seasons)	-----
Reputation or prestige of a school	-----
Has a specific type of program (example: film, music, engineering)	-----
Has an active sports program to watch	-----
Has a sport that you want to participate in	-----
Has an active fraternity/sorority life	-----
Has small class sizes	-----
Has diversity in terms of the type of students	-----
Is known for having students who are serious about ideas	-----
Political climate (example: conservative, liberal, free-thinking, non-conformist)	-----

Creating a College List Continued

What defines a selectivity rating for your child?

First, what exactly is a selectivity rating?

You might have heard terms like “reach,” “50/50,” or “safety.” These are labels high school counselors use to categorize colleges based on how likely a student is to be accepted, typically considering two main factors: **GPA and standardized test scores** (SAT or ACT).

The problem is that **GPA lacks context**. For example, a student who earns all As in 9th and 10th grade but then Bs in 11th and 12th won't be as strong an applicant as someone who starts with Bs and finishes with As, even if their overall GPA is the same (assuming equal class weighting).

Adding to the complexity, many colleges are still “test optional,” meaning students don't need to submit SAT or ACT scores to be considered. So, **how are you supposed to figure out** how hard it is to get into a college?

Step 1 – Let's Redefine Terms

First, because there are so many factors that go into an admission officer's decision (difficulty of classes, letters of recommendation, extracurriculars, essays, etc.), I've seen countless examples of students being accepted to a school their counselor labeled a “reach” but not getting into a “safety.” Despite this unpredictability, we still need a way to roughly approximate a school's selectivity.

So, let's start by changing our language:

Creating a College List

Continued

Let's use these instead:

- **Aspirational Choices:** Colleges where admission is competitive and a student's qualifications are below or on the lower end of their typical range.
- **Target Choices:** Colleges where a student's qualifications match the typical admitted student profile.
- **Solid Choices:** Colleges where a student's qualifications exceed the typical range, making admission highly likely.

Step 2: Learn about a college's profile

Not all colleges share detailed admissions statistics or priorities, but many do. And guess what? You can easily gather that information!

The key is to see how your child's grades and test scores compare to a school's range, whether they're strong in the categories listed as "highly considered." Also, note the school's acceptance rate. But keep in mind, this is **NOT** a perfect predictor—many online estimators often miss the mark for my students.

Other factors, like your child's high school's relationship with a college or other applicants from their class, also play a role. (Don't stress about it now, although I know you want to.) The bottom line? A rough sense of a school's category is enough. More importantly, let's focus on **helping your child become their best self**. If we do that, they'll get into great schools—no matter how one category stacks up or whether someone at their school just invented a new type of laser.

Most Commonly Asked Questions

You've got questions. We've got answers. Scan the QR code or click the link below to access quick video explainers on topics like test prep, visiting colleges, and extracurriculars.

Below are just some of the questions you'll get answered:



Or go to sparkgrad.com/faq

- What do I need to know about the SAT/ACT?
- How can my child discover and develop authentic activities?
- How does an admissions office really work?
- How should my child choose high school courses?
- How do I keep sane and preserve my relationship with my child?
- How do we take advantage of college tours?
- What do most people miss about letters of recommendation?
- How does Early Decision/Early Action really work?

Extracurricular Generator

The key to getting accepted into selective colleges is to become authentically interesting. Scan the QR code or click the link to get ideas based on your child's interests.

Some questions you might want to ask your child and yourself. (You can take notes on the following page.)



Or go to sparkgrad.com/ecgenerator

● What does my teen watch online?

● What does my teen talk about?

● What did my teen do when little?

● What is my teen's best subject?

● Is my teen a self-starter?

● What brings my teen joy?



Types of ECs

Summer
School Year
Volunteering
Work
Internship
Research
Create Own
Art
Writing
Dance
Music

Extracurricular Generator Continued

What activities are “the best” for selective colleges?

Respectfully, this is the wrong question to ask.

With over 40,000 hours working with teenagers (wait, how old am I now?!), I've discovered and proven **one fundamental philosophy** about admissions that not only works best but also changes lives.

It's all about helping teenagers become **authentically interesting** and guiding them to be the best version of themselves.

Therefore, the better question is: **What activities will help my child develop as a person?**

I don't want to be overly dramatic, but reframing what the college admissions process **can really be** has the potential to change a family's approach, reduce stress levels, and increase the number of acceptances.

While I understand, perhaps better than most, that the name of a college can seem to matter in the real world (I was the kid who had to do EVERYTHING in high school to get into Stanford), I firmly believe that success has far less to do with the college and everything to do with a **student's personal qualities**.

Extracurricular Generator Continued

Think of it this way

Columbia received 60,000 applications this year.

Of those, it's estimated that **70% are "qualified,"** meaning the students have the GPA and test scores (if required).

So, if 42,000 applicants are qualified, do you know how many are editors of their yearbook, volunteer at a homeless shelter, and are on the swim team? **(Hint: a lot.)**

That's not to say a student shouldn't do these activities. Nor does it mean I haven't had many students with these activities get into the most selective colleges. However, there typically needs to be something **more**—something authentically interesting—that makes an admissions officer want to accept a particular student.

That's why the admissions process is **not some kind of game** to be played. It doesn't require "marketing" a student (though demonstrating a cohesive narrative in the essays is important).

The more a student can discover and develop an interest (even if they change their mind several times throughout school) and communicate **why they genuinely enjoy spending their time** doing it, the more they'll show a college why they belong at that institution.

SAT/ACT Prep Tools

Test prep doesn't have to be stressful. Scan the QR code or click the link to create a personalized study plan with links to practice resources.

Step 1:

We first have to figure out whether your child should even take an exam.



Or go to sparkgrad.com/satactprep

Yes, most colleges are still test-optional, but what does this really mean?

First, colleges typically release their test policies in **March or April** each year, so things can change. However, keep in mind that some schools now require standardized tests again.

For colleges that are test-optional, it means a student **can be accepted without taking a test**. I've had many students get into the most selective colleges without scores—even this year.

That said, this doesn't mean a student shouldn't study and aim for the best score possible. I've seen acceptance rates nearly double for students with strong test scores. However, students should pass **this quick test** to decide if it's really worth the effort:

SAT/ACT Prep Tools

Continued

Step 2: The quick test.

Question 1:

What is your child's PSAT or PACT score?

If they haven't taken it yet, they should take a practice test for each online (you'll find resources for this when you scan the QR code).

Question 2:

What is the range of scores typically accepted by a college?

This is called the 25th–75th percentile range. In the College Summaries section below (accessible via the QR code), you can find full details on a college's range. Alternatively, you can search Google by typing: "(name of college) + SAT or ACT range."

Question 3:

How willing/motivated are they to study?

Most students don't start seriously studying until the summer before senior year, though there are exceptions. Due to a teen's development, their junior year workload, and other factors, many begin preparing around December or January of 11th grade and continue through the summer, often taking the test 3–4 times.

Here's the Key:

Most students can raise their SAT score by about 200 points (or ACT by 5 points) with dedicated study. To decide if it's worth it, add 200–250 points (or 5–6 points for the ACT) to their practice score and compare it to their target school's 25th–75th percentile range. They should aim for the middle or higher in the range to boost their chances of acceptance.

College Visit Planner

Campus visits are a great way to get a feel for a school. Scan the QR code or click the link to create a travel plan with routes, tour sign-ups, and tips for making the most of your trip.

Checklist:

- Schedule campus tours

- Plan your travel itinerary

- Prepare questions to ask

- Do pre-research on the schools

- Get your child to take notes



Or go to sparkgrad.com/visits

**And yes, we will help
you do all these things!**

Unknown College Visit Rules:

1. Try to visit different types of colleges rather than just the favorites.
2. Fewer school trips done with quality is better than rushing to see many schools quickly.
3. Anything beyond 6–7 visits often leads to family arguments.
4. And yes, the information sessions can get BORING!

College Visit Planner

Continued

Let's break those down just a bit more:

Try to visit different types of colleges rather than just your favorites.

Most students have no idea what they truly want in a college at first. Their choices are often **based on perceptions** or their friends' opinions. Only by exploring different types (big public, medium private, small liberal arts; urban, suburban, rural; aspirational, target, solid) will they really understand what's available and be able to create a balanced list.

Fewer school trips, done thoughtfully, are better than rushing to see as many schools as possible.

Here's the advice I give to all my students: leave your parents behind, **walk up to a group of students**, and say, "Hi, I'm [Your Name]. I'm visiting for the day and just wanted to see what you think about going here." Then see what happens! :)

Anything beyond 6–7 visits often leads to family arguments.

Of course, your family may be different, but visiting more than seven colleges can start to wear on everyone—especially if you're doing **both the tour and the info session** at each school (which, as I'll explain, isn't always necessary).

And yes, the information sessions can get BORING!

This is where an admissions officer gives a presentation about their college. While they can be helpful, they often start to sound the same. The truth is, you can learn a lot of this information online. So, if your family feels burned out or wants to prioritize certain schools over others, **skip the session and focus on what matters most.**

College Visit Planner

Continued

Possible Questions to Ask

You can type below!

Do pre-research on the schools

I ask my students to start learning about colleges before they visit, as this helps them come up with the best questions.

By scanning the QR code in the College Summaries section below, you'll find links to virtual tours, dorm room tours, and student reviews that your child can use to explore different institutions. For teens who actually enjoy reading, I also recommend getting the [Fiske Guide to Colleges](#) for a solid overview.

Get your child to take notes

They can bring a notebook or use their phone to jot down notes.

The key is to have them write down their impressions immediately after visiting a college. It's important that they get as specific as possible about what they liked, as this will be helpful later when writing college essays!

College Summaries

Finding college information can be maddening. We wanted to make it easy. Scan the QR code or click the link to access summaries of any colleges you're considering.

Check out the awesomeness of what you'll get for a given college:



- Acceptance rate
- SAT/ACT policy
- Application options (ED, EA, RD, Rolling)
- Deadlines for each option
- Essay questions asked in the application
- Advice for how to write each essay question
- Interview policy
- Letter of recommendation policy
- List of majors
- Study abroad programs
- Student organizations
- College tour sign-up
- Virtual tours
- Dorm room tours
- Student reviews

Or go to sparkgrad.com/summaries

College Essay Tool

The essay is your teen's chance to stand out. Scan the QR code or click the link to get prompts, tips, and examples that worked.

Question:

How the heck is a 17 year-old supposed to know how to write a personal narrative that genuinely shows who they are?

Answer:

They're not.

The good news is that once students understand the structure and realize that they can just be themselves, things get much easier.

I made this tool to do two things:

1. Make it a lot easier to gather all the different essay questions in one place (currently, it's a real pain).
2. Provide some real-life examples that can guide your child how to get started (rather than intimidate them).

Let me show you a short example:



Or go to sparkgrad.com/essaytool

College Essay Tool

Continued

Read the start of this student's personal statement:

My sister Lauren lies buried under the rubble of an urban hotel. Her breathing is rapid and short in the darkness. A rescue team equipped with flashlights and a stretcher is making its way through the wreckage. I am the leader of this rescue team. I am ten years old.

The reason Lauren is trapped can only be blamed on the television. Or rather, the lack thereof.

Throughout my childhood, my mom refused to allow me access to that flickering screen with which my friends were obsessed. When my friends spoke of Bart Simpson, I never imagined that he was actually yellow. "South Park" might as well have been a grassy recreational area.

See how it starts with a "moment" story that pulls you in as a reader?

Then it provides context for the story to introduce a personal quality the student is about to describe.

College Essay Tool

Continued

Let's keep going:

Without a television to distract me, I got to work on some big projects. I constructed airplanes in my front hallway, built boats out of living room furniture, and hosted guests in hotel rooms erected in my family room. This brings us to the trapped sister. At some point (after the boats, airplanes, and hotels---but before the Wild West stunt shows) I decided it would be best to have a rescue drill with my family members. I had participated in one at school and was certain my family should have similar training. Needless to say, my sister was rescued from the rubble without a hitch and I got back to work in my family room hotel.

Now, in my ripe old age of seventeen, I have left behind the engineering masterpieces that composed my childhood. But I have certainly not abandoned my love for creative design: In 6th grade, I built my own computer, in 7th grade I created my own holograms using lasers and mirrors, and in 8th grade, I discovered my love of graphic design.

College Essay Tool

Continued

Let's keep going:

Since 8th grade, I have experimented with multimedia graphic design—creating art with copy machines (I'm on a first-name basis with FedEx Office employees), 1950s letterpress printers, and the latest versions of Adobe software. Experimenting with various mediums has allowed me to make my vision more tangible. Most recently, I have worked as the Design Editor of *Crossfire*, my high school newspaper. This has allowed me to continue my work in the graphic arts while writing articles that reflect my academic passions. I have learned to reinforce my writing with powerful visuals and infographics...

This next part provides context for the personal quality. In other words, how does the creativity that came from not watching TV show up in other parts of his life? While the college personal statement is usually not the time to brag, it's essential for students to include specific details and examples to illustrate their point.

College Essay Tool

Continued

Ok, here's the wrap-up:

As a result of such an upbringing, I am not forced to view the world through a multimedia lens shaped by marketing gurus. Rather than discussing the merits of a particular TV show with friends, I had to develop other ways of relating—thereby freeing myself from the cultural compendium of network television. By removing a centerpiece of cultural inspiration and discussion, my mom had unknowingly unleashed a world where I could operate free of influence and discern my own decisions through careful consideration and thought.

The ending is often the most challenging part for students because it needs to answer the question, "So what?" What's the point of writing this essay?

Is this the best college essay I've ever read?

No.

Did this boy get into Stanford and go on to found SnapChat?

Yes. Yes, he did.

College Essay Tool

Continued

Some colleges require no essay at all (e.g., the University of Arizona).

Others require only the 250–650-word personal statement (e.g., Wesleyan, Skidmore, Northeastern).

Still, others require the personal statement plus 1–8 additional short-answer essays, known as supplements (e.g., Michigan, the Ivies, Georgetown).

THE BIG KEY TO REMEMBER:

Students don't need to write 40+ essays! Many colleges ask the same or similar supplemental questions, allowing students to "recycle" their answers.

Here are the three most common questions right now:

- Why do you want to attend our college?
- Describe a community you belong to and how it has influenced you.
- Describe a time when one of your perceptions changed

These are simplified versions, but you'll see variations and gain insight into how to answer them by scanning the QR code!

Scholarship Search Engine

Scholarships can make college more affordable. Scan the QR code or click the link to find opportunities tailored to your teen.

Did you know that there are over 1.7M college scholarships available and an estimated \$100 million goes unclaimed each year!

So, let's get some of that money.



Or go to sparkgrad.com/scholarships

When I was in high school, I had to find scholarships because my family couldn't afford Stanford. Back then, I used a 1,000-page book and spent weeks searching for scholarships. My goal now is to make this process **much easier for you.**

After scanning the QR code, you'll be prompted to answer a few questions that enable the AI system to find scholarships matching your criteria. While it still takes time to apply, I recommend starting by focusing on **four main parameters:**

Scholarship Search Engine

Continued

First, you should know that scholarships are available for students of all ages, not just seniors, so feel free to start early and prioritize by deadline.

Second, prioritize scholarships that have the most specific qualifications matching your child. For example, it's easier to win a scholarship for students from Oklahoma who want to study linguistics than to compete for the national Coca-Cola Scholarship.

Third, focus on scholarships that require the least amount of work or allow a past essay to be reused. Students are often burned out from the college essay process, so applying to multiple scholarships quickly can be a big advantage.

Fourth, prioritize scholarships that are renewable rather than one-time awards. Winning \$2,000 per year for four years is easier—and more impactful—than trying to win four separate \$2,000 scholarships.

Budget Planner

Knowing the numbers helps you plan. Scan the QR code or click the link to calculate costs for your teen's top schools.

Here's a sample college budget:



Tulane University

Or go to sparkgrad.com/budgets

Tuition and Fees	\$68,678
Housing (On-Campus)	\$10,758
Meals (On-Campus)	\$8,110
Books and Supplies	\$700
Transportation	Variable
Depends on the student's distance from campus.	
Miscellaneous Expenses	Variable
Includes personal expenses, one-time orientation fee, health insurance, laundry, etc.	
	Total \$88,266

Budget Planner

Continued

My goal with this section is to make it easy for you to compare costs across different colleges.

While the general rule is that private universities cost more to attend than public ones, that doesn't always tell the whole story.

Some state schools charge significantly higher tuition for out-of-state students.

Meanwhile, if you're applying for financial aid, private colleges often provide much more assistance. For example, Stanford gave me substantial aid, while UCLA wasn't able to offer any.

I always recommend that families contact a college's financial aid office to see how they can help. You might be surprised at how some schools go above and beyond to support their students.

Useful Websites

While the previous QR codes & links will provide everything you need, here are some useful websites that you, as a parent, will most likely use throughout the process:

APPLICATIONS:

The Common Application

Or go to commonapp.org



The University of CA Application

Or go to the [UC Application Website](#)



MIT Application

Or go to the [MIT Application Website](#)



Georgetown Application

Or go to the [Georgetown Application Website](#)



Useful Websites

Continued

STANDARDIZED TESTS

SAT (The College Board)

Or go to collegeboard.org



ACT (The ACT)

Or go to actstudent.org



FINANCIAL AID

FinAid.org (all the info you need)

Or go to finaid.org



FAFSA Application

Or go to studentaid.gov



CSS Profile Application

Or go to cssprofile.collegeboard.org



More Help

My mission has been to help as many families as possible realize the amazing opportunities for colleges, and I'd love to help yours in any way I can.

Thank you for taking the time to go through this notebook with me!

I truly hope it saves you time and reduces stress while helping your child achieve their dreams.



And if you'd like an affordable way to get my personal guidance—[Join My Live Meet & Greet!](#) 🎓

To ask me a question, email me at danny@dannyruderman.com

THANK YOU!

About Danny Ruderman

Danny Ruderman is nationally recognized as one of America's premier college counselors. After being the first in his family to attend college and only the third student to be accepted into Stanford University from his public high school, Danny's mission is to help as many families as possible navigate the admission process. He is the author of *The Ultimate College Acceptance System* (St. Martin's Press) and *Top 100 Answers to Your College Admission Questions*. He has also created college counseling programs used by nonprofits and Fortune 500 companies.

