



Diary of a High School Senior: Navigating college admissions



October 8, 2023

By [Freyja Pacheco](#)

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It's time for college applications, and all the stress that goes with it. But thank goodness for a quality school, quality counselors and quality classmates.



Baxter Academy for Technology and Science. Photo by Freyja Pacheco.

For high school seniors, college application season has arrived. All around me, fellow seniors are making college lists, scrambling for recommendation letters, and typing first, second and third drafts of college essays.

However, each student's plan and situation is unique. There are many who have had this process planned out since middle school and are hiding anxiety behind a well-practiced answer to the dreaded "So where do you want to go to college?" question. Then there are those who feel lost, overwhelmed, and like they are drowning in expectations.

Tension and stress levels are high, and self-esteem, mental health and hours of sleep are low.

I'm a student at Portland's Baxter Academy for Technology and Science, which bills itself as a project-based learning, college prep high school. We have about 400 students, 100 per grade, who have come as far as Jay, about 65 miles away, to benefit from the STEM-based curriculum.

Baxter is known for its broad range of classes, amazing fabrication lab and community-based activities. During college admission times, Baxter supports its seniors by offering time, space, and teachers who can help with the process. Our two guidance counselors stay very busy through these months with recommendation letters, answering questions, running in-school college visits and much more.

Asked what support they hope to provide, guidance counselor Emily Kelly said: "The purpose of the guidance department during this time is to address students where they're at, so no matter what their goals are they have a touch point through us and we will help them navigate their plans."

From what I can see, most students cannot pay for college out of pocket. Therefore hundreds of scholarships and other financial aid opportunities must be reviewed, signed up for and applied to by their deadlines. These scholarships can seem to make the difference between being able to afford a dream school or not, and can be as intimidating as the college applications themselves.

The self-worth tied to getting into college varies. Plenty of my peers believe they will thrive wherever they end up and put much less pressure on themselves. But many students, myself among them, tie their academic ability and self-value to whether we can get into a selective institution.

It is unfortunately a time when students question many of the academic decisions they made in the past and whether those decisions will make a difference in achieving their dreams. What high school we decided to go to, what classes we signed up for, where did we slack, and what clubs, activities and programs did we decide to join or not join?

This is a time of overthinking what different decisions we could have made that would make our applications look better to those on admission boards.

There are numerous things in the past few years [that shifted](#) the senior college application process a great deal. Many are related to COVID-19, such as the two free years of community college that was extended only last year to include 2024 and 2025 graduates.

Gov. Janet Mills proposed a \$20 million fund to provide the deal to classes graduating from 2020 through 2025. Many students are taking advantage of it by preparing to transfer after two years or choosing fields that only need an associate's degree.

Because of the free community college option, many students' college lists are looking more different than usual. The percentage of kids graduating from Baxter and going straight into college has gone up since the deal became available. For example, 82% of the 2022 graduates reported going to a two- or four-year university and 75% made the same decision in 2023.

I asked five seniors the same three questions about their experience with college applications. First, I asked where they felt the most and least prepared for college apps. Second, I asked what helped them the most, and lastly I asked where they needed more support.

There were definitely common answers. Three of the five students said they were least prepared in understanding financial aid and needed more support. A significant change to the application process this year is the opening date to apply for federal student aid changed from Oct. 1 to Dec. 1. That means applicants will not have a set financial aid package until much later in the year. This, and the pandemic's long-lasting effects on many individual financial situations, has caused more anxiety and confusion with the daunting task of paying for college.

Many students also agreed certain classes they were taking at Baxter were playing essential roles in easing college stress, including Senior Seminar, a once-a-week required course where seniors can ask questions and receive support from guidance counselors, and Science Technology and Ethics, a 400-level English course in which part of the syllabus is writing and editing your college essay.

One student in my Science Technology and Ethics class said, "It's nice to be able to work and get our questions answered in the moment," and another said of the teacher, "He really takes the time to look over our ideas and answer our questions."

Students say getting good recommendation letters and writing essays are two of the least stressful parts of the college application.

Although this is a time of stress, we must remind ourselves each and every 2024 graduate is a smart, capable student. Here at Baxter, we are lucky to have the support of an impressive school, and we continue to inspire each other to push through this season and prioritize our mental health as well.

This time next year, when we have made our decisions and many of us are sitting in college classrooms, I'm sure we will look back on this time, and be grateful we put in the work to reach our goals.