

# NAVIGATING THE SYSTEM: Resource Guide for the College Search and Application Process

**AT OHIO WESLEYAN**, we are proud to welcome students from more than 30 states and over 20 countries. Many of our students (22%) are the first in their family to go to college. Some students are the first in their family to attend a small private university.

Our students bring a variety of experiences and perspectives to the campus, and many of them have one thing in common: They found the college application and search to be daunting and sometimes confusing. We hope this guide helps you to navigate this important process. It includes helpful terminology, tips for the application process, on-campus resources, links to scholarships, and much more!

Throughout this guide, you will find information applicable to navigating the college-entry process at almost every college or university, but when relevant, we provide specific examples from Ohio Wesleyan. This guide, while extensive, is not comprehensive, so we encourage you to reach out to admission representatives if you have further questions or want clarification. **We are here to help!**

## Important terminology

**One of the biggest barriers for first generation college students and first-time college applicants is terminology.**

During the college application process, admission representatives and university professionals reference many offices, forms, and procedures. We have included links and definitions below to some of the most common terms you may hear.

### ED, EA, & RD

Most colleges and universities offer three different types of application deadlines: ED, EA, and RD. ED refers to Early Decision, which is a binding early admission program. In other words, if you are accepted, you are making a commitment to attend that institution. Only apply Early Decision if you feel confident that the university is your first choice and you have had a thorough conversation with your family about how you will pay for college. If you are considering Early Decision, it is always best to consult with your school counselor, your parent(s), and even your assigned admission counselor at that institution. You can apply to only one school under an Early Decision deadline.

EA refers to Early Action, which is a non-binding admission program. The deadline is often in November or December, and students who apply Early Action will typically hear by January or February if they are admitted (sometimes even earlier). However, students have until the National Decision Deadline of May 1 to make their final college choice. You can typically apply Early Action to as many schools as you want!

The last type of deadline is RD or Regular Decision. RD is the final deadline, so make sure to submit your application before this deadline. Still not sure which deadline is right for you? Read our Admission blog on this topic [here](#).

### Merit aid vs. need-based aid

Financial aid packages include a lot of information, and they can be confusing. Basically, all of the aid a school offers can be divided into two categories: merit aid and need-based aid. Merit aid is money given by the college to recognize your academic achievements or talents, regardless of your financial need. For example,

a music scholarship based on your amazing bassoon audition would count as merit aid. To learn more about Ohio Wesleyan's merit aid options, check out our [list of scholarships](#). Some schools, including OWU, host competitions to let students compete for more merit aid during the winter or spring of their senior year. You might receive an invitation to these competitions at the time of admission or shortly after you have been notified of your admission status.

Need-based aid is calculated and awarded based on your demonstrated financial need. Your need is determined by the Free Application for Federal Student Aid ([FAFSA](#)). Some schools also require you to submit the College Scholarship Service ([CSS](#)) [profile](#). Both of these online forms ask for your financial records and estimate the amount that your family can reasonably pay to help fund your college education. This estimated amount is known as your Expected Family Contribution or EFC. These online forms require information from your parent(s) or guardian(s), including tax returns and details about savings and other sources of income. You can select the institutions to which you want to send this information.

Upon receiving your FAFSA (and CSS profile, if required) a financial aid office may offer you need-based aid. Some institutions will meet your full demonstrated financial need (Cost of Attendance - Expected Family Contribution = Financial Need), but not all institutions have the resources to be this generous. Many colleges and universities may choose to meet a percentage of your aid with grant assistance.

Grants are funds that the college or university offers a student to cover some or all of the cost of attendance. If you receive a grant, you normally do not need to pay this money back to the institution. Need-based aid may also include federal and state government grants or access to a work study program (see below.) You can learn more about these aid options and loans on our [financial aid website](#).

### Office of the Registrar

You may have heard about this office if you took AP (Advanced Placement), IB (International Baccalaureate), CCP (College Credit Plus), Dual Enrollment, or similar classes in high school.

The Office of the Registrar is responsible for awarding credit for your courses. For example, if you took AP Biology, this office would determine whether you qualify to receive college credit for the course. Most colleges list their policies regarding AP and IB on their website in order for prospective students to understand how their credits may transfer and what scores they need to receive credit.

You can read OWU's policies [here](#). Incoming students must send any college-level transcripts for evaluation by the Registrar. You can learn more about the Office of the Registrar [here](#).

### Work study

Work study programs function differently at each college and university. There are two types of work study: [Federal Work-Study](#) (FWS) and institutional work study. The Federal Work-Study program is financed through the government. The government offers qualified colleges and universities a certain amount of work study funding that institutions then award to qualified students who demonstrate a predetermined level of financial need. To receive this type of aid, students must work their allotted hours each semester on campus, so this money is not guaranteed if the student does not secure campus employment or does not work enough hours.

Some colleges and universities also offer institutional work study programs. For these programs, the institution — instead of the federal government — supplies the funding for the hours worked. A student can choose whether their pay is applied toward their tuition balance, or if they keep their wages earned. Each institution decides their maximum allotment of federal and/or institutional work study hours. Therefore, a student could be given the option to work a range of work study hours from three to 20 hours per week. The average work study allotment at OWU, for instance, is 8-10 hours per week.

Not all students are eligible for federal or institutional work study depending on an institution's policies for awarding that resource. At most universities, you can work a variety of jobs to fulfill your work study requirement. You can read more about Ohio Wesleyan's work study program [here](#).

### Enrollment deposit

Once you've decided which college you'll attend, you need to submit an enrollment deposit. Depending on the university, these deposits can range from \$50-\$1000, and paying a deposit is a big step! At many colleges and universities, your deposit is nonrefundable. If this is the case, it should be stated in your offer of admission. After your deposit, you are officially a member of the incoming class, and you will start to receive information relevant to new students, such as housing, orientation, and class registration. Basically, your enrollment deposit is your promise to enroll full-time in the upcoming year.

### BA vs. BS vs. BFA

Most universities offer a couple of different types of degrees. The majority of undergraduate students pursue a Bachelor of Arts (BA) degree. Even though "arts" is in the name, these degrees can be in any subject, including the humanities, sciences, and social sciences. Some students choose to pursue a Bachelor of Science (BS) degree. Normally, this degree requires more courses and credits than a BA program. Despite the name, these degrees may be offered in more than just the scientific majors and departments. To earn a Bachelor of Fine Arts (BFA) degree, students must major in the arts, such as theatre, music, or art. Students in a BFA program normally need to complete more courses and credits than those enrolled in a BA program.



## TIPS & TRICKS FOR THE APPLICATION PROCESS

As an admission office, we read a lot of applications: the good and the not-so-good. To help you submit the strongest application possible, here are some useful tips and tricks:

**1. Make sure to have someone else proofread your essay.** A writing sample with a lot of typos or grammatical errors can significantly weaken your application.

**3. Include all of your activities and involvements – school activities and non-school activities – on your application.** In the activities section, we want to hear about what you do outside of school hours. If you work a part-time job, play an instrument for fun, or babysit your siblings, we want to know! Activities can include important responsibilities at home or with your family. This section can include passion projects like painting, writing, or podcasting. Activities can also include summer camps, conferences, or travel.

**5. Do not hesitate to contact admission counselors.** Most admission representatives enter the profession because they are excited about interacting with prospective students and assisting them through the search process. Asking questions is encouraged, and it also demonstrates your excitement and interest in a school, which only helps your application. If you want to reach out to our staff, meet your admission counselor [here](#)!

**2. Write your essay about you.**

Your essay is an opportunity for us to learn more about you beyond your academic achievements and extracurricular involvements. Your topic does not need to be grand or dramatic. Some of the best essays we read are about a small hobby or a fun memory. The most important thing is that you tell us something new about you, whether it is a passion, your favorite activity, an important person in your life, or an impactful moment in your past. For example, essays from English class featuring your thoughts on *Moby Dick* – however well written – are often not our favorite because we have not learned about your personality or interests. To help you begin your essay, check out our admission blog on [making your essay shine!](#)

**4. Even if it's not required, submit a recommendation letter – but make sure it is from someone who knows you well.**

References from teachers, school counselors, coaches, or supervisors can strengthen your application. These letters allow for the admission committee to learn more about you and your personality, and the letters normally paint a very positive picture of your abilities. If you're not sure whom to ask (or how to ask), read our admission blog on [steps to a great recommendation letter.](#)

## Who qualifies as a “first generation” college student?

This question is somewhat complicated to answer, and depending on whom you ask, the answer can be very different. The most common definition is that anyone who is the first in their family to go to college is considered “first generation.” A similar definition is that “first generation” refers to anyone who is the first in their family to earn a bachelor’s degree.

While this description applies a lot of the time, some students still struggle with first generation identity. Am I first generation if my grandparents went to college but my parents did not? If my mother attended university in a different country? If my older brother went to college but my parents did not? Some higher education professionals define “first generation” as students who lack the cultural knowledge and support to help them through the college process, which includes a much larger group. At OWU, we try to be as inclusive as possible, so we offer our first generation and incoming student resources and programming broad enough so that a wide range of students can benefit.

---

## I received my financial aid letter for my perfect college, but it is still too expensive. What do I do?

Fortunately, you have a few options. The first option is to search and apply for outside scholarships. Many organizations, towns, and states offer scholarships to students based on a variety of factors. These may include academic achievement during high school, a specific talent, race or ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, or some combination of these factors.

Another option is to contact your admission representative or the financial aid office to talk through

the financial aid package (to be sure you fully understand all of the details) and to ask whether there are additional financial options you can consider. Many institutions have processes for qualified students to appeal their financial aid package.

At Ohio Wesleyan, we allow students to appeal their financial aid package through either our [special circumstances appeal](#) form or our general appeal process. Contact your admission counselor for more information if needed.

---

## Where can I find information about outside scholarships? When do I need to start applying to these awards?

There are so many scholarships available, and it can be intimidating to even start looking. One great place to begin is a resource from our financial aid website, which includes a [list & guide to outside scholarships](#).

There are also many scholarship websites where you can search based on your intended area of study, state of residence, etc. We recommend using [Scholarships.com](#) or [Niche.com](#). However, be aware that these sites do not thoroughly vet every scholarship, so do your research. Is the organization legitimate? Do they ask for inappropriate information (such as your social security number)? Have they awarded this scholarship before? Most of these scholarship sites are free, so you should not pay for a list of scholarships.

Your high school counselor is another great resource. They often know about local scholarships available.

Our best advice is to start searching and applying for outside scholarships during the summer before your senior year. Deadlines vary, but some scholarships ask for applications as early as September of your senior year.

## How do I start making and narrowing down my college list?

Beginning the college search is challenging. In Ohio alone, there are well over 100 colleges and universities, and the range of options can feel daunting.

To get started, we recommend doing two things. First, try to make a list of factors that are important to you. It can be broad or narrow, but take some time to think about what you really want. Do you want a small school? Do you want to be in the city? Do you want a specific academic program? Do you want to be close to home? Are you looking to be involved in a particular extracurricular activity or sport?

Next, once you make this list, even if it only includes one or two factors, choose three or four schools in your local area that fit your criteria. After visiting these schools, you will probably have a clearer sense of what you like and don't

like. Sometimes, you just need to see a few campuses to understand what is important to you.

If you are unable to visit in person, don't panic! There are many ways to engage with colleges and universities virtually. You can often find online information sessions, virtual tours, opportunities to chat with current students, and Zoom panel discussions — all typically available on admission websites. These virtual experiences also allow you to learn about the opportunities and personality of the school. Check out Ohio Wesleyan's virtual options [here](#).

---

## When should I start applying to colleges & universities?

You should begin working on your application essay and securing your recommendation letters during the summer before and at the start of your senior year. Application deadlines can be as early as October, and completing college applications can be time consuming.





## ON-CAMPUS RESOURCES FOR FIRST GENERATION COLLEGE STUDENTS

Ohio Wesleyan is dedicated to supporting our first generation and all incoming college students. Explore some of the offices and programs below to learn more about support systems on our campus. Many other colleges and universities have similar resources to offer. If you are not sure what support systems a college or university offers, contact your admission representative or search their website.

**1. [Summer Bridge Program:](#)** This program welcomes first generation students – and students from other historically underrepresented groups in higher education – to campus during the summer before their first year. Students learn about the campus, resources available, and develop study skills. They also begin to build a support network.

**2. [Sagan Academic Resource Center:](#)** This office provides academic support for students through tutoring, the writing center, the quantitative skills center, and the accessibility services office. Most services are free to all current students, though we do offer a fee-based academic coaching program to students who need an additional level of academic and out-of-class support.

**3. [Counseling Services:](#)** At OWU, we employ professional counselors who are available for individual, couple, and group counseling. This office also provides wellness training for students, faculty, and staff.

**4. [Office of Multicultural Student Affairs:](#)** The Office of Multicultural Student Affairs (OMSA) takes the lead on providing support for students of marginalized identities, specifically students of color, LGBTQIA students, first generation students, and/or low income students. This office provides a variety of programs and services to students, including planning events for Hispanic Heritage Month Celebration, sending students to conferences across the country, and leading a travel learning course on American civil rights history.

**5. [Women’s Resource Center:](#)** This center provides information and programs to empower women to deal with the unique challenges they face on campus and to become advocates for women in the local, national, and international sphere. The WRC’s programs and resources seek to foster healthy communication between men and women and improve community interactions.

**6. [Spectrum Resource Center:](#)** The purpose of the Spectrum Resource Center is to help provide LGBTQIA+ persons, their friends, their families, and allies with tools to address LGBTQIA-related issues and to assist in educating the campus community at large. Past programming includes PRIDE week celebrations and the annual drag show.



## OTHER RESOURCES

If you are interested in learning more about outside resources available to first generation students or to first-time college applicants, check out the links below.

1. **[BigFuture](#)**: This website is offered by the CollegeBoard. You can search for colleges that match your preferences, explore the college resource guide, and use the scholarship search feature.

2. **[Studentaid.gov](#)**: This website offers a comprehensive overview of financial aid, the timeline for applying for aid, and funding options.

3. **[ACT College & Career Planning Resources](#)**: The ACT website provides many great articles about applying to college, financing college, and thinking about your future career.

4. **[Teen Vogue article](#)**: This article is light-hearted and provides a lot of great advice on how to succeed during your first semester of college.

5. **[U.S. News article](#)**: This article discusses some of the challenges that first generation college students face, but it also offers some advice to students.

6. **[Bishop+](#)**: At Ohio Wesleyan, we host a series of virtual events. Some of the events, particularly those in the Bishop+: Road to College series, focus on tips and tricks for applying to college and navigating the college process. You can sign up for future events and watch past videos at the link provided.

7. **[Bishop Banter](#)**: This podcast gives you insights into the OWU experience and offers some great advice for students entering their first year of college.

Oh-wooo