

Andi's Notes to Expand Nola Kate's College Consideration List

I would like to substantially expand Nola Kate's college consideration list, and I would build it differently than I would for a typical high-GPA student.

Situation: Nola Kate has a 4.27 GPA, rigorous honors/dual-enrollment coursework, and an ACT of 18, with a clear interest in multimedia journalism/broadcast journalism/mass media.

For her, I want schools that do at least one of three things:

1. Award merit based heavily or entirely on GPA
2. Allow her to apply test optional without hurting scholarship consideration
3. And/or have enough departmental/competitive scholarship money that her academic record, writing, leadership and activities can overcome the testing issue.

I found several that I think might belong on her list and I'd like for you to discuss these as a family.

School	Drive from Bham	Why I Like it for Nola Kate	Scholarship Outlook
University of Montevallo	45 minutes	Broadcast/Media Production; smaller campus; hands-on	Excellent
Mississippi State	2.5 hours	Broadcast & Digital Journalism + Print & Digital Journalism; major university atmosphere	Excellent
Western Kentucky	3 hours	Excellent journalism/broadcasting school; ACEJMC accredited; very media-oriented	Excellent
Samford	Local	Strong private-school environment; communication/media; excellent test-optional merit structure	Excellent
Ole Miss	2.5 hours	Outstanding Journalism & New Media options; TV/video, multimedia, visual, sports, social	Great
UNA	2 hours	Journalism & Digital Media Production; ACEJMC accredited; affordable Alabama option	Great
Jacksonville State	1.5 hours	Digital Journalism and Digital Media Production; very GPA-friendly merit	Very Good
Belmont	3 hours	Journalism in Nashville, AP bureau on campus, tremendous industry exposure	Good
Loyola New Orleans	5 hours	True journalism program in a major media/cultural city; test-optional merit	Good
University of Memphis	4 hours	Journalism and Strategic Media; some GPA-only scholarship consideration	Average
Southern Miss	4 hours	Digital Journalism; department scholarships; affordable-ish OOS option	Average
Alabama	1 hour	Excellent News Media program and huge media infrastructure; competitive scholarship possibility	Average
Murray State	4 hours	Journalism/mass communication and GPA-only academic merit	Average
MTSU	3 hours	Fantastic journalism/media curriculum and Nashville access	Okay
UAB	Local	Journalism specialization, Birmingham internships and department scholarships	Okay

1. University of Montevallo — I would move this WAY up

This may be one of the most obvious scholarship-strategy schools for her that we haven't emphasized enough. Montevallo offers a Mass Communication degree with a Multimedia Journalism concentration, including broadcast news writing, feature writing, digital writing, television/digital reporting and multimedia journalism. But here's the big Nola Kate advantage: Montevallo has waived ACT/SAT scores for both admission AND scholarship consideration, and explicitly says students who don't submit scores will not be disadvantaged in scholarship review. Merit can be based on GPA. That makes Montevallo a major financial safety candidate, not merely an admissions safety.

My rating for Nola Kate: HIGH PRIORITY.

2. Mississippi State — one of my favorite discoveries for her

I think Mississippi State needs to be seriously considered. The Communication program offers: Broadcast & Digital Journalism, Print & Digital Journalism, Communication &, Media Studies, Creative Media Production, and Public Relations The journalism curriculum includes television production, electronic news writing, multimedia journalism, photographic communication, digital communication, media law and journalism ethics. More importantly, the current nonresident scholarship schedule includes GPA-only awards. Under the currently published structure, a nonresident student with a scholarship GPA of 4.10+ receives a package worth \$19,000 annually/\$76,000 over four years without a test-score requirement attached to that tier. Nola Kate's reported GPA is 4.27, although we need to see exactly how MSU recalculates her transcript GPA before assuming she falls in that bracket. This could potentially become one of her very best combinations of: Big school + SEC-type campus + journalism + strong GPA merit + reasonable drive.

My rating: MUST ADD.

3. Western Kentucky University — sleeper school that may be PERFECT

This one really caught my attention. WKU has a full School of Media & Communication with majors in: Journalism, Broadcasting, Visual Journalism & Photography, Film, Integrated, Advertising & PR, and Communication. Its Advertising, Broadcasting, Journalism, PR and Visual Journalism programs are ACEJMC accredited. And WKU is test optional for students with Nola Kate's GPA profile. For Fall 2027, WKU's automatic scholarships include: 3.80–4.00 unweighted GPA + no ACT/SAT: \$3,500/year. Then here's the important part: Alabama students receiving an institutional scholarship can qualify for WKU's Tuition Incentive Program, which reduces out-of-state tuition substantially—WKU describes it as reducing OOS tuition by nearly 50%—and other scholarships can stack. So don't look at the \$3,500 and dismiss it. The tuition adjustment can make the actual financial picture much more attractive.

My rating: MUST ADD and VISIT.

4. Samford — stronger possibility than her ACT suggests

I know Samford was already on her radar, but after looking at its current scholarship rules, I would absolutely keep it. Samford specifically says: A test score is not required to qualify for merit scholarships. Even the Crosland Scholarship can consider test-optional applicants based on Samford's recalculated weighted GPA. The average Crosland award is

\$20,000/year. The Marion Scholarship averages \$17,500/year, requires only a 3.0 minimum GPA and does not require a separate application. That makes Samford far more interesting for Nola Kate than a raw sticker-price comparison would suggest. I would apply test optional and make her academic rigor, activities, writing, service and career direction do the work.

My rating: KEEP, HIGH PRIORITY.

5. Ole Miss — this is an excellent academic match for what she wants to study

Ole Miss has one of the best actual program fits on this entire list. Its Journalism BA offers emphases in: Multimedia News Reporting, TV & Video Storytelling, Visual Journalism, Sports Media, and Political & Social Justice Reporting. It also offers specialization possibilities in social media, PR, visual design, magazine publishing, media sales/management and other areas. Even better, its current out-of-state merit chart awards merit without a test score. A 3.75–4.0 GPA student currently receives \$8,000 annually without an ACT/SAT, with higher amounts triggered by test scores. This does not automatically make Ole Miss inexpensive—but it means the ACT does not erase her merit eligibility.

My rating: MUST ADD/KEEP.

6. Jacksonville State — much better for her than people may realize

Jax State now offers specific concentrations in: Digital Journalism, Digital Media Production, Sports Media & Analytics, and Public Relations & Advertising. The journalism program incorporates multimedia, podcasting, reporting and digital storytelling. And this is where it becomes compelling. Jax State currently awards GPA-based merit with no test requirement, including: 4.0+ GPA → \$8,000/year → \$32,000 over four years, and explicitly says test scores can increase the scholarship but cannot reduce the GPA-based award. That's almost tailor-made for this situation.

My rating: FINANCIAL SAFETY / MUST APPLY.

7. UNA — absolutely still belongs

UNA's Mass Communication program is ACEJMC accredited and has a Journalism & Digital Media Production concentration featuring broadcast news writing and producing, radio production, television production, advanced reporting, digital/social media, feature writing, podcasting, and advanced media production. For 2027, UNA awards a no-test academic scholarship of \$1,500/year for a 3.51–4.00 unweighted GPA, and—very importantly for Nola Kate—students with a 3.0+ GPA and ACT below 20 can apply through UNA's General & Endowed Scholarship application for additional merit consideration. So, I would not judge UNA simply from its automatic merit chart.

My rating: KEEP.

8. Belmont — I really want her to investigate this one

Belmont might be the most interesting private-school addition. It has an actual BA/BS in Journalism in Nashville. Even more impressively, the Associated Press Nashville bureau is housed inside Belmont's Johnson Center, giving journalism students unusual proximity to working AP journalists. Belmont also emphasizes digital, broadcast, investigative and multimedia journalism. Financially, Belmont awards general academic merit scholarships

of \$8,000–\$25,000 per year based on GPA, essay, activities and test score if submitted. Belmont says about 87% of admitted first-year students traditionally receive merit scholarships. Sticker price is the concern. But Nola Kate's GPA and overall story make it worth seeing what Belmont actually offers her.

My rating: ADD.

9. Loyola University New Orleans — my wildcard

This is right around the outer edge of your six-hour concept, but I would include it. Loyola offers Mass Communication with a Journalism concentration, with print, online and electronic journalism paths. And Loyola is genuinely attractive for this particular academic profile because it allows students to exclude their ACT from both admission and merit scholarship review. Loyola explicitly says it will honor the weighted GPA if it is higher. Students are automatically considered for renewable academic merit scholarships up to full tuition, and historically merit recipients generally had at least a 3.0 GPA. The gigantic full-ride Ignatian award would require a 30 ACT, so that's not our target. I'm interested in Loyola's ordinary institutional merit.

My rating: ADD AS A SCHOLARSHIP WILDCARD.

10. University of Memphis

Memphis has a full Department of Journalism and Strategic Media, including Journalism, Creative Mass Media, Advertising and Public Relations pathways. More importantly, Memphis now has two scholarship evaluation pathways:

1. GPA + test score
2. GPA-only evaluation

So, Nola Kate can be considered for certain academic scholarships based solely on her high-school GPA. Memphis also gives her a different environment—a real city with working media organizations—which can be valuable for journalism internships.

My rating: ADD.

11. Southern Miss

Southern Miss has a dedicated Digital Journalism program with writing, reporting, production, digital media, social media, law and ethics. It also advertises 15 program-specific Foundation scholarships, and its School of Media and Communication distributes more than \$20,000 annually in scholarship funding. Its big university-level merit awards are more test dependent than some of our top choices, so I wouldn't put it above Mississippi State, WKU or Montevallo. But it is still a reasonable value-school journalism application.

My rating: ADD TO THE SECONDARY GROUP.

12. Murray State — another sleeper

Murray State is worth adding because its academic scholarships explicitly include a GPA-only path. For Fall 2027: 3.80–4.00 GPA + no ACT/SAT = \$5,000/year Provost Scholarship. And its Journalism and Mass Communications department has additional departmental scholarships, including some with very modest minimum testing requirements; one incoming-journalism scholarship lists a 17 ACT threshold. It's farther north and smaller than many schools she has

considered, which is actually why I like including it—we're giving her a genuinely different option.

My rating: ADD AS A VALUE/SMALLER-CAMPUS OPTION.

What about Alabama?

*I know you don't want to consider it. **Geaux Tigers.*** But I think you should absolutely apply. For Fall 2027, because Nola Kate's GPA is well above 3.0, Alabama does not require her to submit an ACT for admission. Automatic merit is a problem because the 2027 in-state automatic scholarship chart begins at ACT 25, but students who do not submit a test remain eligible for competitive scholarships. Academically, Alabama is excellent for her: the News Media BA includes reporting, broadcasting, visual communication, videography and multimedia production, with access to The Crimson White, WVUA 23, Alabama Public Radio and other campus media. So, Alabama becomes a competitive-scholarship play rather than an automatic-merit play.

What about MTSU?

Programmatically, I love it. MTSU has an entire School of Journalism and Strategic Media with concentrations including Entertainment Journalism, Investigative Journalism, Sports Media, Media Design, Environmental Journalism & Communication, and Media Studies. The problem is money. Its major guaranteed freshman merit scholarships are still heavily ACT-dependent. So, I would keep MTSU because the program is terrific and it's within range, but I would rank it below WKU financially unless we uncover departmental awards that change the net price.

The school I think we were overlooking: MONTEVALLO

If you made me pick the five schools I most want added/emphasized right now, based specifically on Nola Kate rather than prestige, they would be:

1. Mississippi State
2. Western Kentucky
3. University of Montevallo
4. Belmont
5. Loyola New Orleans

And I would keep Samford, Ole Miss, UNA, Alabama and Jax State firmly in the working group. I would structure her actual application list like this:

SCHOLARSHIP/FINANCIAL ANCHORS

*These are schools where I want an acceptance **and** a serious financial offer.*

- Montevallo
- Jacksonville State
- UNA
- Mississippi State
- Western Kentucky

STRONG TARGET SCHOOLS

Excellent journalism/media fit with realistic admission and meaningful scholarship possibilities.

- Ole Miss
- Samford
- Belmont
- University of Memphis
- Murray State

FINANCIAL WILDCARDS WORTH TESTING

Apply because a holistic merit offer could make them surprisingly affordable.

- Loyola New Orleans
- Southern Miss

STRONG ACADEMIC/PROGRAM OPTIONS WHERE MONEY IS LESS PREDICTABLE

- Alabama
- MTSU
- UAB

And I would NOT build her strategy around improving the ACT

I still want Nola Kate to take the ACT again, and I might actually have her try the SAT once because sometimes a student with this kind of GPA has a substantially different result on the SAT. Even moving from an 18 to a 20–22 starts opening additional doors. A 24–25 would materially change several merit packages. But I don't want to make her college plan dependent upon that happening.

Instead, the strategy should be:

4.27 GPA + rigor + journalism direction + activities + excellent application + excellent writing + test optional wherever advantageous + aggressive institutional and departmental scholarship applications.

That's much smarter than repeatedly putting her in scholarship competitions where the first screen is an ACT number.

My current Top 10 for Nola Kate

Taking program + scholarship potential + distance + admission probability + opportunity together, my working ranking would currently be:

Rank	School	Why
1	Mississippi State	Best blend of big-school life, journalism and potentially huge GPA-based OOS merit
2	Western Kentucky	Perhaps strongest under-the-radar journalism + GPA-merit combination
3	Montevallo	Excellent financial strategy, test optional, multimedia journalism
4	Ole Miss	One of her strongest journalism fits + test-free OOS merit
5	Samford	GPA/application can drive substantial merit without ACT
6	Belmont	Superb Nashville media exposure + \$8K–\$25K merit possibility
7	UNA	Accredited program, affordable, safe admission, scholarship opportunities
8	Jacksonville State	Excellent financial safety and increasingly good digital journalism options
9	Alabama	Strongest in-state big-school media infrastructure; scholarship is the question
10	Loyola New Orleans	Extremely interesting test-optional/private merit wildcard

Then I'd have **Memphis, Southern Miss, MTSU, Murray State and UAB** sitting immediately behind those.

The biggest thing this research changes for me is that Nola Kate has more options than her 18 ACT makes it appear. There are enough colleges now explicitly using GPA-only or test-optional merit that we can build a genuinely competitive financial strategy around the part of her academic profile that best represents her—her transcript.

And Mississippi State, WKU, Montevallo, Belmont and Loyola are the five additions I would be most excited to put in front of her.