



FINDING THE RIGHT COLLEGE

Choosing Your College: The Basics

Feel like you need to go to a big-name college to get the best education and impress all of your friends? Take a moment to consider that college is not just about getting a great education — it's also a huge leap into a whole new world of social experiences, personal growth, and independence. (Not to mention a new level of hard work, studying, and academic achievement!) The overall culture of your college may play as big a role in your future success as your degree. Figuring out what's important to you will help you narrow the field, and you may discover some alternative options that hadn't even been on your radar!

Starting your search with the basics can help you identify colleges that will best suit you academically and personally. Each of us has unique needs and values, and what is important to you may not matter to someone else. Take location, for instance. If you don't want to be more than 100 miles from home, then schools on the other side of the globe are out! The same goes for school size, cost, and other basic criteria. By identifying your needs early on, you can eliminate hundreds of schools and focus on the things that will make your school a perfect fit.

Size of School

The fact is, colleges come in all sizes. They range from a tiny school in California that enrolls only 26 students to enormous institutions like Ohio State University, which has more than 60,000 students! So, which size is better? The answer to that question, of course, depends on you and your individual comfort zone. Consider the following questions: Did you go to a small or a large high school? Did you like the size of your high school? Did you grow up in a city or a rural area? Do you like being places where everybody knows you, or do you like the anonymity of a crowd? How much individual attention do you prefer from your teachers? All of these considerations may help you determine which size of school is best for you.

Type of Institution

There are many different types of colleges and universities. Some schools devote significant time and resources to research, and focus on large graduate programs. This can be great, if that is what you are looking for... but it doesn't suit every incoming college freshman. Other schools limit (or completely forego) graduate programs. There are many colleges that enroll only undergraduate students, and focus their attention on teaching and learning. In addition to these differences, remember that some schools offer a specialty in one specific area, such as engineering or writing. Others are best known for offering their students a broad, liberal arts education. Other differences could include whether the schools are coed, or only open to students of one sex. It is often also worth noting whether the schools have a particular religious affiliation, and whether they are public or private. There are also historically black colleges, schools with co-op programs where you earn money while going to school, and schools with large evening, distance-learning, and part-time programs. The options really are almost limitless! Determine where your interests lie, and you will be able to find the types of schools that will be your best match.

Location, Location, Location!

There are colleges in every living environment you can imagine, from tiny college towns in Minnesota, to pastoral hills in Ohio, to the middle of New York City, Chicago or Los Angeles! If you have always lived in the suburbs or a smaller town, choosing an urban campus could seem like an adventure at first glance. However, after a week of the noise, dirt, and crowds, will you find yourself longing for a grassy campus with open spaces? On the other hand, if you are used to the city and mall life but choose a scenic college in a rural area, will you find yourself rushing into the Student Center after a few nights, looking for any sign of noise, lights, and people? Think very carefully about where you grew up, what kinds of areas are the most comfortable for you, and how much of a change you want when you head off to college.

Distance from Home

Closely tied to location is the issue of how far from home you want to be. For some people, going to college is a chance to explore a totally different part of the country. Other college students want to make sure they can have dinner with their family once a week, or go home to do their laundry. However, this is far more than a decision about the comforts of home! When deciding how far you want to be from home during college, think very seriously about how much money you can afford to spend in travel, not to mention how frequently you feel homesick. The fact is that for most students, the farther you are from home, the less often you'll be able to afford to visit. On the other hand, with email, mobile phones, and a good internet provider, you can still feel close to home even if you're in California and your sister is in New Jersey.

Cost/Scholarships & Financial Aid

Naturally, not all colleges cost the same amount, and the costs can get rather confusing. In fact, there are even different types of financial aid available at different schools. People often hear about students who received a scholarship for their athletic ability, but those same kinds of offers may be available to other students who show their talents and hard work with their grades, musical talent, or other special abilities.

Public universities often offer much lower tuition rates to in-state students, but their fees to out-of-state residents are usually pretty similar to private schools. On the other hand, private institutions charge everyone the same (usually higher) tuition, but they often have privately-funded scholarship monies available. Because of this, it's worth applying to some private schools even if the cost seems high initially.

Student Population Representing the population of the country (and the world!), college students are not all the same. Some institutions, particularly larger schools and those in big cities, tend to have a student body that hails from a wide range of ethnic, socioeconomic, and religious backgrounds. Other schools, especially smaller colleges and those in very rural locations may lean toward having a fairly homogeneous student body. Other important elements of the student population include whether most students live at the school or commute, the age of the average student, and how many students are involved with the Greek system of sororities and fraternities, if there is one.

Majors and Requirements

If you already have a good idea what field you want to enter after college, it's important to make sure you select a college that will best prepare you for your chosen profession. Some schools are particularly well known for excellence in specific majors, like pre-med or architecture. Attending these schools – and performing well there – will put you in an enviable position to pursue your desired career after you graduate. Of course, many entering freshmen are not so sure what they want to do with their lives just yet... in that case, a student may want to consider a school that will offer a variety of options.

Universities and colleges will almost always require students to take classes in a wide range of areas during their first year or two. These schools are great for students who either want a well-rounded education or are trying to figure out what area to focus on. However, even more specialized schools will require a set of general education courses before they let students just dive in to their chosen majors. Compare these requirements between schools, as they may vary from place to place.

Athletics and Events

This can be a larger element of the college scene than many students think, before attending their school. Are you an avid sports fan, or does the sound of a marching band and the sight of a football uniform make you cringe? At some schools, sports are a huge element of the social calendar in many students' lives. Other schools may not have intercollegiate athletics at all, and others may not pay much attention to it even if the school supports teams. Bear in mind that the culture of intercollegiate athletics can vary substantially from one college to the next. Maybe you're really into going to live concerts, or you might love nothing better than to go hiking in the woods. If you like to spend your free time going to shows at clubs, you probably won't be happy at a small school in the countryside where relatively few popular musical acts stop on tour, and you might be happier in an urban environment. However, if you love to be outdoors, a campus in a natural setting can give you just the kind of balance you need to feel – and perform – your best.

Special Activities and Programs

Many students have always wanted to try living and studying in another country, and experiencing another culture? A surprising number of colleges offer special programs to help you study overseas for a semester, or even a whole school year. You'll usually receive full credit for your academic work overseas, as well as enjoying the perfect chance to learn a new language, make some new friends, and experience exotic scenery and cuisine.

If you're a singer/musician, a visual artist, or an aspiring journalist, then you want to consider school that will not only fulfill your academic goals, but your personal interests and aspirations, too. Some colleges and universities have great arts and theater programs, or excellent newspapers, giving students a chance to be involved in extra-curricular activities outside their majors. Others – especially commuter schools without a large, on-campus contingent of students – focus more of their attention on great classes, but there may not be as much else to offer. There are also institutions created specifically for a type of study, such as conservatories of music, art schools, and other programs that can be a perfect fit for the right student.

Your Gut Feeling

This is truly a situation where you must trust your instincts. If a place “feels right,” that's an important thing to notice. Similarly, if it just “feels wrong,” no matter who wants you to go there or how good it looks on paper, that school may not be the ideal place for you. Selecting a college or university is an extremely personal choice, and after considering all the other objective factors, the fact of the matter is that it comes down to you. Visit colleges you're interested in, and see how you feel walking around their campuses. Could you imagine yourself going to school there? Once you get a true feel for the types of campuses – and the kinds of schools – that are the best fit for your personality, lifestyle and goals, you'll be well on your way to finding the college that's right for you. Good luck and happy hunting!

VISITING AND RESEARCHING YOUR COLLEGE LIST

College visits are an essential aspect of building your college list. You don't need to see every college before you apply, but you should see some representative models and then pursue more of those that are like the ones you prefer. Before you hit the road, you'll need to know what a good fit is potentially, and you should do enough browsing and research to make the visits worthwhile. Keep your options open. Visit all types of campuses even if you know you are decided against them. You might be pleasantly surprised.

A matter of timing

You're probably insanely busy as a sophomore or junior, and breaking out the time to visit campuses is not easy. That's especially true when you factor in the availability, or lack thereof, of on-campus tours and information sessions, let alone one-on-one interviews. You're probably free on most Sundays, but most college admission offices are closed. You're probably free during major school vacations, but college campuses are like ghost towns because that's when the colleges are on break as well. You'll need to make some compromises, perhaps missing a practice or performance here or there, or working with your teachers and guidance counselor to be excused from classes on a few days. This lack of time makes it all the more important that you make visits count by preparing for them.

Why visit?

First of all, you need to know what seems to be a fit for you, and there's no substitute for actually visiting a campus in person. An online tour or DVD can give you an initial flavor, but walking around, seeing the students, experiencing the information session, going in and out of buildings, and seeing what's in the surrounding area are essential to helping you establish your comfort level with the institution as a whole. Second, colleges are starting to pay more attention to how much attention you pay them. How do you demonstrate interest, so that a college will be more likely to admit you? Visit, of course. Interview, if they'll let you. Write great essays that establish the logical fit between you and the college, and continue to stay in touch with the college and its representatives through letters, e-mails, and calls during your senior year.

The power of research

So how do you discover, and then establish, that logical fit between you and some large institution that you don't know much about? Research. Research should begin very early. Get to know your prospective colleges' Web sites, because that's where they make available almost any information you could possibly want. You can delve deeply into prospective majors, course listings, faculty research areas, special programs, internships, scholarships, graduation requirements, academic opportunities, and extracurricular offerings. What's great about the Internet is that you can not only see the general course listings in departments that might be of interest to you. You can also find out which courses will be offered next semester, and the semester after that.

Prior to a college visit, spend some time exploring each college's site. What majors are offered? Minors? What are the requirements to fulfill the major? Can you find out the percentage of students majoring in these areas? As you read through the courses listed in the department, do you find yourself getting more interested or tuning out? How do these offerings begin to compare to the other colleges you are researching? Spend some time in the academic section of the colleges' Web sites, and then spend time in the admission section. Here is where you'll find the incoming class profile that lists the scores, grades, geographical background, and other aspects of the first-year class. Can you place yourself in this profile? Does this school seem like a huge stretch? A realistic reach? A target? A likely admit? Look for special admission and academic programs, scholarship opportunities, information on need-based financial aid, and extracurricular offerings that fit your interests. Begin to try to find your place in this college. If you can't, it's probably not a great fit. If you find yourself becoming increasingly interested, then a visit is likely to be worthwhile.

Keep track of what you see

As you continue your visits, be mindful of the model you're exploring. Size, location, institutional type (from college to research university), campus environment, and other factors will play out differently for you. Keep notes and review them as you continue your research by going back to the college Web sites and other third-party sites and guide books that will offer you additional perspectives. Is there a theme that is starting to develop? Are you drawn to one or more types of college or university? If so, that's the starting point for your next visits. Which other institutions might compare well to the ones you like?

As you can see, research is a continuing process, and visiting doesn't stop until you finally select the one college you will attend. Even in late spring of senior year, you'll likely find yourself reviewing college materials carefully and planning a couple of final follow-up visits to schools that have admitted you. This ongoing evaluation and open-minded, critical analysis is a key component of a smart, well-informed approach to college admission — one that will help you to find and gain admission to a college where you are most likely to be successful and happy.

The Campus Visit: First Impressions Count

Would you ever think of buying a car without driving it first? Of course not — how else will you know how it runs unless you get behind the wheel and take it for a spin? The same goes for choosing a college. While a school may look good on paper, you might be in for a shock when you actually step on campus for the first time. You can't tell what a college will really be like just from pictures on its Web site and catalog. Perhaps the freshman dormitories look like they should be condemned or the campus is situated in a high-crime area. You wouldn't be able to see these potential deal-breakers from the pages of a glossy catalog featuring happy-go-lucky coeds studying under the flowing branches of a wispy willow tree

While these visuals may seem like an exaggeration, they are a possibility. That is why you need to visit every college that you plan to apply to. Here's what you need to look for when you take your campus tours.

Academics

The best time to visit college campuses is during the school year, when classes are in session. That way, you can see the actual size of a class, the format in which the class is run, and who is teaching (a professor versus a teaching assistant). But, no worries, there are still classes that go on throughout the summer. You just need to make sure you ask lots of questions of your tour guide to get the real deal.

Take a look at the size of the classrooms. Are they large lecture halls that hold more than 100 students? Are they smaller rooms? If you're a self-starter, then large lectures might be OK for you; but if you need some one-on-one attention, the school you choose to attend should provide small-class learning opportunities. Ask your tour guide about the average student-teacher ratio in freshman classes versus upperclassman classes.

Location

Campuses are located in one of three types of locations: urban, suburban, or rural. If you're looking to attend college in a bustling city, that's great; but just because a school is situated in a city doesn't mean that it's the right place for you. Perhaps the campus is located in a remote part of a city, from which it is difficult to get to the city's center. Or maybe it's in one of the busiest, noisiest sections of town — if you like peace and quiet when you study, this might not be the best location for you.

The same goes for suburban and rural schools. Just because the location sounds ideal from a catalog, it might not be ideal when it comes time to actually live on campus. Perhaps that university located in the rolling green hills of Kentucky didn't mention that there were dozens of horse farms surrounding it. While horses and green hills sound lovely, you might not think the same of the smell of horse manure waking you up every morning! The key here is to take a really good look around you when you visit a campus.

Housing

Where are you going to be living on campus? While the academics and location are very important, don't forget that you will be spending many of your waking (and sleeping) hours in your dorm room.

Find out the following information:

- Are there freshman and upperclassmen dorms?
- Are the dorms co-ed or single-sex?
- Is there a quiet time enforced every night for studying?
- Are laundry facilities available?
- Is there a student lounge?
- Are there computer and phone hookups in all the rooms?
- Does the dormitory have a sprinkler system?

Student Life

Let's face it: you're probably not going to spend all of your time studying and sleeping, so you need to find out what the social situation is. Is the school a party school? Are sororities and fraternities big on campus? What kind of extracurricular activities and competitive sports are available? Knowing what to expect from the social scene before you sign the dotted line will help you determine if the school will be right for you.

Security

Your personal safety is of utmost importance when you leave for college. You'll be walking a lot of places on your own, both during the day and at night, and you need to know what kind of security is available. If the campus is large, find out if there is transportation available. Many large campuses offer intercampus bus service — just make sure to ask when the last bus runs. You should also find out if the school offers an escort service. If you are studying late at night at the library and don't want to walk back to your room by yourself, it is reassuring to know that a security guard will be available to accompany you.

Application Do's and Don'ts

Filling out stacks upon stacks of forms can be daunting, especially when you're trying to make a good impression upon the admission committees and get everything done on a deadline. This list should help you get the job done well — and on time!

The Do's

- **DO** read applications and directions carefully.
- **DO** make sure that everything that is supposed to be included is enclosed.
- **DO** fill out your own applications. Type the information yourself to avoid crucial mistakes.
- **DO** start with the simple applications and then progress to the more complex ones.
- **DO** make copies of applications, and practice filling one out before you complete the original.
- **DO** type or neatly print your answers, and then proofread the applications and essays several times for accuracy. Also ask someone else to proofread them for you.
- **DO** describe how you can make a contribution to the schools to which you apply (if you're asked).
- **DO** be truthful, and do not exaggerate your accomplishments.
- **DO** keep a copy of all the forms you submit to colleges.
- **DO** be thorough and turn things in on time.

The Don'ts

- **DON'T** use correction fluid. If you type your application, use a correctable typewriter or liftoff strips to correct mistakes. Better yet, fill out your application online.
- **DON'T** write in script. If you don't have access to a computer or typewriter, print neatly.
- **DON'T** leave blank spaces. Missing information may cause your application to be sent back or delayed while admission officers wait for complete information.
- **DON'T** be unclear. If the question calls for a specific answer, don't try to dodge it by being vague.
- **DON'T** put it off!

Admission Tips for Students with Disabilities

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) requires educational institutions at all levels, public and private, to provide you equal access to their programs, services, and facilities. Schools must be accessible to you, as well as to their employees and to the public, regardless of your disability. To ensure accessibility, they must follow specific requirements for new construction, alterations or renovations, academic programs, and institutional policies, practices, and procedures. As a disabled student, you have the right to request and expect accommodations, including auxiliary aids and services that will enable you to participate in and benefit from all programs and activities offered by or related to a school.

To comply with ADA requirements, many high schools and universities offer programs and information to answer your questions and to assist you with both selecting appropriate schools and in attaining full inclusion once you get there. Most colleges and universities disabilities services offices to help you negotiate the system. When it comes time to apply, write to the schools that you're interested in to find out what kinds of programs they have in place. As you narrow your choices, make sure you visit the campuses before making a decision.

Am I considered disabled under the ADA?

You are considered to have a disability if you meet at least one of following three conditions:

- You have a documented physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities, such as personal self-care, walking, seeing, hearing, speaking, breathing, learning, working, or performing manual tasks.
- You have a record of such an impairment.
- You are perceived as having such an impairment.

Physical disabilities include impairments of speech, vision, hearing and mobility. Other disabilities, while less obvious, are similarly limiting; they include diabetes, asthma, multiple sclerosis, heart disease, cancer, mental illness, mental retardation, cerebral palsy, and learning disabilities.

The term "learning disabilities" refers to an array of biological conditions that impede your ability to process and disseminate information. A learning disability is commonly recognized as a significant deficiency in one or more of the following areas: oral expression, listening comprehension, written expression, basic reading skills, reading comprehension, mathematical calculation, or problem solving. If you are learning disabled, you may also have difficulty with sustained attention, time management, or social skills.

Getting started

If you have a disability, follow the same steps for choosing and applying to a school as any other student, but you should also evaluate schools based on their ability to accommodate your special need(s). Get organized, and meet with campus specialists to discuss your specific requirements. Then, explore whether the programs, policies, procedures, and facilities meet your specific situation.

It's usually best to describe your disability in a letter attached to your application so the proper fit can be made between you and the school. Send copies of your psycho-educational evaluation, testing records, and/or any other assessments of your disabilities directly to the school. Some will help arrange your schedule and offer transition courses, reduced course loads, extra access to professors, and special study areas to help address your needs.

A disability doesn't have to be a barrier to continuing your education. If you're a motivated student, it's a completely realistic goal. Invest the time and effort and make it happen!

The Personal Interview

Although it is relatively rare that a personal interview is required, many colleges recommend that you take the opportunity to have a face-to-face discussion with a member of the admission staff. Not sure if this applies? Read through the application materials to determine whether or not your college places great emphasis on the interview. If they strongly recommend that you have one, it may work against you to forego it.

Unlike group interviews and some alumni interviews, the personal interview is both an information session and a further evaluation of your skills and strengths. You'll meet with a member of the admission staff, who will assess your personal qualities, high school preparation, and capacity to contribute to undergraduate life at the institution. On average, these meetings last about 45 minutes — a relatively short amount of time in which to gather information and leave the desired impression. Here are some suggestions on how to make the most of it.

Scheduling your visit

Students usually choose to visit campuses in the summer or fall of their senior year. Both times have their advantages. A summer visit generally allows for a less hectic visit and interview. Visiting in the fall, on the other hand, provides the opportunity to see what campus life is like in full swing. (If possible, it's a great idea to check out campuses during both seasons.) Always make an appointment and avoid scheduling more than two college interviews on any given day. Multiple interviews in a single day hinder your chances of making a good impression, and your memories of the colleges will blur as you make your way from campus to campus.

Be prepared

Read the college catalog and be familiar with the basics about the college before going for your interview. You will be better prepared to ask questions that are not answered in the literature and that will give you a better understanding of what the college has to offer. You should also spend some time thinking about your strengths and weaknesses and, in particular, what you are looking for in a college education. You will find that as you get a few interviews under your belt, they will get easier.

Ask questions

Inevitably, your interviewer will ask you, "Do you have any questions?" Not having one may suggest that you're unprepared or, even worse, not interested. When you do ask questions, make sure that they are ones that matter to you. The questions that you ask will give the interviewer some insight into your personality and priorities. Avoid asking questions that can be answered in the college literature — again, a sign of being unprepared. Although the interviewer will undoubtedly pose questions, don't think of the interview merely as a question and answer session. Ideally, a well-prepared question may lead to an informative and interesting conversation — one that will allow you to learn more about the school.

Be yourself

In the end, remember to relax and be yourself. Don't drink jitters-producing caffeinated beverages prior to the interview, and suppress nervous fidgets like leg-wagging, finger-drumming, or bracelet-jangling. Also, give yourself a break. Your interviewer will expect you to be somewhat nervous, which will relieve some of the pressure. Consider this an opportunity to put forth your best effort and to enhance everything that the college knows about you up to this point.

CHECKLIST

Here are some questions you may be asked in your interview:

- What courses have been most difficult for you?
- How would you describe your high school?
- If you could change one thing about your high school, what would it be?
- What do you do in your spare time?
- What do you want to know about our activities?
- Have you worked up to your potential?
- What other colleges are you considering?
- What do you expect to be doing seven years from now?
- Have you ever thought of not going to college? What would you do?

Here are some questions that you may want to ask during your interview:

- How do you treat AP scores?
- Is there a limit on the number of AP credits you will give?
- How do you match roommates?
- What new offerings are there in my major?
- Is there an opportunity for me to design my own major?
- Are there any new buildings being planned?
- How does student advisement work?
- What is your system for course selection?