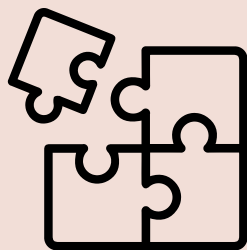


Finding the best college fit



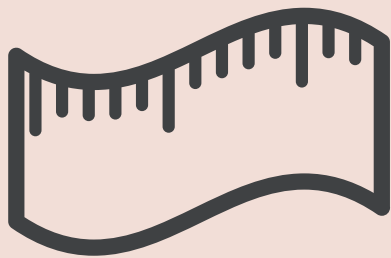
The Basics

It all starts with looking inward before we go outward! Think about what is important to you in how you want to spend the next 4 years learning and living. Do you feel like you want to go to a “big-name” college in order to get the best education and to impress your friends? Stop for a moment and consider that college is not only about getting a great education – it is also a huge life change that will open you up to new social experiences, a new level of personal growth and independence (not to mention a new level of hard work, studying and academic achievement). The personality and culture of the college you will attend will also affect your success in the future. Defining what is important to you in a school will allow you to narrow your choices and help you to discover options that you may have never thought about.

Each of us has unique needs and values, and what is important to you may not matter to someone else and that’s more than okay. Take location, for example. If you don’t want to be more than 100 miles from home, then schools on the other side of the country shouldn’t even be considered. 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. What is important to you and what are your “deal breakers”? Keep this in mind during your search - if a school doesn’t fit what you are looking for, move on and focus on the ones that DO! If you’re having a hard time trying to figure out what you do like, I would suggest starting some college visits to get a feel for the different options out there! It can be any campus - sometimes learning what you don’t like is just as helpful as determining what you do like.

Considerations When Choosing a College

Most college-bound students already realize that the best schools tend to accept and enroll those with the best grades and the highest test scores. You probably are also aware that there are some college names that are a lot more impressive on a sweatshirt than they are in real life. The real question that should be asked by all college-bound students, however, involves figuring out whether a school is right for you? There are some important details to consider when deciding which colleges and universities to apply for – and even more importantly, where to commit to. Sadly, many students don't spend very much time thinking about this life-changing decision, though, and they may end up unhappy as a result. This can even happen at schools that are well respected and super popular – if the university is a poor match for a student, it doesn't matter how highly it is ranked. By taking the time to think about these things now, you'll be able to hone in on the details that really matter to you... and with that information, you are far more likely to find the college or university that is the right fit for you.



Size of School- Colleges come in all sizes. They range from a tiny school in California that enrolls only 26 students to enormous institutions like Penn State University, which has more than 80,000 students. So, which is better? The answer to that question, of course, depends on you and your individual comfort zone. Consider these factors: How big or small is your high school? Do you like the size of your high school? Are you used to a city or a rural area? Do you like 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 - 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. It is often also worth noting whether the schools have a particular religious affiliation, and whether they are public or private. Determine where your interests lie, and you will be able to find the types of schools that will be your best match.

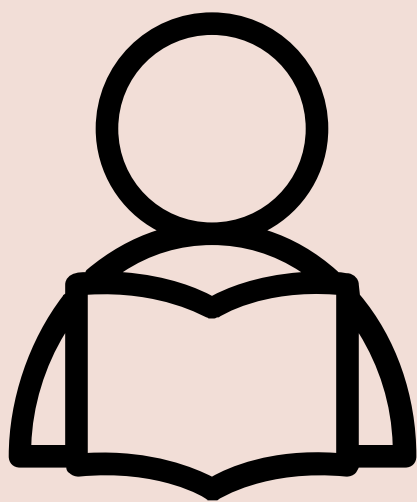
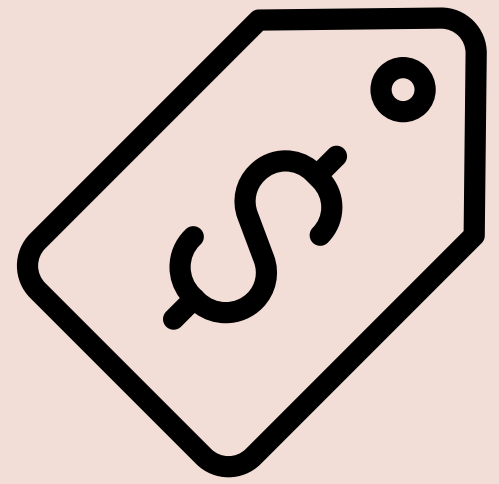


Location - There are colleges in every living environment you can imagine, from tiny college towns in Pennsylvania, to picturesque hills in the northwest, to the middle of New York City, Chicago or Boston! If you have always lived in the suburbs or a smaller town, choosing an urban campus could seem like an adventure at first glance. However, after a week of the noise 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 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 life, 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 really 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 every now and then, or go home to do their laundry. When deciding how far you want to be from home during college, think very seriously about how much money you can afford to spend on travel, not to mention how frequently you may feel homesick or just want the chance to stop home for a quick weekend trip. The fact is that for most students, the farther you are from home, the less often you'll be able to afford to visit.

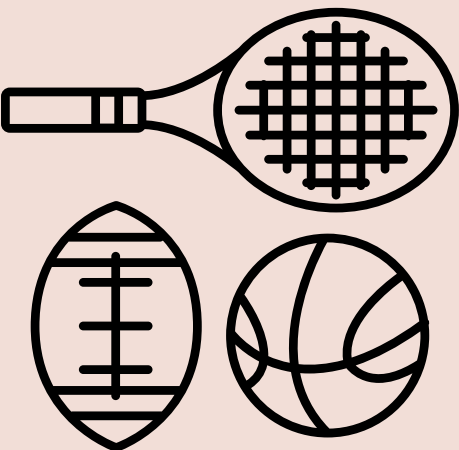
Cost/Scholarships & Financial Aid - Naturally, not all colleges cost the same amount, and the costs can get rather confusing. In fact, there are even different types of financial aid available at different schools. People often hear about students who received a scholarship for their athletic ability, 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 a much lower sticker price, 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 scholarships available. Because of this, it's worth applying to some private schools even if the cost seems high initially. After your financial aid package comes out, you may find the net cost is actually comparable to some of the state schools you have also looked at.



Student Population - Just like our country and world for that matter, college students are not all the same. Some institutions, particularly larger schools and those in big cities, tend to have a student body that comes from a range of ethnic, socioeconomic, and religious backgrounds. Other schools, especially smaller colleges and those in rural locations may lean toward having a fairly uniform 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 doing well there – will put you in an excellent position to pursue your career after you graduate. Of course, many incoming college 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 into their chosen majors. Compare these requirements between schools, as they may vary from place to place.



Athletics and Events - 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 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, an artist, or an aspiring journalist, then you want to consider a school that will not only fulfill your academic goals, but your personal interests and goals, too. Some schools have great arts and theater programs, or excellent newspapers, giving students a chance to be involved in extracurricular activities outside their majors. Others - especially commuter schools without a large, on-campus group 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 perfect for the right student. Whatever you feel is important in your life to make your college experience well-rounded, should be explored up front in the college selection process.



Trusting Your Instincts - If a place "feels right" to you, that's important to notice. Similarly, on that same note, 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. Forget it, and move on! Don't waste your time, energy or money on application fees "just because". 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.

Visiting and Researching Your College List

College visits are an essential part of building your college list. You don't necessarily have to see every college before you apply, but you should see some examples and then pursue more of those that are similar to the ones you prefer. Before you hit the road, you'll need to know what a potential good fit is for you, and you should do enough browsing and research to make the visits worthwhile. Keep your options open!

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 YouTube video 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 pay 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.

Timing -You're probably insanely busy as a high school student. 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 counselor to be excused from classes for a few days. This lack of time makes it all the more important that you make visits count by preparing for them. You can get excused absences for college visits after approval by your counselor, so make sure you utilize this option wisely.



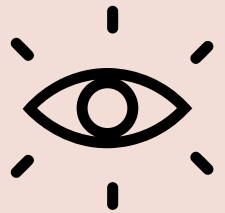


The Power of Research -So how do you discover and then establish a logical fit between you and some large institution that you don't know much about? Research! Research should begin early. (Sophomore/Junior year) Get to know your potential colleges' websites. You can delve deeply into possible majors, course listings, faculty research areas, special programs, internships, scholarships, graduation requirements, academic opportunities, and extracurricular offerings. As you read the material on each website, 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' websites, 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 and you can move on. If you find yourself becoming increasingly interested, then a visit is likely to be worth it.

Keep Track of What You See - As you continue your visits, be mindful of size, location, institutional type, campus environment, and other factors that are important to you. Keep notes and review them as you continue your research by going back to the college sites and other guidebooks that will offer you additional perspectives. Keep a Google spreadsheet to stay organized, share with your counselor for feedback, and take notes to go back to.



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 an open-minded, critical analysis is a key piece 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 website. Perhaps the freshman dorms 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 a website, no matter how thorough it is.

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 a real feel for the campus. 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.

- **Location:** Campuses are located in one of three types of locations: urban, suburban, or rural. 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 the same gender? Is there a quiet time 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 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.

This process can feel like a lot. That's okay! It's important to take it one step at a time and at the end of the day stay true to YOUR goals and needs. Don't worry so much about finding the "right college" or the "best college", but more so the one that is the BEST MATCH for YOU! That's what it's all about.

