

How to Choose a College

(pasted from information from the princetonreview.com)

One of the few nice things about the college admissions process is that you get to choose first. Before an admissions officer reads your application, you decide where to apply. Choosing wisely requires work; simply picking a handful of schools with average SAT scores that are close to yours is not likely to yield a list of schools where you would really be happy.

As you start thinking about whether a particular college is right for you, it's helpful to ask yourself two questions:

1. Do I want to go to school here for four years?
2. Do I want to live here for four years?

Usually, the second question is more important than the first. There are lots of colleges where you can get a good education, but only a few offer after-class ski opportunities. Here are some specifics to consider.

How can you find colleges that match your needs? First, identify your priorities. Next, carefully research the characteristics of a range of schools. Finally, match the two. Here are some college characteristics you should consider.

Size of the Student Body

Size will affect many of your opportunities and experiences, including:

- * range of academic majors offered
- * extracurricular possibilities
- * amount of personal attention you'll receive
- * number of books in the library

When considering size, be very sure to look beyond the raw number of students attending. For example, perhaps you're considering a small department within a large school. Investigate not just the number of faculty, but also how accessible faculty members are to students.

Big schools have more diverse courses, students, and activities. Although they're often bureaucratic, life is not as overwhelming as you might think, since most big schools are divided into smaller colleges. If you're going to have to work your way through school, a big city will offer more employment opportunities than a small town will. It will also be easier to find jobs that won't bring you into constant contact with your schoolmates, if that would bother you.

Small schools have smaller classes (fewer large lectures) taught by real professors (and not grad students, as you often find at large schools). You'll meet most of the people in your class, and much of the administration. If you're a good athlete, but not a potential pro, you'll get the chance to play intercollegiate sports at a smaller school.

Location

Do you want to visit home frequently, or do you see this as a time to experience a new part of the country? Perhaps you like an urban environment with access to museums, ethnic food, or major league ball games. Or maybe you hope for easy access to the outdoors or the serenity of a small town. City or country? Warm or cold climate? Again, you're selecting not only a school but also a place to live.

Academic Programs

If you know what you want to study, research reputations of academic departments by talking to people in the fields that interest you. If you're undecided, relax and pick an academically balanced institution that offers a range of majors and programs. Most colleges offer counseling to help you find a focus. In considering academic programs, look for special opportunities and pick a school that offers many possibilities.

Campus Life

Consider what your college life will be like beyond the classroom. Aim for a balance between academics, activities, and social life. Before choosing a college, learn the answers to these questions:

- * What extracurricular activities, athletics, and special interest groups are available?
- * Does the community around the college offer interesting outlets for students?
- * Are students welcomed by the community?
- * Is there an ethnic or religious group in which to take part?

- * How do fraternities and sororities influence campus life?
- * Is housing guaranteed?
- * How are dorms assigned?

Cost

Today's college price tag makes cost an important consideration for most students. At the same time, virtually all colleges work to ensure that academically qualified students from every economic circumstance can find financial aid that allows them to attend. If you have Bright Futures, you may want to consider staying in-state and saving money for other things (like study abroad or graduate school). However, just because you qualify for Bright Futures doesn't mean that you must stay in state. Try to approach your parents about the money issue openly and honestly instead of guessing or assuming their expectations.

Diversity

Explore what you might gain from a diverse student body. Think about the geographic, ethnic, racial, and religious diversity of the students as a means of learning more about the world. Investigate what kinds of student organizations or other groups with ethnic or religious foundations are active and visible on campus.

Retention and Graduation Rates

A pretty useful statistic. It shows what percent of freshmen come back the next year. Although there are a lot of reasons people leave a school, the better schools have high retention. One of the best ways to measure a school's quality and the satisfaction of its students is to learn the percent of students who return after the first year and the percent of entering students who remain to graduate. Comparatively good retention and graduation rates are indicators that responsible academic, social, and financial support systems exist for most students.

SAT Averages

One of the first things students generally do is look up colleges in a college guide and eliminate schools whose average SAT or ACT score is higher than their own. An average is not a cutoff. If a college's average verbal SAT is 550, that means that approximately half of its students scored below 550. And many colleges make their average look better by excluding certain groups (like athletes) who generally score lower. Don't exclude schools with combined SAT scores 150 points under or over yours. And if you're an under-represented minority or a great athlete, understand that schools will look beyond test scores.

What Your Parents Think

You're probably going to need your parents' help in financing your education. Don't alienate them by telling them that you don't care what they think. Involve them in the process, and talk about things like finances and the distance to the school. This will be your college. Don't let your parents' wishes prevent you from applying to schools you want to go to. At the same time, don't feel you have to apply to a college just because your mother wants you to go there. If you're determined to do battle, make sure you're fighting over a school that genuinely means something to you.

What Your Guidance Counselor Thinks

Most counselors are knowledgeable and care. Listen to what they have to say. On the other hand, many counselors have hundreds of students to advise on personal, career, and academic concerns, not to mention college planning. Moreover, even the best counselor cannot be expected to know about all of the programs and departments at all the colleges around the country. If you are applying to a college or program outside your counselor's experience, you'll have to do some research on your own. Certainly, you should walk into your counselor's office having done some thinking about your needs and strengths.

Visits

In the summer, you should take a road trip with your parents and visit some schools. It's a good chance to talk about the process. In the fall, visit more schools with your friends, and try to arrange to stay on campus through the admissions office. In either case, call to make interview appointments as soon as possible -- spaces fill up fast!

For more information or help with your college applications, please contact:

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