

FINDING THE 'RIGHT' COLLEGE FOR YOU

Applying to college is the probably the first critical decision that a young person will make in their life. Choosing the 'right' college provides the opportunity to maximize your talents in an academic and social environment that promotes learning as well as your development as a person. The 'right' college is not a quantitative decision but one based on a multitude of qualitative factors that, if applied honestly and with the benefit of good research, can result in a great collegiate experience for you.

How do I choose a college that is right for me? Only you can answer that question, but there are clues that can help you along the way toward your final decision. The college search is the right time to get to know who you are – to discover what interests, passions, and pursuits are most meaningful to you, and how those translate into your future. Knowing yourself is one of the biggest assets you can have at this critical moment in your life. To help you identify your unique characteristics and priorities, try asking yourself some questions:

Basic questions about your wants and needs

- Are you comfortable with the size of the school? Why?
- Are there social activities and organizations on campus that appeal to you?
- Are fraternities and sororities a big part of campus life?
- Is there racial, socioeconomic, and religious diversity on campus?
- What percentage of the student body is comprised of international students?

Financial questions

- Realistically, how much is each school going to cost you? Figure in all expenses: college tuition cost, room and board, books, computer, and various living expenses.
- How much financial aid is available? Is this financial aid that you can count on for the entire time you are in school? What about scholarships?
- Do you qualify for financial aid or scholarships based on income, major, academic achievements, athletic prowess, citizenship etc.
- Is their admissions process need blind, i.e. do they consider whether you have applied for financial aid when they are deciding to offer you admission?
- Is each college worth the price tag? If your first choice costs \$30,000 a year and your second costs \$10,000, is the first choice worth an extra \$80,000 over four years?

Academic questions

- Does each college offer the kind of majors that interest you?
- If you have a particular major in mind, how good is that department at each school?
- Find out what the faculty/student ratio is at each school, and what percentage of classes are taught by professors (as opposed to teaching assistants or instructors).
- What is the academic culture like at each school?
- Are students competitive with each other for good grades?

- How academically motivated are other students?
- What is the retention rate of each school? Retention refers to the number of students who don't choose to leave that school without a degree. A low retention rate is not a good sign.
- What kinds of academic advising and study skills assistance are available to students?
- What job placement and graduate school admissions profile does the college have?

Geography questions

- Are you comfortable with the geographic setting of the school (urban campus, small town campus, rural location, etc.)?
- What is the climate like? Frigid? Humid? Just right?
- What will it be like to live in the town or area surrounding each college? Fun? Too much fun? Boring? Extremely uncomfortable? A welcome challenge?

Make lists that rank institutions based on the factors most important to you. Keep a clear focus on what your 'wants' and 'needs' are, if you can. The colleges that rank close to the top of your list are the ones that you should include in your deliberations. Once you have your initial set of colleges, there probably will be too many, but certainly enough to start your research.

You should have at least 20 - 30 colleges at the top of your list, more might be a challenge to narrow down but it can be done if you are diligent. To develop your initial list, you can use search engines on websites for organizations such as Collegeboard (U.S.A.), UCAS (U.K.), OUAC (Canada) and others. They will allow you to select parameters related to many important criteria including majors, finances, admission criteria, geography and campus life.

Now you can begin to concentrate on the few that may fit your needs. The internet is the best place to start. Find out all you can about each one, keeping in mind the factors that you used to select them. Here are some places to look:

- Look up statistics on each college in newspaper articles, internet sites, college reference and guide books, e.g., Peterson's Guides, College Board's College Handbook, Princeton Review's Top Colleges and The Times Guide to UK Universities etc.
- If possible, go on a campus visit. If you cannot visit the campus, send for a video or view it online - these are usually short and often glitzy, but they at least let you see what the campus looks like and usually show you a 'typical' student.
- Go to the home page of each of the colleges on your list. From there you can link to all sorts of pages that give copious information related to the institution.
- Send for view books and catalogues - colleges are happy to inundate you with literature about themselves. File all the information so that you can review each one at decision time.
- Attend College Fairs, College Information Evenings, Open Houses, etc. Ask questions! Talk to alumni reps, guidance counselors, friends, family, your teachers, your uncle's business partner's sister's daughter who attended the college, etc. Find out all you can from as many people as you can.

There is no perfect formula to getting the college search process right. Most students find a moment of clarity which allows them to focus their attention on a few institutions that excite them. Certainty only comes once you have been at college so don't expect to know for sure. However, trust your instincts and research, and you will surely make a good choice. It is a process of elimination, weighing options, and long hours of thought. When all the research is done and it is time to apply, there probably are still questions to ask, but you know that you have certainly answered almost all the critical ones and therefore can be sure of yourself.

Finally, you may find that you still have too large a list to select from. A good number is around ten schools to actually apply to - don't forget that applications run anywhere from thirty to sixty dollars (or more) per school and can become a big expense in itself. If you still have twenty schools you are thinking about, go back and research some more to eliminate some. Be selective!

Send in your applications using the 3-4-3 rule: Three colleges that are safe or 'fall back on' schools, i.e., you are fairly certain you meet their criteria and will be admitted; four colleges that are mid-range, i.e., you match the profile of most admitted students but there may be some competition for spots; and three colleges that are a 'reach', i.e., you've always dreamed of going there, but they are so competitive and selective your chances may be slim. You may be admitted, however; each year colleges have their own list of factors that can change (things like geographic diversity, underrepresented populations, departments looking for more majors, etc.). It is always worth applying to your 'reach' schools!

You can certainly modify the college choice process to suit your individual situation. If you are applying to multiple countries, you may find it necessary to increase the number of applications. For example, a student applying to the UK and USA may send five choices to UCAS in addition to the ten or so that they select for the USA. Remember, this is about your future so keep as many options open as you can. You can always turn down options rather than regret not having pursued an application that may have been attractive to you.

Hopefully you will be admitted to the majority of your choices if you have done your research and evaluated your accomplishments honestly. If you are not accepted to some of your choices, don't take it personally. You did the research and know you are still a strong candidate. When you receive acceptance letters, you will be able to make your final decision using the same method that narrowed your choices. Ask questions, do the research, and then listen to your heart guided by your mind. College is a wonderful experience given that you have done your homework and found the right place for YOU!