

Choosing a College

Choosing a college or vocational training program after high school is a very individual decision. It's difficult to start from square one, but if you dedicate some time to really reflect on what you want out of your college experience, you should be able to narrow the choices down to 4 - 10 schools to apply to.

College search engines provide a way to sort through the numerous college choices. Here are a few:

- U.S. Department of Education College Navigator (<http://nces.ed.gov/collegenavigator/>)
- College Board (<http://www.collegeboard.com>)
- Petersons (<http://www.petersons.com>)

Articles that may help your search:

- "How to do a College Search" from the Colleges that Change Lives website (<http://ctcl.org/news/college-search>)
- "Making that decision – together" from the Seattle Times (http://seattletimes.nwsources.com/html/education/2003976375_collwebcover.html)

Here are some steps to help get you started:

Develop Criteria

This is a big decision, and with so many colleges to choose from, why compromise? Here are a few important questions to ask yourself:

1. **Size** – Do you want a large campus or small campus? Do you want to be very involved in a small academic community where you know most of the students, or would you prefer the anonymity of a large student body where you can pick and choose from different groups and activities?
2. **Campus Community** – Do you want to live on-campus or commute? Do you want an exciting campus with lots of activities or do you plan to spend most of your time off-campus?
3. **Location** – Do you want to go to school close-by or start fresh in a brand new part of the country or world? Do you want to live in the big city or would you prefer a quiet, rural campus, or something in between?
4. **Learning Style** – Do you learn best from large lectures, small discussions, or hands-on labs? You may want to look for colleges that offer many opportunities for your favorite way to learn.
5. **Prestige** – Do you want to go to a "brand name" school or is it more important to find a school that fits you, even if you've never heard of it?

Narrow Down by your Interests

Investigate the availability of the majors and activities you're interested in. Look on the colleges' websites.

1. **Majors** – Does this school have all the majors you're considering?
2. **Sports** – Need to go somewhere with your sport?
3. **Activities/Clubs** – It's perfectly reasonable to want to go to a school with the activities that make you happy. If a school you like doesn't have a club you want – ask an admissions counselor if you'd be able to start a new club.

Let Colleges Know

Instead of sifting through mountains of brochures from every school out there, notify the colleges that you're interested in by requesting information and calling/emailing questions.

Be Realistic

Time to sit down with family, a trusted mentor, and/or your school counselor and review your list of potential schools. Look at how the school would fit you in terms of:

1. **Course Requirements** – Do you have all the high school classes you need (like 3 years of math or 2 years of foreign language) to get into this school? If not, can you get these classes? Or is there a way the college might waive these requirements?
2. **Academic Achievement** – Some schools have a GPA or SAT/ACT cut-off for admissions, though most schools are more flexible. If your Junior and Senior grades and test scores aren't great, find out if there's a way to submit other materials (essays, sample work, letters of recommendation) to bolster your chance of admission.
3. **School Fit** – Can you see yourself living at or near this school for 2-6 years? Does this seem like the type of place you could pursue your interests? If you change your mind about major or career, will it be an easy transition at this college?
4. **Range of Schools** – Make sure you apply to schools that vary by selectivity (difficulty to get into), location, and cost. Your situation might change between now and when you start college.
5. **Try NOT to get caught up in the price tag yet.** You don't know what kind of financial resources might be available from the colleges and your local community.

Apply to Colleges

Organize your applications and send them out. If you are having trouble with the rising cost of college applications, ask your school counselor if you might be eligible for fee waivers. Also, contact the schools and see if they will waive or reduce your application fees.

Apply to Financial Aid and Scholarships

Review Admissions Acceptance and Financial Aid Offers

Some of the schools on your list will be cut out if they don't accept your application. The schools that do accept you will send you a financial aid package after you are admitted. This document will detail what types of federal financial aid and institutional scholarships the college can offer you. Feel free to write to the financial aid office at a school and ask for more aid if you need it (it doesn't hurt to ask!). At this point, you will probably consider cost.

Visit

Many college students report that simply stepping on campus was one of the most important deciding factors in choosing their college. Don't discount your instincts about what "feels right"!