

Excel in Your College Search

Choosing where you want to go to college is an extremely personal -- and frequently stressful -- decision that teens and their families have to make. So, how can this article help you? This article's intent is to give you a framework that will help you choose the college that is right for you. And one piece of advice before we begin: It's best to start this process as early as possible!



Step 1: Determine what you might like to study or major in at college. Yes, many students enter college as “undecided,” and that's fine, but if you have some idea of a career or a major, that information can help in finding colleges that offer (and even specialize) in that field.

Step 2: Develop a list of criteria you want to use to evaluate and weed out colleges. Do you want to live close to home, or far away? Do you want a large university or a small college? What about costs? Here's a list of common criteria:

- degrees offered
- majors/minors
- location (rural or urban setting)/distance from home
- size of the student population (from small at 1,000 to large at 35,000+)
- public vs. private
- costs (tuition, room and board, etc.)
- financial assistance packages
- campus resources (labs, libraries, computer access, etc.)
- graduation rate/time
- placement success/internship and co-op programs
- accreditation
- class size
- faculty contact/classes taught by full-time doctorally qualified faculty
- quality/reputation/ranking
- degree of pressure to excel
- safety (campus, community)
- student body (diversity, gender, etc.)
- social life (Greek organizations, sports, school spirit, etc.)
- religious affiliation/independent
- housing options (dorms, apartments, living at home)
- realistic entry expectations (based on typical student admitted)

Step 3: Compile a list of possible colleges and universities. With at least some idea of the criteria that are important to you, begin the gathering phase. You can find college information in books, such as *The Fiske Guide to Colleges*. You can use college-related Websites, such as CollegeBoard.com or TheAdmissionsOffice.com. You will surely also get suggestions from family, friends, and high school teachers and guidance counselors. You should also consider attending college fairs, where you can actually meet representatives from the schools, as well as gather important literature.

Step 4: Gather all your resources and information about each school you're considering. If you don't have all the information you need on a particular college, you should consider visiting the college's Website. And most colleges offer some sort of virtual campus tour, so you can get an early taste of the look and feel of a college from your PC.

Step 5: Use the criteria from Step 2 to narrow your list of colleges to a manageable number. This number will vary widely among teens and their families, depending in part on how many you and your family can realistically visit. Most experts suggest narrowing the list to 10 or fewer, but we have known some students who had close to 20 colleges after completing this step.

Step 6: Visit the colleges on your list from Step 5. The best way to really get a feel for a college is by visiting the campus, taking a tour, meeting with students, attending a class, reading the campus newspaper, eating in the cafeteria, and spending the night in a dorm (if possible). You have to feel "at home" at the place where you will spend the next four years of your life, so visiting is important.

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Step 7: Apply to the schools that made the cut after the first six steps. How many schools should you apply to? Of course, this decision partly depends on your financial situation (since most colleges have application fees), but most teens generally apply to one or two dream or "reach" schools (where they have a small chance of getting admitted based on a realistic appraisal of admissions criteria), two to four schools where they want to go (and can expect to be accepted), and at least one "safety" school (where they are a shoo-in for admission). But you need to choose the number and type that are right for you; some people don't apply to safety schools, and others apply to only the best schools that have made the cut from the first six steps.

Step 8: While you're waiting to hear back from the colleges you applied to, start hitting the books or the Web to find scholarships (if you need them ... and everyone should consider them!).

Step 9: Make a final choice among the schools that accepted you. If you applied for financial aid, take a close look at the offers. If the school you really want to attend gave you a low aid offer, you should consider contacting the school and making a counter offer and see what happens; many schools have become more willing to negotiate in this area.

To help you with your decision-making, you might use the College Choice Table below (this is just a sample chart where you might rate three different colleges on any number of different variables using your own scoring system).

Sample College Choice Table

	College 1	College 2	College 3
Criteria			
Degree(s) Offered			
Majors/Minors			
Location/Distance from Home			
Size of School (from small at 1,000 to large at 35,000+)			
Public/Private			
Cost (tuition, room and board, etc.)			
Financial Aid Package			
Campus Resources (labs, library, etc.)			
Graduation Rate/Time			
Placement			
Quality of Program(s)/Pressure to Excel			
Admissions Requirements			
Accreditation(s)			
Average Class Sizes			
Degree of Faculty Contact			
Student Body Characteristics (diversity, gender, etc.)			
Social Activities (Greek organizations, sports, school spirit)			
Safety Concerns			
Housing Options (dorms, apartments, off-campus, home)			



ASSIGNMENT: Prepare a table in Excel for your own college search. Select 3 colleges that you are seriously considering. Then select 15 criteria that are important for you personally. Use the internet to research the information for your colleges and fill in the chart. Email the completed spreadsheet.