

Factors to Consider When Selecting Colleges

Before starting your search, it's important to ask yourself some [reflective questions](#) about why you want to go to college in the first place. After pondering those questions, a good starting point is thinking about the following criteria: **Programs and Majors/Types of Schools, Location, Campus Setting, Size, and Cost.**

1. **Programs/Majors and Types of Schools.** Many students are understandably overwhelmed by sifting through long lists of potential [college majors](#), but for others, it can be a helpful part of the research process (you can also revisit the career/skills/personality assessments from Sophomore Seminar to generate some ideas). You can also take [this assessment through MyMajors](#) to help you brainstorm potential “good-fit” majors.

If you aren't ready to consider specific majors yet, it can be helpful to think about the [type of school](#) that might be a good fit for you. Would you fare better in a Liberal Arts school where you can study a variety of subjects and focus on developing your critical thinking and communication skills in an interdisciplinary setting? Or a pre-professional school where your studies would be focused on a particular career? Based on your future plans, is a 2-year or 4-year degree more appropriate? What about accelerated/combined programs (DPT, 3-2 Engineering, Architecture, Med/Dental) - are those of interest? Do you want a school that caters exclusively to undergraduate students? What about interdisciplinary majors or [Co-op/Internship Programs](#) - do those matter to you? What about the campus culture: do you want a campus that is more Conservative? Liberal? Or maybe neutral? Are you more interested in studying the Humanities or STEM? What subjects do you enjoy studying? Do you want a school that has a core curriculum or an open curriculum? Would you prefer a Residential or Commuter school? What about Public vs Private? Also consider schools with strong **“Supportive Start” First Year Programs**: programs that support students during their crucial first year of college while they are still acclimating to the environment.

2. **Location.** Some students like using the college years to explore a different part of the country (or world), while others prefer staying within a car ride from home. There's no right or wrong answer here, but it's definitely worth pondering. How far away from home are you comfortable being? Do you want to be able to easily get home for Thanksgiving and other breaks? Can you afford the travel costs if you go to college in Colorado or California and travel back and forth four or five times a year? Do you want to experience life in a different part of the country for the next four years? Since many colleges prefer a geographical mix in their applicant pool,

students from Wayland may have a slightly better chance at some Midwest, Southern, or Western colleges than they would at comparable colleges in the Northeast.

3. **Campus Setting.** Urban? City outskirts? Suburban? Rural? Don't care? There are pros and cons to each setting, so it's important to think about what *you* want. For many students starting this process, it can be helpful to visit different types of schools in the area to get a sense of what they look and feel like. Some students like being in a city or near-city settings because of the energy, the social and employment/internship opportunities, the ease of public transportation, or other reasons. Others want to be near a city, but want a residential campus feel that can more frequently be found in a suburban setting. And still others prefer being away from the noise and in a more serene setting, perhaps near mountains or other natural areas. Not sold on small-town and rural schools? Check [this argument](#) out.
4. **Size.** Here, too, there are pros and cons. Bigger schools can provide an environment where you see new people every day. They can also come with bigger sports teams (sometimes) and a lower sticker price, especially for in-state public schools. That said, they can also come with bigger class sizes, TAs or graduate students teaching many classes instead of full-time professors, and it can be easier to "get lost in the sauce" (which, for some students, can be a recipe for disaster). For students looking for a more personalized education with accessible professors they can really get to know, smaller schools can be great options (although the trade-off is they usually cost more). Finally, looking at Honors Colleges within public universities can be a great way to get the best of both worlds: a tightly knit and supportive academic community nested in a larger campus atmosphere.
5. **Cost.** In the era of \$85,000+ sticker prices, cost *has* to be a top priority for almost everyone. Investigate colleges that offer merit scholarships as well as those that meet a high percentage of demonstrated need (check out Jeff Selingo's ["Buyers and Sellers" List](#) for colleges that are more generous with merit aid - "Buyers"). Consider **financial safeties** (schools that are toward the "safety" end of the spectrum and more likely to offer scholarships, or less selective state colleges and universities that are more affordable from the start). Look into Return on Investment and post-graduate placement data for the colleges you're applying to. Check out Ron Lieber's book, [The Price You Pay for College](#), for a roadmap to help families navigate the difficult and often confusing journey of paying for college.

There are other factors to consider, too.

- **Academic Environment** (Class sizes, student-to-faculty ratio, accessibility of professors, level of rigor/competitiveness, selectivity, unique semester/quarter/trimester plans, core requirements, retention & 4-year graduation rates, career/internship services, disability support services)
- **Social Environment** (Campus culture, Greek life, meal plans, recreation options in the surrounding area, clubs/organizations, community service opportunities, housing/living arrangements, weather, athletics, etc.)
- **Big Fish, Small Pond vs Small Fish, Big Pond.** Some students thrive in a competitive environment where they are constantly stretching and challenging themselves to be their best. Others fare better in an environment where they are one of the stronger students and can reap the benefits that come with that (more faculty attention and potential recommendations, research/internship opportunities, a better quality of life and balance between academics and extracurriculars, an easier path to being in the top 10-15% of their class, etc.). Again, there's no one-size-fits-all here - it's more about getting in touch with who you are as an individual and going from there.
- **Special Programs** ("Supportive Start" First Year Programs, Study Abroad, [ROTC](#), Research Opportunities, Learning Support, Test Optional)
- **Diversity** (race, gender, sexuality, socio-economic, etc.) [HBCUs](#) and [LGBTQ+ friendly schools](#)
- **Athletics:** Prospective college athletes - see the following resources for more info about the [recruiting process](#) and [NCAA Eligibility](#), and read about the basic [recruiting process steps](#) at the link.
- Check out these great guides: [First Generation College Students](#) & [BIPOC Student Success Guide](#)
- Still not sure? Take this [quiz](#) to start figuring it out.

The Importance of a Balanced List & Finding a Good Fit



As you start building your preliminary list, it's good to cast a wide net and keep an open mind. That said, as you move closer to application season (senior fall/winter), you will want to ensure that your list is **balanced**. The primary categories are Reach, Target, and Likely (with a newer category thrown in the mix: Lottery).

“Lottery” - This relatively new category houses the single-digit, "highly-rejective" colleges and universities, some of which accept fewer than 5 out of every 100 applicants. It's completely fine to apply to some of these schools, but it's also important to understand the odds of admission.

“Reach” - Schools at which there is a likelihood of denial. It's fine to include a handful of reasonable long shots in this group, but expectation management is key.

“Target” - Schools that possess the significant features a student desires AND at which the student is in the mid-range of the typical acceptance pool.

“Likely” - Schools that have most of the features a student desires and at which it is “highly likely” that the student will be admitted.

Generally, we recommend students have 2-4 schools in each category (not including the lottery category - that choice is up to you), but it can vary from student to student. Check out this [article from MEFA](#) to help with that decision.

It's important that you don't put all of your eggs in one basket (especially if it's the reach or lottery basket). It's also important that you actually like the schools on your list - particularly the Likely-end schools. It may be true that you don't *love* them in the same way you love your Reach schools, but it's still important that they have enough of what

you are looking for.

Finally, the “best” school you get into isn’t necessarily the best school for you. As hard as it may be, try to **focus on finding the right fit over prestige**. Not getting into a top-ranked school is not a failure. Quality opportunities exist beyond the highly-selective institutions, and sometimes the opportunities are even more plentiful at slightly less selective schools. When thinking about fit, consider factors like:

- Academic advising
- Supportive start programs
- Flexibility in majors
- Tutoring services
- Career support, alumni networks, and graduate outcomes (job or grad school placement)
- Campus culture
- Co-ops or internship opportunities
- Student activities (clubs and organizations)
- Campus safety
- Diversity
- Size
- Location and distance from home
- Social life
- Financial fit

Check out the [New Dream Schools list](#) from notable educational journalist and author, Jeff Selingo. In his new book, *Dream School*, Selingo argues that families should look beyond prestige and expand their college search to include a wider range of institutions that offer quality learning and a good return on investment. The book aims to help students and parents find a college that is a better fit for them by focusing on factors like academic programs, practical experience, sense of belonging, affordability, and career outcomes, rather than just highly selective schools.

Choosing a college where you can flourish matters more than simply getting accepted to a highly ranked school. The *best* college is one where you can thrive socially, academically, and personally.

College Planning Resources

Programs/Applications

- [College Guidance Network](#)
- [Naviance \(Naviance Student Login Instructions\)](#)
- [Common Application](#)

Search Engines

- SuperMatch College Search (found in Naviance)
- [BigFuture](#)
- [NYT College Rankings Tool](#)
- <https://www.niche.com/colleges> (& Direct Admissions)
- [Explore College Majors](#)
- [Appily](#)

Books/Web Resources

- [The Fiske Guide](#)
- [The Princeton Review: The Best 386 Colleges](#)
- [Colleges that Change Lives](#)
- [The College Finder](#)
- Jeff Selingo's ["Dream Schools" List](#) and ["Buyers and Sellers" List](#)
- [The NSSE \(National Survey of Student Engagement\) Pocket Guide to Choosing a College](#)
- [Times Higher Education Rankings](#)
- [Forbes](#) & [WSJ](#) top colleges lists (also check out Forbes' yearly College Financial grades)
- [IvyWise Knowledge Base](#)

Resources for Diverse Students

- [The Ultimate Guide to HBCU's](#)
- [HBCU Guide \(study.com\)](#)
- [HBCU website](#)
- [Campus Pride Index](#)
- [College Guide for LGBTQ Students](#)
- [BIPOC Student Success Guide](#)

- [Muslim College Guide](#)
- [Helpful Resources for Diverse Students](#)
- [College Resources for Diverse and Multicultural Students](#)

Miscellaneous College Planning Resources

- [LinkedIn College Data](#)
- [High School vs College](#)
- <http://www.collegetripsandtips.com/>
- <https://www.collegedata.com/>
- [Common Data Set](#) (search “college name + common data set”)
- [The Alumni Factor: A Revolution in College Rankings](#)
- [The College Tour](#)
- [U.S. Education Department’s College Scorecard](#)

MA College & University Resources

- [Free Community College in MA](#)
- [Standards for MA State Colleges and Universities](#)
- [NEBHE’s Tuition Break](#)
- [MassTransfer - A2B](#)
- [UMass Campus Overviews](#)
- [MA Department of Higher Education](#)
- [Free Tuition Based on Income](#)

Resources for Students that Learn and Think Differently

- [College Programs for Kids that Learn and Think Differently](#)
- [College Programs for Students with Special Needs](#)
- [Elizabeth Cohen Hamblet \(Learning Disabilities Consultant\)](#)
- [Association on Higher Education and Disability \(Ahead.org\)](#)
- [The K&W Guide to Colleges for Students with Learning Differences](#)

International College/University Resources

- [NACAC Guide to International University Admissions](#)
- [Canadian Colleges and Universities](#)

Financial Aid & Scholarships

- [MEFA \(MA Educational Financing Authority\)](#)
- [Financial Aid & Scholarships](#)
- [*The Price You Pay for College*](#)
- [WHS Scholarship Program](#)
- [Fastweb.com](#)
- [Goingmerry.com](#)
- [Scholarships America](#)