



CRAFTING A BALANCED COLLEGE LIST WITH INFORMED MATCHES

Step 1: Take a Self-Inventory

Knowing yourself is the first step to finding a college that is “right” for you. Remember, a school that is perfect for your best friend may not be a good fit for you. Ask yourself the following questions in order to identify your own unique traits and priorities:

- What are my goals? What is my objective in going to college? What would I like to do with my college degree?
- What are my interests? Do I have current hobbies that I would like to continue to pursue in college? What captivates me when I’m not in school?
- What are my abilities? What do I do well in outside of school? In school? What is my favorite subject?
- What kinds of relationships do I value? How important is it to me to have many friends, versus a few good friends? How important is it for me to have close relationships with my teachers? How do I feel about being far away from my family and home community?
- What is my learning style? What kind of worker am I? How much structure do I need in my learning environment? Will I need academic support? Do I like collaborative learning, or am I more of an independent learner? Am I a visual, auditory, or kinesthetic learner?

Step 2: Consider Types of Colleges

Now that you know your passions and desires, try to eliminate colleges that will not fit your needs. You can narrow the field by considering college characteristics and the strengths and weaknesses each has to offer. A great way to do this is by using “College Matchmaker” websites. Some good places to start include www.collegeboard.org, www.actstudent.org, and www.collegenavigator.ed.gov. Questions you may be asked include the following:

What type of college are you interested in? Do you want to go to a two-year or four-year college? Liberal arts college? Large research institution? Technical institute? Vocational school? Professional school? Women’s college? Service academies? Historically black college? You’ll want to explore all of these choices and determine which one works best for you.

Consider Location. Where do you want to go? Start to narrow your search by state, region, or even country. Start with a wide range and then scale it down to a specific geographic area as you continue your search.

How about size? Do you want to attend a large university in a small college town? A small college in a big city? Do you want an intimate setting or a large student population? How about options for weekend activities? How extensive is the book collection in the library? What kind of technological resources will be available? If you know what you want to major in, how large is the department?

How selective should the college be? Now is the time to review your high school record (i.e., grades) and your test scores (SAT/ACT). Be realistic about your performance. How do you stack up to the “average” incoming freshman? Remember that sometimes the “famous” and “well-known” colleges may not necessarily be the best fit for your needs. There are scores of smaller, lesser-known colleges with outstanding quality.

Are there specific academic programs you are interested in? Do you already know what you will major in? (It’s okay if you don’t!) However, for those of you who have a specific area of interest, you may want to take this into consideration when you’re creating your college list. Does the school offer your major? Are the professors easily accessible? Are there internship opportunities? How about study abroad? What sort of reputation does the school have?

What is the school climate and campus life like? Quality of life is not restricted to the classroom. What sort of social and athletic organizations do you want to be involved in? Are you interested in Greek life? Do you have a special talent and want to contribute to a music or drama group? Are you interested in playing sports? What is the balance between academic and social activities on campus? Is it important to you to have diversity in the student body?

Would you like to attend a religiously affiliated school? Are you interested in attending a school with a particular religious orientation? Most schools do not discriminate against those not of their faith, but a few do require chapel attendance or a community service component. Explore the school’s doctrinal beliefs. How does the school integrate faith into their classrooms? On campus?

How much will it cost to attend? For many, this is one of the most important factors when it comes to selecting a school. Are you eligible for financial aid? Do you have college savings? Note: At this point in your research, *do not preclude a college based on cost alone!* Colleges work hard to put together financial aid packages to meet the needs of their students. While it is important to be realistic, it is also important to dream. At the initial stages of your search, be sure to keep your options open when it comes to cost. As you narrow your search, cost should become a greater factor.

Step 3: Time for Research

Now that your initial search has eliminated a large number of colleges, you can start to concentrate on the few that may be your “good fit” schools. This is where the Internet and college resource books can serve as terrific resources! If you used a search engine to develop a short list, now is the time to become a detective. Find out everything you can about each school on your list.

How to become a College Detective:

- [Visit campuses!](#)
- Look up statistics on each school on college websites and guidebooks.
- Go to the schools’ homepages and click on “Prospective Students” or “Incoming Freshmen.”
- File all information in your “College Folder” or box.
- Attend college fairs.
- Ask questions! Talk to alumni, current students, admissions reps, the School Counselor, your teachers, friends who attend the school, etc. Find out all you can from as many people as you can.

Look into some of the opinion-based books, such as *Fiske’s Guide to Colleges* or *Rugg’s Recommendations*. You’ll find information based on interviews and surveys. This will help you gain a better sense of the college from the students’ perspectives.