

# What Really Matters in Your College Search

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I have worked in and around college admission for over 40 years. But when my own children went through the college admission process, I didn't pressure them to strive for the "top of the top" or apply to the so-called "best" colleges. Neither of my children took SAT prep courses, and neither were anxious about the college admission process.

So why didn't I push them more? Because I knew that of the 2,300 four-year nonprofit colleges and universities in this country, there were at least 50 schools that would be great places for my children specifically—schools where they could grow, develop, and engage. Schools where, with the help of caring faculty, they could find a voice that would serve them well in the future. Schools where they could explore and take risks without the fear of "blowing it."

These schools didn't necessarily coincide with the top 10 as ranked by popular magazines and guidebooks. When it came to their college search, my children were more interested in substance than status. And I heartily recommend all students adopt such an attitude as they embark on their college search and application process.

My son taught me the importance of substance early in his college search

when a scheduling conflict forced him to make a decision between AP versus regular calculus. His SAT scores and grades were strong, and even though I knew colleges would prefer to see the AP class, I encouraged him to make his choice based on what he wanted to do. Ultimately, he chose to take the class that conflicted with AP calculus. "Look, Dad," he said, "if a college isn't going to admit me because I took regular calculus rather than AP, then I don't want to go to that college!" Case closed. He was "walking the walk," and I was a happy parent.

Today, when I speak with high school students and learn about the angst surrounding college admission, I sigh with an insider's knowledge of the process at some pretty selective schools. There is absolutely no reason for students (or parents) to be nervous about the college admission process—unless the student decides to apply to a college for poor reasons; reasons like "because it's hard to get in" or "because everyone will be impressed if I go there."

What a misguided definition of success we have developed as a society! Is it more valuable to have a "wow" college bumper sticker on the back of your car than to make the most out of a college experience that actually fits your personality, learning style, and educational ob-

jectives? Is it more important to look impressive than to be impressive?

Those ubiquitous "best of" college lists aren't the cause of the problem (though they are partially to blame). Rather, our society reinforces an image of success defined by name brands, whether we're talking about cars, clothes, or colleges.

Don't let this happen to you in your college search. Follow the advice below to discern what you *truly* want and need out of your college of choice.

## Know yourself first

Self-knowledge is the first step in the college search process. While there are several good learning-style inventories online (see one for free at [learning-styles-online.com](http://learning-styles-online.com)), simply asking and answering a few key questions will get you started on this essential first step.

### How do you learn best?

- Are you an independent learner, or do you need some direction?
- Are you inquisitive or accepting?
- Do you prefer to work alone or in teams?
- Are you an active or passive learner? Do you prefer to figure things out on your own, or do you want to be taught how to find the answer?
- Do you prefer a structured or unstructured learning environment?

### *How do you interact with others?*

- Are you an initiator, or do you prefer to wait and see how things unfold before jumping into new situations?
- Do you prefer to interact in organized groups with a purpose or informal groups to “hang out”?
- Are you open and tolerant of differences, or do you prefer to be with “people like you”?

### *What are your general goals for college and life?*

- What causes stress in your life and what makes you happy, whether academically or something you do in your free time?
- When are you most productive?
- What do you enjoy learning about most? You don’t have to know what you want to major in or even what you want to do after college, but you do need to have academic objectives and interests.
- Who—not what—do you want to be? (For example, do you want to be someone who gives back to others, travels the world, or creates art?)

Answering these questions will help you understand yourself and what you want to get out of your college experience. They represent the first step in selecting the right set of schools for you. Next, you must use that self-knowledge and your goals to guide your search for colleges and universities that fit.

### **Get to know a college’s “personality”**

Colleges and universities have “personalities” like we do: athletic, artistic, sociable—you get the picture. And whether a school is small or large, residential or commuter, teaching or research heavy, undergraduate or graduate, and diverse or homogeneous can make a big difference.

So, how do you discover a college’s personality and determine whether it’s a good fit for you?

*Use multiple college search sources*  
You should never rely exclusively

on one college search resource, particularly “shortcuts” such as “best-of” rankings, “top schools” guidebooks, or college review websites and forums. Conduct your college search using a variety of websites. (CollegeXpress, The College Board, College View, and *Peterson’s* all offer search tools worth exploring.) Even word-of-mouth recommendations, while helpful, will never take the place of a rigorous college search. Speaking of which...

### *Talk to your counselors and teachers*

They can help you develop a list of possible colleges that fit your interests, style, and academic profile, especially at the very beginning of your search.

### *Use the college’s website*

When you have a reasonable list of schools to explore, go to their institutional websites and drill down. Learn what the English faculty are doing in their classes and what students in Public Policy do for final projects. Learn about extracurricular organizations and alumni accomplishments. Get to know each school on its own terms.

### *Use email to your advantage*

After searching a college’s website, email some faculty and students who are doing things that interest you. Also use email to contact your regional (or academic area) admission representative and introduce yourself by asking a well-researched question.

### *“Like” the college’s Facebook pages*

Follow events on campus and what current and prospective students are saying about the college, its programs, and its people.

### *Once you’ve done your homework, visit!*

Ask students about their experiences, talk to faculty about their expectations and how they interact with students, speak with an ad-

mission counselor, and stay overnight if you can.

### *Choose three to 10 “first choices”*

One of my college counseling colleagues advises her students to make all their school choices “top” or “first” choices—aka all schools they would be thrilled to attend if admitted (and if it’s affordable). If you select your colleges right, you can’t go wrong when the final decision is in your hands.

### **A few final words**

Nationwide, only about half the students entering a four-year college or university graduate. While the rate is typically much higher at selective colleges, it nevertheless tells us that many students select colleges for the wrong reasons.

The substance of the experience and how a particular institution fits your needs should be your top concerns. For example, many students never consider a small liberal arts college (versus a large university) because even the “best” of these smaller institutions are much less visible than their “brand-name” university counterparts. These schools aren’t for everyone, to be sure, but they would undoubtedly benefit far more students than ever apply.

The college selection process does not have to be stressful if students and parents focus on what is really important to them in school and life. And the only way to feel confident in your college options is to embark on a fearless path of self-discovery and a probing assessment of institutional characteristics. Once you’ve done this well, you’ll find that your final college choices—and acceptances—are broader and better than you would have ever imagined. 🏠

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