

Approaching the College Search

Know thyself.

Socrates

Chances are, you've been thinking about it, at least in the abstract, for years.

Initially it might have started as a fascination with a particular college or university, based on the success of one of its sports teams or stimulated because a parent, older sibling, or other relative went there, or because the coolest teacher, youth group leader, or camp counselor you ever had was going there.

So maybe you ordered a sweatshirt or car window decal online, checked out the school's Web site, or maybe even visited the campus.

From there, as the PSATs rolled around (if not sooner), you might have started to think more seriously about the subject—about where you might want to go and, more important, where you might actually be able to *get in*.

And that's where we're going to pick up the story: sometime in the beginning or middle of your junior year of high school (or sixth form, if you're in prep school)—the time when, to maximize your chances of success in the upcoming admissions process, you should really start thinking seriously about college.

But where in the world do you start?

The world of college admissions seems so large, and the task so enormous, that it often feels easier to procrastinate and push things off for another day.

Don't.

Start now.

DEVISING A STRATEGY

The first thing you're going to need is a strategy—a way to approach the admissions process and to narrow down, based on certain characteristics that you determine are important to you, the field of hundreds upon hundreds of possible choices. Perhaps you already have a school or two that sticks out in your mind as a favorite, but even if you do, engage in the following exercise to test *why* that school is a favorite and whether or not the things that make it a favorite are more broadly applicable. If you are starting from a blank slate, do not despair. This exercise will help you narrow the field of possibilities to a manageable number for further review and study.

First, let's take a look at what some of your mentors considered in making this all-important decision.

"My first criterion was academic reputation," Zoe recalls. "I only applied to schools that I saw as being excellent liberal arts institutions. Being from a small town and very attached to New England, I also chose schools within an easy one-day drive from home. I was also attracted to beautiful, classic campuses, an ambiance that I perceived as liberal or progressive, and an ethnically, racially, and socioeconomically diverse student body."

"I looked at academic reputation, size, location, the social scene, and the opportunity to learn in small-class environments," Jim advises. "If you know, or at least have a pretty good idea of what you want to study, the strength of a university's department in that subject should also guide your decision."

"I considered only those schools with a good music program," Tiffany agreed. "But I also looked for schools that paired that music program with a strong liberal arts curriculum to supplement my musical aspirations."

"Even though I had no idea then that I would be embarking on a music career—being a musician—I did care about the music programs at the various schools I was looking at, as well as the extent of musical endeavors in the undergraduate culture," Tom added.

Other mentors were guided by their interest in high-level athletic competition.

"I applied to five schools and the factors I relied on in choosing schools were limited to the lacrosse record and what kind of lacrosse program I'd be joining if I went there," Aaron said. "I knew I was going to play college lacrosse, so that was the main focus for me in choosing where to go to school."

"I knew that I wanted to attend a liberal arts college in New England where I could play baseball," Dave agreed. "I had decent grades and my college adviser recommended that I look at some of the NESCAC schools like Williams, Amherst, Middlebury, Bates, Tufts, Colby, Trinity, and Bowdoin. All of these schools offered the combination of challenging academics and a level of baseball I knew I could

compete at. The Middlebury coach showed the most interest in me, and after my visit, I fell in love with the campus and met some very friendly people. I committed to apply early to Middlebury and got in ED1, so it ended up being the only school I applied to. I lucked out big time!”

“Highly qualified students should also seriously consider the availability of scholarships or honors programs, as many colleges and universities will offer them free or reduced tuition. No loans to pay back means more freedom after college is done,” Jim counsels.

Many of the mentors also stressed the importance of an intangible “gut feeling” they got while touring a particular campus.

“I went to each campus at least twice, and as I visited campuses, the main thing I focused on was a feeling of ‘the right fit.’ I asked myself whether I could envision myself living here happily for four years,” Zoe noted.

Others similarly stressed the importance of the “gut feeling” you get during a campus visit.

“I selected Duke because there was something about it that just felt right,” Chase recalls. “It was an intangible attribute that I felt when I went there on a tour. I drove away from Duke knowing that no other school made me feel that way, and I was sold.”

“The feeling or ‘vibe’ you get from a college visit is definitely something you should trust,” Tom agreed.

So now it’s your turn to figure out what matters most to you. Take yourself somewhere where you can be undisturbed for the next half hour or so. And, as mentioned in the Introduction, get yourself a journal, spiral notebook, or three-ring binder that you intend to dedicate to the purpose of collecting your responses to these exercises. You’ll need to access your responses again as you go through college and will want to be able to find them easily. For ease of reference, we’ll refer to this as your *workbook* from now on.

Okay, now turn off your cell phone and prepare to think critically about what really matters to you.

FACTORS TO CONSIDER IN CHOOSING A COLLEGE OR UNIVERSITY—AN EXERCISE IN DEFINING YOUR INTERESTS

Think about each of the following twelve factors and how each one might help you identify things you would like (or dislike) in a college or university. After reading the description of each one, determine whether the factor is unimportant to you (0), somewhat important to you (1), or very important to you (2), and circle the appropriate number next to each factor.

Size of School 0 1 2

Do you want to be part of a small, intimate community with perhaps only a few hundred students in your college class and perhaps only a handful of students in each of your academic classes, or would you prefer to be part of a huge campus where you can study in relative anonymity, and where at least the introductory classes can contain several hundred students each? Is it important for you to know most of the people in your class, or are you happy enough simply to know a few people within the larger community? How much does the physical size of a school matter to your decision? Write down a few thoughts in your workbook.

Urban or Rural Setting 0 1 2

The next question to ask yourself is *where* you would like to be situated during college. Do you want to study in a large city or urban center, where the city's bustling cultural offerings (concerts, sports teams, restaurants, and nightlife), as well as its downsides (crime, expense, and congestion), become part of your educational experience, or would you prefer an idyllic country setting where there is less distraction and where you can keep a pet, take a run almost anywhere, and otherwise stay on campus and concentrate on your studies? There are benefits and drawbacks to each option, and the decision as to which is "better" is a purely personal one. Take a few moments to think about your preferences. Are there any cities in particular that you would especially like to consider? Are there any regions of the country that you find particularly enticing? Record your thoughts in your workbook.

Proximity to Home 0 1 2

Would you like to stay close to your family, or are you interested in getting as far away from them as humanly possible during the years you are in college? Before you make a hasty decision about this, though, consider the implications. Even if you have a rocky relationship with your family right now, that may change; and even if it doesn't, you're still probably going to have to make the pilgrimage home for at least Thanksgiving and winter break. If you're not excited to get home to begin with, it will be even more of a pain in the ass, and an expense, to have to take a five-hour flight to get home.

So how important to you is proximity to home? Record your thoughts in your workbook.

Climate 0 1 2

Simply put, how significant an impact on you will the climate have? Are you prepared to completely exclude any school that is under a blanket of snow for four

months out of the year, or would climate be a factor only in choosing between two otherwise similar schools?

Unless you suffer from seasonal affective disorder or some other physical or psychological condition that is exacerbated by the weather, we strongly discourage making decisions about schools solely on the basis of their climate, but hey—we're not the ones who are going to live in Nome for the next four years either.

So how important is climate going to be to you? Write down your thoughts.

Cost/Financial Aid 0 1 2

How much school can you and/or your family afford? Alternatively, are you prepared to take on whatever student loans are necessary to bridge the gap between what a school costs and what you can afford? If you are not at all familiar with your financial aid options, it might help you to read Chapter 4 before you answer this question.

So how important is a school's price tag to you?

Academic Schedule 0 1 2

Another significant differentiator between colleges is the academic schedule they feature. The majority of colleges employ the traditional semester system, whereby the academic year is divided into two fifteen- or sixteen-week semesters, with the fall semester beginning in late August and ending before a "winter break," and the spring semester beginning in mid-January, divided by a spring break in March, and ending in mid-May. In most schools based on the semester system, students complete their final exams and semester papers prior to leaving for winter break, and again by the end of the term in mid-May, which leaves them open to begin summer jobs or other experiences from late May through mid-August.

Other colleges and universities employ the full-year, trimester system, whereby each academic year typically comprises three fifteen-week sessions. At many of these schools, students are required to attend at least one third-trimester summer term, which can disrupt recurring summer plans, such as working as a camp counselor, but may also allow students to graduate in less than four years if they elect to attend more than one of these summer terms.

Still other colleges and universities are structured on the quarter system, whereby the academic year is typically divided into four ten-week terms, each separated by a period of time off. At these schools, most students elect to study in the fall, winter, and spring quarters, leaving summers free for work or other activities. The advantages of this curricular structure include the ability to take a greater number of courses or course credits each year. The disadvantages are that with each course typically covered in ten weeks rather than fifteen or sixteen, reading loads can be heavier and there is less time to cover course material in class.

Many schools feature hybrids of these curricular structures. One popular hybrid includes a “Jan-term” intersession, during which students study only one course intensively for the month, travel, or engage in other nonacademic activities of interest.

Obviously, the curricular structure adopted by a particular school has a very significant impact on your life as a student. Is there a particular structure that strikes you as more or less attractive? Write down some thoughts about your preferences.

Curricular and Grading Philosophy 0 1 2

What about a school’s emphasis on a “core” curriculum? You might be forced to take, for example, four classes in each of a designated set of curricular areas, such as the “hard” sciences (math, chemistry, physics); the “soft” sciences (economics, psychology, political science); history; and language, literature, and the arts. What about a school’s insistence that you become proficient in a foreign language? Or that you spend time abroad?

What about a school’s philosophy with regard to grades? Would you favor a school that lets you take a certain number of your courses pass-fail rather than for a grade, or do you want all your courses graded on a hard curve? What about schools that don’t give letter grades at all?

How important is a school’s curricular and grading philosophy to you? Don’t worry if you don’t know which schools do what. That’s for your independent research, which comes later. For now, we just want you to write down your thoughts on this subject.

Curricular Strength in Subjects of Greatest Interest 0 1 2

Do you have a subject that you already know you want to study in college? Perhaps you know you want to be premed or to study economics, marine biology, American literature, or psychology. How much is a school’s strength in that area going to matter to you? Is it an overriding factor or just one consideration among many? This may depend on the strength of your commitment to the area you think you want to study.

Write down your thoughts.

Fit with Special Talents, Skills, or Interests 0 1 2

Do you have a special talent, skill, or interest that you hope to continue to develop or explore in college? Perhaps you play an instrument and are especially interested in having soundproof practice rooms available twenty-four hours a day. Maybe you are an artist and need access to certain facilities outside the academic setting. If you are an athlete, will the training facilities at a school matter a lot to you?

Would you be interested in cross-registering in graduate school classes to pursue a cocurricular or extracurricular talent? Do you need access to a particular sort of library or laboratory to further an interest or conduct research in a particular area? How important would these sorts of considerations be to you in identifying places to apply? Write down your thoughts.

Housing Arrangement 0 1 2

What kind of housing arrangement would you prefer during your college years? Do you want to live on a campus dominated by the Greek system, where housing on campus is primarily centered around fraternity and sorority houses? Are you looking for theme-based dorms? Cooperatives? Do you want a single, or would you prefer to have one or more roommates? Do you even want to live on campus? How important are housing considerations to you? Write down your thoughts.

Racial, Ethnic, Religious, Cultural, and Stylistic Diversity 0 1 2

How important to you is the racial, ethnic, religious, cultural, and stylistic diversity on campus? Is this something that you want to pay special attention to? Think about the importance that campus diversity plays in your decision and write down some thoughts on the subject.

Sports and Sports-Related Scholarships 0 1 2

If you are a high school athlete, how seriously are you thinking about continuing your sport in college? How important to you are the division you will play in; the strength of the program, the coach, and the other players on the team; the training facilities; whether you are actively recruited, and the scholarship package? Do you want to zero in on specific schools based on these considerations? Write down your thoughts.

WHAT TO DO WITH WHAT YOU'VE LEARNED

Okay, let's consolidate what you've just learned. Enter your ratings (0, 1, or 2) for each of the factors on the following list:

- Size of school _____
- Urban or rural setting _____
- Proximity to home _____
- Climate _____
- Cost/financial aid _____

Academic schedule	_____
Curricular and grading philosophy	_____
Curricular strength in subjects of greatest interest	_____
Fit with special talents, skills, or interests	_____
Housing arrangement	_____
Racial, ethnic, religious, cultural, and stylistic diversity	_____
Sports and sports-related scholarships	_____

Now take all the factors you scored as 2s and thus considered to be very important, and rank them in the order they matter *most* to you. Then do the same with the factors that you scored as 1s and thus considered to be important. Let the zeros drop off the list; if they are unimportant to you, you won't need to be further distracted by them. Assemble your rank-ordered list of factors in your workbook. This rank-ordered list of factors should now steer your search for schools. Now, it's time to dive headlong into the search itself and to figure out where to apply.

MAKING YOUR LIST

Now that you know what's most important to you, you should be able to winnow down the list of hundreds and hundreds of schools. Chances are, though, you will still feel confused about how to proceed.

Stay with us.

Get a new three-ring binder (separate from your *Campus Confidential* workbook) where you can start to capture information about your college search, and fill it with paper and dividers so you have a separate section for each school. From now on, every time you go online or go to your local bookstore to research schools, you'll bring this ring binder with you. It will be the *only* place you record information about your college search. This way, you'll always know where your information is, and you'll never lose anything. From now on, any time you print something off from the Internet, get something in the mail from a school, or take notes on a particular school, put it behind the relevant tab or divider in this notebook.

Now, on with the search.

The first schools that go in your notebook are those that you have previously identified as "favorites" for whatever reason. Start a tab for each one.

Next add the schools that each of your parents went to if they went to college, and the schools where any of your siblings went or are going. Make a tab for each one.

No, we don't care right now whether you like those schools or not. We don't care whether you know *anything* about those schools right now. What we do know is that because your parents or siblings went to a particular school, you will likely get a thumb on the admissions scale as a "legacy." At some schools, this will matter a lot. At others, it won't matter as much . . . but the fact remains, it is at least *considered* at nearly every school, so you would be remiss to ignore this immediate advantage.

The next school that goes in your binder is your state college or university. There are at least two good reasons for this. First, because you are an in-state student, you will get a *significant* tuition break over what out-of-state students will pay for the same education. Second, because you are an in-state applicant, you will have an advantage in the admissions process. We don't care whether you are a National Merit Scholar or a C student. Your state college or university should be included in your admissions plan.

NOW WHAT?

Okay, so you now have at least one and perhaps several schools in your admissions binder. Now it's time to hit the books and the Internet and do some research. There are a whole host of reference materials available to assist you in your college search. The best of these guides include *The Insider's Guide to Colleges*, compiled each year by the staff of the *Yale Daily News*; Barron's *Profiles of American Colleges*, which comes complete with an interactive CD-ROM that lets you search for colleges by particular factors; *The Princeton Review's Complete Book of Colleges*, featuring a similar and useful "Counselor-o-Matic" college selection tool; and the *U.S. News and World Report Ultimate College Guide*.

You can, of course, drive yourself crazy with the amount of information available to you. We suggest that you spend an afternoon at your local bookstore, consult these various sources, choose the *one* that resonates best with you, and go from there.

Once you have your chosen reference in hand, strike off on your search based on the factors you identified as important to you. It may be helpful to start your search based on the size of the schools you want to consider, whether you want to be in an urban or rural setting, and the geographic region(s) you'd most like to be in. This should help limit your search to a more reasonable size. From there, the resources in the books we mentioned in the previous paragraph will help you work with the factors you identified in the exercise in this chapter to further narrow your search of the remaining schools. Next, look for schools that excel on all or most of the factors you deemed to be very important. Visit the schools' Web sites, take virtual tours, and continue to narrow the list.

WHAT ABOUT A SCHOOL'S REPUTATIONAL "RANK" AND ITS ADMISSIONS CRITERIA?

So far, we've been talking only about what schools are best for you, and now, at last, we come to the place where the rubber meets the road.

Yup, you guessed it.

The school's reputational "rank" in *U.S. News and World Report* and its admissions criteria—those dreaded ranges of GPAs and SAT scores that appear in the description of every school in the books. How should these considerations guide your selection of schools?

"I don't want to admit it, but the reputation of your college or university matters," Dan says. "Like it or not, much of the world places stock in reputation and excellence by association. When you start hunting for a job, the reputation of the institution you are coming out of carries weight. It had some impact on my success in applying to medical school."

"Yale's reputation has definitely impacted my career development very positively," Tom agreed. "I've frequently observed that when I'm involved in discussions of projects, that affiliation with Yale gives me an instant stamp of credibility and legitimacy."

So what do you do? Junk all the work you just did trying to figure out what was important to you and just apply to the highest-ranked school you get into?

No, no, no . . .

First of all, you need to remember that the *U.S. News and World Report* rankings are driven by a number of factors, including things like student selectivity and graduation rates that might not matter a whit to you. The rankings likely also completely ignore many factors, like a school's social atmosphere, course or major offerings, or geographic location—things that may be extremely important to you.

So do you junk the rankings then?

Not exactly. But the reason we didn't put "reputation" into the factors for consideration is that we wanted you to decide the factors that mattered to you on your own. Once you've done that, you can consider the reputation of schools that offer all or most of the things that are important to you and let it guide you in making close calls.

"I think that schools' reputations fall into broad categories, like 'great,' 'good,' 'fair,' and 'never heard of it,'" Zoe says. "Wellesley's reputation certainly had a positive impact for me in grad school and beyond, but I don't think the distinctions are that meaningful outside of these bands."

And what of the admissions criteria, then?

When you apply for admission to college, a school will examine an entire constellation of factors in considering your candidacy. The first factor can be broadly referred to as your high school academic record, comprised of your high school (or prep school) GPA, your weighted and unweighted rank in class, the range and difficulty of courses you have taken, and the grades you earned in those courses. The second factor is your standardized test scores, including your SAT and the scores you've earned on any SAT II exams. The third factor, referred to generally as "extracurricular activities," includes the in-school and community activities you participated in and the degree of commitment and leadership you displayed in each, any interesting things you did with your summers, and any special talents or skills you possess. The fourth factor is the strength of your letters of recommendation—whether these letters shed any real light on you as a person and single you out from the crowd. The fifth factor is how you performed on your application essays—whether you were able to make a compelling case for your candidacy and whether your writing style in these essays seems to match up with the writing sample you provided on the SAT. The sixth factor is the on-campus or alumni interview. Other factors that may also be considered include your ethnicity, your major or expressed area of curricular interest, and whether your family has an alumni relationship with the college or larger university.

Looking at this list of factors, you can see that your high school grades and your test scores are going to play a crucial role in where you will be accepted. So within reason, you need to be realistic about the schools you apply to.

"You *do* have to be realistic about your chances," Kevin noted. "Although you never know what ultimately makes the difference up or down to an admissions committee, you'll know if you've got a good shot at the premier schools or not. If you don't, no amount of legerdemain will deceive them into thinking that a guy with a 3.0 GPA and no sports skills belongs at Princeton."

"But don't be afraid to apply to reach schools," Lyndsee challenged. "You never really know what they're looking for to fill out the class, and you might be the one who has it!"

As you consider schools, you should place them into one of three categories: (1) "likely" schools—places where your credentials generally exceed the published averages for that school and where your admission is likely; (2) "coin toss" schools—schools where your credentials generally fall in the middle of published averages and where, therefore, many students with credentials similar to yours will be accepted *and* rejected; and (3) "reach" schools—schools where something *else* in your admissions package: a knockout essay; a killer interview; consistent, stellar recommendations; an exceptional talent in a particular area; or an obvious "fit" with the school in some other way—is going to have to carry you.

As you do this, do not disqualify any school simply because it is a reach for you. The best colleges and universities in the United States are reach schools for nearly all their applicants. No one is a surefire admit to Yale, Williams, Juilliard, or the like. Just be honest about the way you categorize your schools so that you don't end up with too many reach schools and not enough coin tosses.

How many, you ask?

Ultimately, the number of schools that you take to the next stage of the process is up to you. At a minimum, though, we suggest that you apply to no fewer than two fit schools, six to eight coin toss schools, and two to four reach schools. We've known good students who have applied to as many as twenty-five schools; and, of course, if you are one of the lucky people who get admitted by early action or early decision to their top-choice school, you'll only apply to one. For most people, though, the final number tends to range between eight and fourteen schools.

Your list will be a work in progress for some time. Get comfortable with that reality and don't try to hurry yourself down to a final list. Part of the decision-making process requires some time for you to process and reflect on all the information and impressions you are gathering. As your friends go through the same effort, they may identify schools that deserve a look from you, and vice versa. Be sure that you never apply to a college just because your friends do—but if their research turns up a school that fits your profile, by all means add it to your list.

Oh, and there's one more really important thing.

You need to make yourself and us a promise. Repeat after us:

"I will not apply to any school that I would not attend if it was the only place I got in."

In addition to pure common sense, this is also a matter of economics and time management. You will already be applying to a pretty large number of schools. That will be both expensive and time-consuming to do well. There is simply no point in going through this process with a school if you know you wouldn't actually go there if you got in.

A WORD ABOUT GUIDANCE AND COLLEGE COUNSELORS

Finally, a word about how best to use your high school guidance or college counselor. Unless you attend a well-heeled prep school (where there will be plenty of individualized attention, though the application rules may be more restrictive), you will likely find your high school's guidance office to be overwhelmed. The combination of too many students and insufficient manpower can lead even the most

well-meaning counselors to give you short shrift or to suggest schools to you based on an incomplete understanding of your needs and interests.

This situation can be immensely frustrating, and, if you don't take control of the process, can end up pigeonholing you into a category you might not want to be in. Fortunately, there are ways to ensure that you get the attention you need from your overburdened guidance office or college counselor.

First of all, *always* be polite and respectful to these people. For one thing, they are ridiculously overworked and underappreciated. For another, in many cases they wield a lot of power. Many high school guidance counselors, particularly senior ones who have been around awhile and have come to know many college admissions officers personally, can significantly affect your chances of admission positively or negatively with a well-placed word or two about you when these admissions officers come to your school, or with a good suggestion about what to emphasize on your application to a particular school. These people decide how to prioritize the dozens and dozens of recommendation letters they have to write each season. They hold a wealth of historical knowledge about which candidates from your high school were successful in gaining admission to a particular school, what their credentials were, and what, if anything, might be transferable to your application. Finally, they also know a lot about trends in the admissions game and how your high school is presently viewed by different colleges and universities.

It is important to get on the “good side” of the high school guidance counselor assigned to you—and there are very specific and effective ways to do this. First, if you haven't done so already, stop by during a free period or before or after school and introduce yourself. Shake hands and make eye contact. In the spring of your junior year, before SAT season but after the crush of the college admissions process has subsided, schedule an appointment with your counselor and bring along a copy of your updated résumé to help the counselor quickly get better acquainted with who you are and what you are all about. If you are reading this at the beginning of your senior year, do this *right away*. Have a frank conversation about your grades and where you hope to attend college. Seek the counselor's advice, but don't be afraid to push back if he or she suggests schools that you don't like or that you feel are not good fits for you. If you know what your top-choice school or two is already, make that known. Finally, as the meeting ends, thank the person for his or her time, promise to keep him or her up-to-date about your scores and accomplishments, and pledge to show up for your next meeting with a well-researched list of schools to discuss.

There is nothing a high school guidance counselor appreciates more than a polite, respectful, and well-prepared student. Guidance counselors are in place to help you—but you first need to be able to help yourself.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

The Insider's Guide to Colleges

Barron's Profiles of American Colleges

The Princeton Review's Complete Book of Colleges

U.S. News and World Report Ultimate College Guide

www.collegeboard.com (database on colleges, scholarships, financial aid, and majors; online registration for SATs; downloadable applications)

www.usnews.com/usnews/edu (college profiles)

www.collegebound.net (advice and resources for college search)

www.nytimes.com/college (searchable directory of articles on majors or fields of study)

www.collegenews.com (college newspapers)

www.campustours.com (links to virtual campus tours, maps, and pictures)

www.collegiatechoice.com (handheld college walking tour videos—for sale)