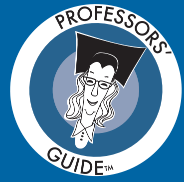

1 STARTING YOUR SEARCH

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Starting any big project is always intimidating. And starting the college search is particularly so, since there's so much pressure associated with the process that everyone going through it—even those with the calmest possible temperaments—is going to have periods of feeling totally stressed out. The worries are many: How do I know where to apply? Will I have good enough scores on the SAT or ACT? Are my high school grades or class rank up to snuff? Do I actually have to be interviewed? What should I write on the personal essay? Will I get in where I want to go? Will I be able to afford where I want to go? Could I be making a decision that will ruin my career possibilities after college—or even ruin my life? Do I even know what career I want to have? And how does anyone actually manage to survive applying to college, anyway?

We know that, for many, this can be a tough process. But it doesn't have to be as hard as a lot of people make it. It's a lot easier if you take it step by step. And, more important, it is a lot easier if you have clear, straightforward, and simple advice about what to do at each stage of the process—not to mention if you know some of the insider secrets. That's what we're here to give you. To get you started off on the right foot—and to help you get acquainted both with the colleges and with yourself—we start off with some basics and explain:

- The 10 questions you should ask yourself as you begin your college search
- Learning the landscape: the 6 major kinds of colleges
- The 8 things that make better schools better

10 Questions to Ask Yourself as You Begin Your College Search

Most people start their college search by looking outward: they look at websites, talk to parents, teachers, counselors—maybe even read books! But really the best way to start is by looking inward. That's because with so many colleges, which differ in so many ways, it's really important to get in touch with *your* priorities and values before you start on the path to applying to—and picking—a college. Going to college is a huge life change and you want the college you choose to be in line with who you are and what you want out of college. So take the time to read over, and think carefully about, these questions:

1. What reasons do you have for wanting to go to college? Although this might seem like such a no-brainer that there's no point in answering it, take some time to generate and write down all the reasons you might have for wanting to go to college. Do you want to get a world-class education? Do you want to prepare for some lucrative career? Are you looking to expand your social life and, in the best case, meet that special someone? Are you hoping to break free of your parents and develop a greater sense of independence? Do you just have no other idea of what to do with the next four or five years of your life? Whatever your reason or reasons, having a list and referring to it from time to time can help you determine more clearly what you want to get out of college and help you judge if particular colleges will really provide you with what you are looking for.

2. Do you have a single passion, or lots of broad interests? Some high school students have a particular area of study or an activity that they know is their true love and that they are absolutely certain that they want to pursue for the years to come. Been interested in climate change since you were 10? Always wanted to

study bats? Been intrigued by international relations for as long as you can remember? Then you might want to think about colleges that are specifically devoted to that pursuit or have special programs in the area. However, if you like lots of subjects or just learning for the sake of learning, then a more general college, with strengths in lots of fields, might be just what you're looking for.

REALITY CHECK. Be careful not to confuse a passion with a passing interest: there are many tales of a "passion" that faded after the first semester of college. And don't feel bad if you don't yet have a passion—most people in high school (and even beyond) don't.

3. Have you had any experiences at a college (perhaps in summer programs or concurrent enrollment programs), and what did you learn from them about what you like or don't like in a college? Some high school students have already had some experiences in a college setting, which can provide you with a leg up in sorting out what you might want to look for when choosing a college. If you're one of these students, ask yourself whether you liked the kinds of classes you took; whether you liked the living arrangements at that sort of college; whether you liked the kinds of students they had at that college; whether you liked being away from home; and so on. How you felt about a proto-college experience can provide you with important clues about what you might like in a real college experience.

4. Which courses in high school did you like and not like—and, most important, why? Reflecting on your educational experiences in high school can help you figure out what kind of educational experiences you want to have in college and what kinds you want to avoid. Did you like classes that were smaller and had lots of discussion or did you think larger classes where the teacher mainly lectured were more to your liking? Did you like classes that emphasized creative thinking or ones in which memorization was the main mode of study? Did you prefer classes that emphasized group

work or ones with more individual work? Thinking about what learning experiences worked best for you can provide models for what kind of instruction you'll value in a college.

5. Do you enjoy classes that challenge you intellectually, or do you prefer easier classes? Do you like to have classmates that are as smart (or smarter) than you, or do you prefer to be at the top of the class? Naturally, no one wants to attend a school where everything is over their head or everyone is smarter than he or she is, but that shouldn't be a major worry because the college-selection process usually prevents these outcomes. However, you do have some choice about whether you want to be at a place where the students are academically gifted or study really hard—and the professors gear their courses toward smart, hard-working students—or a place where students are less academically inclined and the professors lower their expectations (and their course content and assignments) accordingly. Knowing your level of comfort—or discomfort—in challenging (and, in some cases, competitive) settings can be a help in knowing what sort of college to aim for.

6. Do you prefer to have more freedom in selecting your courses, or do you like having a predetermined curriculum? While high schools tend to have fairly strict requirements and relatively few electives, colleges vary between ones with large numbers of required courses and ones with extremely few courses you have to take (some even have an "open curriculum" in which there are no requirements). Do you like the idea of having control over much of your college program or would you rather the college structure your courses for you? Would you like fixed, set-out majors or would you like the possibility of designing your own? Knowing how you like to structure your education can help you evaluate whether the requirements at the various colleges you might be considering are right for you.

7. Do you like being in a place with lots of extracurricular activities going on—and, if so, what kinds of activities might you like to engage in? If you are a person who is always going out on the town, you're not going to be happy in a town where everyone clears out on the weekends and there's nothing to do. But that same town might

be just fine for the person who just wants to hang out in the library all week long. Everyone has different kinds of interests, so consider how high a priority it is for you to attend a school with lots of social life and parties, many sporting events to watch, sports opportunities for you to participate in, a lively arts scene, an emphasis on community service or political action, a religious community that suits you, or other activities that interest you. Of course, interests can often develop or change, so consider not only what you like doing now but also what you think you might want to explore a little down the road.

8. Are you looking for a place where the student body is diverse, or would you like most of the students to be pretty much like you? Consider the level of diversity (social, political, gender, ethnic, religious) at your current school and how you experience it: Are you in a high school with mostly the same kinds of students, and would you welcome the opportunity to interact at college with different kinds of students? Or are you in a high school with great diversity and are just fine with that. Or do your high school experiences make you realize that you'd rather be with students more like yourself? Whatever your answer is, you should take it into account when thinking about colleges: with over 4,000 choices you should be able to find one with a student body you feel comfortable in.

9. What kind of town or city do you like to live in, and where would you like it to be? Do you like the idea of life in the big city or is a rural small town more to your liking? Or perhaps life in a smaller town with easy access to the big city? Is there a particular region of the country—or a particular kind of climate—that you feel is where you'd most like to be? Keep in mind you have to live in the place for four or five years—and “living” is more than just taking courses.

10. Do you want to get away from your parents or do you want to keep one foot in the nest? Distance from home is often a major factor in selecting a college, because, many students like the idea of being able to come home for holidays and weekends. On the other hand, some students want to stay as far away from the coop as they can. Know which type you are.

REALITY CHECK. Once at college, students often find that the easy drive home is actually longer than they'd like to be driving on a regular basis. And besides, the activities at college (whether academic or otherwise) end up being quite a bit more fun—or, in the case of upcoming exams and paper due dates, more pressing—than making the trek home. So try to think through the realities of the situation—how much you want to spend time with your friends vs. time you spend with your family even now.

Learning the Landscape: The 6 Major Kinds of College

Now that you've had a chance to reflect a little on your own experiences, aspirations, values, and expectations, it's time to turn to the colleges themselves—the places where you'll be spending, and enjoying, the next four, five, or six years of your life. But before beginning to consider any particular colleges—whether ones you've heard of or will hear of as you carry out your college search—it's important to understand the major differences among kinds of college and what these differences might mean to you. So here are some of the main distinctions to consider at the very outset of your college search:

1. College vs. university. Although people talk all the time about "college," actually, if you're being precise there's a real difference between a "college" and a "university." A university is an institution of higher education that offers both undergraduate and graduate degrees, while a college offers only undergraduate degrees. The name of the school is the giveaway: if the name is the *University of X* or *X State University,* it's a university, and if the name is *X College* or *X-County Community College,* it's a college.

At universities there tends to be more of an emphasis on research (though this doesn't mean that the teaching isn't great, since researchers can often incorporate their research into their teaching). And generally, universities will be larger, with larger departments, many more course offerings, and more instruction (especially in introductory courses) done by graduate students or lecturers. Colleges, on the other hand, typically emphasize teaching, so you might find smaller classes, more student-focused faculty, and, in many cases, a more supportive and less anonymous environment.

EXTRA POINTER. **Many universities are made up of separate "colleges," such as the College of Arts and Sciences (which is the "Liberal Arts" College by another name), the College of Education, College of Business, College of Engineering, College of Health Sciences, and the College of Architecture. But, basically, you're still going to a university, even if you're in one of these colleges. In most cases, you can take classes in different colleges and switch between them if you want.**

REALITY CHECK. **Some universities have so-called Honors Colleges, which they market as equivalent to an elite, highly selective college. If you're thinking of going to one of these, take a hard look at how many classes you will take as separate honors classes and how many regular classes you will take. In our experience, even when you're in the Honors College at the University of X, you're still at the University of X—and not in the fancy, marquee college that your honors program claims to be equivalent to.**

2. Public (or state) vs. private. *Public* institutions—which include the state university system as well as community- and city colleges—are partly financed by tax dollars, whereas *private* universities and colleges are financed only by private sources of funding, such as tuition and donations. It's usually the case that for *in-state* residents, public colleges are cheaper than private colleges (though, in some states, well-capitalized private colleges can compete on price with the state university system). And although in some, especially economically depressed, states public institutions might have less good facilities than richer private schools, there's a good number of private institutions that are financially strapped and hence not as well equipped and staffed as one might think.

REALITY CHECK. Community colleges and city colleges will in almost every case be cheaper than state universities and easier to get in to.

BEST-KEPT SECRET. Some state universities, especially in larger states, try to make up for shortfalls in state revenues by charging the full, out-of-state price to students not from their home state (this can easily be three or even four times the in-state price). If money is an issue, in many cases *private* colleges will be cheaper than out-of-state public colleges. (However, if you can pay the whole bill, you might want to consider out-of-state public universities, where your ability [and willingness] to pay big bucks might increase your chances of admission.)

3. 4-Year vs. community (or 2-year) college. 4-year colleges (or universities)—which, for many students, take five or six years to complete—culminate in a *bachelor's* degree of some sort (most commonly a BA—bachelor of arts—or BS—bachelor of science—but also possibly a BFA—bachelor of fine arts—BSW—bachelor of social work—BEng.—bachelor of engineering—or BArch.—bachelor of architecture).

By contrast, community or 2-year colleges—which, for many students, especially working students, take three, four, or even more years to complete—offer a variety of *associate's* degrees (typically an AA—associate in arts—AS—associate in science—or AAS—associate in applied science). The AA and AS degrees are meant for students who plan to transfer to a state university for their last half of college and typically parallel the first two years of a bachelor's program at a 4-year college. The AAS degree is usually meant to be a vocational degree, leading to careers in such fields as

health care, criminal justice, paralegal, IT management, and many others (indeed in many cases the community college partners with local industries to place graduates in jobs in their chosen field).

4. Big vs. small. Colleges come in an unusually wide variety of sizes and, especially for students whose level of comfort and enjoyment depend on the size of group they'll be interacting with, this can be a key factor to consider. *Mega* universities are those with over 50,000 students; there are only a few universities in this country that are this large. *Large* universities are those whose student body is between 25,000 and 50,000 students; there are a good number of these, typically the flagship (that is, main) campus of state universities. *Middle size* universities are those between 10,000 and 25,000 students; many, many universities fall into this category. *Smaller* universities are those with between 5,000 and 10,000 students; many colleges fall into this category. *Small* colleges have between 3,000 and 5,000 students, and *ultra-small* colleges are those that have fewer than 3,000 students (there are a few of these).

The larger the university or college is, the more likely it is that you'll have lots of majors, a broad variety of social activities, and many different kinds of students. On the other hand, you'll probably find larger classes (especially in the lower division, that is, first two years) and sometimes wait-lists to get into classes; a bureaucracy that rivals that of the DMV on a bad day; and, for some students, a feeling of anonymity. Smaller colleges will typically provide smaller classes, more opportunities to interact with the professors, quieter campus settings, and fewer activities. On the other hand, smaller colleges can also lack access to more sophisticated research equipment, for example in the sciences, and might offer fewer majors or a more limited course offering than their larger brethren (if you're doing very advanced or sophisticated work in some field you might run out of courses and have to take them at a neighboring college—sometimes a good idea, sometimes not so hot).

5-STAR TIP. The smaller the school you're considering, the more carefully you need to check out whether they offer the subjects you want to study. You might not find chiropterology (the study of bats), Akkadian (an ancient Semitic language), or ethnoarcheology (the study of contemporary cultures in an effort to interpret an archeological site) at a small or ultra-small college.

5. General versus special focus. Most colleges and universities in this country are broad-based, all-purpose schools that offer a wide variety of subjects in which you can take courses. But there are also a number of "special-" or "single-focus" schools, that is, institutions in which over 75 percent of the students are studying some particular subject. Some examples include arts schools (in which students might study painting, sculpture, or visual design); music conservatories (in which students study performance or composition); STEM schools (in which students concentrate on science, technology, engineering, or math); military academies (in which you might train to be an officer in one of the services); and a number of others. In addition, there are single-sex colleges (in which you'll find only men or women but not both); colleges that have a religious affiliation (though usually you need not be a practicing member of that religion or even, in some cases, a member at all to attend); and special mission colleges (which include HBCU—historically black colleges and universities and HSI—Hispanic-serving institutions).

Pick any of these only if you're very sure you want to spend most of your time on the area of focus, and you want to be around other students with interests very similar to your own. And keep in mind that in most cases you could study a particular field both at a special-focus or a general-purpose college. For example, you could be a music major both at a music school or a regular college (though, of course, the instruction will be more focused at a dedicated music conservatory).

6. Highly selective vs. somewhat selective vs. not-at-all selective. Some schools admit only a very small percentage of the applicants and have classes composed almost entirely of students with top grades in high school and very high SAT or ACT scores (along with other impressive accomplishments). Others admit students with a wider range of academic achievements and of standardized tests scores. And still others take all students who have completed a high school degree with a specified list of courses. In general, highly selective schools tend to have much more of an academic focus: the courses and assignments will be more demanding, students spend most of their time on academic pursuits, the students are more likely to show up at class fully prepared, and the students will do more of their work outside of class. Less selective schools might have an increased focus on social activities and, to some degree, as a consequence, less emphasis on academics: the courses generally are pitched to be accessible to a wider level of student abilities, and it will be far easier here to find students who blow off class or show up for quizzes totally unprepared. Finally, at a not-at-all selective school (including an open admissions school), the students will be representative of the college population as a whole: some students are very motivated, other less so, and still others not at all.

8 Things That Make Better Schools Better

Pretty early on in your college search you're likely to realize that some schools are the rock stars of the college scene. There's a buzz at your high school when their reps show up to give presentations. There's excitement and huge crowds around their tables at the college fairs. Some of your classmates become starry-eyed when their names come up. You know someone really smart who went there. But you might wonder: What's so great about these schools? Is what these schools have to offer so much better than what might be found at other, less talked-about colleges? Ultimately, the best college for you is going to be the one that's the best fit in a variety of areas: educational, social, financial, and many others. But on the educational side of things, as you start scoping out the college scene, you'll be better able to assess the offerings of any college you might be considering if you know about the academic features that distinguish the top-of-the-line colleges.

1. The faculty teach the classes. You would have thought that at every college it's the professors who teach the classes. Wrong. At many schools—in addition to the regular faculty that is composed of assistant, associate, and full professors—there is a cadre of lecturers, adjuncts, and graduate students who are hired to teach courses that, for whatever reason, the regular faculty doesn't want to teach (usually introductory or large lecture courses). Now we're not saying that every non-regular faculty member is bad, just that they're usually not as committed to the institution and its students (especially adjuncts teaching at many colleges); sometimes not as experienced (especially graduate students who might be teaching for the first time); and generally not required to do research (hence the teaching is more likely to be from the textbook rather than from their own research).

5-STAR TIP. **To find out what percentage of courses are taught by non-regular faculty compare the *schedule of classes*, available on the web (which usually lists the names of the people teaching the courses that semester) with the list of departmental faculty, available on each department's web page (which lists all the regular faculty members). Courses with no faculty listed on the schedule are often courses taught by non-regular faculty, sometimes hired at the last minute.**

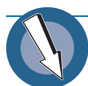
BEST-KEPT SECRET. **At schools that employ a large number of graduate students, there are usually rules about when graduate students are allowed to teach their own course (as opposed to leading discussion sections or doing just the grading). Better schools require a master's degree, or two to four years of graduate courses, or a year-long apprenticeship; less good (and more financially strapped) schools allow grad students to teach their own course their very first year of graduate school, often with no special training. Find out what is required at any school you're considering attending. Ask.**

2. The professors do research. You might have thought that there was a sharp divide between teaching and research and that whatever obscure research the professor might be doing has no bearing on the course you might be taking from him or her. But that's not really the case. Professors who are used to doing creative and original work are more likely to ask *you* to do original and creative work, rather than just master the textbook or learn lots of little facts (indeed, some professors might have you study current articles in the fields, not just textbooks). Also, the fact that the professor does research will become more important in more advanced or upper division courses, in which the professor's being "up" on the goings on in his or her field—not to mention his or her own research in the field—can greatly influence the quality, and the currency, of the material you're being taught. And, at

many top schools, advanced undergraduates can have the opportunity to work with the professors on the professors' research projects, even coauthoring articles in some cases—something you can't do if your prof isn't actually engaged in research.

5-STAR TIP. Some major research universities have groups of faculty concentrating on some issue or topic within their field—for instance, computational biology, physical applied mathematics, or cognitive and brain science—and have undergraduate courses to go with it. If you're applying to such schools, be on the lookout for such "groups."

3. The classes are smaller. There's a big difference between sitting in a lecture with 350 (or 550 or 750) students and a small class with only 20 or 25 students. In the first, you typically sit back like a sponge, passively absorbing and writing down what the professor has to say. In the second, you can have a two-way human interaction, where the professor knows the students, engages them in class discussion (which generally is a more effective way to learn than by listening to a lecture), and offers a variety of out-of-the-classroom learning experiences. To see what the size of classes is at schools you're considering, check the enrollment column in the college's schedule of classes or just ask some student.



EXTRA POINTER. As part of its rankings, *US News & World Report* includes information on percentage of classes under 20 students and percentage of classes over 50 students. Also, check out the student-to-faculty ratio: the smaller the ratio, the more likely it is you'll have small classes.

4. The instruction is on a higher level. You might have thought Physics 101 is the same at every school. Not so. At the better schools

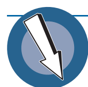
the material is presented on a higher level—often at a faster pace, with more emphasis on analysis and theory, and with less memorization (depending on the field). And there can be fewer tests and quizzes (the professor expects the students to master the basic "vocabulary" of the course without having to be tested on it), and more papers, studies, or projects. Also, in skills-based courses—math, physics and chemistry, world languages, and many other fields—there can be tiered courses, that is, many different levels of the same course, thus affording you an opportunity to take a more advanced version of the course if you have the relevant background, interest, or major.

5. The students are better—and work harder. Being among stronger and more motivated students—rather than among scores of slackers—helps motivate you to engage more fully with your classes and makes class discussions more lively, collaborative projects more fruitful, and study groups more helpful. Plus, it enables professors to offer more state-of-the-art and challenging courses. Professors have to tailor their classes to the level and ability of the students. So, at better schools you'll get classes that haven't been tamped down to accommodate lower levels of students' ability and motivation.

6. There are fewer requirements—and more ways to satisfy them. One mark of a less good school is that there is an exact list of distribution classes that everyone has to take and no one can place out of. What's bad about this is that, no matter what your level is, you're stuck with the same basic level (or, as it's called in the trade, "service") course that everyone has to take. Even if you are fine with taking that class, you're likely to find lots and lots of students who aren't; their bad attitude tends to drag down the whole class experience. Now add into the equation a professor bummed out by having to teach lots of students who don't want to be there and have no interest in the subject matter—and a professor who knows that the class has to be structured so that everyone, more or less, can pass the course.

Much better is the structure in which either there aren't so many requirements or where the requirements are grouped in *areas* and there are a good number of courses that satisfy each

area requirement. Check the college and the departmental websites to see what's required at your choices of schools.



EXTRA POINTER. In some disciplines—for example, various kinds of engineering, music, world languages, and other fields—there's an exact four- or five-year program at every school. In these fields, a program of specifically required courses is not a negative. Also, at some schools there is a required first-year program, for example, a humanities or a "great books" sequence that is taught at a very high level—an exception, then, to the above generalization.

7. The curriculum is more sophisticated. Better schools generally offer a wide range of *majors* and *minors*, including subjects you wouldn't find in your high school, for instance, nanotechnology, international relations, oncology nursing, or Pashto. You're also likely to find many interdisciplinary *programs* (collections of courses from different departments or from different colleges within the university), such as Southeast Asian studies, religion, medieval and renaissance studies, logistics and transportation, and many, many others; and many *concentrations* (groupings of courses within a single department), for example, legal philosophy or behavioral economics.

8. The educational facilities are better. Not all schools are equally well capitalized (or, in street language, have equal amounts of money). As a result, not all schools have equally good facilities, for example, science labs and equipment, computer facilities, libraries, or other high-priced items. The leading universities generally offer top-level facilities, such as a particle accelerator (for physics), spectrometer (for optics), or a 3D printer (for art or engineering). If your interests turn you in a particular, equipment-driven direction, make sure the schools you're considering have what's needed for you to fulfill your dream.