



The College Search Handbook

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Research

The second step in the college selection process is what might be called the research phase, in which you gather information in order to learn what college options are available. When you begin meeting individually with your guidance counselor in the spring of your junior year, you will be asked to think about the characteristics you want (or don't want) in a college. You might also want to work through a computerized college-selection software program with the goal of identifying a preliminary list of 10-25 colleges you might want to consider.

Once you have done this, you need to spend some time gathering information about different schools. The more time you spend carefully comparing what different colleges have to offer, the more likely you are to make a good final decision. Unfortunately, this is the part of

the selection process most students don't devote enough time and attention to.

There is a lot of information available about colleges, some of it good and some of it bad. Not only do colleges employ sophisticated marketing techniques to encourage your interest, but information and advice about college admissions has become a growth industry. Magazines such as U.S. News and World Report and Money devote entire special issues (their biggest-selling issues) to college admissions, and at many bookstores only the "True Crime" section takes up more space than the section devoted to college guidebooks. The more research you do and the more information you gather, the better and more objective the picture you will form about what a given college is like, and the better consumer you will become.



Sources of Information

“Junk Mail” from Colleges

One of the hidden benefits of being a prospective college student is that the amount of mail you receive will increase dramatically. The source of this additional mail is something known as the Student Search Service.

When you take the PSAT in grades 9-11, you will be asked to indicate if you would like to receive information from colleges interested in students like you. If you check “yes”, your name will appear on mailing lists that can be purchased by colleges.

Requesting Information from Colleges

If you don't receive unsolicited mail from a college in which you are interested, you should contact the college for information. Every college and university is anxious and willing to send you literature (you generally will not be placed on a college's mailing list before the spring of your junior year), and requesting info is simple. You may request info by visiting the college home page, by mail, or by phone.



How should you deal with this junk mail? It is probably worth taking a few minutes to look at each piece. The fact that you received it indicates that the college which sent it is interested in students with your general characteristics. In addition, the more you familiarize yourself with the ways in which colleges sell themselves (there is no small college that doesn't feature personal attention), the better a consumer you'll be. If you receive mail from a college that looks interesting, even one you've never heard of, send back the reply card and learn more about it.

What should you request? The most valuable piece of literature you can get is a viewbook (sometimes known as a prospectus or candidate's guide). The viewbook is the fancy promotional brochure with all the color pictures, but it will provide you with the basic information you need as well as a feel for what the college thinks makes it distinctive.

You may also want to ask for a catalogue (because of the cost of printing catalogues, many colleges make the catalogue available only on-line), the official college or university listing of course offerings and regulations. Depending on your individual interests, you may also request information on financial aid, athletics, or specific academic programs.

Sample Inquiry letter

Your Address
Hometown, VA
Date

Office of Admissions
College of Hard Knocks
City, State Zip

Dear Sirs:

I am a junior at <insert high school name> and am interested in receiving information about <insert college's name>. Would you please place me on your mailing list and send me a catalogue, viewbook, application and information about financial aid?

Thank you for your help.

Sincerely yours,

Your name

College Representatives Visiting Your High School

Each fall admission representatives from numerous colleges and universities will likely visit your high school to meet with interested students. Juniors are encouraged to sit in on a couple of meetings, while seniors should meet with the representative from any college they are considering. Meeting with a member of the admission staff one-on-one or in a small group is not only a great opportunity to learn more about the college, but it may also prove beneficial in the admission process, as admission officers often have a significant role in evaluating applications from schools they visit.

College Nights

Each year representatives from many in-state and out-of-state colleges will attend local "College Nights" or "College Fairs." These programs provide an opportunity for students to collect information about a variety of college options and talk with representatives from schools to which they plan to apply.

Friends

Your friends, particularly those who are already in college, can be good sources of information about colleges. As with other sources of information, weigh the opinions of your friends and acquaintances against the other information you have. What is right for you may be very different from what is right for your friends. Don't rule out colleges based on information from friends you wouldn't trust to buy you lunch.

On-Line Resources

The web is rapidly becoming the best source of information about colleges. Almost every college has its own home page, and the information available from the home pages ranges from virtual campus tours to evaluations of courses and professors to e-mail addresses for students and faculty members to applications that can be downloaded. It takes some time, but surfing the web is the best way to research colleges other than visiting. In addition, there are a number of sites devoted to college admissions.



Guidance Office Tools

The guidance office in your high school should be a strong resource for your college search. Many times it will contain a full library of college reference materials for your use in researching colleges. These will vary from school to school, but often include:

Family Connection from Naviance – This online database will be available to assist students and parents through the college search and application process. At this secure site, you may research colleges, view the schedule of colleges visiting your school, and access many valuable college counseling resources

College Catalogues - The guidance office will likely contain catalogues from many colleges and universities. The bookshelf where the catalogues are kept should also contain viewbooks from many colleges.

College Files - In the guidance office you may also find a file cabinet with files on many colleges and universities. Typically, the files for each college will include applications, profiles, and other brochures.

College Guidebooks - The guidance office likely seeks to maintain a complete library of reference books related to college admission. The collection includes a variety of both

objective and subjective college guides as well as books about the admission process, campus visits and application preparation, SAT preparation, and scholarship and financial aid.

Comprehensive College Guidebooks – Any of these books contains listings with facts and figures on most colleges and universities. They are helpful if you are looking for basic information, but don't put the information in any kind of context. Most of them can, however, also be used for weight training.

- The College Handbook
- Peterson's Guide to Four-Year Colleges
- Barron's Profiles of American Colleges

Subjective Guidebooks and College Ratings – These books select a group of schools (usually 300-400) and do a several page write-up on each that attempts to reflect the flavor or personality of the school. They are based on a limited number of student opinions rather than comprehensive research, so you should treat these as a source of information but not as a definitive source of information. One author says he never visits campuses, but can tell exactly what a school is like if he gets two student questionnaires back. Another author calls college residence halls and asks the person who answers the phone what the college's best majors are. A third book relies heavily on quotations from students, and students have learned that the more outrageous the quote, the more likely it is to appear in print.

- The Fiske Guide to Colleges
- The Insider's Guide to the Colleges
- The Best 310 Colleges
- Cool Colleges
- Rugg's Recommendations on the Colleges
- Profiles of American Colleges

Recommended Reading about College Admission (compiled by Mr. Scott Mayer of St. Christopher's School, Richmond, VA)

The College Admission Mystique by Bill Mayher

Mayher is a former preparatory school counselor and has written a series of essays with a sensible approach to issues such as how to talk to your child about college and the importance of visiting colleges without thinking about how easy or hard they might be from an admission perspective. He also has essays on using the college counselor to the best advantage, finding financial aid, and managing the emotional issues involved with the college transition.

The Gatekeepers: Inside the Admissions Process of a Premier College by Jacques Steinberg

We think that this is the best of all of the books that "take you behind the scenes of the admission process." The book is based upon a series of articles that Steinberg wrote for the *New York Times* in which the author was permitted to be with the admission committee of Wesleyan University (CT) throughout the application process. The book provides a good description of how selective admission works and the details involved in the selection process. Its weakness lies in its "buy-in" to the myth that attending a prestigious college is

the sole path to success in life and its focus on the personal friendship between one admission officer and one high school counselor as part of the dramatic narrative.

The Chosen: The Hidden History of Admission and Exclusion at Harvard, Yale, and Princeton by Jerome Karabel

This book provides historical context for how college admission has evolved into a selection process that incorporates multiple objective and subjective criteria. While the book focuses on the “Big Three,” the example is representative in varying degrees to admission at any college with a selective process. Yes, it is over 600 pages of text, but it is a fascinating read with tremendous insight into why and how the admission process has changed over time and operates today.

Crafting a Class: College Admissions and Financial Aid, 1955-1994 by Elizabeth A. Duffy and Idana Goldberg

Like The Chosen, this book is likely more of an academic study about the admission process than most students and parents want to read. We’ve listed it because its basic premise helps to break what we think is one of the most commonly held myths about college admission: namely, colleges just seek to admit “well-rounded students.” The reality is that colleges want a “well-rounded *class*” that is composed of both well-rounded students and those that are a bit pointy. Meeting the needs of the institution’s overall goals while selecting a class that rounds out those priorities is what guides admission decisions.

Colleges that Change Lives: 40 Schools You Should Know about Even if You're Not a Straight-A Student and Looking Beyond the Ivy League: Finding the College that's Right for You by Loren Pope

Pope’s belief is that the small liberal arts college provides the most significant benefits for undergraduate education. He also emphasizes that the college search should be about finding the “right fit” and not selecting a school because of its name, perceived reputation or rank. Both books provide information about several different colleges and advice on how to find what the right fit for you will be. While some of the general information about the college admission marketplace and some of the specific school descriptions are a bit out-of-date (the books were written and revised in the 1990’s), the main themes and college suggestions are still very meaningful in helping students conduct a successful college search.

College Rankings Exposed: The Art of Getting Quality Education in the 21st Century by Paul Boyer

Boyer provides insights into really understanding what information rankings provide and why rankings are not necessarily a good measure in evaluating colleges. More importantly, this book helps students discover criteria other than rankings as they look to find the right fit in their college search. His chapters, *What Students Really Need to Learn*, *The Five Criteria to a Quality Education* and *Measures of a Quality Education* are not only helpful in the college search, Mr. Mayer has recommended these chapters to college freshmen as they make the high school to college transition and to help them get the most out of their college experience.

Playing the Game: Inside Athletic Recruiting in the Ivy League by Chris Lincoln

This book provides great insight into athletic recruiting at selective schools. The focus in the book is on the Ivy League and NESCAC (Div. III), but the information is representative

of athletics and the admission process at many selective and highly selective colleges and universities.

Letting Go: A Parents' Guide to Understanding the College Years by Karen Levin Coburn and Madge Lawrence Treeger

This book, now in its fourth addition, is regarded as one of the best resources in helping parents with children that are making the transition from high school to college. The authors are administrators in student affairs and student counseling at Washington University in St. Louis, MO.

Making the Most of College: Students Speak Their Minds by Richard Light

Over the past couple of years, many colleges have recommended or required all incoming students to read this book. Light's advice is based upon his experiences and research as an academic advisor and professor at Harvard University. While the research is based upon the experiences of Harvard students over a ten-year period, most of the findings and advice is useful to all soon-to-be college students.



Visiting Colleges

Of all the ways you can gather information about colleges, the best by far is visiting campuses. Visiting colleges is important for several reasons. Actually being on a campus will tell you things you couldn't possibly learn with any amount of reading, and you are likely to react very differently in person to schools that look identical on paper. Several years ago a senior planned to major in music until he went to visit his first choice school. Within ten minutes he realized that everyone at the school was much more serious about music than he was. The trip itself was expensive, but in the long run

saved him and his family both time and money. A second senior had a very different reaction. Every time he visited a campus, he found himself thinking more about the school he ultimately attended.

More importantly, the more colleges you visit, the better you will know what you want - and don't want - in a college. The more you visit, the better you get at it, and after several visits you will find yourself looking for specific things. Under no circumstances should you choose to attend a school you haven't visited.

Visits: How Many and When?

There is little agreement among experts regarding when is the best time to visit. Some believe that you should never visit during the summer, as you don't see a campus in all its ambiance, and yet others believe that summer is an ideal time to visit, because you can visit a number of schools in a short period of time.

In truth, there is not one "best" time to visit. It is generally preferable to visit when school is in session, but it can be hard to find the time. Colleges generally don't encourage juniors to visit before the spring, as members of the admission staff are busy reading seniors' applications. A number of parents have commented that spring break is a good time to arrange visits, and many colleges complete their academic years by early May. The demands of fall during the senior year, particularly for those participating in varsity athletics, do not leave much time for college visits. We recommend that every student visit at least 4-5 colleges before the beginning of the senior year in order to have several points of comparison.



What you get out of a campus visit depends on where you are in your own decision-making process. During the junior year, a campus visit focuses on college characteristics, while during the senior year you are doing comparison shopping, focusing on the culture or personality of the school. What this means is that visits done before the junior year are of little value, other than as a way of comparing different types of colleges (small vs. large, urban vs. rural, etc). It also means that you should take the time to do a formal visit even if you think you know a college well (i.e., you have been to football games since before you can remember or your sister went there or you live down the street). And it means that

you may want to think about a follow-up visit before you make your final decision. In order to hold on to your sanity, you should limit yourself to two campuses per day, and by all means avoid the 6-day,

15-college, “if it's Tuesday, this must be Bucknell” grand tour. Seeing too many colleges in too short a time will probably mean you remember none of them.

Setting Up a Visit

You should generally call the Admission Office at a college to set up a campus visit. Many colleges allow you to schedule visits on-line as well. Telephone numbers can be found in most general guidebooks. Calling saves you time if an appointment is not available, allows you to find out what kind of arrangements the college makes, and also allows you to ask questions and request relevant information to help you prepare for your visit. You should call at least two weeks prior to your planned visit.

Colleges deal with campus visits in different ways. Many smaller colleges will give you an individual appointment, including an interview, while other institutions prefer to conduct a group information session and tour several times a day. If you plan to visit on a weekend, you may have difficulty having a formal tour, as many college admission offices are not open at all on weekends, and those that are usually close Saturday at noon.

With or Without Parents?

Should you visit with parents or by yourself (for purposes of this section we shall consider visiting with a friend to be visiting by yourself)? There is no right or wrong answer to this question, and every family has to make the decision that's right for them. Please allow a bit of editorial opinion:

I was one of those jerky teenagers who thought my parents didn't know anything, and when it came time to look at colleges I wanted them to be uninvolved. Fortunately, they got smarter as I got older, and when I worked in college admissions (and especially when I became a parent) I realized what an important role parents can and should play in this process. I therefore think it's a good idea for parents to go along on visits other than the senior year, spend-the-night-in-a-dorm-and-go-to-classes visit. Parents provide an extra set of eyes, and you want them to feel invested in and comfortable with your college choice when you call them freshman year and ask them to send money. One good strategy is to split up once on campus in order to cover more territory.

What Should a Visit Include?

In one sense, choosing a college is choosing a place to live. You wouldn't buy a house without checking out the bedrooms, the kitchen, and the back yard, and likewise you should make sure when you visit a college campus that you check out all the facilities that might be important to your quality of life. A good college visit should last a minimum of three hours and should include some unscheduled time for wandering around.

Here are some of the things a good college visit should include:

Campus Tour

Regardless of what else your visit includes, you should arrange to do a formal campus tour (and group information session, if that's the alternative to a personal interview). Is the campus easy to get around? What is the mix of old buildings/new construction? Are the older buildings in good shape? Is the campus clean? Do you go in a lot of buildings or does the tour guide just point out things?

Visiting a Class

The reason you are going to college (presumably) is to be a student. Sitting in on a class in an area of interest will tell you a lot. Are most classes small or large lectures? How interested are the students in the class? How prepared are they? Does the professor (assuming it is a professor and not a teaching assistant) seem to know the students? Do students remain after class to ask questions?

Visit the Residence Halls

Are they coed or single sex? How many students per room, and are they organized by suites? Do most students live on-campus, and is housing on-campus available/required? Are the residence halls quiet enough to study in? Are they clean? Do they have laundry and kitchen facilities?

Eat a Meal

Food is very important to most college students. Is the food edible and/or plentiful? What options are available under the meal plan? Are special diets available? Do faculty members eat with students?

Check Out the Library

Because the library is one of the most valuable tools available to a college student, you should look it over carefully. Does the library maintain open stacks? What are the library hours (seeing how late the library stays open on Friday and Saturday nights is a good indication of how serious the academic program is)? How extensive are the journal and periodical collections? Is the library on-

line with other libraries? Are students studying in the middle of the day, and at night is the library quiet or a social center?

Academic Equipment/Facilities

Be sure to ask to see any academic facilities or equipment that are important to you. For example, you may want to see the telescope or the surface of the dance floor, or computer laboratories, or the foreign language center, or specific multimedia equipment, particle accelerators, etc. While you will have many experiences at the college or university you select, your primary goal is to receive an education. To the extent that particular equipment and facilities will enhance your pursuit of your education, you should be sure you are comfortable with the college's offerings.

Visit the Student Union

Do students hang out in the middle of the day? What kinds of souvenirs/personal items/books other than textbooks are available in the bookstore? What kinds of posters for clubs, organizations, and events are there?

Athletic Facilities

How extensive are the athletic/fitness facilities for students who are not varsity athletes?

Other

Depending on your particular needs and interests, you might also arrange to meet with individuals such as the Financial Aid Director, a coach, the Pre-med Advisor, or a professor in your area of academic interest.

Time to Wander Around

It was Yogi Berra who pointed out that "You can observe a lot just by watching", and that advice is particularly relevant when visiting college campuses. Perhaps the most valuable way to spend time is to walk around, observe, and engage members of the campus community in conversation.

After the Visit

As soon as you finish your visit, take some time to make some notes. What did you like, or not like, and why? What are your parents' reactions?

Sample Questions to Ask During a Visit

- What is the average class size in the freshman year? Largest?
- What is the average class size in upper-level major courses?
- How many courses are taught by professors? Graduate assistants?
- By the senior year, how many professors does the average student know well?
- What percentage of the faculty is part-time?
- What is the typical academic load for a student?
- How is registration handled? How difficult is it to get the classes you want?
- How good is the advising system? Who does the advising?
- When do you have to declare a major?
- What are the most popular majors? What are the strongest and weakest departments?
- How many hours per week do most students study?
- Are there research opportunities available for undergraduates?
- What foreign study programs are available? How many students pursue study abroad?
- How easy is it for the average student to get access to a computer? Is the campus networked? Wired? Wireless? To what extent do faculty utilize technology in the classroom?
- How many students per residence hall room?
- What percentage of students live on campus? Is housing guaranteed for four years? Are there kitchen and laundry facilities in the residence halls?
- Are the residence halls quiet enough to study in?
- How are roommates selected? Is it possible to change?
- What does the meal plan include? Are special diets available?
- Do students leave on weekends? What happens on a typical weekend?
- How would you describe Greek life at the college/university? What percentage of students participates in the Greek system? Are there social alternatives?
- How prevalent are drugs and alcohol on campus?
- What is the surrounding community like? Is there a good relationship between “town and gown?”
- What varsity/intramural sports are offered? How popular are athletics?
- What are the most active extracurricular organizations on campus?
- How safe is the campus? What security measures are available?
- What health facilities are available on campus?
- Is there an honor system? How does it work?
- Where do most students come from?
- What percentage of students enter graduate school in four years?
- How many freshmen do not return for the sophomore year?
- When students transfer out, why do they leave?
- What career planning services are available?
- Is there opportunity for internships? How does the program work?
- What percentage of graduates obtain jobs or are in graduate school six months after graduation?
- What are some of the things that make this college or university stand out from similar institutions?
- What do people like best? Least?
- What are the big issues on campus?
- What is the political mood on campus?
- How diverse is the campus?
- How much has tuition increased during the past four years? What is the projected increase during the next couple of years?
- Is admission need-blind?
- How is financial aid packaging done? Does the college meet 100% of demonstrated need?
- Are there non-need scholarships available?
- How easy is it to find a job on campus or in the community?

Things to Look For

- How clean is the campus?
- Is there a good mix of old and new buildings? Are the old buildings well maintained?
- Are people friendly?
- Do professors know their students?
- How crowded is the library in the middle of the day?
- How crowded is the student center in the middle of the day?
- What kinds of information about concerts, lectures, etc, do you find?
- What do people talk about?

Tips on Interviewing

- The personal interview is not as important in the college admission process as it once was. Many institutions, particularly large ones, do not give personal interviews, and those that do interviews usually treat them as informational rather than evaluative. Nevertheless, an interview can be a wonderful opportunity to learn more about a college and to leave the interviewer with a sense of the qualities that make a student special.
- The best interviews most resemble a normal conversation. You should approach an interview as if you are interviewing the college as well as it interviews you.
- Be on time.
- Dress neatly but comfortably. You need not wear a coat and tie if it makes you uncomfortable, but don't wear army fatigues unless you are actually in the armed forces and on maneuvers.
- Do your homework. Read through the college catalogue and other admission materials so you won't ask questions like whether the college has an English major. Use your research to put together a list of follow-up questions.
- Have an agenda. You should approach an interview with an idea of what you want to learn about the college and what you want the interviewer to know about you.
- Most interviewers will not deliberately go out of their way to make you "sweat" with difficult questions. They may, however, ask questions to make you think on your feet or defend your opinions. If you talk about your leadership, you shouldn't be surprised to be asked to define leadership, and you may be asked a question to determine if you follow current events. If asked a tough question, don't be afraid to pause while you think through your answer or even to say, "I don't know," but whatever you do, be sincere and don't try to BS.
- Don't hesitate to ask the interviewer how strong a candidate you are for admission (don't expect anything more than a rough estimate). You may want to take an unofficial copy of your transcript to the interview.
- Before you leave, make sure you have the name of the interviewer and after you return home write a thank-you note.

Thoughts about Financing a College Education

The only issue related to college admissions that will cause more anxiety for your parents than where you will go to college is how they will pay for it. A college education is the second biggest investment (after a house) made by any family, and there are few parents who can write \$50,000 checks without feeling it.

One of the myths about college is that “there are millions of dollars in unclaimed college scholarship claims every year.” Unfortunately, this is not the case. It is true that there are a few “exotic” scholarships that are hardly ever used, but 90% of the scholarship funds available each year are need-based and are controlled by colleges and by the government.

I make no claim to be an expert on financial aid (and given that it changes every year, no one may be an expert), but here are some general tips on applying for financial aid and looking for scholarships:

- You should not fail to consider any college because of cost. The more expensive the school, the more likely you are to qualify for help. You should have a frank conversation with your parents early in the selection process to determine if there are financial limitations. In deciding where to apply, you may want to have several financial “safeties” just as you have admissions “safeties”.
- Your eligibility for need-based financial aid depends on your family's ability to pay, as determined by a formula incorporating family income and assets. In general, the amount of aid you will qualify for is the difference between your family contribution and the total student budget for the college. If your family contribution is \$20,000, you will receive no aid at a public university costing \$20,000 and \$30,000 in aid from a university costing \$50,000 (assuming that the institution has the funds available to meet 100% of a student's need). Every year there are some students for whom it is less expensive to attend a private institution than a public university.
- There are two forms you may be required to fill out in order to apply for need-based financial aid. The Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) is the application for all federal financial-aid programs, and is the primary form most colleges will require you to fill out. Approximately 250 colleges, most of them private, require the PROFILE form produced by the College Scholarship Service. The PROFILE allows colleges to ask for more complete information in determining eligibility for institutional financial aid funds. Both forms can be picked up in the Guidance Office. The PROFILE is usually available in early October and the FAFSA in early December. Some colleges may require you to fill out institutional forms as well.
- Timing is important. You should complete both forms as soon as possible, as financial-aid is given “first-come, first served” at most institutions. The PROFILE may be completed with estimated tax information during the fall (you must supply actual tax information at the end of the year), while the FAFSA should be completed as soon as

possible after January 1. Submitting the FAFSA on-line will save 5-7 days of processing time. Both forms should be completed by February 1.

- If you qualify for aid, you will receive a letter from the college with a financial-aid package. A typical package includes some grant money, some loan (to be paid back after graduation), and possibly some work-study funds. Any scholarship monies you win from outside sources will generally count against the institutional funds.
- Your best source of information about financial aid is the financial aid office at any college. A particularly good book providing an overview of how financial-aid works is Don't Miss Out: The Ambitious Student's Guide to Financial Aid (Octameron Publishers).
- There are a number of non-need scholarships available every year. The majority of these are small in amount and tied to essay contests or other competitions, but an ambitious student can identify and apply for a number of these if he spends time researching them during the summer after the junior year. There is not one good source of these scholarships, but there are several books listing scholarships that may be in your guidance office. In addition, a website called FastWEB (www.finaid.org) contains the largest database of non-need scholarships available. Many colleges, particularly private colleges, offer scholarships that are not need-based. Traditionally these have existed to attract the very top students, but many institutions now offer sizable grants to help equalize the cost of public and private education.
- Any Virginia resident who attends a private college in Virginia qualifies for the TAG grant from the State Council of Higher Education. The TAG program provides a grant of approximately \$2500 to every state resident attending a Virginia private college. Contact the college financial-aid office for details.
- Many families will be contacted by for-profit scholarship search services offering to identify sources of scholarship aid for a fee. It is recommended that you steer clear of such firms, for it is unlikely that they will identify any aid sources you can't find with a minimum of effort. The Financial Aid administrators' website (www.finaid.org) includes information about scholarship scams.