

Self-Evaluation

The first step in choosing a college is evaluating yourself, your strengths and weaknesses, your likes and dislikes, what you want and need out of college. Who are you? How do you learn best? Why are you going to college, and what do you want to gain out of the college experience?

Choosing a college is in one sense choosing a place where you will live during the next few years. You should therefore

take into consideration the things that are truly important to your lifestyle in looking at colleges. If you can't stand cold weather, you probably shouldn't go to college in Minnesota or Maine. If you don't want to be known by your social security number, you might be more comfortable in a small college than in a large university. And if playing a sport is truly important to you, you should take that into consideration in your choice of college.



Some Questions to Help Evaluate Yourself

- What values are most important to you? What do you care about?
- How do you define success? Are you satisfied with your accomplishments to date? What do you want to accomplish in the years ahead?
- What kind of person would you like to become? Which of your unique strengths and talents would you most like to develop? What would you most like to change about yourself?
- What are your academic interests? Which courses have you enjoyed the most? Which courses have been most difficult for you?
- How do you learn best? Is there a certain type of teaching style you particularly enjoy?
- What do you like best about your high school? Least? What would you change or keep if you had the power?
- Is your high school record an accurate reflection of your ability? Are your SAT scores? Are there outside circumstances that have impacted your academic performance? What is the best indicator of your potential for college work?
- Which of your extracurricular activities (either at or away from school) mean most to you? Why?
- What accomplishment are you proudest of? Why?
- How would others describe your role in the school community?
- How would you describe the environment in which you've grown up? How has it affected your thinking? How has it helped/hindered you?
- What books have you read that changed the way you think?
- If you had a year to go anywhere and do whatever you wanted, how would you spend that year?
- Are you a self-starter, or do you prefer structure and direction?
- How important are the opinions of your parents, teachers, and friends to your decision making?
- What kinds of surroundings are essential to your well-being? Do you prefer a fast-paced environment where something is happening most of the time, or are you happy in a more relaxed environment?
- How would you feel about going to a college where other students were very different from you? Would you find it exciting or intimidating?
- What balance of study, activities, and social life suits you best? Are you turned on by intellectual things: books, ideas, issues, and discussion?
- Do you want an academic program where you must work hard and think hard, or would you prefer to make good grades without knocking yourself out?

- How well do you respond to academic pressure and competition? Is it important to you to be at the top of the class, or would you be satisfied to be in the middle or bottom of your college class?
- Do you prefer a school that consists of undergraduates only or do you want to attend a university that also includes graduate students?

Some Factors to Consider

Size

Probably no other factor will affect the kind of college experience you have as the size of the college you attend. Small colleges and large universities provide fundamentally different kinds of educational experiences (that is not to say that either is better, just different). Small colleges offer small class sizes, the chance to get to know professors and students on a more personal basis, and the opportunity to take leadership roles in campus organizations. They can also be stifling environments for some students. Large universities offer better facilities, more courses and extracurricular opportunities to choose from, and big-time intercollegiate athletics, but also large lecture classes and anonymity. Nationally,

the majority of colleges have under 2,000 students.

The very first decision some students make concerns size; for others, it is the last decision they make. Some students try to find the best of both worlds by looking for “medium-sized” schools out there, but they are few and far between, and most of them are very competitive for admission. Most people attracted to a medium-sized school as the best of both worlds assume that medium-sized schools are large enough to have good facilities and small enough to provide personal attention. It is entirely possible, however, that a medium-sized school may instead be small enough to have inadequate facilities and large enough to be impersonal.

Location

Location is important in two different respects. One is what part of the country you want to go to attend college. This involves answering questions such as how far away you want to be from home, how important climate is to you (if you want to go to college to play golf, you probably shouldn't go to college up north, because the course will be covered with snow for most of the school year), and whether you want to go to college with people from different or similar backgrounds. Many Virginia students want to remain in the Southeast for college. What they find is that there are a limited number of options in the entire Southeast if you want a certain type of school. For instance, there are as many

good liberal-arts colleges in Ohio as there are in the entire Southeast. There is also an argument to be made for going to college in a different part of the country in order to get a broader educational experience.

The second respect in which location is a consideration is the kind of community the college is located in. Do you want an urban campus with access to all the benefits (and negatives) offered by a city? Do you want to go to school in a “college town” where the college or university is the major employer and source of culture? Or do you want a college with an idyllic campus separated from civilization?

Campus Life

This covers a number of intangibles which combine to give each college its unique flavor. Do you want a school where most of the students are interested in ideas and learning, a school where most students are grade-conscious and work extremely hard, or a school where most students do enough to get by and are primarily interested in having a good time? Do you want a college or university where most students live on campus, or do you want the freedom to live in an apartment off-campus after the freshman year? Do you want a school that is politically conservative? Politically correct? Politically apathetic? Do you want to know most of the other students on

campus, or would you prefer some anonymity? Do you want a place where most people remain on weekends, or a place that offers lots of opportunities to leave campus at the end of the week? Do you want a college where Greek life is important? Do you want a school where varsity athletics are important?



Reputation

Too many students and parents put too much emphasis on reputation, thinking that college selection and admission is ultimately a matter of buying a name-brand diploma. “I want to go to the best college I can get into.” A college education is an experience rather than a brand name, and the best college is the one that is the best fit for your interests and your abilities, not the one with the biggest name. Reputation is worth paying attention to, but you



probably haven't heard of some of the finest undergraduate colleges in the United States. College reputations tend to run ten years behind reality, and you should be careful not to let someone else's opinion of a college substitute for your own judgment. Don't let someone you wouldn't trust to order your lunch convince you that a certain school is good or bad. Likewise, don't put too much heed in books and magazines that purport to rank the “best” colleges in America.

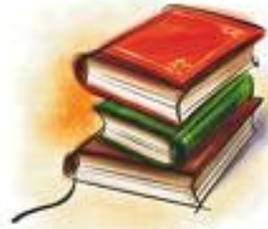
Cost

With the cost of a college education being the second biggest investment most families make after the cost of a home, there is no way that cost can't be a factor. With private college tuitions in the \$40,000-\$50,000 range, even families with the resources to afford such costs must ask if a college education is worth that much. That question is particularly relevant in Virginia, a state with unusually good public college options. The prevailing wisdom has always

been that a family should not rule out colleges solely on the basis of cost, that decisions about affordability should be made later in the process rather than sooner. If cost is going to be a factor, it is recommended that parents and students have a serious conversation about finances early in the decision-making process, and that a student think about having economic “safeties” as well as admission “safeties” on his/her list of college choices.

Major

Contrary to what many people think, choosing a college based on whether it offers a particular major program is relatively unimportant. You may be one of those rare individuals who knows exactly what he wants to do with the rest of his life (if so, congratulations, maybe you can give the rest of us some pointers), but no one should be expected to know what they plan to do with rest of their life at age 18 (or 22, for that matter). Most students who know what they plan to major in before they go to



college end up changing their minds several times. In addition, with very few exceptions (Engineering, Accounting, Pharmacy, Nursing, Elementary Education, among others) your major in college will not directly prepare you for a career. You can probably major in whatever you want and still prepare yourself for a career in medicine, law, or business. So be careful about putting too much emphasis on potential majors.



Advice For Athletes

If playing a sport has been an important part of your high school experience, you should think about whether you might want the opportunity to continue participating in college. Not only can participating in a sport significantly enhance the college experience, but athletic talent can be a boost in the admissions process at even the nation's most selective colleges.

Here are some guidelines for athletes regarding the college search process:

- Being an athlete should not change significantly the way you approach the college search process. Regardless of whether or not you are being heavily recruited for a Division I scholarship or are interested in walking on at the Division III level, you should factor athletics into the larger issue of what is the right kind of college environment for you. Don't sit back and wait to see what colleges show interest in you: determine which schools you are interested in attending and contact coaches at those institutions.

- Playing a sport in college, even in Division III, requires a more serious commitment than playing in high school. Be realistic about how important playing a sport is as part of your overall college experience.
- Similarly, be realistic about your own abilities. Several years ago, one of my students became convinced that he could play basketball for Dartmouth. When I asked him if he was good enough to start for the local public high school, he replied, “Of course not.” As bright as he was (he ended up going to Washington & Lee, where he didn't make the basketball team), he didn't realize how good the athletic competition is in the Ivy League. If you are not sure if you are good enough to play in college, talk to your coaches. In addition, look at athletes you've competed against who are playing in college. How do you compare?
- Once you determine that you have the talent and interest to play in college, think about what your ultimate athletic goals are. How important is winning a scholarship as opposed to having the opportunity to attend an institution to which you might otherwise not be admitted? Would you be happier making an ACC-level team but never playing, making a Division I roster with a chance to play junior or senior year, or being a Division III All-American?
- As a prospective college athlete, you may receive unsolicited letters of interest from college coaches. If you do, you should be flattered, but don't let your head swell too much. A college coach friend of mine says that letters and phone calls from coaches are meaningless, that it is only when a coach comes to see you play that the interest is serious. If you receive a letter with a questionnaire from a school you are interested in considering, you should fill it out and return it.
- You should not wait for coaches to contact you. You should take the initiative to contact the coach at any school you are interested in attending in the spring or summer of your junior year. Send a short letter expressing your interest along with an “athletic resume” listing your academic and athletic awards and credentials. Most college athletic departments now have a prospective student-athlete questionnaire on their website. You may also want to talk with your coach about contacting colleges on your behalf.
- If you want to play in NCAA Division I or Division II, you must be certified by the NCAA Initial-Eligibility Clearinghouse. To be eligible to compete you must have a grade-point average of 2.0 in 16 academic core courses and have a combined score of 1010 or higher on the SAT. (Your SAT score can be lower if your GPA is higher.) In order to be certified, you must fill out an NCAA Student Release Form after the end of your junior-year. This form is available from the Guidance Office, as are two publications from the NCAA, [Making Sure You Are Eligible to Participate in College Sports](#) and the [NCAA Guide for the College-Bound Student-Athlete](#). Send one copy directly to the Clearinghouse and give the other two copies to the Guidance Office so it can send your transcript to the Clearinghouse.
- How much being an athlete benefits you in the admissions process varies depending on the institution and where you rank on a particular coach's recruiting list. In Division I, the more a coach wants you, the less competitive you need to be academically. If you are

good enough to earn a scholarship, you will probably be admitted if it is judged you can successfully do the work. Even in the Ivy League, athletes compete for admission with other athletes rather than against the overall applicant pool. In Division III, the situation may be a little different. Athletic excellence may not get you admitted if you are not competitive for admission, and so many Division III coaches attempt to bring in as many players as possible in hopes that some of them will be admitted and capable of contributing.

- Being an athlete can make the admissions process easier in some respects and harder in other respects. Every college that fields intercollegiate teams, whether in Division I or Division III, is looking for students capable of playing, and a number of student-athletes have found that being an athletic recruit has earned them admission to more selective colleges than their academic record alone might make possible. Being an athletic recruit can be difficult in that you're rarely sure where you stand, because your chances of admission depend on your value to the college coach. A baseball player was admitted to a Division I school because he was a right-handed hitting catcher from Virginia, and a tennis player was admitted to an ACC school only because the coach was willing to invest scholarship money in him rather than ask him to walk on. The use of Early Decision programs for athletes at Ivy League and other strong academic institutions can also force a decision without the ability to know what all your options might be.



A Sampling of Small Colleges: Fewer Than 2,500 Students

South

Birmingham Southern Centre Davidson Eckerd Emory and Henry Guilford	Hampden-Sydney Hendrix Lynchburg Millsaps New College (FL) Oglethorpe	Presbyterian Randolph-Macon Rhodes Roanoke Rollins Sewanee	Stetson Transylvania Trinity U. VMI Washington and Lee Wofford
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North East

Allengheny Babson Bard Bates Bowdoin Clark Colby Connecticut	Dickinson Drew Franklin and Marshall Gettysburg Goucher Grove City Hamilton Hampshire	Haverford Hobart Lafayette Middlebury Muhlenberg St. John's (MD) St. Lawrence St. Mary's	Skidmore Swarthmore Trinity Union Vassar Washington College Wheaton (MA) Williams
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Midwest

Albion Beloit Carleton Denison DePauw	Earlham Grinnell Kalamazoo Keynon Knox	Lake Forrest Lawrence Macalaster Ohio Wesleyan Rose-Hulman	Wabash Wittenberg Wooster
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West

Cal Tech Claremont McKenna Colorado College	Harvey Mudd Lewis and Clark Occidental	Pitzer Pomona Reed	Whitman Whittier Willamett
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A Sampling of Medium Colleges: 2,500 to 5,000 Students

South

Elon Furman High Point	Loyola (LA) Mary Washington Mercer	Morehouse UNC-Asheville Rice	Richmond Samford Wake Forest
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East

Brandeis Bucknell Catholic Clarkson Colgate	Columbia Dartmouth Emerson Fairfield Holy Cross	Johns Hopkins Lehigh Loyola (MA) MIT Naval Academy	Princeton Rochester Tufts Weslyan West Point
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Midwest

Butler Case Western Reserve	Chicago Gustavus Adolphus	Kettering Oberlin	St. Olaf
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West

Air Force Academy Denver	Pacific Pepperdine	Puget Sound Santa Clara
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A Sampling of (larger) Medium Colleges: 5,000 to 10,000 Students

South

Charleston	Miami (FL)	UNC-Wilmington	Tulane
Duke	Ole Miss	Radford	Vanderbilt
Emory	UNC-Greensboro	Southern-Methodist	William and Mary

East

American	Drexel	Harvard	Rensselaer Polytech
Boston College	Fordham	Hofstra	Vermont
Brown	George Washington	Ithaca	Villanova
Carnegie-Mellon	Georgetown	Penn	Yale

Midwest

Northwestern	Notre Dame	Washington U
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West

Stanford

A Sampling of (smaller) Large Colleges: 10,000 to 20,000 Students

South

Alabama	Clemson	Kentucky	Virginia
Appalachian State	East Carolina	UNC – Chapel Hill	VCU
Arkansas	George Mason	North Carolina State	
Auburn	Georgia Tech	South Carolina	
Baylor	James Madison	Tennessee	

East

Boston University	Massachusetts	Northeastern	Syracuse
Cornell	New Hampshire	Rochester Inst. Of	
Delaware	NYU	Technology	

Midwest

Iowa	Kansas	Miami (OH)
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West

Cal-Santa Cruz	Oregon	Southern California
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A Sampling of Large Colleges: More than 20,000 Students

South

Florida	Georgia	Texas
Florida State	Louisiana State	Virginia Tech

East

Maryland	Penn State
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Midwest

Illinois	Michigan	Minnesota	Purdue
Indiana	Michigan State	Ohio State	Wisconsin

West

Arizona	Cal-Berkley	UCLA
Arizona State	Colorado	Washington

