

Steps to Choosing a College

1. Determine what is important to you

You need to consider what you want out of your college experience and what type of environment you will find comfortable. The following offers some suggestions for items that you may want to take into account when choosing a college.

- **Size of the college and the classes.** Do you like to know everyone on campus or would you prefer to see new faces. Would you be more comfortable in a small class or a class of 300? How do you learn better, in a lecture-style class setting or a smaller discussion-style setting?
- **Campus life.** What types of social events are popular on campus? Do the students stay on campus on the weekends? Are there fraternities and sororities? Are the athletic events popular? Are there clubs or organizations on campus that interest you?
- **Diversity.** Do the students come from your state or other states? Is there a mix of ethnic backgrounds?
- **Living accommodations.** Do most of the students live on or off campus? Is there adequate housing available? What are the residence halls like?
- **Location.** Would you prefer to live in a suburban, urban or rural setting? In what geographical location do you wish to live? What type of climate do you prefer? How far away from home do you want to go?
- **Type of College.** Do you want to go to a two-year, four-year, or a community college? Are you interested in a vocational/technical school? What is the school's academic calendar? Is it semesters or quarters? Are there block plans or year-round calendars?
- **Academic programs.** If you have a decided major, does the college offer it? Is the department well respected in the discipline? If you are undecided, are there a variety of majors offered at the college?
- **Academic standards.** What are the GPA requirements? What are the average SAT or ACT scores? Do not be discouraged if the average test scores are above your own scores. Remember it is the average, which means there are students both above and below the average.
- **Cost and financial aid availability.** Is the school affordable to you? What is the financial aid package the school is offering? Do not automatically eliminate a school from your list because of cost. Compare the financial aid packages from the schools you are considering. Sometimes, the more expensive schools are able to offer a financial aid package that may make it as affordable as a less expensive school.
- **Length of time it will take to earn a degree.** Ask about the average number of years students take to earn their degree at the institution.
- **Facilities that are available.** Are there adequate computer labs? What are the athletic facilities like? Is the library up to date? Will the health center and other student services meet your needs?
- **Placement rate or graduation rate.** What is the retention rate of the college? Does a high percentage of students graduate and find a job in their field? Do they get into graduate school? Is the career placement office helpful?
- **Safety on campus.** Is campus security readily available? What types of security programs, such as safe-ride or emergency phones, are in place?

2. Make a list of potential colleges

Based on the criteria that are important to you, make a list of the colleges that fit your requirements.

- Do a college search on-line. By answering a few questions, this tool can select colleges that match your criteria.
- Search the Internet and read books, magazines and newspapers to find out more about colleges.

- Request catalogs and view books from the colleges that interest you.
- Attend college fairs and speak with college representatives that visit your school.
- Talk to friends, family and your counselor for information and advice. Speak to alumni from your high school and find out their impressions.

3. Narrow your choices

Determine which of the colleges on your list best fit your criteria and interests.

- Read the catalogs and view books you have requested.
- If available, look at the college's home page and take a virtual tour.
- Schedule a campus visit at the colleges you have chosen. If a visit is not possible, call and ask questions

4. Apply to the schools that interest you

By now you should have narrowed down your list of choices and have an idea of where you would like to attend. Submit an application for each school. Some schools offer on-line applications as well.

You should choose several schools that interest you. Include one or two schools that are "reaches" or present an admission challenge. You should also include a couple of schools of which your qualifications match closely. Finally, remember to include one or two schools which you exceed the qualifications as "safety" schools. Make sure that you would be happy at any of the institutions to which you apply.

After applying you will need to begin focusing on how you will finance your choice. You should continue to search for scholarships and begin to research your financial aid options.