

Chapter 2: Starting Your College Search

The college search is an involved process, but it gives you a chance to sample a variety of schools to find what fits you best. The college search can be exciting, but it can also be very stressful.

Don't let the sticker price scare you away from any college — there are numerous ways to make college affordable which we cover in detail in Section III. In addition, there's a lot of bad information out there on colleges' expense. So before you cross off colleges due to cost, discern what really matters to you in an academic setting. College may be vocational, or it may be purely to learn. No matter what it is, finding what matters to you is the first step. If you want to attend an undergraduate school, here are some questions to start asking as you begin the college search.

In deciding where to apply, first consider your values. Do you value being close to home, or would you prefer to go elsewhere? Are you looking for schools with strong resources in your current favorite subject, or are you looking to have a school with a lot of potential choices? Perhaps you can find both. What about the size of the school? Your main concern may also be finding the sweet spot between affording college and getting a quality education. Considering what's important to you — and what isn't — is a good way to gain clarity about what you actually want from your educational experience. It can be helpful to write down the qualities you value next to aspects you would prefer to avoid. The key point in determining what you want is to listening to what *you* actually care about. Take this opportunity to break out of the 'should' to reflect upon what you really want. Once you have narrowed in on things you value, put them on paper and revisit them through the application process. Here are some of the things to consider while reflecting on what you want out of your college experience:

Academics. What are the academic programs that interest you most? Do you want a school with a liberal arts curriculum? Are you potentially interested in academic research? What sort of academic atmosphere do you want during your college experience? Would you prefer professors who are highly esteemed in their field, or professors who are eager to sit and talk to undergraduates for hours—are there places that offer both? Do you prefer large classes or smaller seminars?

Location. Do you want to be close to your family or far away? Do you prefer a rural, urban, or suburban setting? Do you care about the location's climate? Do you want to be near the mountains, the coast, or perhaps both? The difference in lifestyle and extracurriculars in a snowy place versus a sunny place is remarkable.

Size. Do you want a close-knit college experience where everyone knows, or knows of, everyone else? Or, do you want to attend a big school so you'll always have the chance to meet new people?

Public/Private. Do you have a preference for public or private school? Public schools tend to have more students from that state than private schools – is that a plus or a minus?

Housing. Do you want to live on campus all four years? Would living off campus in the surrounding area be affordable? Is it more expensive to be on campus, relying on the school's housing and meal plan?

Social life. Do you want to attend a school with prominent Greek life? Do you want a school that has more of a social scene on campus or off campus? How do you like to spend your weekends? Do you want your peers to come from similar geographic areas, share political/religious views, or be of the same gender/race/ethnicity as you? Do you want to go to a place that prides itself on a diverse student body?

Food. Do you require specific dietary or religious needs? Does the quality of the school's dining halls make a difference to you?

Athletics. Is a strong school athletic program important to you? Do you want a lively, sports-crazed atmosphere? Are you uninterested in or put off by sports?

Extracurriculars. Are there certain clubs or extracurricular activities that you want to join? Do you want to play intramural sports?

Finances. How much can your family or you realistically afford to spend per year on your college education?

Before you decide on colleges that best match your family's financial preferences, you should think deeply, consider all of these questions, and sketch out the characteristics of your *ideal college experience*. Then look to the many financial resources that are out there that could make that experience a reality.

We will discuss matching personal preferences with what colleges have to offer and the process of creating the college list in Chapter 4.