

How to Choose a College

Choosing a college or university can be a difficult decision. It's a decision that you probably have never made before. Unfortunately some parents don't give good advice either, in some cases because they didn't attend college themselves and don't know much about it, and in other cases because, regardless of whether they made a wise decision or not, they never learned how to choose a college wisely.

The problem is even more difficult when you consider that the question is not so much "What is the best school?" but rather, "What is the best school for me?" Of course we believe that North Park University is an excellent school. You probably already know, however, that no matter how proud of North Park we are, and no matter how good of a school this is, if it doesn't suit your needs you should choose another.

In choosing a school you'll want to apply an unusual mixture of determination and skepticism combined with flexibility and compromise. Once you decide what characteristics you are looking for in a school you'll want to find a school that matches your expectations quite well. You don't want to be swayed by someone's recommendation that goes contrary to your plans and desires, with a big exception. The admissions people, faculty members, and administrators have the advantage of first and second hand evidence. We've been to college, remained on campus after graduation, and read reports and articles about education. This leads to greater wisdom in assessing what's important to a good fit. So when you get advice to change your plan, you'll have to judge whether your specific self-understanding outweighs the advisor's general wisdom.

Step 1: Specify your target. It's a lot easier to select a good college if you know what you're looking for. Answering the questions below will help you determine what characteristics describe your version of an ideal school.

1. What sort of education do you want?
 - What special programs, such as exchange programs, internships, access to special lab equipment, ROTC, or building projects are important to you?
 - Do you prefer significant access to regular scholars or limited access to renowned scholars?
 - What balance do you want between a liberal arts education and vocational training?
 - Is there a specific field that you would like to study?
 - Are you especially interested in a hands-on education, a traditional education, service learning?
 - Do you prefer semesters or quarters? (Quarters typically have fewer classes at a time but a faster pace.)
 - What do you want your education to accomplish for you immediately after you graduate?
 - What do you want your education to accomplish for you in the long run?
2. What reputation do you want?

A famous alma mater can open doors for you. The Ivy League schools are the obvious choice for reputation but in each field there are other favorites as well.
3. Realistically, how competitive of a school could you get into? If it comes down to it, would you rather struggle at one school or thrive at one that is less demanding? You will develop life-long work habits while in college. Ultimately, would you do better by learning to rise to the challenge of a school that would seem to be too tough, or by exceeding expectations and taking on the role of a leader at a less demanding school?

4. What characteristics do you want in your school?

Your college years will be the next phase of your life. How do you want that life to go? Be sure to answer any of these questions that are important to you.

- Do you want to live close to home or experience a distant place?
- Do you want to live in a familiar environment or one that is very different?
- Do you prefer a place that is urban or rural?
- Do you prefer a climate that is warm, cold, temperate, damp or dry?
- Would you prefer a huge university with massive resources or a small school that offers more personal attention?
- Do you want to live on campus, commute from home, or commute from your own place?
- Are you interested in joining a fraternity or sorority?
- Do you want a religious school? If so, how liberal/conservative should the rules be for student behavior? How much should this influence the curriculum?
- Do you want a school that has a distinct political perspective? Even if not, do you want to avoid a school that would condemn your perspective?
- What sort of classmates do you want? Upper/lower class? Religious? Athletic? Conservative/liberal? White/Black/other? Ambitious/easy going? Academically focused/well rounded? Politically involved? Normal/exceptionally bright? Nerdy? Self-sufficient? Partiers? Free thinking? Homogenous or well-mixed? Your classmates will form your community. They'll be your competition, neighbors, roommates, and perhaps life-long friends.
- Do you want many extra-curricular activities? If so, which ones?
- How important is an attractive campus to you?
- How safe of a campus do you want?

5. Do you have any special criteria?

Are you intent on going to the same school as your father or your favorite movie actress? Do you want to attend school in the state where you were born? Will you go to the same school as your beloved? Do you need a coach who will improve your chances to qualify for the Olympics? Do you want to study under a particular professor? Do you prefer a campus where the allergen count is low? Make a note of any of these special criteria.

6. How much can you afford to pay?

Look into summer jobs, ask your parents how much they will contribute, and ask a few banks what they will contribute. Add in any special scholarships that you've earned. At this stage don't worry about scholarships from the school or government financial aid, since the schools will help you determine those amounts.

Step 2: Learn about each school under consideration.

- Ask all of the questions from above that are important to you. While some questions can be answered routinely, others are best answered with a campus visit while students and professors are around and classes are in session.
- What are the graduation rates and retention rates? This lets you know whether recent students have been satisfied enough to stay at the school, and successful enough to graduate.
- How successful are the graduates? Be sure to get the answer in a manner that is meaningful to you. You might prefer to hear the percentage of graduates that get accepted into post-graduate schools, or the median salary of alumni. (Note whether statistics are for your program or university wide.) How many students find a spouse while in college?
- Are alumni satisfied with their experience at the school?
- What does the school consider it's greatest strengths?
- What does the school consider it's worst weaknesses?
- Would you feel comfortable at the school?

- Would you get a good education at the school?
- Would you grow as a person at the school?
- Would you gain valuable experience at the school?
- What are your chances of getting accepted?
- What are the campus crime statistics?
- Is the school properly accredited?
- What is the student/faculty ratio and what is the average class size?
- How well qualified are the professors (often measured in percent with terminal degrees)?
- How much is tuition and how much is available in scholarships/financial aid? Many schools routinely offer very generous financial aid packages, so don't dismiss a school just because the tuition is high.

Step 3: Compare each school with your standard. It's possible that a school will seem attractive even though it doesn't satisfy the criteria that you've identified (or that it will seem unattractive even though it does match your criteria). If this happens try to determine whether your impression is unduly influenced by something that doesn't really matter much, or whether your criteria should be adjusted.

Suggestions by others: http://www.quintcareers.com/choosing_a_college.html

Our advice for prospective foreign students is at:

http://www.northpark.edu/home/index.cfm?northpark=International.Int_Main