Tips for parents on finding a college match

How can your child find colleges that match his or her needs? First, identify priorities. Next, carefully research the characteristics of a range of schools. Finally, match the two. Here are some college characteristics to consider.

Size of student body

Size will affect many of your child’s opportunities and experiences:
- Range of academic majors offered
- Extracurricular possibilities
- Amount of personal attention your child will receive
- Number of academic resources (e.g., books in the library)

In considering size, your child should look beyond the raw number of students attending. For example, perhaps she’s considering a small department within a large school. She should investigate not just the number of faculty members, but also their accessibility to students.

Location

Does your child want to visit home frequently, or is this a time to experience a new part of the country? Perhaps he would like an urban environment with access to museums, ethnic food, or major league ball games. Or maybe he hopes for easy access to the outdoors or the serenity of a small town.

Academic programs

If your child knows what she wants to study, she can research the reputations of academic departments by talking to people in the fields that interest her. If your child is undecided, as many students are, she may want to choose an academically balanced institution that offers a range of majors and programs. Students normally don’t pick a major until their sophomore year, and those students who know their major before they go to college are very likely to change their minds. Most colleges offer counseling to help students find a focus.

In considering academic programs, your child should look for special opportunities and pick a school that offers a number of possibilities.
Campus life

Your child should consider what college life will be like beyond the classroom. Students have to maintain a balance between academics, activities, and social life. Before choosing a college, your child should learn the answers to these questions:

- What extracurricular activities, athletics, clubs, and organizations are available?
- Does the community around the college offer interesting outlets for students?
- Are students welcomed by the community?
- Is there an ethnic or religious group in which to take part?
- How do fraternities and sororities influence campus life?
- Is housing guaranteed?
- How are dorms assigned?

Cost

In considering cost, look beyond the price tag. For most students, today’s college costs make finances an important consideration. At the same time, most colleges work to ensure that academically qualifies students from every economic circumstance can find financial aid that allows them to attend.

Diversity

Your child should explore what she might gain from a diverse student body. The geographic, ethnic, racial, and religious diversity of the students can help students learn more about the world. Investigate which student organizations or other groups with ethnic or religious foundations are active and visible on campus.

Retention and graduation rates

One of the best ways to measure a school’s quality and the satisfaction of its students is to learn the percentage of students who return after the first year and the percentage of entering students who go on to graduate. Comparatively good retention and graduation rates indicate that responsible academic, social, and financial support systems exist for most students.
Recommendations: Student self-assessment

This form assists your college counselor in writing your recommendation. The more specific details you can give us, the more thorough your college recommendation will be. This form will also help you with the entire college application process, especially in preparing for interviews and writing admissions essays. Expect to spend three or four hours on this task, which should result in a document of three to eight pages.

Name: ________________________________

Date: ________________________________

1. School activities: List the activities you have participated in, the number of years, and the amount of time per week you spent, and what you have gained or learned from each activity. Consider artistic, athletic, literary, community service, and leadership positions.

2. Which activity was most important to you? Why?

3. What do you consider your most important activities outside of school? List jobs, paid or voluntary; religious activities; hobbies; travel; music; art; and drama. Include the number of years of your involvement and the amount of time you spent on the activity weekly, and explain why this activity was significant to you.

4. In or out of school, which awards and honors have you received? Which elected offices have you held?

5. What book(s) have had the greatest impact on you? Why?

6. Describe the academic accomplishment (major paper, science experiment, artistic project) you are most proud of, and tell why you take pride in it.

7. What kind of learner are you? Which academic setting or assignments make you thrive? What interest you?

8. List your three most distinguishing or most admirable qualities. Explain each in several sentences.

9. What do you hope to accomplish in college and after? Consider your career goals and your broader goals.
Dos and don’ts on writing the college application essay

A great application essay will present a vivid, personal, and compelling view of you to the admissions staff. It will round out the rest of your application and help you stand out from other applicants. The essay is one of the only parts of your application over which you have complete control, so take the time to do a good job on it. Check out these tips before you begin.

DOs

Keep your focus narrow and personal

Your essay must prove a single point or thesis. The reader should be able to find your main idea and follow it from beginning to end. Ask someone to read just your introduction to see what e or she thinks your essay is about.

Essays that attempt to be too comprehensive end up sounding watered down. Remember, it’s not about telling the committee member what you’ve done – they can pick that up from your list of activities – but about showing them who you are.

Prove it

Develop your main idea with vivid, specific facts, events, quotations, examples, and reasons. There’s a big different between simply stating a point of view and letting an idea unfold in the details:

- **Okay:** I like to be surrounded by people with a variety of backgrounds and interest.

- **Better:** During that night, I sang the theme song from *Casablanca* with a baseball coach who thinks he’s Bogie, discussed Marxism with a little old lady, and heard more than I ever wanted to know about some woman’s gallbladder operation.

Be specific

To avoid clichéd, generic, and predictable writing, use vivid, specific details.
Okay: I want to help people. I have gotten so much out of life through the love and guidance of my family, I feel that many individuals have not been as fortunate; therefore, I would like to expand the lives of others.

Better: My mom and dad stood on plenty of sidelines until their shoes filled with water or their fingers started to freeze or somebody’s golden retriever signed its name on their coats in mud. I think that kind of commitment is what I’d like to bring to working with fourth-graders.

DON’Ts

Don’t tell your readers what you think they want to hear

Most admissions officers read plenty of essays about the charms of their university, the evils of terrorism, and the personal commitment involved in being a doctor. Bring something new to the table, not just what you think they want to hear.

Don’t write a resume

Don’t include information that is found elsewhere in the application. Your essay will end up sounding like an autobiography, travelogue, or laundry list. Yawn.

Overloaded: During my junior year, I played first singles on the tennis team, served on the student council, maintained a B+ average, traveled to France, and worked at a cheese factory.

Don’t use 50 words when 5 will do

Eliminate unnecessary words.

Okay: Over the years, it has been pointed out to me by my parents, friends, and teachers – and I have even noticed this about myself, as well – that I am not the neatest person in the world.

Better: I’m a slob.

Don’t forget to proofread

Typos and spelling or grammatical errors can be interpreted as carelessness or just bad writing. Don’t rely on your computer’s spell-checker. It can miss spelling errors like the ones below.

After I graduate form high school, I plan to work for a nonprofit organization during the summer.

From that day on, Daniel was my best fried.
Twelve myths about paying for college

Billions of dollars in financial aid are available to those who need help paying for college. Yet a lot of misinformation clouds the facts about what type of aid is available and who is eligible. Here are some myths dispelled for those confronting the process of securing financial aid.

**College is just too expensive for our family**

- Despite the media hype, a college education is more affordable than most people think, especially when you consider that college graduates earn an average of $1 million more over the span of their careers than high school graduates. The average yearly tuition at a four-year public college in 2006-2007 was just $5,836. There are some expensive schools, but high tuition is not a requirement for a good education.

**There’s less aid available than there used to be**

- In fact, student financial aid in 2006-2007 rose to a record level of $135 billion. Most students receive some form of aid. Less of this aid now comes in the form of grants, however; most aid is awarded through low-interest loans or institutional and other grants. You should carefully consider the financing packages you’ve been offered by each college to determine which makes the most financial sense.

**My family’s income is too high to qualify for aid**

- Aid is intended to make a college education available for students of families in many financial situations. College financial aid administrators often take into account not only income but also other family members in college, home mortgage costs, and other factors. Aid is awarded to many families with incomes they thought would disqualify them.

**My parents saved for college, so we won’t qualify for aid**

- Saving for college is always a good idea. Since most financial aid comes in the form of loans, the aid you are likely to receive will need to be repaid. Tucking away money could mean that you have fewer loans to repay, and it won’t make you ineligible for aid if you need it. A family’s share of college costs is based mostly on income, not assets such as savings.
I’m not a straight-A student, so I won’t get aid

- It’s true that many scholarships reward merit, but most federal aid is based on financial need and does not even consider grades.

If I apply for a loan, I have to take it

- Families are not obligated to accept a low-interest loan if it is awarded to them. One financial aid administrator recommends applying for aid and comparing the loan awards with other debt instruments and assets to determine the best financial deal.

Working will hurt my academic success

- Students who attempt to juggle full-time work and full-time studies do struggle. But research shows that students who work a moderate amount often do better academically. Securing an on-campus job related to career goals is a good way for you to help pay college costs, get experience, and create ties with the university.

Millions of dollars in scholarships go unused every year

- Professional scholarship search services often tout this statistic. In fact, most unclaimed money is slated for a few eligible candidates, such as employees of a specific corporation or members of a certain organization. Most financial aid comes from the federal government, although it is a good idea to research nonfederal sources of aid.

My folks will have to sell their house to pay for college

- Home value is not considered in calculations for federal aid. Colleges may take home equity into account when determining how much you are expected to contribute to college costs, but income is a far greater factor in this determination. No college will expect your parents to sell their house to pay for your education.

I should live at home to cut costs

- It’s wise to study every avenue for reducing college costs, but living at home may not be the best way. Be sure to consider commuting and parking costs when you do this calculation. Living on campus may create more opportunities for work and other benefits.

Private schools are out of reach for my family

- Experts recommend deferring cost considerations until late in the college selection process. Your most important consideration is to find a school that
meets your academic, career, and personal needs. In fact, you might have a better chance of receiving aid from a private school. Private colleges often offer more financial aid to attract students from every income level. Higher college expenses also mean a better chance of demonstrating financial need.

**We can negotiate a better deal**

- Many colleges will be sensitive to a family’s specific financial situation, especially if certain nondiscretionary costs, such as unusually high medical bills, have been overlooked. But most colleges adhere to specific financial aid award guidelines and will not adjust an award for a family that feels it got a better deal at another school.