



What to Look For In a College

Attending college is a major investment of time, money, and energy. Applying to college also requires the same investment. It is important that you become an informed consumer so that you can wisely choose which colleges are the best investments for you. Below is a resource guide to finding important information about colleges. As no single source will give you a complete picture of any college, the research process should involve getting as much information from as many places as possible.

When researching colleges, keep these factors in mind:

1. Preferences and Needs - *Does this college have what I want?*

Think about what you want in a school? Consider your preferences about:

- Location
- Size of student population
- Setting (urban, rural, suburban)
- Distance from home
- Majors and programs
- Diversity of the student body
- Extracurricular activities
- Academic support services

2. Quality - *Does this college offer a good education?*

Quality refers to the strength of the education and experience a college can offer. Some indicators of quality are:

- Sophomore return rate
- Graduation rate
- Accreditation
- Professional certification

3. Admissions - *Can I get into this school?*

Look at the average GPA and SAT scores of students accepted to the college last year. How do your GPA and SAT scores compare? Also, look at the percentage of students accepted last year.

Keep in mind that colleges are trying to diversify their incoming class in terms of gender, race, ethnicity, geography, and career interests, among other factors.

It is also important to know about any special admission programs, like EOP (Educational Opportunity Program).

4. Affordability - *Can I afford this school?*

Paying for college is a major concern for students and families. Look at the total cost of attendance (COA) for each college – add up the costs for tuition, room and board, fees and estimates for transportation and books. To estimate what kind of financial aid may be available, look at the percentage of students who financial need is met and any school policies regarding meeting financial aid.

You will want to apply to colleges with a range of costs – public and private, in state and out of state.



Researching Colleges

In order to determine if a college is right for you, you will have to do a lot of research. Below, is a list of different sources you may find useful for college research. As no single source will give you a complete picture of any college, get as much information from as many sources as possible.

Viewbooks, DVDs, and other promotional material from colleges

Before going on, it is important to debunk one classic myth about this resource: **Receiving this material from a college does not necessarily mean that the school wants you or that you will get into the school. It is targeted advertising.**

- This material is particularly good for developing a preliminary interest in a school. Don't let these things pile up. Look through them with some initial guidelines in mind: What states are you willing to study in? Are you willing to go to a school that is religiously affiliated? Do you want to go to an urban school?
- You can't make a final decision about what colleges you will apply to with this material, but you may be able to get some idea about what schools you want to consider or even what things you want in a college. You can also decide that you don't want to go to college in a specific state or to a religiously affiliated school, for example. Making this decision means you can recycle tons of promotional materials. This helps you get organized and feel less overwhelmed.
- Although it is helpful, you should be wary of this kind of material. It may include all kinds of cool statistics, pictures, and testimonials about the school, but this is not an *objective* source. Remember, these are advertisements from the school. Colleges hire professionals to help them create an attractive image and make consumers (like you) interested in them. So you want to consider the following: **What stats aren't they showing you? What emotional response are they trying to evoke with the imagery, layout and even the font? Are they playing a certain kind of music on the DVD?** For example, if a school seems to be making an extra effort to show students of color in their DVD or viewbook, they may be trying to convince you that their school is diverse. Is this always true? Of course not. For example, a few years ago, one college received a lot of bad publicity for digitally editing a picture to include an African-American student into a crowd of Caucasian students at a sporting event.

The Internet

Most schools have their own website. This website serves a lot of the same purposes as the view book or the video but with some added bonuses. The website is often the same website that students and faculty will visit. This means that there will most likely be announcements about upcoming events, access to information about specific majors and classes, and in-depth information about resources like the library, health services, counseling services, and even the cafeteria. Remember that the website is also used for promotional purposes, so don't rely solely on it for information. It is not an objective source.

You can usually also view a course catalog which gives you a sense of the range of classes and majors at the college along with the specific classes offered and required in your major of interest.



Researching Colleges

Some other college related websites:

- **The College Board:** www.collegeboard.com
Although the College Board is mostly known for the SAT, its website also includes a personalized organizer that helps you keep track of dates and deadlines, SAT registration, college applications, and even your college research. The site has a lot to offer as far as searches and information go, even if you don't use the organizer.
- **US News and World Report:** www.usnews.com/usnews/edu/eduhome.htm
US News is best known for its ranking of national colleges. Though such rankings may sometimes be misleading, there is still value in this website. It includes a rare community college search as well as other information about these colleges. It includes campus profile commentary by Edward Fiske, which can help you get the "feel" of a school beyond the numbers. It even has a GPA calculator.
- **FastWeb:** www.fastweb.org
We encourage students to begin looking for scholarships as soon as possible. One good way to get started is to log on to this website. FastWeb is a scholarship search that will find scholarships matching data you enter into their questionnaire and also offers other resources.
- **CollegeNet:** www.collegenet.com
This website has a lot of valuable resources. It includes searches for colleges, scholarships, and online applications. It also has information regarding financial aid including CollegeNet's own scholarship.
- **Occupational Outlook Handbook:** www.bls.gov/oco/
This website gives you access to information about different careers and their educational requirements.

Books about College

While there is no one book that will offer you everything you need to make your decision, there are several kinds of books that you will find useful.

- **Databooks:** These books provide important statistics that you can use to evaluate many different colleges. They can tell you the admissions requirements, number of students, contact information, majors, ethnic breakdowns, and sophomore return rates at many schools.
Examples:
The College Board's College Handbook (The College Board)
Peterson's Complete Guide to Colleges (Thomson's Corporation and Peterson's)
- **Commentary books:** These books provide an "insider's look" at some colleges. The authors of these books often select a number of schools that they consider the best in the United States and survey students for their thoughts on topics ranging from the professors to living arrangements to hang-out spots.
Examples:
The Fiske Guide to Colleges (Edward B. Fiske, Sourcebooks, Inc.)
The Insider's Guide to the Colleges (Yale Daily News Staff, Griffin Trade Paperback)



Researching Colleges

- **Books organized by majors:** These books identify the schools that offer every major (often by state).
Examples:
Index of Majors and Graduate Degrees (The College Board)
Rugg's Recommendations on the Colleges (Frederick E. Rugg, Rugg's Recommendations)
- **Special interest books:** The information in these books is geared towards a specific population's needs or interests.
Examples:
The Multicultural Student's Guide to Colleges (Robert Mitchell, Noonday Press)
Colleges that Change Lives (Loren Pope, Penguin Books)
Directory of Theatre Training Programs (ed. Jill Charles, Theatre Directories)
- **College catalogs:** Each individual school publishes a catalog, sometimes called a bulletin. Information includes school policies, scholarships, admissions requirements, classes, and majors. Call the college or go on their website to get one; they are usually free.

Other Useful Resources

- **Visit different schools!**
This way you can see for yourself what a school is really like. You will want to see if you can imagine yourself at the school. Before you go, think about what you want to get out of your college visit. You can use this self-assessment as a guide for the questions you will ask on your tour. On your visit, you can interview students and ask them about the school. You may want to specifically ask to meet a student from New York City so you can get a better grip on how you will feel there. Ask to see a class, the library, and a dorm room (if applicable). Look at the newspapers and flyers for upcoming events. You will also want to survey the surrounding area for safety issues as well as accessibility to stores and entertainment.
- **Ask others!**
Make sure to discuss the colleges you are researching with your college advisor. They are there to help you decide which schools to apply to. You may also want to ask other people whose opinions you respect. Although your decision should not weigh entirely on what others think, they may have access to information that you don't have. Ask around and add the information to your pros and cons list.

Whatever you do, make sure to use objective sources in researching the colleges you might be applying to. One source will never be enough!