

Ten Tips for a Successful College Search

The countdown to college has begun! Over the coming months, you will begin to learn about college options that might be good "fits" for you academically, personally and financially. Be systematic in your approach. Ask good questions. You will learn quickly that not all colleges are alike. As you move forward in the decision-making process, be sure to:

1. **Know yourself.** Make sure you understand your strengths and weaknesses, likes and dislikes. Honest self-examination is critical at the outset and throughout the process. Your interests can and will change daily. Look for consistency—what traits, interests and passions have been with you over time? Reflect on your learning style as well as preferences regarding living environment.
2. **Cast your net broadly.** Early in the process, collect as much information as possible from and about colleges. It is easily accessible and won't cost anything. Use the computerized college search programs at your school or on the Internet to sort for colleges that meet your personal and academic criteria.



Professor TAG:

"Before you look at the first college brochure, let's talk about YOU. Refer to your top four priorities as they relate to the college experience you imagine for yourself. These priorities will become your compass bearings as you look at colleges."

3. **Treat guidebooks as guides, not gospel.** It makes sense to have a guidebook or two handy for easy reference as you learn more about colleges. Understand what you are buying, however. Some guidebooks present the facts—and just the facts. Others will attempt to seduce you with comparative ratings as well as a more subjective analysis. While ratings and analysis can be helpful in getting you started, it would be risky to make final choices based on this type of information. There are no reliable shortcuts in the college search process.
4. **Visit college campuses.** It is important to experience first-hand the campus culture of any college you are considering. Take tours. Visit classes. Whenever an interview is offered, take it! Talk with students and faculty. Ask questions. You should be able to visualize yourself on that campus. Visit the schools you really like two or three times. Mix up your agenda with each visit. It is never too early to visit. You should try to visit at least once before you apply.
5. **Talk with recent graduates about their experiences.** Current students and recent graduates are the best evidence of the return you will get on your investment in the educational experience at a given college. Put them to the test. What did they like and dislike? What were their most *meaningful experiences?*

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Get them to tell you stories about their experiences. Listen for consistency. Try to imagine yourself in the stories they are telling. Don't settle for "this is a great place—you'd love it here." Find out why. Their reasons for loving it may not jive with yours.

Professor TAG:

"Sometimes true institutional personalities emerge when the spotlight is not on the performers. If you want to get a sense as to how questions regarding housing registration, financial aid, or billing might be handled down the road, raise those questions now."

- 6. Examine Outcomes.** If you have ideas regarding a major and/or career track, find out how recent graduates fared in these areas. You will discover quickly that a lot of colleges have a little bit of "something for everybody." The truth is in the outcomes. Ask for evidence of graduate school and job placements. How does a particular college perform in these areas? Make sure the information is valid. Some colleges will tell you that they place 90% of their applicants to medical school. That's great if there is volume and substance to the program. On the other hand, nine out of ten placements over three years doesn't cut it.
- 7. Take an honest look at affordability.** Be prepared for sticker shock. The private college that cost \$5,000 for your parents twenty-five years ago now carries a price tag of \$35,000 per year. This may or may not be an issue for them, but you need to find out. Ask your parents what they can or are willing to afford. It is better to know up front if there will be financial limitations on your college selections rather than finding out after you fall in love with a school that your family cannot afford.
- 8. Resist the temptation to buy on impulse.** Start early as you look at colleges and shop late. First impressions often serve us well. Remember, though, that colleges spend hundreds of thousands of dollars each year to make that first impression a good one. Test it. Revisit when not expected. Sleep on your feelings. Make sure the fascination exists for the right reasons. "This would be a great school because it puts me close to my grandparents," or "That's a great view of the mountains and the lifts are only a quarter of a mile away!" are not good reasons to buy. They are amenities that may come with a good choice; they don't *make* a choice good.
- 9. Take note of how you are treated.** In the courtship between you and a college, the way an institution responds to you is a good indication of how that place will treat you once enrolled. Look past the fancy literature, the telemarketing and the staged visits. What happens when you write for specific information or call with a question? How are they treating you?
- 10. Make sure you own the process!** Your parents are not going to college. They are very proud of you and want the best for you in college, but they're staying home. This is your gig! The greater your involvement from start to finish, the more comfortable you will be with the outcomes.

Seven Tips for Interpreting College Rankings

By Peter Van Buskirk

Author, *Winning the College Admission Game*

1. **College rankings can be a reference point** for families as they triangulate on colleges in the search process. Readers should fold information taken from the ranking reports into impressions they are gleaning about colleges from other sources as well as acquaintances (teachers, counselors, current students, recent graduates, professionals in the community) whose educational interests mirror their own.
2. **Don't obsess on a number!** Nothing in the ranking process is absolute. There is no such thing as *the best* college unless the term is used to describe the *best college fit* for a young person. For every student, there is a "best college." Students should focus on finding and getting into the colleges that best suit their needs and interests rather than obsessing on a college because of its ranking.
3. **Use the rankings as a guide, not the gospel.** College rankings are derived from a systematic, but *unscientific* collection of data from and about colleges and universities. While the data may prove useful, it can't really be used comparatively due to vast differences between the culture, mission and politics of the institutions being assessed. For example, how can you compare testing profiles across colleges that vary greatly in terms of how they use (or don't use) tests in the admission process?
4. **Don't change who you are to get into college.** Too often families become fixed on particular college destinations, especially those with impressive rankings, and proceed to re-make the student into the image of what they think those colleges want. Rather than squeezing every hour out of every day in the pursuit of the perfect credential for the dream college, students should follow their passions in living the teenage years to the fullest.
5. **Focus on the three W's.** College rankings frequently distract students from thinking about the things that are most important to them as they contemplate their educational futures. Students need to remain focused on the three W's: *who* they are, *why* they want to go to college and *what* they hope to get out of the college experience.
6. **Find the college that fits you best.** Regardless of its rank, the best college fit for you will be one that:
 - Offers a program of study to match your interests and needs.
 - Provides a style of instruction to match the way you like to learn.
 - Provides a level of academic rigor to match your aptitude and preparation.
 - Offers a community that feels like home to you.
 - Values you for what you do well.
7. **Buy the magazine for the articles—they're great!** It is best to approach the actual rankings with a jaundiced eye. Why? The main reason the rankings change every year is that the editors keep changing the formula—not much science in that marketing strategy! On the other hand, the editors have compiled an outstanding resource in the articles that wrap around the numbers. Check them out!

The Best College for Me Worksheet

How well do you know yourself? As you respond to each of the questions below, you will develop a guide for college selection that is rooted in your personal values system. A good college fit for you is one that will match your responses.

Make a copy of this page and give it to your parents. Ask them to respond on their own. Then, compare your answers. They might be surprised by what they learn about you. And you might be surprised by the insights they have into you!

1. What are your academic interests and/or program needs?
2. Describe the learning environment in which you are most comfortable (i.e. small or large classes; seminars or lectures; internships, independent study or structured courses, etc.)?
3. Do you want to be challenged in a rigorous academic environment (i.e. did you take a majority of Honors, AP or IB courses in high school) or a less pressured academic environment? Why?
4. What are your priorities? Are you going to college to study or have a good time?
5. Are you an adventurer who enjoys a lot of change or do you prefer a predictable, unchanging environment? Do you want to spend the next four years with people like you or do you want to meet people from cultures and backgrounds different from your own?
6. What do you do well or care about deeply? What interests, talents or skills do you want to pursue while in college? How do you want the school to support these interests?

The Best College is the Good Fit

Which college is *best* for you?

Which candidates are *best* for the college?

With over 3,000 colleges and universities across the country, you will quickly discover that there are lots of potential options. Some are well known if not quite famous. Others will be new to you. Most will have something of value to offer.

Over the course of your college planning process, you and the group of colleges that interest you most will engage in alternating rituals of selection. You make the first move by choosing to apply. The colleges will in turn make selections from among their applicants. If you are one of the lucky ones with multiple acceptances, the final choice becomes yours.

The quality options that emerge on your radar screen will be the colleges that are most compatible with you and your priorities. Ultimately, you want to find the best “fit.”

Similarly, colleges are eager to find the highest degree of compatibility or “fit” in their applicants. After initially courting your application, they will make distinctions between you and other compelling candidates as they select the entering class.

The “best college” is the one that is right for you. It is a quality option because it is the college that will best meet your needs. It fits. Don’t be surprised if you find more than one that seems to fit. That’s great. Not only will you be happier at such colleges, the odds are you’ll have a better chance of getting in. A good college “fit” is one that will meet most if not all the following criteria:

1. Offer a program of study to match your interests and needs.
2. Provide a style of instruction to match the way you like to learn.
3. Provide a level of academic rigor to match your aptitude and preparation.
4. Offer a community that feels like home to you.
5. Value you for what you do well.

As you consider colleges, how do they measure up against these rules for a good fit? You need be conscious of the inconsistencies because they will likely become sticking points for you later on. Don’t settle for a college that only meets one or two criteria.

Senior Year Myths

A lot of students enter the senior year content with the knowledge that they "satisfied graduation requirements" in one or more of the major discipline areas. You've no doubt heard the talk among your friends:

- "The junior year is the most difficult and important academically."
- "I've already had four years of language starting in eighth grade."
- "I've satisfied my math requirement for graduation."
- "Science in the senior year is a waste of time unless you want to be a doctor."
- "Colleges don't really look at senior grades."

Each is a preface to, "so I don't have to take any more in my senior year." Each of these statements reflects a choice the speaker is making. The choices you make say a lot about your passion for learning. As a result, they will also have a direct bearing on your range of options when the decision letters are delivered.



Professor TAG:

"Give yourself a competitive edge with a strong senior year performance. Choose courses in traditional academic areas that challenge you. Don't over-schedule. Take courses that make sense given your prior experience. Then, do well in them."

At the end of your junior year, though, you are finally able to determine for yourself the courses you will take. It is in the planning for the senior year when students often ask, "Is it better to take an easier course where I know I can get an "A" or to take the harder course where I can probably do the work, but will be more likely to get a "B" or a "C?" The answer: take the harder course—AND get the "A!"

Think about it. Colleges want you to show your best work. Which impression do you want to make—that you are content to stay at the level of your junior year and just take what you need to graduate, or that you are continuing to seek new challenges? Your best bet is to move to the next logical level of rigor academically. Show that you have the desire to make yourself better in the classroom. In doing so, you remain competitive for admission.

A good rule of thumb is: the more selective the college, the more important the senior year performance is as the deciding credential. Many colleges will wait to make final decisions until mid-year grades are evaluated.

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Checklist for a Successful Campus Visit & Interview

Professor TAG:

"There is no such thing as a good 'drive-by' visit! You've got to stop the car, get out and walk around. If you can, talk to people. Get a feel for the place!"

1. **Plan ahead.** If possible, schedule your visit at least two weeks in advance. At some colleges, you may need to call two months in advance for an interview appointment. This will be especially true over the summer and around holidays.
2. **Prepare well.** Read the information you have about the school. While on campus, you will want to test your impressions. Know why you are there. See how you fit. Think of good questions to ask. They should reflect your understanding of the place and not be designed to trick anyone. Get a good night sleep the night before your visit.
3. **Dress comfortably.** You don't need to "dress to impress" nor should you dress down. Your attire should complement you well and not detract from your overall presentation. If your attire distracts interviewers, they will lose sight of you.
4. **Arrive early.** Give yourself time to stretch and walk around before you make an official introduction. Find a snack bar or some place where you can comfortably take in campus life. Take advantage of opportunities to introduce yourself to the people you encounter. Listen to their stories. When its time to check in, you take the lead.
5. **Relax.** You need to give the impression that you are comfortable with the process. Establish good eye contact. Speak clearly and use appropriate grammar. Remember that your body language tells the other person a lot about you. Maintain good posture. Stow the gum. Smile!
6. **Take advantage of everything they have to offer.** If a college offers interviews, take one. Take a tour. Ask to visit an academic department or program area in which you have an interest. Be prepared to ask questions that reflect your interest. The people you meet, including interviewers, are most often impressed by the quality of the questions you ask. This is your chance to learn—and to make a good impression.
7. **Tell your story.** If you find yourself in an interview or one-on-one situation with a member of the admission staff, be sure to share any extraordinary circumstances, good or bad, that influenced either your performance or perspective.
8. **Record your visit.** Make notes as soon as you are able. Videotape or take pictures of the campus. Collect postcards. The more colleges you see, the more they will run together in your mind. Record the visit in a timely fashion to avoid confusion later.
9. **Follow-up.** Your campus visit gives you a chance to collect impressions and establish relationships. Should you apply, you will benefit from the recollections that others have of your visit. Be sure to thank people for extending themselves to you.



Professor TAG:

"Plan in advance. For information about visit times, check the college's web site (usually under 'Visitors' or 'Visiting the Campus' in the Admission or Prospective Student sections). If you want an interview, call to arrange the date and time that suit you best. Be aware that not every college offers the opportunity for a personal interview."