



Where to Go

Choosing the "right" school is different from identifying the "most prestigious" college one can get into. The former really is more important; but the latter is not going to disappear. So how should a family decide what's a truly good fit for the student.

A Family Decision?

No! The use of the word "family" was an intentional and provocative tease. Choosing where to go to college really has to be the student's decision. But the process of exploration and consideration is going to be a family event.

And whether everyone involved – particularly the student – likes it or not, that's the reality of the process.

How to Begin

Everyone is going to have an opinion about where you should go to college. (Yes, we're changing tense here, simply to reinforce whose decision this really is.) Some families have known that Sam was always destined for Yale; or Notre Dame, or ...wherever.

How nice for them. And if you are like Sam, and have "always" wanted to go to a particular college, that is a good place to start. But it is only a starting point. And for the rest of you, how should you begin your search?

You are More than a Test Score!

Our friends at Zinch (www.zinch.com) have pioneered

a college-matching service based on an important belief: that everyone really is more than their SAT score. Sure, SAT scores count. (Although they are less and less important at more and more colleges.) But one of the factors you should consider— because most colleges do — is your "numerical shorthand."

More than a score... What are your grades and SAT (or ACT) scores? If you haven't taken the SAT yet, what were your PSAT scores? And what is your grade-point average? Don't worry about the details yet; but quick: are you an "A" student? A "B+" student? What type of student are you? Put this aside; we'll come back to it later.

Start a List

Part of getting through the college search and admissions process – with as little stress as possible – is to stay organized. Create a list.

Some people do it on paper; others like to create an excel spreadsheet. We attach one here to help get you started.

What Colleges have You Thought About?

Many students – while still in high school or even in middle school -- have been intrigued by certain colleges. It might have been where a parent or relative went. Or it could have been a military academy. Or an art college. Or a place where you attended a sporting event or a summer course. Make a list of colleges that have hit your radar screen – for whatever reason. Importantly, include schools that you were turned off by as well as places that intrigued you. Add these schools to your list – even if your initial reaction to a place is that you hate it. (Part of your exploration process should incorporate a clear articulation about why you hate a place.)

Ask Your Parents for Their Opinion

Yes, this is your decision. But your parents (usually) know you better than anyone else. They will have opinions – even if it is no particular preference or a determination not to influence you. And even if you're furious at them

at the moment or convinced they really don't understand you, ask them: what colleges do they think would be right for you? Or that you should at least explore. Add them to your list.

Ask People Whom You Respect

Ask a few teachers who know you well; and any relatives or friend's parents whom you respect what they think. Add these schools to your list.

Doing Smart Research

You may have some perfectly valid impressions or gut reactions to a college; even before you've ever set foot on the campus or picked up their viewbook. We'll respect that – to a point. Now you have to do some research.

Use the Fiske Guide

The *Fiske Guide to Colleges* is a terrific place to start. Its profiles of colleges are well-researched, thoughtful, and clearly written. Again, a great place to start; and we emphasize start. Ultimately you should do way more research about the places where you may be applying and attending. But start by reading the Fiske Guide profiles of all the schools on your list. We've added a column on our master list that includes a column called "Post Fiske Guide Reaction: More or Less Interested?" Very simply, it means that after

reading the college's profile in the Fiske Guide, was your immediate reaction to be more or less interested in the place? Just add that reaction to the list.

Other Research Sources

Every college has a website – DUH. Visit it. But visit it with a critical eye. What turns you on about it? What turns you off? Look at course lists. Even check out reading lists for particular courses. Do the courses being offered in a particular semester excite you? Or are they too esoteric for your taste?

Read the college newspaper. Are the issues they cover of interest to you? Or do they leave you cold? Does the paper focus on campus politics or more national/state issues? What issues do you find worthy of a bull-session? Are the events they publicize appealing or of little interest? Would you be spending your weekend evenings alone in your room – assuming you wouldn't really want to – or are there activities and events that you can't wait to attend?

Other guide books. The *Princeton Review* is our second favorite (after the Fiske Guide.) Who can fault lists like "Best Party School" or "Dodge-ball Victims"?

Talk to people. Contact students who have gone to your high school and are now at schools which you

might consider. Do they like the college? Is it a happy place? Are the students grinds? Cut-throat? Too busy partying to learn much? Get some reactions from people who know the place now; not from adults who attended 20 years ago?

Assume You Are Going to Change Your Mind

This is tricky but true: more than 70% of college students change their academic major after their freshman year. Some 20% change it more than twice. Which means, odds are, you will too. So although you will probably make your college choices based in large part on what you think you want to study, that major or course of study is probably going to change. That is OK. You have to start somewhere. But are the colleges you are looking at appealing if and when you change your mind?

Cost

The cost of a college education is significant. It is often described as the second largest purchase a family will ever make (after a home.) It is also an investment, not simply an expense. The range of college costs is significant: some great public universities like the University of Arizona can cost just over \$13,000 for in-state students;

to private colleges such as Sarah Lawrence which costs over \$53,000 per year.

So the cost of a college, a family's ability to pay, and its appetite to take on student debt are all factors. We can't prescribe when finances should enter into a family's decision about college choices. But we do recommend having candid conversations between parent and child throughout the process.

Use Your List as a Dashboard Not a Scorecard

We recommend using your list as a dashboard: a quick visualization of lots of information. By adding numerical assessments to particular questions or characteristics, you'll be able to evaluate places a bit more easily. You shouldn't simply add up individual scores, but use the scores to help guide you. (Just as you don't want colleges to evaluate you simply as a combination of your SAT score and grade-point average, you shouldn't make determinations about colleges solely on their "ranking" or some overly simplified scorecard.)

Some Less Obvious Questions

Ask a high school junior or senior whether she prefers a small college or a large

university; an urban environment or a suburban setting; large lectures or small seminars. After an initial shrug of the shoulders, you'll probably get some thoughtful responses. And they're probably all half wrong – or at least mostly uninformed.

Huh? Think about it: how can you ask someone who has spent the last four years of high school in classrooms of never more than 35 people to give an informed opinion about a class with 300 students? Odds are you've never experienced a lecture class with 300-plus students. They can be great or they can be deadly.

In fact, one of us was recently asked to recall the very best classes we remember from our college experience. Two courses immediately come to mind: a senior seminar with 12 people and a lecture course with more than 400. The surprise, of course, was the lecture.

The class was in American History, and the professor was a master at weaving political, social, economic/business events; peppered by the impact of "personalities" who affected events. He brought all these factors together seamlessly and made history come alive in a way that we had never experienced. It was a "life-changing" event in that history became one of our lifelong interests. And it

took place in a giant lecture course.

Some Questions

So what questions should you be asking? Here are some suggestions:

How do you feel about distribution requirements? Some colleges have extensive distribution requirements or core curricula? Is there a language requirement? A lab science?

Do most of the students play sports? Not just varsity inter-collegiate sports but club level and intramural? Do you want to participate?

Are drinking or drugs a considerable element of the social scene? Do you care?

Is the place academically cutthroat or competitive? Or is there a serious but laid-back, cooperative approach to academics?

Is the campus near or far from a large urban center? And do you care? Is the campus an idyllic oasis in the center of an urban nightmare or in the middle of nowhere?

Does distance from home really matter to you or your parents? Will you want to go home for an occasional weekend? Or just major holidays? Is a four-hour drive on country roads more difficult than a one-hour flight?

Do you want to be recognized by professors, most of the other students, and maybe even the college president as you walk across campus? Or are you more intrigued by the unknown; by finding new activities, classes, or friends throughout your four years? We have no particular bias for or against big or small schools. The question is for you to think about: where are you going to be more comfortable?

Does weather matter? Do you hate the cold? Or have you never experienced a really hot climate? After growing up in the east, one of our sons wanted a college in a warm climate; but he wanted dry heat as opposed to humidity. It made his search a little easier.

Are there pre-professional activities, jobs, or internships you want to explore? Do you think you want to work in government? In healthcare? In the media? Does the college offer good opportunities in those areas?

Is foreign travel or exchange programs part of your dream? Does the college encourage a semester abroad and do they have easy options to take advantage of foreign study?

Visiting Colleges

Nothing compares to a college visit to help decide whether a place may be right for you. We are continually amazed by how quickly kids decide whether a particular school is right for them. Whether it is a gut feel; a quick assessment of the students who attend a particular school; or a turn-on or turn-off by a tour guide, admissions representative, or reaction to the physical campus, kids seem to know pretty quickly whether a place is right for them.

A note to parents: trust your kid's instincts. You may love a place while your child hates it; or vice versa. You may certainly make your opinion known. But then remember it is your son's or daughter's experience, not yours.



But our advice is to visit as many schools as you possibly can. Even schools you may not think are quite right or you can get into.

A suggestion: keep notes or keep a journal. Trust us: all these schools will start to blur together after a few campus visits. You will want to remember whether it was “X” college that had the such-and-such requirements; or it was “Y” university where everyone had to move off campus by sophomore year. So keep a record of your reactions: what you liked and what you didn't.

Putting it All Together

Use the “Where to Go” worksheet—available for free at www.zinch.com/parents—to help you analyze your research.



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