



Which Is the Right College Path for Me?

So you've decided to go to college! Choosing the right path to college can be very difficult because there are so many different options and so many factors to consider. The most important criterion for making a sound decision is knowing yourself: what you value, what you like, what makes you happy, and what frustrates you. This brochure will help you start thinking about your preferences so you can choose an institution that suits you.

What Should I Consider When Figuring Out My College Preferences?

Consider the following questions at several points during the college planning process--as you begin planning in your sophomore or junior year of high school, again during the summer between your junior and senior years of high school as you begin to finalize the number of colleges to which you are applying, and as you make your final decision. The answers you come up with will aid you in focusing on specific institutional types to consider.

Goals

- Why are you going to college?
- Is your priority to start a career?
- To become more well-rounded?
- To learn specific skills such as communication?

Values

- Is religion important to your value system?
- How important is being a part of a close community?

Learning Style

- What is your preferred way of learning? Do you prefer lectures, small group discussions, active learning through projects or work, computer learning, or individualized learning?

Interests

- How do you spend your free time? Do you enjoy doing community service, exploring or participating in sports or the arts, surfing the Internet, reading, and/or other activities?



Role Models

- Are role models of your own ethnicity/race, gender, or religion important to you?
- Do you want to develop personal relationships with faculty members and be given the opportunity to work with them on projects and research?

How Can I Tell What Might Be a Good "Fit"?

Your answers to these questions can help guide you to an institution that suits you well. However, keep the following points in mind as you consider institutional fit:

- You will grow during your college years, and your initial fit with an institution may change as you develop.
- Especially in large institutions, the abundance of different communities may make it difficult to identify a particular group with which to compare your own values and beliefs, because these communities may vary by department or program or from residence hall to residence hall.
- Fit does not mean acculturation or adopting cultural values that are not your own. For example, African-American students do not need to adopt a white culture to be successful; perseverance and some social support can help minority students succeed in environments where the majority of the students are from different cultures (Morning, 1991).

What Are Some Common Mistakes I Should Avoid When Narrowing My Choices?

The most systematic way to end up with a good fit between you and the institution is to gather a great deal of information about colleges, then narrow your search based on personal characteristics and preferences. The process is time consuming and sometimes tedious, however, and many students try to take shortcuts that almost always fail. Below are some of these shortcuts and the dangers associated with using them.

Mistake #1: Limiting your search to institutions with which you are already familiar. Many students rely heavily on family and peers as sources for determining which colleges they should consider. Be careful--many more institutions might be a strong fit for you. Do your own research in guidebooks and on the Internet to become aware of new options. Remember, you will attend the college you choose, but your parents and friends won't. You need to be happy with the choice.

Mistake #2: Limiting your choice of institutions based on your standardized test scores. Many students compare their standardized test scores to the average Scholastic Assessment Test scores or American College Test scores of students attending institutions and use this information to determine colleges they'll apply to. It's important to remember, however, that test scores are just one piece of information that colleges use to evaluate students. Every campus has students who scored much higher and much lower than the average against which you're measuring yourself.

Mistake #3: Limiting your search to colleges you think you can afford. Many financial aid options are available, including grants, scholarships, loans, and work-study arrangements. High school counselors, publications, and Internet resources can provide you with information about paying for college. First determine the schools you are interested in attending, then try to determine ways to fund your choice.

Mistake #4: Choosing a college because your friend or girlfriend/boyfriend is going there. Just because a campus is a strong match for your friends or loved ones does not mean that it is the best choice for you. Did they do their homework in exploring colleges? Be sure you do.

Mistake #5: Making your decision based on the rumor mill. Many students form judgments based on the impressions of their peers. The rumor mill can be a great source of inside information as long as you seek many different people's opinions so that you can evaluate the institution from several different perspectives. Don't make a major life decision based on one person's opinion.

Mistake #6: Making your decision based on false assumptions. Peers, family members, and others may be sharing inaccurate information, such as the commonly held--but inaccurate--belief that a student's learning and development depend on the selectivity of the school. It is important to read widely and try to get the most accurate information possible in order to make a sound decision.

What If I'm a First-Generation College Student?

First-generation college students (people whose parents did not attend college) may have a more difficult time adjusting to college because they often do not have a clear picture of what college life will be like and may not have friends or family members with whom they can discuss their experiences. If you're a first-generation college student, it is particularly important that you ask the right questions of yourself and that you think about these questions as you review materials about colleges so you can make a more informed decision. Furthermore, it is especially important for first-generation college students to meet other students from backgrounds similar to theirs so that they can have a support group (Bonifacio and Sinatra, 1991).

Conclusion

Finding a school that suits you right from the start is important. Although transferring to another institution is always an option, students who transfer between four-year institutions are less likely to go on to earn their degrees. Transfers also appear to be related to lower occupational status and earnings (Pascarella and Terenzini, 1991). This does not mean that you should stay at an institution you don't like, but it does mean that your choice is important and has implications for your future. Make sure you ask yourself the right questions!

Source: U.S. Department of Education

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