

HOW TO CHOOSE A COLLEGE THAT'S RIGHT FOR YOU

How to choose a college; it's one of the biggest questions students face during their academic careers, and it usually isn't simple to answer. There are a lot of factors to consider, and overlooking one can lead to a less than ideal decision.

If a school isn't a great fit, your student might not be as happy or fulfilled while they pursue their education. Similarly, if the right resources aren't available, something critical might be missing from their experience.

Luckily, while choosing a college seems like a daunting task, it doesn't have to be. With that in mind, here's a step-by-step guide on how to find the perfect college.

HOW TO CHOOSE A COLLEGE

If your student needs to figure out how to find the right college, being methodical is a good idea. By examining each factor individually, your student can better understand their needs. Then, they can see which schools match their preferences, ultimately making choosing a college simpler.

Here's an overview of each of the primary decision points:

1. MAJORS

Not all majors are available at all colleges. If your student knows what they want to study, then that is usually the easiest factor to manage in the "how to select a college" equation.

Essentially, if the school doesn't have a program that could help your student head toward their target career, it probably shouldn't remain a contender. If your student's preferred major or an allied major is available, then that college can stay on the possibilities list.

2. LOCATION

Location is a critical (and multi-faceted) factor as your student works out how to decide on a college. For example, does your student want to stay close to home? Would they rather attend college in a big city or a small town? Is there a region or climate that suits them best? All of these points are important, and they can help your student narrow down their options.

3. SIZE

Colleges come in a wide array of sizes. Student bodies can vary drastically, ranging from less than 100 students to over 70,000.

Total enrollment numbers can impact a college in a variety of ways. Usually, larger schools are more diverse and have a broader selection of programs. Smaller colleges generally have smaller class sizes, and the community may feel tighter knit.

Everything from class options to amenities to the availability of parking can be influenced by the size of the student body. As a result, your student needs to consider what kind of environment suits them best so that they can answer the “how to choose the right college” question in a way that meets their needs.

4. ROOM AND BOARD.

Unless your student plans to live at home while going to college, they need to examine the housing situation as they try to choose a school. This can include looking at dorm and nearby rental options, or even friends or family who live near campus who might be open to your student moving in during the school year.

Additionally, your student should explore their food options. If they intend to live on campus, this might focus on college meal plans. If not, then they might want to figure out whether there are grocery stores nearby that meet their needs.

5. FACILITIES

Before your student chooses a college, they should see what facilities the school has to offer. Are there athletic centers on campus? What does the library offer? Are there technology labs available to all students? Is there a student center?

Your student needs to make sure the available facilities meet their needs. Otherwise, they might end up at a college that isn't a great fit.

6. STUDENT LIFE

Every college has a unique culture. Some campuses offer a lot when it comes to student life, including access to clubs, intramural sports, student centers with entertainment options, fraternities and sororities, and more.

Extracurricular activity options can vary from one school to the next. If your student has certain ones in mind, then they should factor those in as they explore their college options.

7. REPUTATION

When it comes to how to choose a college, your student needs to consider the school's reputation. This includes everything from reviews and recommendations from current or former students to accreditation to graduation and retention rates.

If a school isn't properly accredited, it should immediately be removed from your student's list. Similarly, if freshman retention rates are incredibly low or student loan default rates are high, that should be considered a red flag.

As your student evaluates a school's reputation, they need to examine this in two ways. First, they need to dig into the college's reputation as a whole. Second, they should explore how the school is perceived when it comes to their major or field of study. Some colleges have solid overall reputations, but certain programs they offer might not. It's important to look at it from both angles to make sure that your student can choose a college that is right for them.

8. COST

Cost is one factor that can't be ignored. If your student can't afford a particular school, it doesn't matter what else it has to offer; it has to be pulled from the list.

If cost is a major factor, then it could be wise to start with more affordable schools. This can include affordable colleges with the best financial aid options, no loan colleges, or in-state public schools, which generally cost less. There are also options that can make it easier to get in-state tuition as an out-of-state student.

However, as your student considers the cost, they also need to look beyond the sticker price. There are a lot of things that can impact how much a college costs out of pocket, and one that initially appeared to be too expensive might not be as pricy as it seemed.

Your student's Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) affects how much your student is expected to contribute to their education. By maximizing the FAFSA, they can lower their expected family contribution (EFC), which might make any school more affordable. For example, they might qualify for a Pell Grant after completing the FAFSA or be eligible for work-study.

If your student applies for scholarships, they might be able to secure some extra money that can make it easier to pay for school. Scholarships are a great option that can help your student graduate debt-free. There are numerous different types of scholarships, so your student should explore the various options to figure out which ones might work for them. As they win awards, they can factor that into their decision-making process.

COMPARING SCHOOLS: HOW TO KNOW WHAT COLLEGE TO GO TO

Once your student figures out where they stand on each of the factors above, then they need to start narrowing down their options. Usually, this means doing some research to find potential matches and then ranking their choices based on their priorities.

A college comparison spreadsheet can be an excellent decision-making tool. Your student can list information about each school – including details about academics and financial considerations – and even define personal criteria that matter to them. By using this process, your student can create a scoring system that allows them to see which colleges come out on top.

After their spreadsheet is complete, they'll have a solid answer to the how to find the right college question. All of the information will be in one place, making it easier than ever to come to a decision.