



## College Planning Guide - Beginning the Search

A practical guide to start the college search process.

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Preparing to go to college is one of the most anxiety producing times in the lives of students and their parents. For students, it is one of the most significant steps toward independence and adulthood. For both the parents and the student it can be a period of great uncertainty, stress and sometimes, frustration.

College-bound students need to develop and follow a plan of action if they are going to fulfill their dreams of getting into and getting ready for the college of their choice. The following outlines the basics of college research and a calendar of basic monthly activities that every college-bound student should incorporate in an individual plan.

### Beginning the Search

Each year, many high school students and their parents attend college fairs. These are wonderful places to learn about a variety of colleges across the country. Before you go you should be thinking about what kind of college might interest you.

Some things to consider are:

- What type of degree are you interested in: vocational, two year associates, four year bachelor, masters etc.?
- What size school do you prefer: small (less than 2,000 students), medium (2,000 to 5,000), large (5,000 to 12,000), or very large (more than 12,000 students)?
- Do you want to be in an urban, suburban or rural area?
- Do you care if the school is private or public?
- What part of the country would you prefer: Northeast, South, Midwest or West?
- What is the maximum distance from home?
- Type of college such as coed, single-sex college, specific religious affiliation?
- Student to faculty ratios and average class size?
- Do you require the school to have NCAA Division I, II or III affiliation?
- Do you expect to play intramural sports?
- If you already have an idea of what your major will be, does the college offer a strong program?
- Would you prefer a small, liberal arts college; a comprehensive college (medium size with liberal arts and professional majors); or a university (usually larger with separate colleges and offering graduate study)?
- Are there certain things that will limit your search, such as college costs, diverse student body, study abroad program, athletic programs, fraternity / sorority participation, student activities, cooperative education, other?

Many other factors will affect your decision, but it is most important to decide these global factors first.

One question that may come to mind is "How do I know what I want when I don't know the difference between the choices?". There are six sources of information to aid you:

**Seek guidance from those who know you:** Students, your parents know you the best, seek their advice first. Discuss what type of college they think may be a good fit for you based on their thoughts on above questions. Parents, seek out other parents who have been through the process before. Start with the Booster Club members, they know who's who among parents who have or are going through the process. Discuss college criteria considerations others have thought through.

Start to explore career interests. Look around, how do others around you make a living? Consider your interests. What types of employment or general areas of industry interest you? You may not realize it now, but four years will fly by and your college career will be before you. Begin to plan now for graduation!

Choosing the right college will take some time, thought and common sense. It's best to know what kind of student you are and what type of learning environment you are best suited for. It would be a shame to go through the lengthy college search and financing process only to find out in the first semester that your college choice has too few students in a small town with no activities of interest as your grades suffer and you long to be anywhere but at that college.

**College Guidance Office:** One of your best sources of information about colleges is your guidance counselor. They usually have a wealth of information and experience. It's up to you to make sure your counselor knows enough about you to help guide you toward the appropriate colleges. Student Athletes: In addition to your school guidance counselor, talk with the high school Athletic Director. It's very common that an Athletic Director would have played collegiate sports and can offer some excellent advice, guidance and direction regarding the college search and recruiting process.

**College Guides:** There are two basic types of college guides: the objective, factual guides provides necessary information and are generally quite reliable but rarely give you a "feel" for the college; the subjective, anecdotal guides give you a sense of the intangibles of a college or of college life. You can write or e-mail to the college to request this information.

**College View Books:** The spring of your junior year is a good time to get on college mailing lists. You can write a note or e-mail to the college with your name, address, potential major and specific information you want to know (i.e. sports, financial aid etc.) or you can sign up at a college fair. The first piece you'll receive is the college view book, their marketing piece.

**College Web Sites:** The Internet is by far the best search tool you have. There are numerous college search engines and resources dedicated to assisting you with this process. We have provided you with several web resources within the "College Resource Links" section of this web site. My recommendation is to start with [www.collegeboard.com](http://www.collegeboard.com). One of the best, free, Internet college search resources you have access to. In one of its many sections it has a search tool that will lead you through search criteria and list all of the applicable colleges that fit. It will also allow you to save multiple searches for future reference and research.

Another great web site is the [US News & World Report](http://www.usnews.com), Americas Best Colleges section. The US News College Rankings has become a qualified standard and provides a wealth of information, tools, reference materials, recommendations and is an excellent place to start. Check out US News, Americas Best Colleges, Schools List by Majors. This is a great list to review or take your child through if they're not sure what area of study to major in.

One of the best ways to get an initial feel for a college is through their web site. The great thing is that in addition to getting a basic feel for the college, you can also get answers to many specific questions immediately. Most all college web sites post the basic information to assist you in the college search process. More and more college web sites have implemented virtual tours to provide you a more in depth feel.

Be sure to “bookmark” each college you’re interested in within your Internet browser for future research. Before you know it, all of the college research information will blur together. It can be challenging to keep track of. For that reason I recommend creating a college research spreadsheet log that assists you in maintaining your college search notes. This will assist you in narrowing down the college visit list and will help you stay organized through the process.

**College Visits:** are excellent ways of exploring different kinds of colleges (size, location, setting, etc.) and getting the “real feel” for the college atmosphere. Impromptu visits can work, but to maximize your time, effort and to ensure you get the total visit experience, you should schedule your visit during a junior day and/or senior visit coordinated and sponsored by the college admissions office. These types of visits often include opportunities to speak with currently enrolled students, an excellent source of “real feel” information.

**Searching for the beginning:** Preparing to go to college and beginning the college search process can be overwhelming. One of the keys to success is to remember that it’s not a sprint, it’s a multi-year marathon and the journey starts with a common sense plan. Working the plan, as a Parent / Student team, spending a little time each month will assist you in reducing or even eliminating the stress, anxiety and frustration that can sometimes be found during this lengthy process. It will ultimately lead you to a college choice based on solid decision factors. So get going! It’s never too early to start.

**What’s next?** OK so you’ve begun the college search and you have a list of colleges you may be interested in. Great! Now let’s map out the plan, identifying what you should be doing each month during the junior and senior years to prepare for success.

See “College Planning Guide - Dates, Deadlines & Details”