

## Surviving Your College Search: The Adventure Begins

You seem to have more and more mail from colleges every day. Your classmates keep talking about test scores and acceptance rates. Distant relatives and total strangers seem to take delight in asking you what college you plan to attend. Let's face it—it's time to start your college search.

If those words strike terror in your heart, you're not alone. Many students feel overwhelmed at the beginning of their college search. After all, you'll be making perhaps the biggest decision of your life so far. No pressure there!

To make your college search a little less intimidating, here are some strategies for getting started—and a preview of what to expect.

### Soul Survivor

Most students assume that the college search begins with a guidebook, an Internet site, or a college fair. But the best place to begin is with yourself.

"The very first thing I encourage [students] to do is to 'soul search'—sit down and make a list of all the things they know about themselves," says Joyce Luy, director of admission at Westmont College (CA).

Start with the obvious: What do you like to do? What do you hate to do? What subjects (academic or not) make you sit up and take notice? What totally bores you? What are you good (or not-so-good) at? For example, you might love to write poetry and play soccer, but history bores you and you're not that great at baseball. Or there's nothing you like to do better than to discuss politics, but you zone out when the conversation turns to music or computers.

Once you have a list of your basic interests and abilities, start thinking about more complicated issues. How do you learn best—by listening, discussing, reading, doing? Do you enjoy being part of a large group, or do smaller groups suit you better? Do you seek out diversity among your friends, or would you rather hang out with people that are very similar to you? Are you more comfortable in the city or in a rural or suburban environment? Do you want to stick close to home or move far away? Is there a particular geographical area you're most interested in? You can probably think of other questions to consider, or ask your guidance counselor for more help.

Jot down short answers to these and other questions. Then "translate" your answers into things you'd like to see in a college. For example, that soccer-playing, poetry-writing, history-hating student above would probably want a college with a good English program and an opportunity to play varsity or intramural soccer. (Even if this student has a major other than English in mind, he or she might want to take a few poetry or writing classes as electives.) Similarly, if you love lively discussions, you should probably look for a college that encourages that kind of classroom discussion.

### Winning the "I Don't Know" Challenge

OK, some people seem to know what they want before you even ask them. You probably have a friend or two who seemed destined from birth to major in engineering or political science. But the rest of us probably can't figure out whether we're more comfortable in a city or a small town. The city is so exciting, but a small town is so friendly. They both have their charms and drawbacks. If this sounds like you, forget all those questions for a moment and try something a little different.

Test your imagination. Close your eyes and envision your ideal college. Think about walking around campus. What do you see? Now you're sitting in your favorite class. What does the classroom look like? What are you and your classmates doing? What is the professor doing or saying? Pretend it's Saturday on campus. What are you and your friends doing? Where are you spending your weekend? What's coming up that evening?

While you have that picture in your mind, write down all of the details you can. Describe the college as accurately as possible. When you're finished, read through your description.

"Usually, the characteristics found in the ideal college serve as a good starting point for the college search," says Paul Marthers, director of admission at Oberlin College (OH). If the first picture that came to mind was strolling down the paths of a quiet campus, surrounded by trees, you should probably consider colleges that are in small towns or rural areas. On the other hand, if you envisioned walking down a city sidewalk on your way to your high-rise dorm, a more urban campus may be more for you.

Of course, there are plenty of colleges in between those two extremes, which is why the following strategy can also be helpful.

Sort through your options. "Corral all those college viewbooks [you've] gotten in the mail and acquire three cardboard cartons," says Nancy Scarci, post high school counselor at Roosevelt High School (HI). "A little at a time, skim the viewbooks, look at the pictures, try to get a feel for each school, and make one of the following decisions: OH YES, NO WAY, and ?" Put the viewbook in the carton labeled with that decision.

When you're done, bring the "no's" to the guidance office so the material can be made available to your classmates. Go through the "?" box one more time, trying to sort into "yes" and "no." Then, on your own or with the help of your parents or counselor, go through the "yes" box. What do the "yes" colleges have in common?

"This is a way to start developing the concept of 'what are you looking for' that is so crucial to the search and selection process," says Scarci. In addition, the viewbooks can give students a better feel for what things like "urban" or "rural" might look like.

### **Going Fishing**

Once you have some idea of what you're looking for, it's time to do some fishing for colleges that have the characteristics you seek. This is the time to whip out those guidebooks, visit those Internet college sites, and talk to your guidance counselor. That "yes" box can also be helpful now, especially if you keep it up to date as more college material arrives in the mail.

The goal at this point is to put together a list of 15 to 20 colleges that look promising. They should have most of the characteristics you want. They should also be colleges where you realistically have a shot at getting accepted. A number of "stretch" schools is fine, but if your list contains all of the Ivy League plus Stanford and MIT, you may want to add a few less selective colleges for balance (and to take a little pressure off the admission process). Your guidance counselor can help you assess your academic record in light of the requirements of various colleges.

### **Coming Up Next**

As you might have guessed, the adventure doesn't end with that preliminary list of 20 or so colleges. In fact, a lot of the fun stuff is yet to come: exploring a variety of colleges, visiting college campuses, voting certain colleges off the island (oops, wrong adventure). In the coming weeks and months, you'll become an expert in finding out the real story about the

colleges on your list. You'll refine your idea of the ideal college. And you'll learn more than you imagined about yourself. So stay tuned—your adventure is just beginning!

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