

# Find the Best Colleges for You

Focus  
on the  
information  
that  
matters

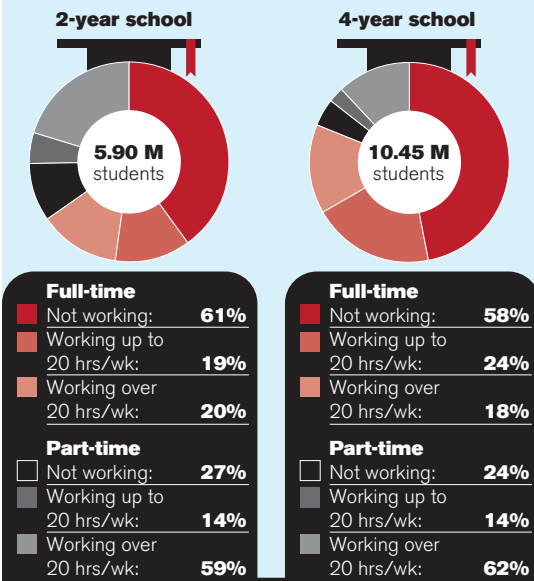


# Student Choices

## Who they are, where they go, what they study

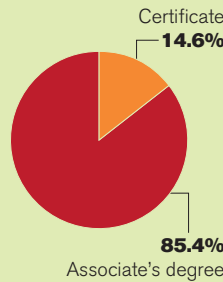
When making your choices about college, you might be curious about what other students are up to. Here's a quick peek at what undergraduates attending 2- and 4-year schools are considering.

### College student employment (2010)



### Certificate/Assoc. degree seekers (2008)

#### Degree sought



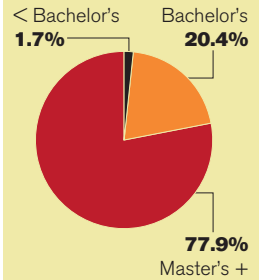
#### Areas of Study (%)

General Studies	24.0
Health Sciences	22.0
Business/Marketing	14.0
Undeclared	11.0
Eng./Architecture	5.0
Education	5.0
Protective Services	4.0
Manufacturing*	4.0
Consumer Services	4.0
Information Sciences	4.0
Public, Legal, Social	2.0
Communic./Design	1.0
Agriculture/Natural Resources	1.0

(\* includes construction, repair, and transportation)

### Freshmen in 4-yr colleges (2010)

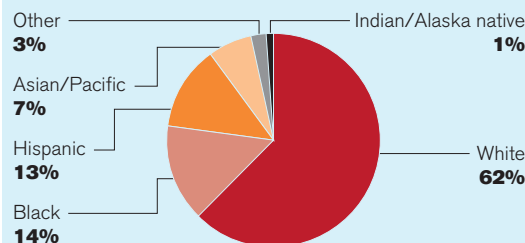
#### Highest degree sought



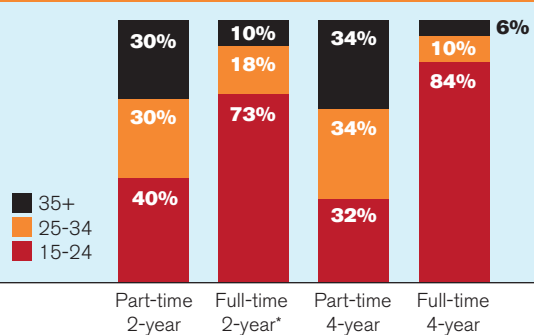
#### Probable majors (%)

Business	13.7
Health Professional	13.0
Biological Science	10.8
Engineering	10.3
Social Science	8.9
Other Nontechnical	8.1
Education	7.2
Undecided	6.8
History/Political Sc.	4.6
Fine Arts	4.3
Humanities	3.3
Physical Science	2.7
Other Technical	2.7
English	1.9
Mathematics/Stats.	0.9
Agriculture	0.7

### Students enrolled by race/ethnicity (2011)

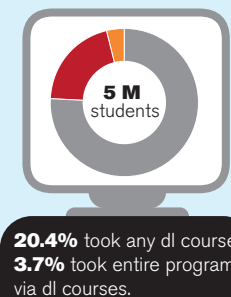


### Enrollment by age (2009)

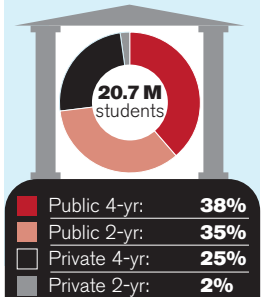


\* Results do not total 100% because of rounding

### Enrolled in distance learning courses (2008)



### Enrollment by type of school (2011)



Sources: CIRP Freshman Survey, a program of UCLA's Higher Education Research Institute; U.S. Dept. of Education; U.S. Census Bureau, DataFerrett, Current Population Survey, October 2010. Dates indicate school year for which most current data were available at the time of publication.

# Find the best colleges for you

## Focus on the information that matters

**Congratulations, you've decided to go to college!** Whether you've already scouted a few schools or haven't yet considered your options, the process of researching colleges and choosing a good one for you can be overwhelming. But you should take heart in knowing that there is information out there to help you decide where you want to go to school. Similarly, schools are working to make sure they have a dynamic mix of students on campus. Think of the relationship as a two-way street: You choose a college because of what it can offer you, and a college chooses you because of what you'll add to its campus and the experiences of other students. But to choose wisely, you'll need to be well-informed.

**You'll find hundreds of resources** in bookstores, libraries, and online for researching colleges. Many have the same data, others have a unique angle on colleges. Most of these resources also use specific terms and concepts you'll need to understand before you can get the most out of them.

**This brief guide can help.** We surveyed and interviewed more than 2,500 students and educators to get the inside scoop on everything you need to know about choosing a college. We took their input and evaluated more than two dozen books and websites devoted to researching colleges. And we

What this guide does—and doesn't do—for you.

This guide does identify and explain the most important information for your college search so that you can make good decisions about college.

This guide doesn't shorten the college-search process. Getting the right information will likely take weeks, if not months. Just remember, the time you take here is an investment in you and your future—it's worth it.



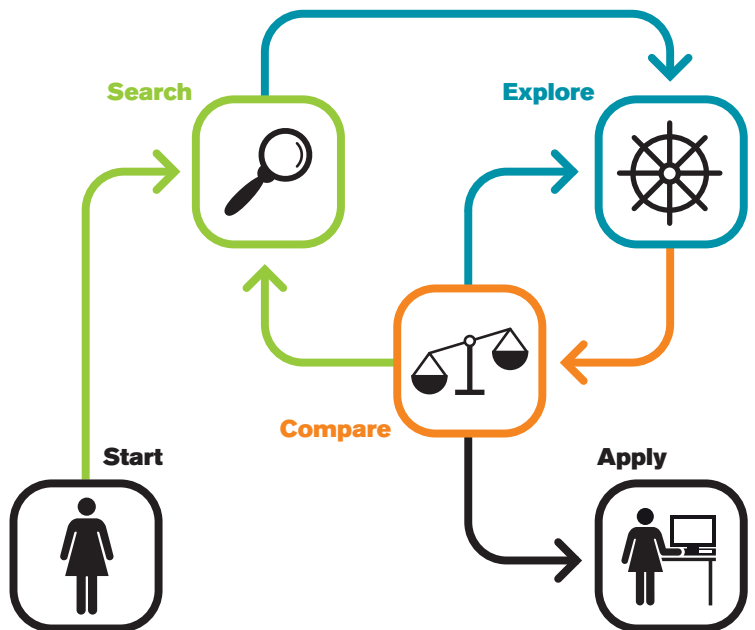
**Tips for using this guide:** Throughout the text, you'll see references to the books and websites we reviewed. Books will always be in italics, and websites will just be normal text. At the end of this booklet, you'll find a chart with detailed evaluations of the guides and directories we reviewed, and a box highlighting "Additional Resources", both with any related URLs. This booklet, including the worksheets, is available for downloading and printing at: ??????????????????.

point out the most useful tools throughout this guide, showing exactly how they can help you best (see the **Comparison of Guides and Directories** on page 19-24 for a full list).

Keep in mind that we're not advocating any particular resource, whether it is available in print or on the Web (though we do advise staying away from online fee-based services, which tend to have similar information to that found in free resources). We'd also like to stress that no resource can replace the work you'll need to do. That's right, researching colleges effectively will require you to roll up your sleeves and take an active part in exploring your options.

## Follow the steps.

The Search-Explore-Compare process is your key to identifying, researching, and evaluating schools of interest to you. Once you've gone through the steps, you'll be ready to prepare applications for the schools that are best for you.



This guide divides the research and selection process into three steps:

- **Search**—This involves building a preliminary school list that will grow and shrink and grow again as you move through the other steps.
- **Explore**—Here you'll gather as much information as you can about the schools you added to your list during the **Search** phase.
- **Compare**—Finally, you'll do a side-by-side evaluation of the schools on your list to narrow down your choices. You might even find that you want to go back to the beginning and **Search** for some more schools to **Explore**.

According to our research, these are the questions each person trying to find a college needs to be able to answer:

- 1** *Does the college offer what I want to study?*
- 2** *How much will it cost, and can I afford to go there?*
- 3** *What is the educational quality and experience offered by the school?*
- 4** *What type of environment does the college offer?*

You'll find out how to answer these questions for each of the schools you'll be considering when we get to the **Explore** section.

**So go on—Search, Explore, and Compare**, using the information that matters most to you in your college search. Then start filling out those college applications, having evaluated your college options with confidence.

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## Be resourceful: Three ways to get the 411 on colleges

The information you'll need comes from three kinds of sources. We found that no one source can give you all the answers, so use them all, keeping in mind what each offers.

### Advice & recommendations from friends, family, or a school advisor

Advice from people you know and trust can be an excellent source for understanding what the school environment might be like and the value of a particular degree—educationally, socially, and professionally. Make the most of these contacts by preparing a list of questions before you sit down to chat with them. Remember: No one person will have all the answers for you.

### Brochures and information from colleges

Materials that come directly from the college are the most authoritative source for costs, deadlines, and course offerings. They also reflect what the college imagines is most important to you and how the school wants to be perceived. Read that information, then ask college representatives how they track whether the school lives up to its promises.

### Print and Web guides and directories

Guidebooks, college directories, and websites help you sift through college options and the vast amount of data published about schools. Keep in mind that each resource has its own angle on what information is important.

# Search

Once you're done with the Search section . . . you should have an expanded list of 3 to 12 schools. You'll explore those in-depth in the next section.



**OK, it's time to start Searching.** First, build a starter list of schools with the two or three colleges that you may know something about. These could be colleges your friends or family went to; a school that came up in a casual Google search you did on, say, “top film schools” or “colleges that offer skateboarding scholarships” or those you found in a guidance office or library when browsing through printed directories.

Eyeball profiles of the same school in multiple sources to get a feel for the different approaches that guides use to describe a school. For example, go to the College Navigator website for a statistical profile; then review a more narrative profile of the same school from a book like *The Ultimate College Guide* or *Colleges of Distinction*. You'll likely be left with various impressions of the school, since each resource emphasizes different information.

**Now expand your starter list** by using filtering options on websites or print guides that list schools by category. These allow you to build a list of schools based on characteristics like availability of a certain major, geographic location, and size of student body. Keep in mind that just as using different search engines can yield slightly different results when you're shopping for a pair of sneakers, for example, different websites and print guides may tell you different things about the same school, so try more than one resource to build your list.

## To keep your options open, don't limit by scores just yet

Some websites allow you to select schools by comparing your GPA and standardized test scores to those of other students admitted in prior years. We suggest that, at least initially, you don't include your scores when using the filters. Admissions counselors told us they look at the entire package—scores, essays, interviews, extracurricular activities (and for adults—life experience such as military service or running a business). They all matter. So why limit your choices too soon?

Once you know more about your school options, it does make sense to take a look at the average scores. Consider whether the environment is one where you can thrive. If your scores are low, what supports do you need to succeed academically? Are you ready? If your scores are in fact higher than those of the other students, consider how well you will be challenged by the coursework and teachers.

Although most students pursue an Associate's or Bachelor's degree, a certificate may be appropriate for your career goals. It's also possible that your ultimate plan is a 4-year school, but you want to start in a 2-year program, perhaps because it will cost less per credit than a 4-year school, be closer to home, or have more flexible hours that meet your needs right now. Keep in mind that many 4-year schools, not just 2-year and technical/career schools, offer Associate's degrees and certificates. If you intend to transfer from a 2-year school or pursue additional credentials, it's important to do some planning now to determine which courses or credits will count in a transfer.

More and more students are also interested in distance-learning opportunities. But do your research—many schools offer distance learning for some, but not all, classes toward a degree.

## Rankings and "best" lists

We don't recommend relying on them, because selecting a school is about finding the best options for you. Depending on the criteria behind those lists, it's a possibility that some great colleges won't be included. During the **Search** process, use these lists to identify possible schools. Then, take the time to **Explore** all the schools you're thinking about. "Best" and "Top" lists aren't shortcuts to good decision-making.

## Websites with good filtering capabilities

The following sites are helpful because they cover a large number of schools and provide extensive filtering capabilities, with some suggesting similar schools (e.g., "more like this").

Websites	Approx. # Schools Included	Filters				Offers College Suggestions	Comments
		4-yr Degree	2-yr Degree	Certificate	Distance Learning (Online)		
College Navigator	4500	●	●	●	○		Filters by degree offered and by distance-learning options. At the time of our research, the availability of distance learning reported in the profile was not specific to the program or degree being researched.
College Prowler	7000	●	●	●		●	Filters by degree offered. At the time of our research, it wasn't possible to pair a search for a specific major with a degree type.
StudentEdge by Peterson's	4700	●	●	●	○	●	Filters by degree type and by online learning/off-campus study. (Free registration required.) At the time of our research, the availability of distance learning reported in the profile was not specific to the program or degree being researched.
U.S. News & World Report's College Search	1800				●	●	Distance learning search allows you to filter by 2-yr/4-yr degrees and certificates. Currently, the only source that offers a search by online degree program.

● - Complete information and/or functionality ○ - Limited information and/or functionality



# Explore

Earlier, we mentioned four questions that students and experts said are important to answer when researching colleges.

## Dig in!

You've just completed the Search section. Now it's time to get to know those schools and see which are the best ones for you.

- 1 **Does the college offer what I want to study?**
- 2 **How much will it cost, and can I afford to go there?**
- 3 **What is the educational quality and experience offered by the school?**
- 4 **What type of environment does the college offer?**

You'll work to answer these questions in the **Explore** phase. Finding good answers will help you make great choices about where to apply and attend. Use our **College Facts Worksheet** (found at the back of this booklet) to track your answers as you move through these questions and to note other information that's important to you. The worksheet is available electronically so you can print out more copies at: [\\_\\_\\_\\_\\_](#). If you can't do that, we recommend making copies before you get started.



### College Facts Worksheet

College Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Locations: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Campus Visit: Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_ Discussion with Admissions Rep: Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

Use a copy of this worksheet for each college you're considering. Gather and record the information highlighted below and use that information to answer the key questions. Evaluate how well each school meets your needs for each of the four questions. Decide whether it does a great job of meeting your needs (high), is good enough (medium), or is weak in a particular area (low). Once you've done that, take all of these worksheets and record the summary evaluations on the College Companion Worksheet. That way, you'll be able to evaluate all the schools you're looking at side-by-side.

<p><b>1 Does the college offer what I want to study?</b></p> <p>Degree I want from this school (circle one):                  Certificate, 2-year, 4-year, combined degree, accelerated degree program</p> <p>Available major(s) I might want to pursue: _____</p> <p>Special study options of interest to me (e.g., study abroad, internships, etc.): _____</p>	<p><b>3 What is the quality of the education I will receive? (best if focused on program of study)</b></p> <p>Accreditation of the school and/or my program _____</p> <p>Quality and variety of available learning experiences (lectures, seminars, labs, group projects, internships): _____</p> <p>4- and/or 6-year graduation rate: _____</p> <p>Freshman retention rate and/or transfer-out rate: _____</p> <p>Student-Faculty ratio and/or average class size: _____</p>
<p><b>2 How much will it cost, and can I afford to go there?</b></p> <p><b>Published Costs</b></p> <p>Tuition: _____</p> <p>Fees: _____</p> <p>Room and Board: _____</p> <p>Travel: _____</p> <p>Other: _____</p> <p><b>Sources of Aid and Financing</b></p> <p>Average gift aid: _____</p> <p>% receiving gift aid: _____</p> <p>Average self-help: _____</p> <p>% contributing self-help: _____</p> <p>Average student debt load at graduation: _____</p> <p>% borrowing: _____</p> <p>Net price for my income group: _____</p>	<p><b>4 What is the college environment?</b></p> <p>Physical setting (circle one): urban, suburban, rural</p> <p>Campus appearance, personality, atmosphere: _____</p> <p>Size (and makeup) of student population: _____</p> <p>Extracurricular activities: _____</p>

High Medium Low
High Medium Low
High Medium Low

High Medium Low
High Medium Low

*Other things important to me*

High Medium Low
High Medium Low



## 1 Does the college offer what I want to study?

You have already built a list of schools you're interested in learning about. You may have developed that list by looking for schools with specific programs of study. If you didn't do that already, try one of the guides that let you filter by major or degree (see table below).

**Once you've got a good list**—anywhere from about 3 to 12 schools—start exploring the specifics of the programs. Use the school's website and printed materials for each of the colleges on your list to find out:

- the classes required for the degree(s) you're interested in,
- the available electives (classes that aren't required but that may be interesting to you), and
- whether opportunities for internships, collaborative projects, or independent study are available.

If working in your field of interest requires a degree beyond a B.A./B.S. (like a Master's degree or a Ph.D.), find out whether the school offers a combined-degree program. If you can't get answers from the school's print or online materials, add these to the list of questions you'll ask an admissions advisor on the phone or during a campus visit.

### Not sure what you want to study?

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First, don't confuse major and career. English majors get jobs as writers, editors, teachers, etc. Do some research and talk to trusted adults about your options. Two websites are particularly helpful. My Next Move (see page 18) has extensive information about occupations, as well as employment projections and the skills and training needed for various fields. MyRoad by College Board has online tests and personality assessments to help you identify majors in line with your interests. Second, if you're still unsure, don't worry. It's still very common for students to go into college not knowing exactly what they'd like to study.

### Find schools by major or degree

		Majors offered	Degrees by major	Comments
Books	<i>Book of Majors 2011</i>	●	●	Directory offering in-depth information on hundreds of majors and which schools offer them.
Websites	College Board's College Search and MyRoad by College Board	●	●	MyRoad offers information on how to think about majors and programs and provides online tests to help you identify majors based on your interests. Both sites by College Board offer identical content on majors and degrees within the profiles.
	College Confidential and College View	●	●	Sites contain identical content on majors and degrees within the profiles. It is easy to identify which degrees are offered for each major within the school profiles.
	College Navigator	●	●	This site allows you to easily identify which degrees are offered for each major within the school profiles.

● - Complete information and/or functionality ○ - Limited information and/or functionality

## Location doesn't determine cost

Some students told us that they used location as an indicator of cost. They might have assumed that a school just miles from home or within their state or region would by default be less expensive. Although it's true that state schools charge lower tuition for state residents, that doesn't necessarily mean the school will cost less overall than a private school, which may make available significant grant funding. And though you might save on the cost of traveling home if the school is close, that really depends on how often you plan to go home!

## 2 How much will it cost, and can I afford to go there?

A great place to start learning about cost and affordability is a federal information portal called Student Aid on the Web. It provides information to help you prepare for and finance college, including identifying scholarships. You'll also find links to and guidance on the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). Every prospective college student should complete this form to ensure eligibility for certain types of aid, including some private and school-based grants and scholarships.

You won't know definitively whether you can afford a school until you receive formal financial aid awards. That's why at this stage of your research, we don't advise that you rule out a school based on cost. You can find ways to make informed estimates; the pieces of information listed below will help you compare the costs of schools and determine how likely you are to receive aid and financing.

### COMMON COSTS



**Published costs** typically refer to more than just tuition, housing, and food, as there are numerous other costs related to attending school. Other costs frequently reported are estimates for on- or off-campus housing, books, travel, and other personal expenses (e.g., cell phone, clothing, food, entertainment). Keep in mind that some of these will vary based on your individual needs, and all vary over time.

**Sources of aid and financing.** Although you can't really know how much financial aid you'll get until you receive award letters, information about average awards can help you at this stage of your research. For each school, look for:

- average amount in scholarships and grants received by students,
- average amount in loans or self-help financing used by students, and
- the percentage of students receiving each of these sources of aid and financing.

Many sources report overall average financial aid; we prefer the breakouts listed above because they offer greater clarity on the types of aid students typically receive. The breakouts will give you a rough sense of how likely you are to receive aid, as well as the likely amount.

**Average net price by income.** This is an estimate of what you (or your family) will need to pay per year, possibly with unsubsidized and private loans. Although we like this number—it identifies the average cost to students within various income groups—it doesn't reflect the cost to all students, all sources of funding (e.g., private scholarships), and out-of-state costs at public universities. By fall 2011, colleges were expected to include personalizable net price calculators on their individual websites, making it easier for you to estimate your costs.

## Student debt?

As you think about how you'll pay for college, a big question to consider is whether to take out student or personal loans. Keep in mind that an education is an investment. A college degree increases your chances of employment and is associated with higher salaries. Still, you'll want to minimize the total debt you incur, because those debts can affect your options after graduation. Monthly debt payments can influence salary needs and where you can afford to live. But that doesn't mean all debt is necessarily bad. How you and your family think about debt influences how you think about the affordability of various schools. It is ultimately a personal view based on your financial circumstances and your future plans.

## Your financial aid crib sheet

**Scholarships** and **grants** are “free” money—awarded based on financial need or merit—that you don't have to pay back. Check the fine print on any contracts or award letters, because the money could come with strings attached. For instance, they may require you to work in a particular location after graduation. **Loans** are money that you borrow. You have to pay them back, but they can still be vital for financing your education. **Subsidized loans** are generally offered based on need and often charge low interest. The “subsidy” means that interest is not charged while you're in school or are engaged in some other approved activity (e.g., deferment or service year). **Unsubsidized loans** can be obtained privately, through local banks, or from the federal government. Unsubsidized federal loans also generally charge low interest, but you will begin owing interest as soon as you accept the loan and use the money. **Work study** is money you earn while working on-campus, like in the library or cafeteria. It can be included as part of a financial aid package. If you accept a work-study aid offer, you (or your family) pay the amount in advance to the school, and then you earn those funds back by taking a job on-campus.

**Average student debt load at graduation.** This number is an average of the amount of money students borrowed over the course of their degree. Look at this along with the percent of students who borrowed. Together these figures give a sense of how much you might borrow if you need to take on student loans.

Finding information on costs and affordability		Average amount of grant/scholarship aid and % receiving	Average amount of loans/self-help and % receiving	Average debt load upon graduation and % borrowing	Direct costs (tuition, fees, books, supplies)	Net price by income	Comment
Books	<i>Ultimate College Guide 2010</i> (U.S. News & World Report)	●	●	●	●		Includes personal expenses like transportation in cost breakdown.
Websites	College Navigator	●	●		●	●	Average aid and self-help are broken down for full-time beginning undergraduate students. Consolidated averages are provided for all undergraduates.

● - Complete information and/or functionality ○ - Limited information and/or functionality

## Accreditation matters

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Attending an accredited school is important for two reasons: (1) Many accredited institutions don't recognize credits or degrees from unaccredited institutions. If you attend an unaccredited school, you may have trouble transferring credits to, or pursuing an advanced degree at, an accredited institution; and (2) Some financial aid awards are available only to students attending an accredited school.

### 3 What is the educational quality and experience offered by the school?

You'll notice that this section has the most data elements to consider; that's because quality requires that you look at a mix of both subjective and objective data points.

**Accreditation.** You've probably heard the term "accredited college," but what does it mean? Accredited colleges meet the minimal educational standards established by independent, nongovernmental accreditation agencies. If you're pursuing a new program or specialized degree, it's a good idea to find out not only whether the school offering it is accredited but also whether the program itself is too. (See box at left.)

**First-year student retention rate** (or transfer-out rate) measures how many students completed their freshman year and reenrolled in the same school the following year (or how many transfer to another school). This figure is one way to think about satisfaction with educational quality and experience. (See box on page 11.)

**Graduation rate** is a measure of how many students who started at the school as full-time freshmen went on to graduate from the school within 4 or 6 years. (See box at right)

**Types of learning opportunities and special study options.** Schools offer a variety of learning experiences— labs, lectures, small seminars, and internships abroad and locally, to name a few. These can make the difference in what you learn and how engaged you are in your studies.

**Quality of learning experiences.** The amount of time students spend in a variety of learning activities reflects student engagement, which is an indicator of program quality and of the likelihood that students will complete their degree. Examples are the amount of time students spend preparing for class (homework), working in groups, writing papers, reading books and articles, engaging in class discussions, or talking with professors, etc. Although many schools conduct and participate in surveys and assessments of learning and engagement, only some make the data available. Given the limited sources for this information, you should make a point of asking a college how it knows its students are effectively engaged in their learning.

**Student/faculty ratio and class size.** Typically, the student/faculty ratio is reported for the institution as a whole, indicating the number of students for each faculty member. A low ratio of students to faculty may mean you'll have a better chance of learning in small classes, where you may get more individualized attention. But a low student-faculty ratio could mean that a large number of non-teaching staff are on campus engaged in other services, especially at research institutions, where professors' obligations go beyond teaching. Look at this measure along with average class size but also find out the average class size for your major or program and class size in introductory classes versus that in advanced classes.

**Academic advising and support programs.** Not all schools offer things like tutoring and writing support or academic counseling. Whether a school provides enough of these resources can make a big difference in whether you complete your degree. You may also want to check whether the school offers programs to help students plan for after graduation, e.g., internship programs, a career center, or a

## Retention and graduation

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These are important indicators but are not absolute quality measures. Compare the retention and graduation rates of the schools on your list. If some have lower rates than others, explore what the reasons might be. For example, do financial aid packages get smaller after freshman year? Does the school offer good mentoring and advising programs? Keep in mind that if the school has a large number of part-time students or students in combined degree programs, those students may take more than 4 years to graduate, which could skew the results. Another factor that can impact the graduation rate is whether a school makes a special effort to attract transfer students—typically transfer students aren't included in the graduation rate even if they graduate. It would be helpful to know the retention and graduation rates for your specific program of interest. These are exactly the kinds of insights an admissions advisor should be able to provide.

resume-writing seminar. While many guides list these services, you should also ask the schools about the programs or services that are important to you.

**Weekend or evening classes, or distance learning options.** Many schools offer flexible class scheduling to accommodate a variety of needs, such as students trying to juggle family

## Finding information about educational quality and experiences

		Availability of weekend or evening classes (WE)/distance learning classes (DL)	Rate of graduation within 4 or 6 years	Student/faculty ratio and/or class size	Quality of learning experiences	Types of learning opportunities/special study options	Campus facilities (libraries, labs, arts centers)	Availability of academic advising and support programs	Transfer out/retention rate	Comments
<b>Books</b>	<i>College Handbook 2011</i>	DL/WE	●	●		●	●	●	●	Contains detailed information about class size.
<b>Websites</b>	<b>College Portrait of Undergraduate Education</b>		●	●	●	●			●	Since the data is limited to a few hundred participating public colleges, a school of interest to you may not be included. We include it here because it is the only source that publishes data on participation in various learning activities, e.g., percent pursuing internships or time spent in group projects.
	<b>College Prowler</b>		●	●		●	●	●	●	This site incorporates information from a student poll of teaching and academic experience, and contains detailed class size information.
	<b>The Princeton Review</b>	DL/WE	●	●		●	●	○	●	Quotes from surveys are used to give you a sense of the academic experience. Data is offered on most frequent class size, most frequent lab size, and overall student-faculty ratio, but not on learning experiences.
	<b>U.S. News &amp; World Report's College Search</b>	DL	●	●			○	●	●	●

● - Complete information and/or functionality ○ - Limited information and/or functionality



care or jobs. Some guides note the schools that offer online or distance learning options, but you should still confirm that these options are available for the program you're interested in. For evening and weekend classes, ask the schools whether such flexible schedules are available in all the classes you'll need to complete your degree (both introductory courses and those in your major).

**Campus facilities.** The quantity and quality of libraries, labs, and arts centers can give you a sense of how well-equipped a school is to support both your specific major and the interests you may develop about other fields of study. Access to such resources is even more important if the campus is far away from a city or cultural center.

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#### 4 **What type of environment does the college offer?**

Certain attributes of a school can help you assess the type of experience you can expect from it. Among these are the college's "personality," where it's located, the total number of students enrolled, and the opportunities for a social life. We take a look at them below. Many guides include student feedback about a school. Just as with any user review, don't let one negative comment steer you away from a school. Instead, use this information to help you ask good questions of the students and alumni you'll meet on a campus visit.

**Campus appearance, atmosphere, and personality** can affect your overall experience and success at school. You can get a feel for them from the pictures and videos available on a college's website, descriptions from your friends and family who've attended the school or have seen the campus, and, of course, from visiting the campus yourself. Figure out whether the campus personality (e.g., whether the environment is competitive, has sports and clubs, has fraternities and sororities, etc.) matches what you're looking for in a college.

**Physical setting and student enrollment.** You'll be able to find information about the setting of the school (urban, rural, suburban, etc.) and the number of students enrolled in most college guides and websites. See the sidebar for how to consider these facts in context.

### **Dreams of a big school in an urban environment?**

Perhaps you've dreamed of going to school in a big city for access to cultural events, or maybe you're an athlete and think a rural or suburban setting will offer new challenges. Fair enough, but just make sure that the actual environment at a particular school meets your expectations. For example, a rural or suburban campus may not necessarily have a stronger sports program, just as an urban campus may or may not make it easier to access a supermarket or educational opportunities within a city. Similarly, confirm that your ideas about the number of students enrolled are accurate. A large student population doesn't necessarily mean you won't have ample time with faculty—that may depend on the type of class you're in and your major—nor does it guarantee diversity. Consider looking at physical setting and size of student population, along with other demographic data that may matter to you, such as the gender balance or ethnic diversity across the college (available in most profiles) and in the program you're interested in pursuing (check with the school).



**Types of extracurricular programs** as well as co-curricular programs (like student organizations and intramural sports) can be important. These programs can help you stay balanced amidst the new demands of school, build a social network for campus support and career growth, and have new experiences, which, for many students, is a key benefit of being on campus.

## Finding information about the college environment

		Campus appearance, atmosphere, and personality	Types of extracurricular programs	Number of students enrolled	Physical setting	Comments
Books	<i>Colleges of Distinction</i>	●	○	●	○	Descriptions of the types of extracurricular programs and physical setting are embedded within the narrative.
	<i>Fiske Guide to Colleges</i>	●	○	●	●	Descriptions of the types of extracurricular programs are embedded within the narrative.
Websites	College Confidential	●	●	●	●	Coverage of appearance, personality, and atmosphere are drawn from student comments and surveys.
	College Prowler	●	●	●	●	A unique feature is the report card, which aggregates user comments in a grade that describes appearance, personality, and atmosphere.
	The Princeton Review	○	●	●	●	Campus appearance, atmosphere and personality are addressed by selected quotes from students. Offers very detailed information on extracurricular programs and opportunities.
	U.S. News & World Report's College Search	●	●	●	●	Covers each core element; however, its free version offers the least detail regarding the composition of the student population and extracurricular activities.
	StateUniversity.com	●	○	●	●	Descriptions of campus appearance, atmosphere and personality and types of extracurricular programs are embedded within the narrative.

● - Complete information and/or functionality ○ - Limited information and/or functionality

# Compare

Review the information you've collected. At this point, you might have dropped some schools you were initially considering and added a few others. Focus now on the factors most important to you, even if they aren't ones we mentioned in this guide. For example, consider questions like: In what ways does the curriculum for my major(s) differ among the schools on my list? Are there any factors that make one school more affordable or less affordable than another? Does the school offer the kinds of learning experiences that will engage me? Does it offer the support services I need to be successful? Will I find fun things to do in this new environment to help me stay balanced?

Narrowing it all down.  
It's time to figure out which schools should stay on your list and which should go.

By now, you should have fewer than a dozen schools on your short list. Use the **College Comparison Worksheet** (found at the back of this booklet) to do a side-by-side comparison of them. If the school you had your heart set on at the start falls short in this comparison, reexamine what you did like about the school and the data—maybe something you didn't consider is more important to you than you thought. You may want to go back and **Search** for more schools to **Explore** and **Compare** that address this important quality.

**College Comparison Worksheet**

You've recorded information about each college on your shortlist using the College Facts Worksheet. You've evaluated how well each school meets your needs based on the data for each of the four questions, plus other factors important to you. High means that the school does a great job of meeting your needs for that question. Medium means that it's good enough. Low means that the school is weak in that area and isn't really what you are looking for.

Transfer these evaluations to this comparison sheet. Compare the schools. Which one(s) seem to reflect your needs and the data—maybe something you didn't consider is more important to you than you thought.

The Four Questions	School:	School:	School:	School:
<b>1 Does the college offer what I want to study?</b> High - It has the right mix of degree, classes, and opportunities I'm looking for. Medium - It has the degree and the classes I'm looking for. Low - It does not offer what I thought it would.				
<b>2 How much will it cost, and can I afford to go there?</b> High - I can afford this school even if I don't receive the average level of grant aid for my income group. Medium - If I get some grants, I may be able to swing this. Low - It will require a level of borrowing that I'm not sure I (or my family) can manage.				
<b>3 What is the quality of the education I will receive? (best if focused on program of study)</b> High - This school offers me a great program of high quality. Medium - The school offers a good program for me. Low - There is little to suggest academics are of good quality.				
<b>4 What is the college environment?</b> High - This school offers my ideal environment. Medium - This school has an environment that I might get used to. Low - This school does not offer the environment I'm looking for.				
<b>Other things important to me</b> High - This school addresses all the other things I think are important. Medium - This school addresses some of the other things I think are important. Low - This school doesn't address enough of the other things I think are important.				

Consider removing schools that don't receive a HIGH in response to a majority of these questions. If you keep a school on your list, make a note of why you think the low score can be ignored.



# Additional Considerations

What else do you need to know?

Answering the four questions in this guide gets you most of what you need. But you may have unique circumstances that require additional information.



We've highlighted some common additional considerations below, as well as the resources that we think can help you.

## Admissions Worries?

If you think that low grades or test scores will keep you from getting into a good school, check out the school profiles in *Colleges That Change Lives* and *Colleges of Distinction*. Both resources feature less academically competitive schools that have supportive learning environments.

The websites we recommended in the **Search** section can help you identify schools by using the filters for grades and test scores or the percent of accepted applications (often called “selectivity”). The following print guides offer indexes of schools that are less selective or noncompetitive: *Ultimate College Guide*, *Four-Year Colleges*, *College Handbook*, *Profiles of American Colleges*, and *Guide to Colleges*.

## Child Care

If you're looking for on-campus child care, the College Confidential website allows you to search for schools that offer that service.

## Ask good questions

Throughout this document we suggest questions you can ask admissions representatives. *A Pocket Guide to Choosing a College: Questions to Ask on Your College Visits* (see page 18) includes questions about the topics we've covered as well as several others; we've highlighted a few of those other questions below. Use the questions as they are or use them as a model to frame your own.

- What types of career planning and job placement services are available?
- What percentage of students do community service?
- Is a major senior-year project or experience required?
- Do students interact with other students who have different social, political, or religious views or come from different racial and ethnic backgrounds?
- What does the college do to ensure that you graduate on time?
- Do students and faculty members work together on committees and projects outside of course work?



## Disability Services

To find specific disability support services, use the custom filters provided by College Board's College Search and College Confidential's websites. In addition, check out *Ultimate College Guide*, which offers an expanded description of the disability-support services available, specific admissions criteria, as well as the number of students receiving these services. (Note that this information may not be available for every school.)

## First in Family to Attend College

Even if you're the first in your family to go to college, talk to your family about your college research and get their ideas. They can be an important support system for you while you're in college, even if they can't offer specific advice about colleges or the college experience.

Also visit the First in the Family website. In addition to guidance and resources, the website includes videos in which first-generation college students describe the challenges they faced and their strategies for conquering them.

## Military Services

The students we talked to who were veterans or active duty military said it was very important to have someone on campus who specialized in veterans' needs. One place where you can learn more about GI Bill acceptance and getting college credit for your military experience is the education section of Military.com. In addition, two websites indicate which schools offer veterans services or counseling, College Board's College Search and College Confidential. None of the tools we reviewed can filter by that criterion.

## Transfers

If you're thinking about transferring into a 4-year program, check the profiles on College Board's College Search website or *Ultimate College Guide* for information on support services available to transfer students, the number of transfer students who applied and were admitted, the number of credits required, and what the minimum course grade must be for credits to qualify for transfer. Keep in mind that not all credits will necessarily be transferable. Discuss this with a college advisor.



## Spotlight on middle school students



Starting to research colleges early makes sense, since there is much you can do to increase your readiness and confidence in your choices.

- Talk to your guidance counselor and/or teachers about the appropriate course of study. Will you need to take a certain number of years of a foreign language? Math? Science?
- Find out if your high school has courses or programs that earn you college credits.
- Extracurricular activities make an impression on colleges. Are there any sports or clubs that you might find fun to participate in?

A useful resource for thinking about your strengths, weaknesses, needs and interests is *Thinking About College? A Student Preparation Toolkit*. (See page 18.)

# Additional Resources

We recommend several online resources in this guide that weren't part of our comparison chart. They all offer expanded guidance to help you think about researching colleges and deciding where to attend and ultimately apply.

## **Colleges That Change Lives**

<http://ctcl.org/>

This is the book to turn to for 1) schools that go out of their way to provide services to students and support student success, 2) some insights early on in the process into what you might want out of school, and 3) information on schools on your list (late in the process).

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## **First in the Family**

<http://www.firstinthefamily.org/>

This site has two “views”—one for high school students and one for college students. The content focuses on information relevant to getting into and staying in college. There are videos offering students and families valuable insight into the college experience, as well as an online book containing experiences from and guidance for students.

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## **Military.com (Education Section)**

<http://www.military.com/education>

This large news and community site's education section offers information and tools on how to find a campus that accepts the GI Bill and gives credit or placement exams that recognize your military experience and prior education (see the “School Finder”).

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## **My Next Move**

<http://www.mynextmove.org/>

This U.S. Department of Labor website offers guidance on careers, including employment projections, questions to help determine careers appropriate to your interests, and links to apprenticeship opportunities.

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## **A Pocket Guide to Choosing a College: Questions to Ask on Your College Visits**

[http://nsse.iub.edu/html/pocket\\_guide\\_intro.cfm](http://nsse.iub.edu/html/pocket_guide_intro.cfm)

The Center for Postsecondary Research in the Indiana University School of Education produces a number of student surveys to try to quantify student engagement and educational quality. The *Pocket Guide* reflects the focus of those surveys, highlighting student needs and experiences as key factors in the college selection and decision-making process.

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## **Student Aid on the Web**

<http://studentaid.ed.gov>

This U.S. Department of Education website offers tools to estimate costs and aid, search for scholarships, and track filing deadlines. Registration is useful; you can transfer information from MyFSA to your application for federal aid (FAFSA) and can use it to complete college applications. For the FAFSA, there is even a demo site where you can get a feel for what it is like to complete the form without having to actually submit any information. If you get stuck, you can call a toll-free number (hours during the day and evening) to get answers to questions about the forms, the site, and the process. It's all there under “Contact Us.”

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## **Thinking About College? A Student Preparation Toolkit**

[http://sxl01.businessinnovationfactory.com/files/student\\_preparation\\_toolkit.pdf](http://sxl01.businessinnovationfactory.com/files/student_preparation_toolkit.pdf)

Business Innovation Factory (BIF) is active in researching and reporting on how students think about college. The Toolkit highlights what BIF has identified as key considerations for students as they prepare themselves, not just academically but psychologically, for college.

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The following table offers the results of our evaluation of popular print and online college directories. The solid circles and hollow circles indicate the scope of coverage. The ratios indicate how many elements a given college profile from that source contained relative to the number of elements highlighted earlier. For example, "3/7" in the cost and affordability column means that the resource provides only three out of the seven important information elements we looked for.

Comparison of Guides and Directories		Information Elements Covered*	Comments
Schools Included	Degree Program Filters		
<b>Websites</b> <b>College Board's College Search</b> <a href="http://www.collegeboard.com/">http://www.collegeboard.com/</a> and <b>MyRoad by College Board</b> <a href="http://www.myroad.com/">http://www.myroad.com/</a>	Approx. # of Schools Included	4,000	Free registration allows you to save lists of schools and personal data (e.g., test scores, preferences) as well as compare colleges. MyRoad differs from College Board's College Search in two important ways: 1) registration is required (it's free if the user has registered for the PSAT, otherwise it costs \$20), and 2) it offers numerous features for prospective students—including personality assessments, guidance on careers and majors, and advice on how to succeed in high school.
	Online Schools	●	
	Private	●	
	Public	●	
<b>College Confidential</b> <a href="http://www.collegeconfidential.com/">http://www.collegeconfidential.com/</a> and <b>College View</b> <a href="http://www.collegeview.com/">http://www.collegeview.com/</a>	Approx. # of Schools Included	4,000	College Confidential allows registered users to post reviews, photos, and videos, as well as participate in discussions. You don't have to register if you just want to read the information. In other respects, it's nearly identical to College View. The college search tool, which drives both sites, allows you to weight your criteria based on importance for you.
	Online Schools	●	
	Private	●	
	Public	●	
<b>College Navigator</b> <a href="http://nces.ed.gov/collegenavigator/">http://nces.ed.gov/collegenavigator/</a>	Approx. # of Schools Included	4,500	This Department of Education site links to other government sites that offer information about financial aid, careers, preparing for college, and selecting a major.
	Online Schools	●	
	Private	●	
	Public	●	
	Distance Learning (Online)	○	College Confidential allows registered users to post reviews, photos, and videos, as well as participate in discussions. You don't have to register if you just want to read the information. In other respects, it's nearly identical to College View. The college search tool, which drives both sites, allows you to weight your criteria based on importance for you.
	Certificate	●	
	2-yr Degree	●	
	4-yr Degree	●	
	College Suggestions	●	College Confidential allows registered users to post reviews, photos, and videos, as well as participate in discussions. You don't have to register if you just want to read the information. In other respects, it's nearly identical to College View. The college search tool, which drives both sites, allows you to weight your criteria based on importance for you.
	Filtering	●	
	Side-by-Side Comparisons	●	
	Guidance	●	
	Programs of Study	2/2	College Confidential allows registered users to post reviews, photos, and videos, as well as participate in discussions. You don't have to register if you just want to read the information. In other respects, it's nearly identical to College View. The college search tool, which drives both sites, allows you to weight your criteria based on importance for you.
	Costs & Affordability	4/8	
	Educational Quality and Experience	6/8	
	College Environment	3/4	

● - Complete information and/or functionality ○ - Limited information and/or functionality

\* Indicates how many of the specific information elements reviewed were available. Orange numbers indicate that one or more of the information elements was not complete.

## Comparison of Guides and Directories

Websites	Schools Included				Degree Program Filters				Tools Offered			Information Elements Covered*				Comments	
	Public	Private	Online Schools	Approx. # of Schools Included	4-yr Degree	2-yr Degree	Certificate	Distance Learning (Online)	Guidance	Side-by-Side Comparisons	Filtering	College Suggestions	Programs of Study	Costs & Affordability	Educational Quality and Experience		College Environment
<b>College Portrait of Undergraduate Education</b> <a href="http://www.collegeportraits.org/">http://www.collegeportraits.org/</a>	●	●		300	●	●				●			0	5/8	5/8	1/4	A truly valuable site for its data on student experiences and learning outcomes—important indicators of the quality of the educational experience at the college.
<b>College Prowler</b> <a href="http://collegeprowler.com/">http://collegeprowler.com/</a>	●	●	●	7,000	●	●	●		●	●	●		1/2	5/8	6/8	4/4	Free registration lets you save lists of schools, track important deadlines, and input personal information to help estimate the cost of attending various schools. A unique feature of the site is the "report card," which grades numerous features of the campus environment and experience based on student input.
<b>College Results</b> <a href="http://collegeresults.org/">http://collegeresults.org/</a>	●	●	●	2,100					●	●	●	0	4/8	3/8	2/4	2/4	The site offers sophisticated search and comparison tools; results are reported with graduation rate as an anchor against which additional data elements can be assessed. Registration is not available. Users can save schools to a list during a session, but when the session expires, so does the list.
<b>StudentEdge by Peterson's</b> <a href="http://www.studentedge.com/">http://www.studentedge.com/</a> and <b>Peterson's School Finder</b> <a href="http://www.petersons.com/">http://www.petersons.com/</a>	●	●	●	4,700	●	●	●	○	●	●	●	1/2	4/8	5/8	3/4	3/4	StudentEdge by Peterson's requires registration (but it's free), includes far fewer ads, allows for side-by-side comparisons, and has a more robust search interface. Both offer the ability to narrow an initial set of results by college type including online programs.
<b>The Princeton Review</b> <a href="http://www.princetonreview.com/">http://www.princetonreview.com/</a>	●	●	●	4,000	●				●	●	●	1/2	5/8	7/8	4/4	4/4	This portal for test preparation offers profiles that include a mix of statistical data and student quotes. It's best for looking up specific schools or to peruse the predefined lists. Register to store lists of schools as well as rate those schools.

● - Complete information and/or functionality ○ - Limited information and/or functionality

\* Indicates how many of the specific information elements reviewed were available. Orange numbers indicate that one or more of the information elements was not complete.



## Comparison of Guides and Directories

Websites	Schools Included		Degree Program Filters				Tools Offered				Information Elements Covered*		Comments				
	Public	Private	Online Schools	Approx. # of Schools Included	4-yr Degree	2-yr Degree	Certificate	Distance Learning (Online)	Guidance	Side-by-Side Comparisons	Filtering	College Suggestions		Programs of Study	Costs & Affordability	Educational Quality and Experience	College Environment
<b>U.S. News &amp; World Report's College Search</b> <a href="http://colleges.usnews.rankingsandreviews.com/bestcolleges/">http://colleges.usnews.rankingsandreviews.com/bestcolleges/</a>  <b>StateUniversity.com</b> <a href="http://www.stateuniversity.com/">http://www.stateuniversity.com/</a>	●	●	●	1,800				●			●	●	0	5/8	7/8	4/4	Allows you to search for online degrees by major and degree type.
	●	●	●	2,000		●			○	●		●	1/2	5/8	5/8	4/4	An ad-heavy website offering limited search functionality. Data within profiles is voluminous. This site is most helpful for comparing career, two-year, and four-year schools; investigating unaccredited schools; and looking up specific schools.

● - Complete information and/or functionality ○ - Limited information and/or functionality

\* indicates how many of the specific information elements reviewed were available. Orange numbers indicate that one or more of the information elements was not complete.

## Comparison of Guides and Directories

Books	Schools Included				Degree Program Filters				Tools Offered			Information Elements Covered*			Comments		
	Public	Private	Online Schools	Approx. # of Schools Included	4-yr Degree	2-yr Degree	Certificate	Distance Learning (Online)	Guidance	Side-by-Side Comparisons	Filtering	College Suggestions	Programs of Study	Costs & Affordability		Educational Quality and Experience	College Environment
<b>Books</b> <b>Book of Majors 2011 (College Board)</b> For its limited web edition, see: <a href="http://www.collegeboard.com/">http://www.collegeboard.com/</a> and/or <a href="http://www.myroad.com/">http://www.myroad.com/</a>	●	●	●	3,600					○		●		2/2	0	0	0	This directory is an ideal resource for investigating careers and looking for colleges by major and degree. It lacks detailed college profiles, so further information about colleges needs to be obtained from other resources. Much of the content from this publication is embedded in College Board's two websites referenced earlier.
	●	●										●					
<b>283 Great Colleges (©2008 Spark Notes)</b> For its limited web edition, see: <a href="http://www.sparknotes.com/college/">http://www.sparknotes.com/college/</a>	●	●		283					○		●		0	1/8	1/8	3/4	This editorially driven guide offers a perspective on how to think about colleges and college research. Schools are divided into various classifications. A small quiz identifies which classifications are most appropriate to the user. Given its limited data and scope, this guide is most useful early in the process to get one perspective of "great" colleges and late in the process if a school that's particularly interesting to you is included in the guide. The online companion offers narrative content, but lacks coverage of most information elements.
	●	●															
<b>Profiles of American Colleges 2011 (Barron's)</b> For its web edition, see: <a href="http://www.barronspac.com/">http://www.barronspac.com/</a>	●	●		1,700					●		●		1/2	4/8	4/8	3/4	Profiles include information on required and core curriculum, disability services, and degree options, e.g., Associate's degrees. The Index of Majors offers a side-by-side comparison of schools with columns for degrees offered, tuition, and selectivity. Financial data is irregularly provided in school profiles.
	●	●															

● - Complete information and/or functionality ○ - Limited information and/or functionality

\* indicates how many of the specific information elements reviewed were available. Orange numbers indicate that one or more of the information elements was not complete.

## Comparison of Guides and Directories

Books	Schools Included				Degree Program Filters				Tools Offered				Information Elements Covered*				Comments
	Public	Private	Online Schools	Approx. # of Schools Included	4-yr Degree	2-yr Degree	Certificate	Distance Learning (Online)	Guidance	Side-by-Side Comparisons	Filtering	College Suggestions	Programs of Study	Costs & Affordability	Educational Quality and Experience	College Environment	
<b>College Handbook 2011 (College Board)</b> For its web edition, see: <a href="http://collegesearch.collegeboard.com/search/adv_typeofschool.jsp">http://collegesearch.collegeboard.com/search/adv_typeofschool.jsp</a>	●	●	●	3,800	●	●	●			●		1/2	3/8	7/8	3/4	Noteworthy in this guide are the Glossary of Terms and school profiles, which contain information about disability services. Numerous indexes act as filters offering lists by major, selectivity, etc.	
<b>Colleges of Distinction (©2008 Student Horizons)</b> For its web edition, see: <a href="http://collegesofdistinction.com/">http://collegesofdistinction.com/</a>	●	●	●	200				●		●		1/2	1/8	5/8	4/4	This editorially driven guide is most helpful early on in the research process to get a perspective on how to think about colleges, and then later when you get ready to apply if it has information on a school that interests you. The online companion is not identical to the print.	
<b>Complete Book of Colleges 2011 (The Princeton Review)</b> For its web edition, see: <a href="http://www.princetonreview.com/">http://www.princetonreview.com/</a>	●	●	●	1,600						●		1/2	4/8	6/8	4/4	Though focused on 4-year schools with physical campuses, this guide also features some online schools. Profiles are brief, but more extensive ones are featured in a second section of the book (in which the schools mentioned paid to be included). Some disability services information is included in the sponsored content.	
<b>Guide to Colleges 2011 (Fiske)</b>	●	●	●	300						●	●	0	0	5/8	4/4	This editorially driven guide compares schools on four factors: Cost, Academics, Social Life, and Quality of Life. Unfortunately, the scale is difficult to decode, e.g., it is not clear what school would get a score of 1. Consider exploring this guide early on to understand the landscape of options, and later if a school you like is included in the guide. A particularly helpful component in the book is the index of schools that have "strong support for students with learning disabilities."	

● - Complete information and/or functionality ○ - Limited information and/or functionality

\* Indicates how many of the specific information elements reviewed were available. Orange numbers indicate that one or more of the information elements was not complete.

## Comparison of Guides and Directories

Books	Schools Included				Degree Program Filters				Tools Offered			Information Elements Covered*				Comments	
	Public	Private	Online Schools	Approx. # of Schools Included	4-yr Degree	2-yr Degree	Certificate	Distance Learning (Online)	Guidance	Side-by-Side Comparisons	Filtering	College Suggestions	Programs of Study	Costs & Affordability	Educational Quality and Experience		College Environment
<b>Four-Year Colleges 2011 (Peterson's)</b> For its web edition, see: <a href="http://www.princetonreview.com/">http://www.princetonreview.com/</a>	●	●		2,500					●		●		1/2	1/8	2/8	2/4	Brief profiles of 2,500 schools are followed by "close-ups" of selected (about 500) schools. The "close-ups" are largely written by admissions deans and include further detail on many aspects of cost, quality, and educational experience.
<b>The Best 373 Colleges 2011 (The Princeton Review)</b> For its web edition see: <a href="http://www.princetonreview.com/">http://www.princetonreview.com/</a>	●	●		373				●		●	●	1/2	5/8	1/8	4/4	This editorially driven guide offers several lists (some more helpful and meaningful than others) to identify schools of interest.	
<b>Ultimate College Guide 2010 (U.S. News &amp; World Report)</b> For its web edition, see: <a href="http://colleges.usnews.rankingsandreviews.com/best-colleges/">http://colleges.usnews.rankingsandreviews.com/best-colleges/</a>	●	●		1,400				●	●	●		1/2	7/8	6/8	2/4		

● - Complete information and/or functionality ○ - Limited information and/or functionality

\* Indicates how many of the specific information elements reviewed were available. Orange numbers indicate that one or more of the information elements was not complete.

# After the Research

## Apply (or Reassess)

If you've followed the steps in this guide, you should now have a good sense of what various colleges can offer you. You now also know how to find the information you need about new schools you may add to your list, and you have a strategy for comparing them against your original choices.

Your next step is communicating to the colleges what you have to offer them. Here again, guidance and admissions counselors, as well as public librarians, can be important in helping you prepare your application, write an effective admissions essay, and identify critical deadlines. Now that you've gone through the steps in this guide—**Search, Explore, Compare**—you'll probably have an easier time filling out your applications and preparing your essays because you understand exactly why you and the school are a good match. All you have to do now is tell the schools persuasively in your application!

Where you ultimately decide to go to college is an important decision, so the time you've spent researching is well worth it! You should know, though, that your decision is not set in stone. You can always transfer to a different school if your circumstances and interests change. Now that you understand how to research colleges, you have a strategy for evaluating your options today and in the future.

Do you think there's only one perfect school for you? Think again. Make sure you read this . . .



### Think there's only one perfect school for you?

Often, high school and admissions counselors will talk about how important it is to find the right “fit” between you and a school. As we mentioned early on in this guide, a good fit means that a school has what you want, and you have what the school wants. But that doesn't mean there's just one right fit. Several schools could have what you want and need.

There's no shortage of colleges, and as you'll quickly see from looking at their websites and marketing materials, it can sometimes be hard to tell them apart. Some schools claim excellence in a given field, whether it is science, engineering, research, or liberal arts; those schools all have competitor schools that make the same claims, often within the same state or region. By researching the school, looking for comparable information, asking good questions, and thinking about what's most important to you, you should be able to identify more than a handful of schools worth applying to. Any of those—rather than one mythical “dream school”—could be a fine choice.

# College Facts Worksheet

College Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Locations: \_\_\_\_\_

Campus Visit: Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_ Discussion with Admissions Rep: Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

Use a copy of this worksheet for each college you're considering. Gather and record the information highlighted below, and use that information to answer the key questions. Evaluate how well each school meets your needs for each of the four questions. Decide whether it does a great job of meeting your needs (high), is good enough (medium), or is weak in a particular area (low). Once you've done that, take all of these worksheets and record the summary evaluations on the College Comparison Worksheet. That way, you'll be able to evaluate all the schools you're looking at side-by-side.

## 1 Does the college offer what I want to study?

Degree I want from this school (circle one):  
Certificate, 2-year, 4-year, combined degree,  
accelerated degree program

Available major(s) I might want to pursue:

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Special study options of interest to me (e.g., study  
abroad, internships, etc.):

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

High

Medium

Low



## 2 How much will it cost, and can I afford to go there?

### Published Costs

Tuition: \_\_\_\_\_

Fees: \_\_\_\_\_

Room and Board: \_\_\_\_\_

Travel: \_\_\_\_\_

Other: \_\_\_\_\_

### Sources of Aid and Financing

Average gift aid: \_\_\_\_\_

% receiving gift aid: \_\_\_\_\_

Average self-help: \_\_\_\_\_

% contributing self-help: \_\_\_\_\_

Average student debt load at graduation: \_\_\_\_\_

% borrowing: \_\_\_\_\_

Net price for my income group: \_\_\_\_\_

High

Medium

Low

## 3 What is the quality of the education I will receive? (best if focused on program of study)

Accreditation of the school and/or my program

\_\_\_\_\_

Quality and variety of available learning  
experiences (lectures, seminars, labs, group  
projects, internships):

\_\_\_\_\_

4- and/or 6-year graduation rate: \_\_\_\_\_

Freshman retention rate and/or transfer-out rate:

\_\_\_\_\_

Student-Faculty ratio and/or average class size: \_\_\_\_\_

High

Medium

Low



## 4 What is the college environment?

Physical setting (circle one): urban, suburban, rural

Campus appearance, personality, atmosphere:

\_\_\_\_\_

Size (and makeup) of student population:

\_\_\_\_\_

Extracurricular activities:

\_\_\_\_\_

High

Medium

Low



Other things important to me

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

High

Medium

Low

## College Comparison Worksheet

You've recorded information about each college on your shortlist using the *College Facts Worksheet*. You've evaluated how well each school meets your needs based on the data for each of the four questions, plus other factors important to you. High means that the school does a great job of meeting your needs for that question. Medium means that it's good enough. Low means that the school is weak in that area and isn't really what you are looking for.

Transfer those evaluations to this comparison sheet. Compare the schools. Which one(s) seem to reflect your needs the best? Is there a school you have your heart set on that falls short? Reexamine what you like about the school and the data—maybe something you didn't consider is more important to you than you thought.

The Four Questions	School: _____	School: _____	School: _____	School: _____
<p><b>1 Does the college offer what I want to study?</b></p> <p>High – It has the right mix of degree, classes, and opportunities I'm looking for.            Medium – It has the degree and the classes I'm looking for.            Low – It does not offer what I thought it would.</p>				
<p><b>2 How much will it cost, and can I afford to go there?</b></p> <p>High – I can afford this school even if I don't receive the average level of grant aid for my income group.            Medium – If I get some grants, I may be able to swing this.            Low – It will require a level of borrowing that I'm not sure I (or my family) can manage.</p>				
<p><b>3 What is the quality of the education I will receive? (best if focused on program of study)</b></p> <p>High – This school offers me a great program of high quality.            Medium – The school offers a good program for me.            Low – There is little to suggest academics are of good quality.</p>				
<p><b>4 What is the college environment?</b></p> <p>High – This school offers my ideal environment.            Medium – This school has an environment that I might get used to.            Low – This school does not offer the environment I'm looking for.</p>				
<p><b>Other things important to me</b></p> <p>High – This school addresses all the other things I think are important.            Medium – This school addresses some of the other things I think are important.            Low – This school doesn't address enough of the other things I think are important.</p>				

Consider removing schools that don't receive a HIGH in response to a majority of these questions. If you keep a school on your list, make a note of why you think the low score can be ignored.



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101 Truman Avenue  
Yonkers, NY 10703-1057

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## About This Guide

Consumer Reports (<http://www.consumerreports.org/>) and the Education Conservancy partnered to survey and interview more than 2,500 students, educators, and advocates to understand what information was most important in deciding where to attend college. This guide is a synthesis of that research. To help students fully explore their options, this guide offers a strategy for developing a list of schools to consider. Based on input from students and experts, we developed an outline of the important information you'll need to make an informed choice, and we explain how that information will help you understand a school and conduct an informed comparison of colleges.

Funding for *Find the Best Colleges for You: Focus on the information that matters* was provided by Lumina Foundation (<http://www.luminafoundation.org/>) and the Education Conservancy (<http://www.educationconservancy.org/>).

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