

Things to Think about When Selecting a College

When looking at schools, there are many factors that must be considered before making the initial decisions as to determining schools that are of interest to you. The 3,200+ colleges and universities are spread throughout the 50 states and represent all the variety of elements within the United States. And then there is the rest of the world. Not only is it important to know what you want to study but you also need to know "where" you want to study in terms of location, school size, climate, cost, and many other factors.

Self Evaluation

You need to take a close look at your academic record as well as your strengths, weaknesses, needs, and goals as you try to select colleges to which to apply. Talk with your parents, friends, teachers, counselor - lots of people. In most cases, your parents are the main source for decision-making. However, what your friends say about the "best school for you" and what your parents' friends say is "good" are not particularly good indicators as to what is really "good" for you. You need to research what schools offer and how that fits with your needs. *Keep in mind that what is "good" for one person is not necessarily "good" for you.*

School Size

Colleges' sizes range from 27 students to 55,000 and the school size is very important as you evaluate what you want. Consider:

- Will you feel comfortable in a lecture class of 700 students?
- Do you prefer taking notes rather than discussing issues?
- Is it important for you to have a teacher know your name?

If mass education, where you are one of many, feels comfortable, then a large university might be for you. There is a more extensive range of course selections and a greater variety of programs of study. The majority of engineering programs as well as many business programs are often most found in large universities.

If a more personalized education is your preference, then you should be looking at the smaller liberal arts colleges where a student is as name as well as face. Pre-med programs can make a liberal arts college an excellent choice in terms of working with and getting to personally know professors.

Location

Urban? Rural? Long, cold winters? Sunshine year-round? Near a city? Not a city within hours? Campus settings range from places such as New York University and George Washington University that blend right into the urban setting with no identifiable campus at all to campuses of 10,000 acres of forests and hills that are hours from a major city. Your personal happiness is going to depend greatly upon the environment in which you study so you must consider

the actual location of schools. If being near family or friends is important, fine, but then use that importance to pick out possible locations. Keep in mind that being in a small town does not mean "nothing to do" and being in a large city does not mean "lots to do". Many schools not in large cities have extensive on-campus activities programs that provide more than what a student in a large city can financially afford. A large city does not put you necessarily in crime's way nor does a rural setting preclude crime.

Cold and snow are major factors. You need to think about your capacity to tolerate many months of cold and severe weather as you look at college locations.

Cost

You and your family must take a close look at the cost of a college education. As the annual cost of private education in the U.S. now exceeds US\$40,000, it is likely that a private institution will cost your family at least US\$200,000 over four years. Is this a cost that is affordable? Keep in mind that colleges assume that the family is responsible for financing your education. Financial aid for U.S. citizens comes into play when there is a demonstrated financial need vis-à-vis the FAFSA that determines the EFC. U.S. citizens are eligible for institutional-based financial aid in a combination of grant, work study, and loan moneys. Most financial aid is Need-Based which means a family has to demonstrate financial need on the FAFSA (see page 28). There is financial assistance for non-U.S. citizens. It is usually merit based.

Programs of Study

If you have a specific major in mind, make sure that the schools to which you apply have that program. If you are undecided about a major, it might be a good idea to apply to schools that have a range of majors so that you can pick a major later and have some choice about what to study. If you decide to apply to a "specialty" school (i.e., a school that specializes in just one area such as business), make sure that your interest to study that subject is strong. If you enroll in a school that specializes in business, for example, and decide that you don't like business, you will probably have to transfer to another college to study "something else".

On-Campus Housing vs. Commuter School and Living at Home

The personal growth and learning that goes on in the residential arena on a campus can be as important as is the time spent in class. You might want to consider the on-campus housing options at any school.

"Brand Name" Value

Students and parents should be wary of selecting a college based upon its name and the perceived prestige of that name. It must be kept in mind that at the prestigious, big name research universities, professors concentrate more on graduate students and research than they do on undergraduate students. The designer-label college diploma can assist in getting one's first job but after that,

jobs, promotions, and raises are based upon one's personal qualities and achievements rather than the "name" of the college attended. Check out the following list of lists.

Academic Atmosphere

The degree of stress, competition, and intensity of the environment will impact the overall quality of personal life at any college. A stress-filled environment does not necessarily indicate a high-quality education. The analogy of "the big fish in a small pond/small fish in a big pond" merits some consideration.

Pre-Professionalism vs. A Liberal Arts Education

Pre-professional programs of study are ones that are designed specifically toward certain career goals. Premed, prelaw, engineering, graphic design, culinary arts, and business are good examples of pre-professional majors – majors leading directly to a career. Majors that do not lead directly to a specific career goal fall into the Liberal Arts category. The goal of a liberal arts education is to teach students how to think creatively and analytically and thus preparing them to pursue any career. There are pros and cons for both. If you really know what you want in terms of a career, then a pre-professional course of study might be most comfortable for you. However, if you are not sure, a liberal arts education is an alternative route into a professional career track.