

10 Steps to Choose the Right College for You

With literally thousands of options for post-secondary school education and training, the college selection process can be a bit overwhelming. This plan is just one person’s strategy to narrow the choices. This plan does not deal with the application process, testing, or financial aid aspects of college, but should help pare down the enormous number of options available to most of our students.

At each step along the way, the decision you make may be “It doesn’t matter to me, I don’t have a preference”. That’s fine. You considered the criteria and decided it wasn’t (or won’t be) a factor in your decision making process. Then you just move on to the next step.

Prior to beginning this process, it is advisable that you take a day to visit a college, any college, so you have something to use as a comparison. You don’t need to visit on one of the college’s “Preview Days”. Just plan a day which fits your schedule, making sure you can see a dorm room, visit a class, possibly talk with a professor or coach, and eat in the dining hall.

Step	Action to Take	Reasons Why
1	<i>Location</i> – Think about what part of the state, country, or world you want to spend the next 4 years of your life. Consider climate, size of city, proximity to recreational opportunities, etc.	No matter what the school offers in programs, cost, size, or spiritual atmosphere, you have to like living there. Just like in Goldilocks and the 3 Bears, not too hot, not too cold, but just right.
2	<u>2-year, 4-year or trade school</u> – Are you seeking an Associates degree, a Bachelor’s degree, or certification in a specific trade skill?	Depending on what you want to do, you may not need a 4-year degree. On the other hand, you may need to start with a 4-year degree en route to a Masters or Doctoral degree.
3	<i>Christian or Secular</i> – Decide what spiritual atmosphere you desire on your campus.	As with some of the other criteria, you need to feel comfortable with the spiritual atmosphere on campus. A choice here can significantly narrow your options.
4	<i>Size</i> – You should probably visit a campus or two to see what size feels right. Large, medium, and small campuses each have their pros and cons. Spend some time on a couple campuses to see which size suits your personality, needs, etc.	The last thing you want to do is head off to college and decide after a few weeks or months that the school is too big or too small. Then you’re right back to the same process in selecting a school for next year, or worse yet, next semester.
5	<i>Sports & Extracurricular Activities</i> – You should see if the school offers activities you want to participate in and, if possible, determine if you’re good enough to play/perform at that school’s level?	If participating in these activities was important to you in high school, it may be something you want to continue in college. Yes, you might get some scholarship money, but should that be your motivation to participate? What happens if you no longer want to participate after a year or two? You’ll have to make up that scholarship money somehow.

6	<p>Unique Programs – Does the school even offer the major(s) you think you’d be interested in?</p>	<p>Some programs are offered at most all colleges, while others are found in a relatively small number of schools. Remember that most people’s majors change at least once or twice during college so you need to decide how narrow you want to be in selecting an area of study at this point in your life.</p>
7	<p>Start Applying (& get your FAFSA completed) – Hopefully, you’ve narrowed the number of potential schools to no more than 4 or 5. Secure applications, recommendations, and get them all in as soon as you can. Most <u>regular</u> deadlines are the first of February, but more and more students are choosing to apply by “early admission” dates. You won’t be able to do your FAFSA until after the first of the year, but should get it completed ASAP.</p>	<p>Completing applications can take quite a bit of time. If you still have 10 schools you’re interested in, you’re going to spend many, many hours filling out applications. Make sure that your SAT/ACT scores are sent to <u>every</u> school to which you are applying so that you’re admission to their school is not held up because they’re waiting for your scores.</p>
8	<p>Visit your top choices – If you haven’t already done so, visit those schools you’re still considering. This also might mean visiting them again since you are now really interested in the school.</p>	<p>You can visit during one of the school’s Preview Days, or set up a visit on a regular school day. If at all possible, stay overnight so you get the most accurate impression of what daily life on that campus is really like. Make sure you set up appointments with representatives of any extra curricular programs you have an interest in.</p>
9	<p>Financial Aid Awards – See how much it costs to attend the various schools.</p>	<p>Don’t just look at the bottom line. Make sure you see what form of financial aid is being offered. Scholarships and grants are “free” money, loans mean you pay it back. If you haven’t already, determine the amount of debt you are comfortable with. Remember that this is an investment in your future – possibly a 40-year future in the workforce.</p>
10	<p>Make a Decision!</p>	<p>Keep in mind that most schools want you to decide by May 1st, but take whatever time you need. This is an important decision. At this point you might be down to just a couple schools – maybe one will be the clear choice and your decision will be an easy one!!</p>