

# BASICS of College Planning

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

## Beginning the Search

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

1. What size school do you prefer: small (less than 2,000 students), medium (2,000 to 5,000), large (5,000 to 12,000), or very large (more than 12,000 students)?
2. Do you want to be in an urban, suburban, or rural area?
3. What part of the country would you prefer: northeast, south, midwest, or west?
4. If you already have an idea of what your major will be, does the college offer a strong program?
5. Would you prefer a small, liberal arts college; a comprehensive college (medium size with liberal arts and preprofessional majors); or a university (usually larger with separate colleges and offering graduate study).
6. Are there certain things that will limit your search, such as a diverse student body, study abroad program, fraternity/sorority participation, cost, particular student activities, cooperative education?

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

One question that may come to mind is, "How do I know what I want when I don't know the difference between, for example, life at a large vs. a small college?" There are five sources of information to aid you.

**College guidance offices:** One of your best sources of information about colleges is your guidance counselor. Unfortunately, many high schools don't provide enough counselors to properly work with all the students, usually

because of budgetary restraints. In those schools it is even more important to form a close relationship with a counselor as early as possible. It's up to you to make sure your counselor knows enough about you to help guide you toward appropriate colleges.

**College guides:** There are two basic types of college guides: the objective, factual guides provide necessary information and are generally quite reliable but rarely give you a "feel" for a college; the subjective, anecdotal guides give you a sense of the intangibles of a college or of college life. You can find these in any bookstore or library.

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

**College websites:** If you have access to the web, use it for your college search. The nice thing is you can usually get answers to specific questions. You can find the college by keying in some form of its name followed by .edu.

**Visits:** Visits are excellent ways of exploring different kinds of colleges (size, location, setting, etc.) and getting a "feel" for the college atmosphere.

Other things to consider that affect college life are student/faculty ratios (although that can be misleading depending on how many teaching assistants are counted), average class size (this can be misleading too depending on the number of labs and lectures), and the number of PhD's on the faculty (again, potentially misleading if the PhD only does research or teaches only graduate students).

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