

Tips for Finding Your College Match

Characteristics You Should Consider

Finding a good fit is the factor most important to your college success. What's the best way to find colleges that match your academic and personal interests?

First, identify your priorities. Next, research the characteristics of a range of colleges. Finally, match these up. Here are some college characteristics to consider.

Type of College

Colleges are generally either two-year or four-year. At two-year colleges, you can earn an associate degree. At most four-year colleges, you can earn a bachelor's degree.

Colleges are also categorized as either public or private. Public and private colleges vary in size and available resources. Public colleges are funded by state and local governments, and usually charge lower tuition prices for students who live in their state. That means that the ones in your state may be more affordable for you. Remember, though, that both public and private colleges offer financial aid from various sources.

Size

The number of undergraduates at a college can have a big impact on your experience there. It affects the:

- Range of majors offered
- Extracurricular possibilities
- Amount of personal attention you'll receive
- Variety of academic facilities, including labs, libraries and art studios

When looking at a college's size, be sure to consider more than just the total number of students attending. For example, if you choose a small academic program within a large college, your experience might be very much like attending a small college. Investigate not just the number of faculty members, but also how accessible they are to students.

Location

Do you want to visit home often, or do you see this as a time to experience a new part of the country?

Perhaps you like an urban environment with access to museums, ethnic food and major league ball games.

Or maybe you hope for easy access to the outdoors and the serenity of a small town. Think about where you would be the most comfortable.

Majors

If you know what you want to study, look into the reputations of academic departments in that subject.

Researching online is a good start. If you can talk with people who work in that field, that's even better.

If you're undecided, pick an academically balanced institution that offers a range of majors and programs.

Most colleges offer advising to help you find a focus.

Cost and Financial Aid

Today's college price tag makes cost an important consideration for most students. That said, keep in mind that almost every college works with its financial aid office to make sure that academically qualified students can attend.

Campus Life

Think about what your college life will be like beyond the classroom. Aim for a balance between academics, activities and social life.

Sports and Activities

Most students pursue interests other than academics while they are at college. You might be considering playing a sport at the intramural or varsity level. Or you might want to get involved with the campus radio or television station. Make sure that any activity you're passionate about is available at the colleges you're considering.

Housing and Programs

Often, part of the college experience is living as part of a community. Consider whether you want to live on campus, and whether joining a fraternity or sorority is important to you.

When considering academics, look for special programs and pick a college that offers many possibilities, such as study abroad or work-study.

Diversity

Consider what you might gain from living and learning among students with diverse backgrounds. Think about the ethnic, racial and religious diversity of the students as a means of learning more about the world. Investigate what kinds of student organizations, or other groups with ethnic or religious foundations, are active and visible on campus to get an idea of what it might be like.

Another option is a single-sex college. There are colleges specifically for men and others specifically for women throughout the country. You might want to consider one of these if you feel that you would thrive in a same-sex environment.

Your Ideal Campus

What makes the campus a place you can feel at home? To help you figure it out, think about the answers to these questions:

- What extracurricular activities and athletics are available?
- Does the community around the college offer interesting outlets for students?
- Are students welcomed by the community?
- How do fraternities and sororities influence campus life?
- Is housing guaranteed?
- How are dorms assigned?
- What ethnic, religious, and special-interest organizations are on campus?

Admission Criteria

You should consider what the colleges you are interested in require for admission. Do you want to attend a college that accepts the majority of its applicants, or one that accepts just a small percentage? Some colleges require a minimum grade point average (GPA), while others are more flexible. Find out if the colleges that are a good fit for you require admission tests, such as the SAT®. You may also want to know if you can get advanced credit or placement for AP® and CLEP® exams.

Retention and Graduation Rates

One of the best ways to judge a college's quality and the satisfaction of its students is to find out the percentage of students who return after the first year (called the retention rate) and the percentage of entering students who stay until graduation. Good retention and graduation rates are a sign that the college has good academic, social and financial support systems for students.