

# FACTORS IN CHOOSING A COLLEGE

## ➤ ACADEMICS

- Safety vs Reach Schools
- Specific Requirements
- Rankings and Reviews
- Majors and Minors
- Enrichment Opportunities
- Grad School/Internships/Employability

## ➤ DEMOGRAPHICS

- Location Location Location
- Size considerations
- Student to Faculty Ratio
- Graduation Rate
- Religious Affiliation

## ➤ CAMPUS CULTURE

- Commuter vs. Residential
- Dorm Life
- Campus Clubs
- Athletics
- Recreational Activities

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## FINANCES

- Cost of Attendance vs. Expected Family Contribution
- Housing and lifestyle costs
- Help with scholarships; Alumni Support
- Special programs: WUE, APS, Perkins Loans, Cal Grants...
- To take a loan or not?

## ➤ SPECIAL CONSIDERATIONS

- Early Decision vs. Early Action
- *ALWAYS* visit a college before making a final decision
- *NEVER* select a college because your friends are going there
- Safety and Security Reports
- Outside the Box Schools
- Gap Year?

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<http://www.collegevale.org/styled-2/index.html>

“If you don’t have time to do it right, when will you have time to do it over?”  
–John Wooden

If students take ownership of their college process, the decision-making skills they learn now will be used again and again as they move through life, whether searching for and applying to graduate programs, looking for work, buying a car, buying a home, or making any major purchase. Students really owe it to themselves to take some time now to do this right.

Parents and students can find terrific resources in multiple areas of the Internet. I recommend they start at the National Association for College Admission Counseling’s [website](#). There they will find a lot of useful tools, including [NACAC’s Late High School Awareness and College Planning Guide](#), which has a lot of useful checklists and worksheets students can print out and use as they move through the college process. Another good resource for schools and their students is [StudentEdge.com](#). If your school has not signed up this free service from Peterson’s, you might want to mention it to your guidance counselor. The site includes homework help, career exploration, college search, scholarship search, and free test prep for students. While I’ve not used the service myself, I’ve heard good things about it from my students. [MyCollegeCalendar.org](#) and [Consumer Reports](#) have websites that contain useful free tools, and many books -- e.g., *Admission Matters* and *College Admission: From Application to Acceptance* -- have companion websites with free worksheets you can download for free.

That being said, the College Process section of my classroom’s Resource Room content area includes the following links:

## BEFORE YOU BEGIN:

***Know Yourself:*** The better students understand themselves -- their strengths and weaknesses, needs and wants -- at the start of this process, the easier it will be for them to recognize a good-fit college when they see one. The inventories below are a sampling of inventories out there designed to help students better understand themselves. The results are not set in stone but should give students some food for thought.

[“The Seven Rules About Taking Career Tests”](#) – reminds us these tools just give us food for thought. Also contains links to several assessments, including the Holland.

[Learning Style](#) – while most students on IEPs learn how they learn best, many students do not. It doesn’t hurt to use a learning styles inventory to better understand how you learn best. This site will give students some study skills tips based on their learning style.

[College Personality](#) – this inventory, based on Steven Antonoff’s inventory in his book *College Match*, will help students think about the type of learning environment they’ll be most comfortable in as well as help them gauge their college readiness.

[Career Clusters](#) – this inventory gives students an idea of careers in which people who scored similarly found the most satisfaction.

[Evaluate Yourself](#) – whether they’re sitting down with an interviewer or brainstorming for their personal statement, this list of questions from Bob Turba’s Cyberguidance website will hold students in good stead in the college process.

[Personality](#) – some colleges will use a personality inventory to help match students with their first roommate. Here’s a quick sample of a personality inventory -- a free, simplified version of the Myers-Briggs Type Inventory (MBTI), called the Cognitive Type Inventory, at [personalitypathways.com](#). Students may find their results change if they take the official

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version, or they may find their results change as they age and mature. To learn more about the MBTI, visit the official Myers-Briggs [website](#). To learn more about their “cognitive type,” students can find free descriptions of their “type” with a quick search of the Internet (rather than purchase a report). Reminder: College Vale does not endorse any fee-based services at any of the links you visit.

***Know Your Rights & Responsibilities:*** Oft neglected in college talks, this piece from the National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC) provides students with [clear guidelines](#) in regard to expectations in the college process. If they have learning or physical disabilities, students should also see [“Students with Disabilities Preparing for Postsecondary Education: Know Your Rights and Responsibilities,”](#) from the U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights.

***Know Some Common Terminology:***

[Admission Terminology](#) – the [Common Data Set](#) Glossary of Terms, found at the website of the University of Tampere in Finland.

[Financial Aid Terminology](#) – from FinAid.org, includes acronyms!

***And Bust Some Myths:***

[College Rankings](#) – from NACAC.

## TESTING:

Unless you are planning to apply solely to test-optional schools, you need to know your test scores, as well as your grades, before you begin your college search.

SAT-ACT Concordance Tables – from [ACT](#) and [College Board](#)

[National Merit Corporation](#) – website of the National Merit Scholarship program. National Merit Scholarship cut-off scores vary by state and are subject to change annually. Call (847) 866-5100 to discover the current year eligibility cut-off scores for your state. [CollegePlanningSimplified.com](#), the website of a high school college and career counselor in California, has a terrific explanation of the National Merit program you may want to read.

Free SAT Online Test Prep: [Number2.com](#)

Free ACT Online Test Prep: [ACT](#) (quite a few of the resources here are free, but some are fee-based).

[SAT Score Use Practices by Institution](#) – .pdf from the College Board. Always check with colleges to make sure their policies on this have not changed.

[Test-Optional Schools](#) – close to 850 schools are now test optional.

[SAT Prep Resources](#) – from The College Grants Database. Recommended by kids in Seattle, this site contains lots of useful SAT study resources.

[SAT Prep on a Budget](#), from the Perfect Score Project. This is a last-minute add, as a friend just posted this on Facebook. Some great advice in here, but make sure you read the advice in the comments on calculators.

*The Official SAT Study Guide*, from The College Board.

*The Real ACT Prep Guide*, from ACT.

## THE COLLEGE SEARCH (also see Population-Specific):

There are dozens of search engines you can use to research colleges that fit your needs and wants. In addition to the “big book” online search options, such as [Peterson’s](#) and [Princeton](#)

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[Review](#), here are some additional options for the initial college *search*, listed in no particular order. Some people find certain sites more intuitive than others; if you find or already have a site you like, stick with it. Consumer Reports has even created a [Comparison of \(College\) Guides and Directories](#) you may want to check out.

[The University of Texas at Austin Database of Colleges and Universities](#) – links to most, if not all, colleges in the country by state.

[Wiki College Lists](#) – much like any NACAC listserv archive of college lists you may have saved over the years, these are anecdotal lists of colleges by major and program -- it's important to understand the information included in these lists is only as accurate as the knowledge of the author(s). Includes listings like colleges that accept [American Sign Language in lieu of a foreign language](#) and [colleges that do not require a foreign language](#).

[College Navigator](#) – from the federal government, College Navigator replaces the Department of Education's College Opportunities Online Locator (COOL).

[College Data 411](#) – this site also helps you gauge what type of financial aid package a school provides (some are more generous than others).

[Community College Finder](#), from American Association of Community Colleges.

[Big Future](#) – from the College Board. While this is one of the “big book” online college search engines, I include it here because it includes a search criteria for “veterans counseling,” something all search engines should include.

Looking Outside the Box: [Colleges that Change Lives](#)

Looking Outside the Box: [Colleges of Distinction](#)

Looking Outside the Box: [4International Colleges & Universities](#) – for students who want to study abroad (all four years).

[College Express](#) – find lists like those from Steven Antonoff's book *College Finder* here.

[College View](#) – searches for organizations, too, so if you want astrophysics **and** a marching band, you can find matches. From Hobson's.

[Fairtest.org](#) – find test optional schools here.

[NCAA](#) – search schools by division and league.

[The Common Application](#) – search for Common App member institutions by distance, major, etc. You can search Common App schools before registering.

[National Collegiate Honors Council](#) – find a listing of Honors programs here.

[Great Books Schools](#)

[The Work Colleges](#)

[Cooperative Education Programs](#), this Wiki contains a listing of co-op schools.

[Council of Public Liberal Arts Colleges](#) – yes, you *can* get a liberal arts education at a public institution!

[Sierra Club](#) and [Ecoleague](#) – find listings of green colleges here.

[College listings by major](#), from Cappex.

[GoingtoCollege.org](#) – from Virginia Commonwealth University and the U.S. Department of Education Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, includes a terrific college planning guide for students with disabilities.

[CollegePlanningSimplified.com](#) also has an informative page on the college process for LD students. It includes a partial [listing](#) of schools with programs for students with learning disabilities.

[Women's Colleges](#) – lists women's colleges around the country by state.

[Men's Colleges](#)

## NARROWING THE FIELD:

### Will you feel comfortable on campus?

Only direct resources for this listed here:

Campus Culture – [College Newspapers](#) are a great resource for getting a feel for campus

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culture.

Campus Culture – search [iTunesU](#) for faculty lectures and tours

Campus Culture – search [YouTube](#) for faculty, student, and admission videos.

*Mission Statements* – search the websites of each of the schools you are considering. If the school's mission statement rubs you the wrong way, chances are it's not a good fit.

## **Will you feel safe on campus?**

[Campus Crime](#) – schools are required by federal law (the Clery Act) to report campus crime.

Because I'm not sure all schools report all off-campus incidents, Google searches and Alerts (see below) may help with this, too, in that you may get a feel for the safety of the area surrounding the campus.

[Campus Pride](#) – find LGBT-friendly campuses at this site.

## **Can you picture yourself on this campus?**

Visiting a campus? There are several useful travel planning tools you can use, including [AAA Trip Tik Travel Planner Website](#) and [GoSeeCampus.com](#).

[NSSE Pocket Guide to Choosing a College](#) – this guide will help you get the most out of the college visit. I will add that it is critical studio art majors visit the departments they hope to join and meet the faculty. There can be a fairly deep divide between fine and commercial artists, and students want to make sure they feel comfortable with the department culture before applying. I expect the same can be said for any of the arts, but my experience is with studio art.

[Go See Campus](#) – this site has a free trip planner for planning college visits.

[Campus Tours](#) – nothing replaces a visit to a college campus, but if students cannot get there before they apply, they may find a video tour of the campus here. Video tours of campuses are also usually available at the school website.

## **What's "news" at your schools of interest?**

[Google Alerts](#) – sign up for Google Alerts about schools to receive a daily update of articles that mention school(s) of interest.

## **Is it likely you'll graduate on time?**

[Graduation Rates](#) – College Results from the Education Trust; also see [CollegeMeasures](#) (includes an earnings to student debt ratio analysis). Some state schools have distressingly low four-year graduation rates, but this is often not the institution's fault. Some majors require more focus (for lack of a better word) than others and leave less room for those electives we love. In addition, budget cuts may have necessitated cutting some sections of classes students may need (for example, certain required classes may only offer two rather than three sections in any given semester), so students need to meet with their advisors regularly to make sure they stay on track to graduate on time and know which courses they need to take when, and they need to register early, when registration opens; if they wait until the last day to register for classes (and many do), they have no one but themselves to blame for being shut out of classes needed to graduate on time. They should also give it a lot of thought before changing majors. One student told me she had changed her major **seven** times... Needless to say, this will likely increase the time required to complete all major requirements. Also see [College Reality Check](#), also found below under Financial Aid.

## **What are the institution's graduation requirements?**

[College Source Online](#) – links to over 70,000 college catalogs. Senior thesis or capstone project? General education requirements? Dual degree and off-campus study opportunities? Special services? These and more can all make a difference in your decision, so be sure to read the fine print included in the college's catalog. Free to students.

## **MAJOR CONSIDERATIONS (also see Career-Specific):**

If students are applying to a **university** here or abroad, they will likely need to apply to a specific school within the university and declare a major when applying. That means it's time for some "major considerations"...

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[Career Clusters](#) – (also found in Before You Begin/Know Yourself) explore careers that match your interests. Students may also want to explore careers recommended for their personality type (see Before You Begin/Know Yourself). An Internet search of “careers for (personality type)” should give them a listing of careers they may wish to explore. Remember, the careers recommended are based on surveys/studies that showed people with similar personalities expressed the most satisfaction with the careers suggested.

[Truity.com](#) – another recommended website with free personality and career assessments, as well as a paid career assessment section.

[Career One Stop](#) – view interviews with professionals at this site from the U.S. Department of Labor.

[Major Decisions](#) – many colleges have an advising office that will help you decide on a major. Here’s a website from Penn State.

[Online Career Planning](#) – here’s another site, from Rutgers.

[What Can I Do With a Major In?](#) – useful links and PDF downloads from the Sanger Learning and Career Center at the University of Texas – Austin.

[CollegeMajors101.com](#) – informative site.

[“What’s It Worth? The Economic Value of College Majors”](#) – a study from Georgetown University. For more reports from the Georgetown Center on Education and the Workforce, visit the Center’s [website](#).

[MIT Sloan Career Cornerstone Center](#) – for those interested in researching careers in science, technology, healthcare, engineering, mathematics and computing.

[Occupational Outlook Handbook](#) – research education/training needed, earnings, job prospects, and working conditions for various occupations at this government site.

## APPLYING ONLINE:

Be truthful, be accurate, and before you press send, remember the NACAC Golden Rule of Applying to College: “Never apply to a college you would not happily attend if given the choice.”

[The Common Application](#)

[The Universal College Application](#)

[CollegeNet](#) – provides links to colleges’ web application pages.

[LikeLive.com](#) – formerly MYCOLLEGEi, affords students who live too far away an opportunity to interview with participating colleges.

## THE COLLEGE ESSAY:

[Decoding the Common App’s Essay Prompts](#) – good advice addressing the new, 2013, essay prompts for the Common Application.

[Tips for the UC Personal Statements](#) – from UCSB.

## FINANCIAL AID:

Note there are two Financial Aid sections at this website. This area is geared to students and families (Internet resources for counselors to add to their websites), and there is one geared to providing tools for college counselors (see School Counselors).

[Federal Student Aid Web Resources](#) – find federal student aid basics, including eligibility, programs, and application process; online publications; a “College Preparation Checklist”; “Do You Need Money for College? Federal Student Aid at a Glance”; details on student aid eligibility and what types of aid you can get; scholarships for military families; avoiding scams; loan

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interest rates; repayment information; income-based repayment plan; and information about the Public Service Loan Forgiveness Program [here](#).

[Federal Student Aid YouTube Page](#)

[FAFSA](#) – The Free Application for Federal Student Aid – even if you think you will not qualify for need-based aid, you will need to fill out the FAFSA to apply for low-interest, non-need-based government loans.

[CSS Profile](#) – some colleges will use the CSS Profile or an institutional aid application to determine your eligibility for institutional aid.

[College Abacus](#) – compare your **estimated** financial aid packages at participating schools, based on your own information using the colleges' own net price calculators. If a school does not participate in the service, the site links you to the net price calculator at the college's website.

[CollegeData.com](#) – if you are looking for general advice on financial aid, here's a nice website on the topic.

[College Goal Sunday](#) – national program that provides free on-site assistance with filling out the FAFSA.

[CollegeNET.com](#)

[College Reality Check](#) – funded by the Bill and Melissa Gates Foundation, this website from *The Chronicle of Higher Education* enables users to compare net price, graduation rates, average college debt, loan-default rates, and graduate earnings.

[College Tax Tips](#) – a big shout out to the kids in the Upward Bound program in Denver, Colorado for recommending this site from Intuit!

[CollegeUp.org](#) – an online resource dedicated to demystifying the FAFSA, from the folks at College Goal Sunday.

[FinAid.org](#) – highly regarded website on the topic, includes an EFC calculator.

[Fastweb.com](#) – scholarship search.

[Big Future Scholarship Search](#) – from the College Board.

[Scholarship Dude](#) – scholarship search site.

[Scholarship Experts](#) – free scholarship matching service.

[Scholarships.com](#)

[State Financial Aid Programs](#) – find state grant and scholarship, as well as state and regional tuition exchange, programs at this interactive map page, from NASFAA.

[Student Savings: The Ultimate Scholarship Resource Guide](#) – from Shop Sleuth.

[StudentScholarshipSearch.com](#) – scholarship search site.

[You Can Deal With It](#) – advice on paying for college from the Pennsylvania Higher Education Assistance Agency.

[Going2College](#) – search financial aid resources by state.

[Find Scholarships by State](#) – this link takes you to the page for Massachusetts, but you can check out the state scholarship programs for each state by clicking on the state link at left.

[U.S. Department of Education College Affordability and Transparency Center](#) – annual lists of most and least expensive colleges from the government, required by the 2008 renewal of the Higher Education Act.

[“Be a Smart Consumer”](#) – advice for students and families from the National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators.

[Decoding the Financial Aid Award Letter](#) – note that the government is currently requiring colleges to use a common template for financial aid awards called the [Financial Aid Shopping Sheet](#); however, at this time, colleges are only *required to* use the form when awarding financial aid to students using military financial aid benefits. Many colleges use their own, very similar form to explain their aid package.

[360 Degrees of Financial Literacy](#) – financial literacy for every stage of life.

[“Becoming Credit Wise – What Students \(and You!\) Should Know”](#) – no longer available at the NASFAA site, this article still provides some good information (note it was written before the Credit CARD Act of 2009, which made it more difficult for students under 21 to get credit cards).



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[“Myths and Facts About the Credit Crunch and Student Loans”](#) – originally found on the NASFAA website. Note that the Health Care and Education Reconciliation Act of 2010 eliminated the federally-guaranteed student loan program (FFELP); all federal student loans are now provided through the federal Direct Loan program. Bottom line: Regardless of how easy it may be for you to get a loan, you really need to think hard about how much debt you want to take on. Make sure you have a few “financial aid safeties” in your college list.

[Federal Trade Commission: Avoiding Deceptive \(Student Loan\) Offers](#)

[The Project on Student Debt](#) – some great advice on borrowing at this site.

[Direct Loans – Calculators and Interest Rates](#) – government website that lets you calculate your direct loan interest rate, something everyone should consider before moving ahead with taking on loans.

[How Work Study Works](#) – useful page from CollegeData.com.

[MeritAid.com](#) – search merit scholarships here.

[“10 Tips for Zapping Student Loan Debt”](#) – some good tips in here for managing your student loans and minimizing debt.

[National Student Loan Data System](#) – government site that helps you keep track of your federal student loans.

## GAP YEAR and the PG YEAR:

For some students, it may be a good idea to consider a gap year between high school and college. The gap year gives students an opportunity to refresh, regroup, and refocus before heading off to college.

[“Time Out or Burn Out for the Next Generation”](#) – taking a year off between high school and college can be very beneficial, particularly for stressed out students who have spent the last four years in Harvard-or-Bust environments. This oft-cited article is from the admission folks at Harvard College.

[Enrichment Alley](#) – search resource for summer programs and gap year options.

[Planet Gap Year](#) – resources for planning and researching gap year opportunities.

[TeenLife](#) – recommended by a student, this site also has resources for summer programs, volunteer opportunities, boarding and day schools, and more.

Some students just want to take another year to develop and improve their readiness for college. They may want to take improve their academic readiness, mature socially, or even just hone their skills in a sport they’d like to play in college. Here’s an article from About.com on the benefits of a PG year, including a partial listing of schools that offer the option:

[“The Postgraduate Year: A Time to Grow”](#) – from About.com.

## TRANSITION TO COLLEGE:

[How Is College Different From High School?](#) – comparison chart from Southern Methodist University.

[College Transition](#) – comparison chart from Mid-State Technical College.

[Study Skills Tips](#) – from HowToStudy.org.

[Study Skill Tips](#) – based on your learning style. Students with IEPs are taught to understand and compensate for their learning styles, something **everyone** would benefit from knowing!

[Time Management and Study Skills Tips](#) – great advice from FinancialAidJournal.com.

[Create a Daily Schedule](#) – interesting **interactive** tool to help you manage your time from Study Guides & Strategies.

[Transition to College](#) – some good tips in here on transitioning to and succeeding in college, from *U.S. News*.

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[“Advice for soon-to-be college freshmen”](#) – some sound advice in here from Julie Manhan, Seattle College Bound Examiner.

[Transition Year Articles](#) – from TransitionYear.org.

[College Tips – Tips for Student on College Life](#) – from CollegeTips.com.

[Transition to College for Women](#) – some outstanding advice for women -- and men -- heading off to college from 4collegewomen.org.

[Transition to College for Parents](#) – from Hartwick College.

[“Helping your student make a successful transition to college”](#) – some nice advice in here for parents, also from Julie Manhan, Seattle College Bound Examiner.

[Hands on Banking](#) – managing your money, from handsonbanking.org – in English and Spanish. For more financial literacy, also see School Counselors/Teaching Financial Literacy.

[Used Textbooks](#) – from StatFuse.com. One way to save on expenses at college is to purchase or rent used textbooks. Here’s one site that offers used textbooks at considerable savings. ***Caveat emptor: always make sure you are ordering the required edition of any used textbook you purchase or rent.***

## AFTER GRADUATION:

[360 Degrees of Financial Literacy](#) – financial literacy for every stage of life.

[Careerealism.com](#) – recently read an excellent article at this site on maximizing your LinkedIn networking. Looks like a great career site.

[“Heading Out on Your Own”](#) – I love this series from The Art of Manliness. Great thoughts for talks on transition to college and **beyond** -- for both men **and women**.