

Creating a College List

I really want to know (Who are you?) /

Tell me who are you?

“WHO ARE YOU” BY THE WHO

Keep an open mind that this is an opportunity to learn more about your child’s true interests and deeper desires. It’s also an opportunity for your child to declare those interests and desires by making the college choice their own choice.

A VETERAN PARENT’S ADVICE ON THE COLLEGE SEARCH

Imagine that your name is drawn in a local lottery. You have the option to choose a round trip plane ticket or a helicopter tour. If you choose the plane trip, your natural focus will be all about where you are going. Destination is king. In the airport and on the plane, you will be surrounded by people singularly focused on their trip. They are headed to weddings or funerals, going to graduations, traveling to make speeches and presentations, visiting family or friends, or interviewing for a new job. Everyone has a precise end point in mind. As a result, delays are annoying, lack of coffee or spotty internet service is irritating, and turbulence is scary. What you remember about plane trips typically are the inconveniences—the amount of time it takes to get there, the uncomfortable seats, poor snack selection, and annoying passengers constantly bumping you as they head to the bathroom or remove something from the overhead compartment. What do you

remember if the flight is smooth and arrives on time at its intended location? Nothing. Taxi, accelerate, take off, and land. That is it.

If you choose the helicopter tour, you will lift straight up off the ground with little effort or fanfare. Blades spin, seat belts buckle, doors close, and headphones go on. You are quickly airborne. Your focus is not where you are headed, because you know it will end in the exact spot it starts. The point of the ride is not to get somewhere. Instead, it is to see, learn, explore, appreciate, and to gain a new perspective.

The same is true of college admission. This is not intended to be a direct flight. Too many families view the college search and admission experience as a plane ride. They have one specific destination in mind, so they strap in tight and hope not to be annoyed, frustrated, or rerouted along the way. Our hope is that you begin to view it as a tour. Your goal is to look beyond what you see, to rise up rather than barrel down the runway, and to spend your time excited and learning rather than anxious and trying to control all the details or stay on an exact route.

This chapter will help you enjoy and appreciate the ride; give you good questions to ask along the way; look down over the landscape, observe your choices, and see things from a different perspective; and most importantly allow you and your family to “fly” together.

FIRST THINGS FIRST

The stress and anxiety people describe when they discuss college admission centers on the piece of the experience that you do not control—where and when you will be admitted and how much money that school will give you to attend. They unfortunately forget that you control two-thirds of your college admission experience: where you visit and apply, and ultimately which school you select to attend.

In the next section of the book, we will cover how you can put your best foot forward in your application. First, it is important to add another important building block to your firmly established foundation stone—matching your *whys* with *wheres* in order to create a logical list of colleges to visit and apply to.

If you will continually remember the helicopter ride and keep an open mind as you explore different options, your list will be continu-

ally changing, but ultimately, you will have a solid working list of colleges.

FRESHMAN AND SOPHOMORE YEAR

We are often asked, “What should I (or what should my student) be doing in ninth and tenth grades for college?” The short answer is, “Not much.”

At this point, your job is to be a good high school student. Take classes that interest, challenge, and prepare you. Be a good member of your school and community—not because you think it is going to help “get you in” but because being involved is what makes a rich, rewarding, memorable high school experience. Yes, colleges are going to look at your impact and influence outside the classroom, but you should be volunteering your time, working, participating in clubs, or playing on teams because you are in exposure mode at this point. (Note: we are not suggesting you have to do all of these things.) Do what you enjoy. Try new things. If you hate tennis, do not join the team just because you think it will help you “get into college.” First, it will not. Second—there is no second.

Parents, please encourage your children (and frequently remind yourselves) to enjoy these all too brief and precious years. Resist the temptation to turn each event and grade into a discussion about their college “resume.”

Keep it simple: Ask yourself some very basic but invaluable questions: What do I choose to do when I have free time? What genuinely interests and excites me? What do I like to read or research on my own? What do I have the most fun doing? What am I good at? What would I learn and explore even if it were not required in school? What kind of people do I enjoy being around? What parts of my state or country interest me or would I want to live in? What jobs or professions appeal to me and why? Keep asking these questions and making notes as they change. Tara Nelan, formerly a college counselor and now the regional director of admission for Muhlenberg College, puts it perfectly: “Being authentic and honest with yourself in answering these questions, especially during the 12–20 months leading up to you

actually submitting an application, can help your journey through high school to college be one of growth instead of a task to be done.”

Look and listen: As a ninth and tenth grader, you are in a great position to be a casual observer. Don’t miss out on this chance. Watch the juniors and seniors in your school, on your teams, in your clubs, at your job, or around your community. Listen to their conversations and deliberations. What are some of the colleges the kids you admire are visiting and applying to?

What about some of the adults in your life? Relatives, coaches, friends’ parents, leaders in your community, neighbors—what do they do for a living? What about their life interests you or seems appealing? Where did they go to college? As you get older, you will be hearing the incessant question “Where do you want to go to college?” Get out in front of it. Ask them now where they went and why? What would they do differently knowing what they do now? They will be thrilled to give you advice and insight, if you will initiate the conversation.

Go: Early in high school, we recommend simply getting on college campuses either close to home or while traveling on a family trip. Make an effort to see the campus of a big public state university, a small liberal arts college, or a technical or art institute if you are interested in those fields. Walk around, watch the students, subtly eavesdrop on conversations, catch a game, wander through buildings, eat in the dining hall or food court or at a popular restaurant on the edge of campus. Get a feel for the size of different colleges and how they connect with the surrounding community. Again, ask simple questions: What stands out? What do I like here? What would I not enjoy if I went here? Your answers are hugely important because they point you toward the qualities you will be looking for in the future.

JUNIOR YEAR

This whole college thing is probably seeming a lot more real at this point. Breathe.

Separate needs and wants: In his book *Start with Why*, Simon Sinek introduces the “Celery Test.” Sinek suggests that you imagine that you attend a dinner party and at the gathering a number of people approach

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you and tell you what they think you need: M&M's, Oreo cookies, and celery, to name a few. These recommendations come from highly accomplished, successful friends. When you go to the supermarket, you spend a lot of money buying all of these products, some of which will have little or no value to you. Sinek explains that if you know your *why* before you go into the store, you will make better decisions. If your *why* is to be as healthy as possible, you will leave the store only with celery (and having saved a lot of money).

Identifying your *needs* in a college versus your *wants* is critical. Is being able to double major a *need*, or would a minor in one of those areas be OK? Would it be nice to have easy access to go see professional sports or Broadway productions or eat in world-class restaurants, or are those experiences imperative for you? Maybe you hope there will be a rugby team or a marching band. Ask yourself if those are complementary elements or absolutely central and absolute deal breakers for you. Becoming confident in separating *needs* and *wants* will help you tremendously in this process.

Identify your *needs* in a college versus your *wants*.

BEGIN WITH THE BASICS

Location: Ultimately, your goal is to find a college where you are excited and confident about becoming part of that community. This starts with figuring out the type of setting (rural, suburban, small town, urban area), culture, or part of your state or the country that you are naturally drawn to. Weather is a big deal. Snow looks great on brochures and social media but walking around in sub-20-degree weather for months on end is a different experience. If you are from Miami, visit Vermont in February, not May. Conversely, if you have never experienced humidity, go to New Orleans in August.

Consider some helpful questions like these: Do you need or want to be able to drive home often and quickly, or are the costs and limitations of flying back OK? How important is the size, layout, and architecture on campus? What types of restaurants, activities, or cultural events do you want to have access to on a regular basis? Do you need specific health care access?

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Size: Are you more comfortable with a smaller college of fewer than 2,000 students or would knowing everyone in your class by graduation seem confining? If your high school's graduating class is 50–100 students, your perception of what a large college is will likely be different from a friend whose high school has close to 3,000 students. On many campuses, you will need to take a bus or shuttle between classes. Are you comfortable with that, or do you want a more intimate and compact campus where everything is walkable?

Not all colleges of similar size feel the same when you are on campus. For instance, if you are in the most popular major, your class sizes will likely be higher than their published faculty-to-student ratio, and that has implications for access to professors, research opportunities, classroom dialogue, and so on. Many large universities in recent years have invested heavily in honors colleges or living-learning communities that help create smaller, more intimate cohorts. Go beyond the overall enrollment numbers to determine what your experience would be based on your major and interests.

Majors/programs: One of the many reasons that college rankings are—at best—misleading is that the strength and breadth of specific program offerings at different schools vary greatly. The most selective college in the country might be amazing if you want to study biochemistry, but if they offer only one elective in your intended major of animal behavior, name and acceptance rate are irrelevant. If you are undecided on your major (like most applicants), you may want to explore colleges that allow or require you to explore broadly among disciplines. Given that well over half of undergraduate students change their major at least once (Straumsheim 2016), you should also find out what each college's policy is on switching majors. Practices vary widely. Some schools allow students to change programs without any limitations. Others require you to apply to specific majors after a year or two on campus. Some colleges have GPA requirements or other internal transfer processes for their current students to change from one major to another. This is critical information with significant implications that too few students think to dig into before arriving on campus.

People: Who do you want to be surrounded by for the next four-plus years? Remember that a big part of going to college is creating a network of friends and colleagues. You may only be a student for four years, but the connections you make there will last a lifetime. Where

do alumni from colleges you are considering primarily live and work? Find alumni magazines and school newspapers online and check out the social media accounts of student groups to get a sense of overall campus ethos.

How important is campus diversity to you? Where students are from and the backgrounds they have will strongly influence conversations over pizza at 3:00 a.m., as well as dialogue and debate in the classroom. Who are your people, your tribe, the types of individuals that bring out your best? These answers are hugely important to finding your best college matches.

Do you want a school that is known for student activism, conservatism, or community engagement? Is it important to you that most students live on campus? How do college athletics factor into the equation? Is evident school spirit and bonding with classmates by attending games part of your vision for college? Their brochures may all look the same, but campus cultures vary widely.

Outside the classroom: When people say “college,” you are probably not thinking about lecture halls or late nights in the library. This makes sense because most students are only in class or lab between 15 and 20 hours each week. Double or even triple those numbers to account for studying, writing papers, and so forth, and you are still left with a lot of time to do things you want to on campus and in the area. What are you excited about beyond academics in college? What do you want your college experience to look like in the times and spaces between the classes? Do you want to study abroad in a certain country or region of the world? Are you planning to have an internship or co-op in a specific industry or with a particular company? Intramural sports, clubs, ROTC, research, and service offerings all vary from school to school. Are you a hiker, climber, biker, or caver? How active are the outdoor clubs at the schools you are considering? If you want to pursue an engineering degree and study in another country, make sure this is possible. If you want to play a specific sport, are walk-ons eligible to try out for the team? You can find all of this information online and through social media. You should also make an effort to ask current students these questions when you visit campus.

Cost: A college’s published cost should not keep you from visiting or applying, but you must understand what financial aid you will need to make that place affordable to attend. As we discussed in the previous chapter, finances can be a significant wedge. We sincerely hope

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that you will consider our advice and have open discussions about earnings, expenses, savings, and how college costs factor into your family's overall financial situation, lifestyle, and goals.

Selectivity: We intentionally left this piece until last, and we hope you will as well. If you honestly ask and answer the questions we have outlined, you will find many colleges (with widely varying selectivity) that match your criteria. This is great news because you want to have a few colleges on your list where your grades and test scores put you above their average accepted-student profile. There is nothing wrong with including a few schools with single-digit admit rates. However, if those colleges comprise your entire list, you are setting yourself up for disappointment. Again, your job is to keep an open mind—a mix of idealism and realism.

Research: College Board, Princeton Review, College Data, College View, College Raptor, and Unigo all provide free online interactive tools that allow you to enter and modify key components (size, location, cost, academic and nonacademic programs) to discover and compare colleges. Your high school may also have a college search and application management platform like Scoir or Naviance. If you are staying open in your approach, we expect you will easily identify 20 schools that closely align with your criteria.

RANK THE RANKINGS

Given the rising cost of tuition and increasing debt averages for many college graduates, it is understandable that families increasingly think of themselves as consumers in this process. While traditionally schools have avoided language that describes tuition as a transaction or the cost of a degree as a purchase, in recent years questions surrounding return on investment (ROI) have become far more

Return on investment should be part of your equation in making a college choice.

prevalent. In response, colleges are focusing their marketing, presentations, and communications on “outcomes” for their students as much as they are on the student experience. In other words, they are attempting to articulate the short-term value of attending and also the long-term dividends that a degree provides.

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This is a good thing. ROI should absolutely be one part of your equation in making a college choice.

The downside of viewing college in monetary terms is the temptation to begin to quantify, order, and draw lines. This is understandable, because in our culture we are surrounded by lists. We will add a Top 50 playlist to our online music account in a heartbeat. Reviews and metrics dominate. Think about it. You cannot turn on the TV or radio without hearing ads touting how a new truck was rated number one for towing power or overall customer satisfaction. We pull up comparisons online about average miles to the gallon, safety ratings, and resale value. These can be informative. They can provide some context, but in the end, do you buy the car that ranks highest in fuel economy if you have a family of six and it is a two-door vehicle? Are you completely swayed by a top ranking in power steering or seat recline angle when the SUV will not fit into your garage? Do you accept those ratings and rankings as fact without researching how they were developed and categorized? We hope not.

Yet when it comes to considering colleges, students and parents do all of these things. They take rankings and ratings at face value. They reduce an entire college experience down to one number and assign it infinite comparative value by arbitrarily drawing draconian lines in the sand. Each year students tell us that they were counseled to only apply to schools ranked in *U.S. News and World Report's* Top 25 or that they were pressured to only visit schools ranked in the Top 10 in a particular field; or their friends wondered why they did not apply to more schools on *Niche's* Best Colleges in America list; or ultimately they were made to feel guilty and misguided if they did not choose the highest-ranked school to which they were admitted.

Because this mentality is so prevalent, we believe it limits a healthy and comprehensive college search. There are many rankings sources, but here is the methodology from *U.S. News and World Report* (Morse, Brooks, and Mason 2018) as an example:

35%—Outcomes (including social mobility and graduation and retention rates): How good of a job is the school doing at retaining, supporting, and graduating students?

20.0%—Faculty resources: How do faculty salaries and the number of students in the classroom compare to other universities nationally?

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20.0%—Expert opinion / peer assessment academic: What do academic professionals from other colleges (presidents, provosts, deans, etc.) and counselors on the high school level think about that school? (Often these individuals are not familiar with the schools they are rating, and/or the questionnaires are filled out by support staff.)

10.0%—Financial resources: What is the average per-student spending on instruction, research, student services, and so on?

10.0%—Student excellence: What is the school's admit rate, test score averages, and number of students coming from the top 10 percent of their high school?

5.0%—Alumni giving: At what rate are alumni giving back to their alma mater?

Understanding this is how rankings are determined, we encourage you to ask these questions:

- Do I care if a president (or their assistant) from one college looks favorably upon another (especially accounting for what we know about college competition)?
- Is a school's ability to pay a faculty member \$2,000 more annually (\$244/month or \$8/day) of consequence to my college search and decision?
- Do I really think there is a difference in prestige/quality/experience between two colleges because of the three-slot difference that places one inside and the other outside the top 25? The top 50? The top 75?
- If a college is in an ideal location, has a dynamic student body, is a good academic fit, but ranks ten spots below another, should that number (based on the factors above) matter?
- If the school is outside the top 100 but is offering me a scholarship and has graduates thriving in the field I want to pursue, should I turn it down for a higher-ranked but less-affordable option?

When you apply to college, you trust that they are going to take much more than just your test score or GPA into consideration. You do not

want them to rule you out by drawing a line that you happen to fall just below, despite your great grades, classes, and extracurricular impact. We would encourage you to visit and apply to schools not because of a subjective number but rather based on how it matches your interests.

Opt in. Earlier in the book we discussed the way schools search for students. Search is a two-way street. If you are not receiving information from a college that matches your criteria, opt in. Go onto university websites and complete their electronic prospective student form. Typically, they are going to ask for basic contact information, as well as some of your academic and cocurricular interests. This is an excellent way to begin receiving more general information from campuses. It also puts you on their radar to invite you to campus for special visit programs and to inform you when they are coming to your city or school to conduct information sessions.

Visit. During your junior year, you should be taking the opportunity to hit the road. We will expand on the importance of, and best practices for, visiting colleges in the next chapter. Ideally you will visit every college that makes it on to your final application list, and often students need to visit twice as many colleges as they ultimately apply to. This might mean traveling to as many as 20 colleges, so start early. We understand that traveling to campuses is a big investment of both time and money. If you are unable to physically get to some of the places that interest you, check out the virtual tours that schools produce and present on their websites. YouVisit and CampusTours are among several companies that also partner with colleges to show pictures, videos, student testimonials, and online campus tour information that can be helpful resources.

Show up. Colleges' admission representatives travel extensively in the fall, and increasingly in the spring, to meet students and build excitement for their college. Keep an eye out for college fairs in your area. These can draw several hundred schools who gather to speak with prospective students and families. Regardless of location (stuffy gym, crowded cafeteria, cavernous convention hall), you will find a space lined with admission officers standing behind folding tables and displays with their school banner, glossy brochures, and often some free swag. College fairs are a great way to gather information, network, and learn about schools you have not yet considered. Do not waste this opportunity. It will be crowded, and your time with each college will be limited. Be prepared with two or three questions you

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could not easily find on their website. Schools often have forms to complete or will point you to web links where you can share your information. Do this. It is an excellent way to receive follow-up information about majors, application tips, or campus visit programs and maybe even earn you points for demonstrated interest.

Similarly, when colleges come to your high school, make every effort to attend. Do not just passively receive information. Use that time to connect with the admission officer (typically the same person who will be reading your application). Again, do not let them simply go through their canned speech. Be sure to get your specific questions about your needs and wants answered. Having presented to hundreds of high school groups, we can attest that admission officers greatly appreciate students who ask these types of thoughtful, detailed questions.

Whether you are reading a college guide, looking online, or taking advice from a sibling or teammate, remember that this is *your* search, *your* list, and nobody else's. No one person's opinion is the absolute truth about a particular school—no alumnus, current student, admission director, or college president. Your job is to solicit as many opinions as possible and look for trends and commonalities while staying connected to *your* needs.

LATE SUMMER AND EARLY FALL SENIOR YEAR

Trust your gut. Are you excited about schools you had not heard of a year ago? Have some colleges dropped off your list even though you bought their T-shirts when you visited campus? You are on the right track. Has the order of your list changed? You are doing this right! Remember Sinek's "Celery Test" from the beginning of the chapter? Look at your "shopping list." Confirm again that all of the colleges you are still considering align with your interests, values, and priorities, your *why*. Did you really not like the campus, or did you just have a bad tour guide? Did you sour on a school that was interesting at first because of an offhand remark from a peer? Remember, it is *your* list, *your* choice, *your* college experience.

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Apply. Our advice is to arrive at a final list of colleges that is between five and nine schools that ideally answer your *why*. We advise you to break down your final list as follows:

- 2-3 “reach” schools—colleges where your grades and scores put you below their average admitted-student profile
- 3-4 “target” schools—colleges where your profile aligns with their average admitted student
- 1-2 “likely” schools—colleges where you are well above the average admitted student profile. (While you may hear the term “safety” school, there really is no such thing.)

In the end, the driving question is this: Would you be excited to attend every school on your list? Barbara Tragakis Conner, the director of college counseling at Foxcroft School in Virginia, advises that students apply to five first-choice colleges. The point is that each school on the list should be a great match where you feel as though you could be happy and successful—this way you will not be disappointed if you are not accepted at any given institution.

Unlike the traditional college fair, at Kentucky Country Day School’s Finding Your Fit Fair, college admission officers leave the literature behind, as well as their name tags and banners. Each representative is asked to submit a list of five distinct characteristics or programs at their university, which are then printed on a bland white sheet of paper. Students wander from table to table focusing on the programs or experiences the colleges may offer. Next, students and admission officers gather as a group to debrief the experience, at which time they reveal the school names where each representative works. They discuss what the students—and admissions officers—learned, what surprised them, and how their preconceived notions were challenged. Finally, they allow the college representatives to return to their tables (with brochures, literature, banners, etc.) and meet with students again. This format encourages engagement and discernment rather than reflex and judgment. It is the ideal approach to building a college list—one that focuses on values, programs, and the experience. Consider ways you can conduct your search in a similar manner—focusing less on name and more on how the schools match your criteria.

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 **Try This**


In the table below, list the top five needs (must haves) and the top five wants (“would be nice”) that are important for you as you consider your college experience. Are there certain majors that must be available or other programs, opportunities, or criteria that will inform the college list you build?

NEEDS	WANTS

Share your current list among family members, and ask questions about why each school was included. Ideally, there will be some overlap but also different colleges on each list. What are the commonalities? Differences? What can you learn about each other's expectations, priorities, hopes, goals, and priorities based on these lists.

Talk about This

1. What outside influences are going to affect the college list you build? Rankings? Family connections? Finances? Friends? Parents and students should both make a list and then share your responses.
2. What is one thing you need to communicate to your parent/child about the schools they are considering?
3. What resources are you going to rely on for information about colleges? Are they objective or subjective and how?

 **CHECK IN** After reading this chapter, are you still on the same page? If you are not all-in together, what do you need to do, discuss, or learn to get there?