

Choosing a College: Ten Factors to Weigh

The realization probably hit you when college brochures started flooding your mailbox: there are a lot of colleges out there. In fact, there are more than 3,000 colleges across the country. There are colleges out there that want you.

Once you get in, how do you choose the one that's right for you? Be sure to consider these 10 factors as you decide what school will give you your ideal college experience:

- **Degree Programs:** If you know what you want to major in, definitely look at colleges that are strong in that program. But if you have no idea what you want to study, it's just as important to choose a school with a wide range of degree programs to explore and eventually choose from.
- **Learning Environment:** Think about what type of learning environment suits you best. Then, consider factors like a college's average class size, student-to-teacher ratios and whether classes are taught mainly by professors or graduate assistants. Do you learn better through discussions or through hands-on activity. All of these are factors which will impact your academic experience at college.
- **Campus Life:** What do you want your college experience to be like outside of the classroom? Think about what's important to you in terms of extracurricular activities, social life, school spirit and traditions and housing options.
- **Distance from Home:** Decide how far from home you want your college experience to take you. Do you want to have the support of friends and family nearby, or experience life in an entirely new part of the country?
- **Location:** Do you see yourself attending college in a small town where the campus is the center of activity, or a major metropolitan area where you'll enjoy the benefits of city living? Also decide if you want to be in a certain geographic area or climate.
- **Type of College:** Private, public, religiously affiliated, single-sex or co-ed there are many types of colleges and all offer benefits and drawbacks. Weigh the pros and cons and decide what type is right for you.
- **Size:** A tiny liberal arts school and a huge state university will give you two very different college experiences. Visit colleges at both ends of the size spectrum and a few somewhere in the middle to see where you feel most comfortable.
- **Student Body:** Do you want a college where you'll be surrounded by students similar to yourself, or one where you'll meet people from a variety of backgrounds? Check out student demographics for colleges you're considering, such as male-to-female ratio, average student age, and geographic, ethnic and religious diversity.
- **Cost:** Don't limit your college search because of costs financial aid and scholarships can do a lot to offset cost differences between two colleges. But do think realistically about how you plan to pay for college, and find schools that work within your financial circumstances.
- **First Impressions:** No matter what, you should visit the top two or three colleges you are considering. Talk to students, take a long walk through campus, sit in on a class and grab a cup of coffee in the student union. The best way to get a real feel for a college and decide if you belong there is to go there. And if you're like many students, you'll visit one college that just feels "right." Go with your instincts and believe in first impressions.