

Tips for parents on finding a college match

How can your child find colleges that match specific needs? First, identify priorities. Next, carefully research the characteristics of a range of schools. Finally, match the two. Here are some college characteristics to consider.

Size of student body

Size will affect many of your child's opportunities and experiences:

- range of academic majors offered
- extracurricular possibilities
- amount of personal attention your child will receive
- number of academic resources (e.g., books in the library)

In considering size, your child should look beyond the raw number of students attending. For example, perhaps your child's considering a small department within a large school. Your child should investigate not just the number of faculty members, but also their accessibility to students.

Location

Does your child want to visit home frequently, or is this a time to experience a new part of the country? Perhaps an urban environment is preferred, with access to museums, ethnic food or major league ball games. Or maybe it's easy access to the outdoors or the serenity of a small town.

Academic programs

If your child has decided on a field of study, your child can research the reputations of academic departments by talking to people in the field of interest. If your child is undecided, as many students are, your child may want to choose an academically balanced institution that offers a range of majors and programs. Students normally don't pick a major until their sophomore year, and those students who know their major before they go to college are very likely to change their minds. Most colleges offer counseling to help students find a focus.

In considering academic programs, your child should look for special opportunities and pick a school that offers a number of possibilities.

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Campus life

Before choosing a college, your child should learn the answers to these questions:

- What extracurricular activities, athletics, clubs and organizations are available?
- Does the community around the college offer interesting outlets for students?
- How do fraternities and sororities influence campus life?
- Is housing guaranteed?
- How are dorms assigned?

Cost

In considering cost, look beyond the price tag. Because of financial aid, most students pay less than the "sticker price," so don't rule out a college that would be a good fit for your child before you find out how much financial aid it will offer. Most colleges work to ensure that academically qualified students from every economic circumstance can find financial aid that allows them to attend.

Diversity

Your child should explore what can be gained from a diverse student body. The geographic, ethnic, racial and religious diversity of the students can help students learn more about the world. Investigate which student organizations or other groups with ethnic or religious foundations are active and visible on campus.

Retention and graduation rates

One of the best ways to measure a school's quality and the satisfaction of its students is to learn the percentage of students who return after the first year and the percentage of entering students who go on to graduate. Comparatively good retention and graduation rates indicate that responsible academic, social and financial support systems exist for most students.

Source: www.collegeboard.org