

BUILDING A COLLEGE LIST

You are working towards a list of approximately 10-12 colleges across a range of admissibility because we believe a good outcome includes multiple acceptances—if you are not accepted early to a top choice—so you have options at the end of the process. In other words:

- 3-4 “Likelies” (> 75% chance of admission)—This process is not perfect and even colleges we believe will accept you may not if they suspect you will not attend or if you have applied to a particularly competitive major.
- 3-4 “Targets” (50% chance of admission)—We want you to have some nice options, even beyond your Likelies.
- 3-4 “Reaches” (< 25% chance of admission)—Every list should have a few Reaches.

(Please keep in mind that it is difficult to assess your admissibility at any college until the end of junior year with the benefit of year-end grades and standardized test scores.)

While there are exceptions, particularly for recruited athletes who may receive very specific feedback from coaches and admissions offices and an admissions slot in advance, a well-balanced list of approximately 10-12 colleges, all of which you would be happy to attend, should be appropriate for most students. It is difficult to produce and manage more than that number of thorough, well-constructed applications so we do not encourage students to apply to a larger number of colleges to “increase their chances.”

With more than 2,200 four-year colleges in the United States, how are you going to choose which to apply to?

Idea #1: Start by Identifying What Factors Matter Most to You

For example, list ideal locations, majors, types of fellow students, or aspects of student life that you want in a college, and create a profile. If you are having trouble deciding what attributes you want in a college, start visiting local colleges and think of it as window shopping. We often suggest starting with a large state university, a classic small liberal arts college, and a mid-sized university; you may want to compare an urban campus with one that is more rural or suburban. Even if you do not intend to go to a local college, a visit can help you begin to narrow down what you like and don't like in a campus environment.

Once we understand what factors are most important to you, we will provide suggestions on colleges for you to consider.

Idea #2: Build From the Bottom Up

Once you've identified the qualities that you would like in your college experience, use resources such as online searches and guidebooks to identify particular colleges which look promising—but start by finding the least competitive colleges which fit your profile, and then work your way up to the most competitive colleges.

It is easy to fall in love with “Reaches”—who doesn’t want to attend a college that is widely recognized and admired? It is a greater challenge, and even more important, to invest time in finding great “Likelies” that appeal to you. If your high school uses Naviance, SCOIR, or Maia (and allows you access), you can review scattergrams which show the history of admissions, deferrals and denials for applicants from your high school at specific colleges. This is a useful tool to help determine your own admissibility to any individual college.

If your high school doesn’t use one of these online programs or give you access to scattergrams, we suggest you look at the ACT or SAT mid 50% range of scores published in various college guidebooks to get a sense of where you might stand within a pool of applicants. Given the wide range of grading standards, we find average published GPAs significantly less useful.

Idea #3: Develop Your Own Preferences

Come to your own conclusions about the colleges you are learning about rather than listening to popular opinion. Your college search is just that—your college search. Therefore the qualities that are priorities for you may not be qualities valued by your peers and their parents.

Sentences that begin with “I heard” and include the words **everyone, no one, always and never** are hearsay. You should not judge a college community with hundreds (or thousands) of students and faculty based on rumors and opinions instead of on facts and your own opinions.

Ideally, you will have an opportunity to visit several campuses of colleges you are considering; there is really no better way to get to know a college than by actually being there.

Idea #4: Don’t be Fooled by Marketing

College websites are marketing materials and commercials. They can be useful sources of information about potential majors and facts about the college such as size or cost, but a good photographer can make any college campus look inviting. Invest in a good guidebook which will help you compare apples to apples across a number of schools.

In addition, please do not rely on the lists of colleges published by periodicals. It is impossible to rank order colleges from “best” to “worst” based on surveys and debatable factors selected for comparison by magazines.

Idea #5: Have Fun!

Fred Hargadon, the legendary Dean of Admission at Princeton and Stanford, often said “College is the best four-year sabbatical of your life.” Enjoy the search and look forward to the end result: a smart list of colleges, any one of which you would love to spend four years exploring.