

## BUILDING A COLLEGE LIST

You are working towards building 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, we’re looking for:

- A minimum of 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. More than ever, we are finding colleges deferring, wait-listing, or even denying strong applicants in an effort to protect their yield numbers. You cannot take your Likelies for granted!
- 3-4 “Targets” (50% chance of admission)—To provide some balance to your list, we want you to have some nice options, even beyond your Likelies.
- 4-5 “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. We can provide some preliminary assessments, but they need to be re-visited as your profile evolves and the admissions process itself evolves.

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 2,800 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 be in a better position to suggest colleges for you to consider.

## **Idea #2: Build From the Bottom Up**

Once you've identified the qualities you would like in your college experience, use resources such as online searches and guidebooks to identify particular colleges which look promising. We often recommend starting by finding the least competitive colleges which fit your profile, and then working your way up to the most competitive colleges because it is so 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 your school's history of admissions, deferrals, and denials for applicants to specific colleges. This is a useful tool to help understand your own chances of admission at any individual college.

If your high school doesn't use one of these online programs or doesn't 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. (Keep in mind that those ranges have drifted upwards since most colleges became test-optional during COVID; we should see a correction as some colleges return to requiring test scores.) Given the wide range of grading standards and grade inflation of recent years, we find average published GPAs even 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 colleges you are considering; there is really no better way to get to know a college than by actually being there, especially when students are on campus.

#### **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 and dig deeply into individual college websites to learn about academic opportunities, undergraduate research, study abroad, and student organizations.

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 could provide four years of self-discovery and academic exploration!