



10 Factors in Choosing the Right College for You

Deciding on the right college for you requires a great deal of thought, a little luck, and a bunch of research. Your college selection process will, no doubt, be unique to you based on what you feel is important to your search. When choosing your college, the following factors need to be evaluated in some fashion.

1. Prestige

Prestige can be a vague concept. What is considered prestigious on one coast can be almost unknown on another. Yes, everyone has heard of Harvard, but there are many, many people on the west coast who have not heard of Bennington. Decide now how important going to a "name" school is to you. Then decide whether regional prestige is sufficient or if you are looking for national stature or, conversely, if prestige is not important to you at all.

2. Cost

You know what you can afford more than I do, but I would encourage you not to dump colleges because you think you can't afford them. Sometimes a state university is, after grants and scholarships, more expensive than a private college that you really desire. Get the financial aid office to work the numbers first, then decide what you can afford.

3. Quality

Quality is one of those intangibles that make choosing a college difficult. How good is the school? My advice is to go to the campus, sit in on a class, check out the library, talk with a few (non-admissions office working) students, and go from there.

4. Major

It may seem simplistic, but make sure the colleges you are looking at offer the major(s) you want. While, at the undergraduate level, in many disciplines, there is room for error, this is not true across the board. Yes, you can get into law school with a number of different majors. However, you really can't get into a graduate program in chemical engineering without an undergraduate degree in that same field.

5. Housing

If you are not planning on going to school locally, you will need some form of housing. There are several possibilities which include dorms, off-campus apartments, or renting a bedroom in a house. If it is at all possible and you are of the age where it makes sense to do so, go for the dorms for that first year. After that, you can decide what you want to do, but that is one less decision to make.

6. Size

Yes, size really does matter. Don't go to UCLA if you want a small college experience. Don't go to College of the Ozarks if you want a large campus experience. Both are good schools, but your experience will be vastly different based in part on the number of students on campus.

7. Distance

It should go without saying, but decide now how far you want to be from home. If you won't be happy without occasional visits home on the weekend, you should probably choose a college in the same state as where you live. Likewise, if you can't wait to get away from home, there is something to be said for only looking at colleges outside your home state.

8. Culture

If music is important, if dance is important, if culture is important, choose a school that either has strong programs in those areas or that is located in a city that offers those amenities. Also, decide on which type of culture is important. Both New York City and Dallas, Texas offer music, dance, and culture, but it's different. Quite different.

9. Scholarships & Grants

There is something to be said for choosing the college that offers you the most scholarships and grants. You will get no argument from me. Just make sure that some of these other factors are part of the mix. Arkansas State University is a fine school, but don't choose it solely based on the financial aid package.

10. Location

California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo is a fine school. It has particularly good engineering programs. All that being said, a significant percentage of students consider it because San Luis Obispo, on the central coast of California, is a wonderful town in which to go to college. It is not accidental, either, that UC Santa Barbara shows pictures of its dorms complete with the ocean in the background. Decide now if where the school is located is part of what you wish to ponder. There are some wonderful schools in Kansas, but they do not get the same location points as Hawaii, California, New York, and so on.

We recommend that students make their first step in choosing a college by using an on-line search tool like the one at www.collegeboard.com. It will allow students to explore many of the factors listed above and archive the colleges that seem to be good matches for their interests.

After exploring, please contact your Valor College Counselor so that they can assist you in refining your college search.

*Some of the above information was gleaned from Thomas Nixon, the author of *Complete Guide to Online High Schools* (spring 2007) and co-author of *Bears' Guide to Earning Degrees by Distance Learning* (2006).