



Tips on Finding the Right School

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Choosing Your School: The Basics

Is your child focused on a big-name school? Will it provide him/her the best education? Is he/she more concerned about impressing his/her friends than about obtaining the best education available?

It's not just about a great education; it's a huge leap into a broad, new world of social experiences, personal growth, and independence. Moreover, it's a brand new level of hard work, study, and academic achievement.

The culture of the school he/she attends may play as large a role in his/her future success as the degree received. Deciding what's truly important will help narrow the field. Plus, your son/daughter may discover options that may never have been considered!

Starting with the basics can help identify schools with the best academic and personal fit. Each person is unique; what's important to one may not matter to another.

Take geography, for example. If your son/daughter prefers to stay close to home, then schools more than 4 or so hours away can be eliminated. Identifying needs/criteria early on will permit the elimination of hundreds, if not thousands, of schools allowing your family to focus on what will make any qualifying school a perfect fit.

Size of School

Schools come in all sizes, ranging from a tiny school of 26 students to enormous institutions of more than 60,000 students! Which size is better? It depends on your student and his/her comfort zone.

Type of Institution

There are a variety of schools, both public and private. Some are devoted to research, others to graduate programs. Some limit (or completely forego) graduate programs, while other enroll only undergraduate students, and focus their attention on teaching and learning. Some are best known for offering their students a broad, liberal arts education; others offer a specialty in one specific area, such as engineering or writing. Some are coed, or only open to students of one sex; others have a particular religious affiliation. Some are historically black colleges; others have co-op programs where you earn money while going to school.

Your children have limitless options! Identify the criteria most important to your son/daughter and you'll be able to identify the best matching schools.

Location, Location, Location!

Schools are everywhere, from tiny college towns, to pastoral hills, to urban centers!

If your family has always lived in the suburbs or a smaller town, choosing an urban campus might seem like an adventure. However, after a week of the noise, dirt, and crowds, will your son/daughter be longing for a grassy campus with open spaces? On the other hand, if your family is used to city life, but your son/daughter chooses a scenic college in a rural area, will he/she be rushing into the Student Center after a few nights, looking for any sign of noise, lights, and people?

Think very carefully about life to date, the most comfortable geographic area, and how much of a change truly is desired before choosing the school.

Distance from Home

Eighty percent of children stay within 4 hours from home. Some students will want to have dinner with their family once a week, or go home to do their laundry; others will want to explore a totally different part of the country. Be sure - this is far more than a decision about the comforts of home!

When contemplating distance from home, seriously consider the expense of travel and the frequency of potential homesickness. The farther from home, the less often the visits. On the other hand, with email, mobile phones, and a good internet provider, you can feel close to home no matter where you are.

Cost/Scholarships & Financial Aid

Cost-of-attendance differs from school-to-school. What comprises the cost can be rather confusing. Different types of financial aid may be available at different schools. Your student may receive a scholarship for a variety of reasons (e.g., athletics, academics, music, art, and other talents/skills/abilities) or, perhaps, none at all.

While public schools typically offer in-state students much lower tuition rates, tuition for out-of-state residents is similar to tuition rates at private schools. While private schools charge everyone the same (usually higher) tuition, they often have much more scholarship money available.

Never fear “sticker price.” It’s like airfare; very few pay full price and very few pay the same as other passengers. Often, the amount a family pays for their son/daughter to receive a private school education is equal to or less than the amount they would pay for a public school education.

Student Population

Some schools, particularly larger schools and those in big cities, tend to have a student body hailing from a wide range of ethnic, socioeconomic, and religious backgrounds. Other schools, especially smaller schools and those in rural locations tend to have a fairly homogeneous student body.

Other important elements for consideration: whether most students live at the school or commute; the age of the average student; and, how many students are involved with the Greek system of sororities and fraternities, if there is one.

Majors and Requirements

If your son/daughter has identified their field of study, he/she must be sure to select a school that will best prepare him/her for the chosen profession. Some schools are well known for excellence in specific majors. Attending these schools, and performing well, will place your son/daughter in an enviable position to pursue the desired career after graduation.

Of course, many entering freshmen have no idea what they want to do with their lives. In that case, a school with a variety of options should be considered.

Many schools require students to take classes in a wide range of areas during their first year or two. These schools are great for students who desire either a well-rounded education or who are trying to identify an area of focus. However, even more specialized schools will require a set of general education courses before they let students “dive in” to their chosen majors. Compare these requirements between schools, as they likely vary from school to school.

Athletics and Events

Is your student an avid sports fan? Does the sound of a marching band and the sight of a football uniform make him/her cringe? At some schools, sports are a huge element of the social calendar. Other schools may not have intercollegiate athletics, and still others may not pay much attention even if the school supports teams. The culture of intercollegiate athletics can vary substantially from one school to the next.

Maybe your student loves live concerts, or to go hiking in the woods. If your student likes to spend free time going to shows, he/she probably shouldn't choose a small rural school where few musical acts tour. He/she might be happier in an urban environment. But, if he/she loves to be outdoors, a campus in a natural setting can provide just the balance needed, allowing for your student's best academic performance.

Special Activities and Programs

A surprising number of schools offer semester or year-long overseas study programs. Students usually receive full credit for academic work overseas, in addition to the opportunity to enjoy the chance to learn a new language, make some new friends, and experience exotic scenery and cuisine.

If your student is a singer/musician, a visual artist, or an aspiring journalist, he/she should consider schools that not only will fulfill academic goals, but also personal interests and aspirations. Some schools have great arts and theater programs, or excellent newspapers, giving students a chance to be involved in extra-curricular activities outside their majors. There are also schools created specifically for a type of study, such as conservatories of music, art schools, and other programs that can be a perfect fit for the right student.

Trust Your Instincts

When choosing a school, gut feeling is incredibly important. If a place “feels right,” that's important to notice. Likewise, if it just “feels wrong,” regardless of reputation, that school may not be the ideal choice. Selecting a school is extremely personal and, after considering all objective factors, the ultimate decision rests with your son/daughter.

Visit schools of interest, see how you feel walking around campus, and imagine attending? Once your student has a true feel for the types of campuses - and the kinds of schools - that are the best fit for his/her personality, lifestyle and goals, he/she will be well on the way to finding the best college fit.

Good luck and happy hunting!