

Creating and Finalizing your “College List”

1. Establish your priorities. Students often focus on college destinations without first thinking seriously about how such places might fit them. They are more enamored with names and reputations—and less concerned about whether the institutions actually make sense for them. Before you can begin to make a list of colleges you need to take stock of who you are and what you want to get out of the college experience.

For example:

- Why do you want to go to college?
- In what type of learning environment are you most likely to function comfortably?
- With what kind of people do you want to live and study?
- What are 3-4 things you want to make sure you accomplish by the time you graduate? What will make yours a successful college experience?
- How important are cost and affordability to the equation?

The answers that begin to emerge from this reflective exercise are important to framing your college selections. They will give clarity to your priorities and, more importantly, provide the filters through which you process the information you uncover about colleges and universities.

2. Identify the “essentials.” You are bound to respond to a range of stimuli as you learn about schools. For example, you might be sensitive to the proximity of an urban center or the presence of a “big-time” sports culture. Climate or access to outdoor activities might be important to you. Where does a social life fit? Are you determined to go to a smaller university because you have spent the last four years at a large high school? Oh, and then there is the question of academics and learning environment. Clearly, you’ll have a lot on your mind as you look at colleges!

The above factors are among the many that will have a place in your decision-making. They can’t carry equal weight, however. As you think about the factors that might influence your choice of a college, consider the hierarchy of importance. Is a given factor essential to your success? Very important? Or, would it be nice if it could be satisfied by your selection? Be careful not to let the “would be nice” factors drive your decision-making.

3. Let your list grow. Right now, you are limited by the things you think you know about colleges and those impressions tend to be pretty superficial. It will be the things you have yet to learn that facilitate good decision-making about possible destinations. The good news is you still have time to explore and thoroughly research the possibilities. While you might be feeling some angst about the need to come up with a short list right now, time is still on your side.

4. Focus on places that are “target” schools for you academically. The popular notion about college list development is that a good list should include a sampling of “reach,” “target” and “likely admit” schools. Subscribing to this notion sometimes gives rise to a proliferation of

applications to high profile, “dream” schools at the expense of smart decision-making. The accompanying rationalization might sound like, “Well, how will I know if I can get in if I don’t try?” *This logic is problematic in two ways: 1) it implicitly diminishes (in the mind of the person who espouses it) the value of any school that is not in the “reach” category and 2) it can be incredibly limiting by creating blinders to more appropriate options. Be careful about building your list around highly selective schools. The odds of getting into places where the probability of admission is low don’t increase if you apply to more of them. Moreover, including such schools on a college list will distract you from presenting well at places where you might otherwise have a reasonable chance of gaining admission.

While you might allow yourself a dream school (or two), it is best to build your list around target schools—places where your credentials would put your probability of admission in the 40-60% range, places where you will be valued for what you have to offer. There are never any guarantees in the selective admission process, but putting yourself on the right competitive playing field will be critical to your eventual success as an applicant.

5. Eight-Twelve is enough. By October, you should be ready to whittle your list down to a workable number. If you have been thorough—and thoughtful—in your research you should be focusing on no more than 8-12 applications. That number might include 2-3 (at most) low-probability dream schools and 2-3 colleges where you are likely to be admitted. The rest should be target schools.

Keeping your list to under 12 schools will require discipline as you will be tempted by colleges that want to make the application process easy for you. They will offer fee waivers for applications submitted while visiting their campuses and fee waivers for applications submitted online. Some will recognize you as a V.I.P. or “priority” applicant if you apply by specified deadlines in September. Others will send you applications that are all filled out for you. Yes—they have captured information about you from various sources and made it easy for you to apply. You simply sign and return the form! Don’t add these schools to your list simply because they make it easy to do so!

The bottom line: Stay focused on your priorities and your list. The more applications to which you commit, the harder it will be for you to stay on top of each one—and the more likely you won’t be able to present yourself in a compelling fashion to the schools that are most important to you.