

STEPS TO SELECTING A COLLEGE

(Updated 09/02)

1 PRAY

Ask God to guide you through this process. He cares about you and your future more than anyone, and this is a great time to take Him up on his promise to never leave or forsake you.

2 SELF ASSESSMENT (from "Making the Right Match" by Tony Jeffrey, Ph.D.)

Before you begin to make a list of colleges, it is best to spend some quality time thinking truthfully about yourself. Rather than make a list of colleges you think you can get into or that will be acceptable to your friends, answer the following questions regarding what makes you unique, what your needs are, and what type of environment brings out the best in you. Once you have a good feel for the type of college environment you are looking for, narrowing down your options and making a great match are much easier. If you skip this process, your odds of picking a good match are slim. Think for yourself and realize that what is right for you may not at all be what is right for your friends or siblings.

1. Why do you really want to go to college?
2. How academically competitive are you? Do you thrive under pressure? Do you choke? Are you not even academic? Are you self-motivated or do you need close personal attention?
3. Do you like "being known" or is there more freedom in being anonymous?
4. Do you function best in a place where everyone is "like you" or do you like diversity in a student body? How much diversity have you really experienced?
5. Do you know exactly what you want to major in? Do you have a strong sense of a calling in a specific area?
6. If your faith is important to you, would it be more exhilarating to be in a Christian or secular school? What type of environment would help you grow vs. failing in your Christian walk?
7. Do you like to have lots of options or does that only confuse you? Can you handle frustration and rejection? Can you persist without giving up?
8. Do you like the thought of being near family and friends or does being far away seem better to you?
9. How do you define success? Are you satisfied with your accomplishments to date?
10. What kind of person would you like to become? Which of your gifts and talents would you like to develop?
11. What would you most like to change about yourself? Why?
12. What values are truly important to you (spiritual, political, financial)? How will your college environment affect these values?
13. Are you worried about being homesick and/or making new friends?

Before you begin picking possible colleges, have a candid conversation with your parents. Are there limits to what they can or will contribute to your college expenses? Are there colleges they hope you will consider? Are they comfortable with letting you travel far away to attend college? Negotiate differences of opinion at the start of the selection process rather than at the end. You don't want to select a college that your parents will not support as a final choice.

3 COLLEGE CHARACTERISTICS (from the College Board's, "Finding a College That Fits")

The next step is to make a list of "everything I would want to know about a college before I decided to apply."

PHILOSOPHY: Is the college a two-year school (Community College or Junior College), four-year school, or a vocational/technical school? Is the college public, private or Christian? If Christian, how are various areas of the school (curricula, dorm life, extra-curricular activities, etc.) affected by the school's religious views?

SIZE: Is the size a good one for me? Is it too big or too small? What is the average class size? Investigate not just the number of faculty, but also the ratio of faculty to students and how accessible faculty are to students.

LOCATION: Distance from home may be important. Do you want to visit home frequently, or do you see this as a time to experience a new part of the country? Some like an urban environment with access to museums, ethnic food, or professional sporting events. Others hope for easy access to the outdoors or the serenity and safety of a small-town setting.

PERSONALITY: Does the college fit me? Is it conservative, liberal, geographically diverse, ethnically diverse, etc?

ACADEMIC PROGRAMS: Do they have the major I am seeking? If you know what you want to study, research reputations of academic departments by talking to adults already in the fields that interest you, and using some of the materials available in the Counseling Office that evaluate academic departments. If you are undecided, relax and pick an academically balanced institution that offers a range of majors and programs. Most colleges offer expert counseling to help the undecided student find a focus.

CAMPUS LIFE: Consider what your college life will be like beyond the classroom. In order to grow in all ways, aim for a balance between academics and social life. What extracurricular activities, athletics, and special interest groups are available? Does the community around the college offer interesting outlets for students? Is there a Christian group in which to take part?

Colleges often require that you live in campus housing for one or more years. So, in considering social life, be sure to look carefully at the quality of life in the dormitories. Ask if housing is guaranteed to be available to returning students. If so, how are dormitory assignments made after the first year?

COST: Today's college price tag makes cost an important consideration for most students. At the same time, virtually all colleges work to ensure that academically qualified students from every economic circumstance can find financial aid that allows them to attend. In considering cost, look beyond the price tag to assistance available.

RETENTION AND GRADUATION RATES: One of the best ways to measure a school's quality and the satisfaction of its students is to learn the percent of students who return after the first year and the percent of entering students who remain to graduate. Comparatively good retention and graduation rates are indicators that responsible academic, social, and financial support systems exist for most students.

4 RESEARCH (from the College Board's, "Finding a College That Fits")
Utilize the following resources to find college information:

College guidebooks: Begin with one or two of the college guides available in the Counseling Office.

College-produced resources: Colleges will continue to shower you and the Counseling Office with publications. Don't ignore the college catalog. It is an excellent source of information.

The Internet: You can search for colleges, find scholarships, and even apply to colleges online.

People resources: Talk with teachers, recent college graduates, youth pastors and others about selecting a college. Meet with college representatives when they visit Calvin. Ask about student satisfaction, retention, campus safety, support services, etc. Feel free to follow up with letters or phone calls to this admission person.

College fairs: At a fair you get to meet and talk with representatives from many colleges and universities, ask questions that are specific to your search, and get on mailing lists for applications.

Computer resources: Many libraries, public high schools and community centers have computer software tailored to the college search process.

College Visits: The best way to gain firsthand knowledge of a college or university is to visit. Visit some campuses near your home that vary in size and kind. This will give you a baseline for judging the kind of environment you are seeking. It is important to visit the college you think you will attend before making a final commitment. Through the admission office, arrange to attend classes and stay in a dorm, if possible.

5 MATCH YOURSELF WITH ADMISSIONS STANDARDS (from the College Board's, "Finding a College That Fits")

Before you consider your college search complete, compare your academic and personal qualifications to those of students typically admitted to schools where you want to apply. (This information is easily accessed at www.collegeboard.com. Simply do a search for the college you're interested in, and then click on the "SAT, AP, CLEP" tab.) Large public universities usually make admission decisions based on objective information including: number and rigor of high school courses, grade-point average, class rank, and standardized test scores (SAT I/II, and/or ACT). Private and highly selective institutions will also consider special talents, community service, personal qualifications demonstrated by extracurricular and leadership activities, and other unique qualities you can bring to the college campus.

As you narrow your college list, select one or two institutions that present an admission challenge. Counselors often call these schools "reaches," because the admission criteria are competitive and a small percentage of applicants are admitted. Make sure your final list includes a number of "mid-range" colleges—schools where your qualifications closely match those of the average student. Include a "safety" school or two, where your statistics exceed the profile of most students. Give at least as much thought to your "mid-range" and "safety" schools as you do to your "reaches." Apply only to schools at which you believe you would be happy for four or more years (or two years at a community colleges).