

# Creating Your College List

*by Howard and Matthew Greene*

As with most aspects of the college admission process, you should focus on finding the right balance when you create and revise your college list. If you balance your list in terms of selectivity, geography, and fit, you'll be able to open up some excellent choices for yourself during your senior year of high school.

## **Starting the list: Consider contrasting types**

Exploring only one kind of school will expose you to a very limited set of options. There are several thousand colleges and universities in the U.S. that can be divided into distinct types or models. There are large public universities, small private colleges, two-year community colleges, urban universities, and small-town colleges, to name a few. You can find liberal and conservative environments, traditional and alternative academic programs, and religious and nonsectarian institutions.

Consider instinctively what type of institution seems to fit you best. You may be inclined to stay very close to a city or far from one. Perhaps you learn best in small classroom environments. Your initial instincts can guide you as you explore a few schools and test your assumptions. The important point is that you should not limit yourself. If you're sure you want a large urban university, then check one out, but make sure to visit at least one smaller college in a more suburban or rural setting. You may surprise yourself and decide that type of school fits you better or confirm your inclinations and be more confident about your first choice.

## **Visit campuses to explore different models**

That's right. You need to visit colleges prior to applying to colleges. You don't need to see every school, but you should see enough campuses to know that you are generally on the right track with your list and not making false assumptions or missing interesting possibilities. During initial campus visits, attend a scheduled tour and information session. Consider the college's fit for you, as well as what the school represents as a general college type.

## **Diversify your list geographically**

It's fine to start close to home as you begin to establish your list. Most students attend college within a few hundred miles from home, which allows you to come home for the occasional weekend and stay in touch with your high school friends.

With increasing competition for admission, and depending on the available college choices near your home, you should also consider adding colleges that are farther away. Note that applying to public universities from out of state is harder since these institutions favor in-state students. Most students attend public colleges and universities — nearly two-thirds of those enrolled in four-year institutions. Private colleges actively recruit a diverse first-year class and often offer admission and merit-based financial incentives to qualified students who are applying from around the country.

## **Balance your list by difficulty of admission**

Selectivity is another important consideration when constructing your list. At first, don't worry too much about questions like, "which college is my safety school?" You can establish the schools that are at the upper end of your reach group by comparing your high school curriculum, grades, test scores, class rank, and other talents to the reported data from colleges that interest you.

If you are just entering junior year, which is a good time to start, then you won't have much of this data. However, you do have a sense of your place in your high school class, the level of difficulty of your curriculum, and your goals for the SAT or ACT. Down the line, you should be able to gain a better sense of reaches, targets, and safeties or possibles, solids, and likelies.

Again, balance is key. Don't overload your list with schools that are real stretches. Similarly, don't under-apply, seeking only colleges that won't reject you. It's OK to say "No" to colleges, and to apply to schools that will say "No" to you. Remember, you shouldn't take an admission committee's decision too personally or as a judgment about your worth as an individual. There

are many reasons why colleges accept and reject applicants, many of which have very little to do with your personal attributes or overall ability to do the work. Often, you may be very well qualified, but due to the large number of similarly qualified applicants you may not be among those admitted.

### **Avoid the usual suspects, easy labels, and this year's hot school**

Students at each high school tend to establish a classic clustering pattern around the same group of schools. A dozen or more students pick the same places because they know someone who went there, have friends planning to apply, or have just heard of the college before.

Though you might start building your list this way, you should not limit yourself. We call this the “bunching phenomenon,” when too many students from the same area bunch up at the same college admission offices. These schools won't have specific quotas for how many students to admit from each school, but you can be sure they will reasonably limit the letters of admission they offer in each area. That means you'll have a harder time standing out from the crowd.

Stereotyping schools by what you have heard in the rumor mill is another crutch to avoid. It's easy to make black-and-white conclusions about colleges before you have even given them a fair chance, but in doing so, you might be missing excellent opportunities. Every college is more complicated than its public image and may serve the needs of many different kinds of students.

Even though rankings and hot fashionable trends seem to fluctuate every year, colleges themselves remain fairly constant from year to year. If a college is “in” this year, then it might be becoming overly selective, which means you'll have a harder time getting into a school that's not necessarily a stronger institution than a college that's “out” but very right for you.

### **Be yourself, take the driver's seat, have an open mind, and don't give up!**

Finding a college is more like car shopping than searching for your future marriage partner. You will be spending four important years of your life pursuing an education. You will make friends, contacts, and mistakes. You will discover new interests and build on your strengths. A major goal is to discover your calling, establish your credentials, and prepare for a rewarding career.

There is more than one perfect college out there to help you accomplish these things, and you should build your list by trying to identify a mix of schools that each could potentially work well for you personally. Take control of the process by expressing your views to your parents, counselors, friends, teachers, and admissions officers. Be open to new ideas and possibilities. Above all, remain persistent through your senior year. Balance your list, and establish the goal of opening up several exciting choices for yourself in the spring of senior year.

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