

WHO ARE YOU, AND WHY ARE YOU GOING TO COLLEGE?

Start by examining your reasons for going to college. Why, really, are you going? What are your abilities and strengths? What are your weaknesses? What do you want out of life? Are you socially self-sufficient or do you prefer familial support? Talk with your family, friends, and high school counselors as you ask these questions. The people who know you best will be able to help you the most with these important issues.

SIZE MATTERS

Your college does not have to be bigger than your high school. Most good liberal arts colleges have a population of fewer than 4,000 for a reason. College is a time to explore, and many students find a smaller community more conducive to internal exploration. What really matters, however, is not the number of people, but the people themselves and the kind of community in which you will learn. Many large universities have established smaller “honors colleges” for these reasons.

A NAME-BRAND COLLEGE WILL NOT GUARANTEE SUCCESS

Think about the people in your life who are happy and successful. Find out whether they went to college and, if so, where they attended. Often you’ll find that success in life has less to do with your college choice and more to do with your personal qualities and traits coupled with the experiences and opportunities you will have in college. Employers and graduate schools are looking for outstanding skills and experience, not college pedigree. As you search for colleges, ask about student outcomes. You will find that many colleges you’ve never even heard of actually outperform the Ivies and “name brands”! Visit the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) website for more information and as an alternative to popular rankings and media lists.

YOU DON’T NEED TO PICK A MAJOR YET

Very few high school students have enough information or experience to choose a major. Most students need the variety and depth of college coursework to determine their interests and aptitudes. In fact, many college students change their minds two or three times before they settle on a major and still graduate in four years! Being “undecided” can be a good thing; it will leave you open to exploring more academic experiences.

DON’T BE SCARED BY THE STORIES

If you pay attention to the headlines when it comes to college admissions, you might believe that no one is getting in anywhere! The truth is, the majority of the colleges and universities in this country admit more students than they reject. If you are worried about your chance for admission and are willing to explore beyond the very narrow band of highly selective colleges, you will find many options that could be a great fit for you. Compare your academic profile to those of recently admitted and enrolled students at any college you’re considering. (Most colleges provide this information on their website, but contact the school if you can’t find it.) Ask your high school counselor to help you assess your school record as it relates to various admission options.

YOU CAN AFFORD TO GO TO COLLEGE

If you assume that you cannot afford college based on the “sticker price,” you will miss out. It may be difficult for you to talk about money, but if you investigate all the options and ask for help and advice, you will find affordable choices. Online resources as well as financial aid workshops sponsored by high schools in your community are widely available to get you started. College and university financial aid websites offer useful information and links as well. Investigate early and ask for help.

THE MOST IMPORTANT FACTOR IS FIT

Choosing a college because your friends are going there or because of where it ranks on a list does not take into account who you are and who you will become. College is a match to be made, not a prize to be won. Finding a good fit requires time and introspection. Visiting a college’s website, learning about campus events and guest speakers, and getting in touch with current students and faculty are good ways to supplement a campus visit—or to decide if you even want to spend the time and money on a visit. Check college websites to identify the admission officer assigned to your region of the country and email him or her. Ask if you can get in touch with students from your area or students with interests similar to yours. When you do visit, take the time to sit in on classes, eat in the dining hall, and hang around in the student center or other high-traffic areas. Imagine yourself as part of the community. Talk to students. Ask if they would make the same college choice if they were going through the selection process again.