

For Students:

Searching for Colleges

Searching for Information and Constructing a List

One of the key purposes of your junior-year meetings with your college counselor is to create a college list that reflects the characteristics you are looking for in a school, such as size, location, and quality of academic or extracurricular programs, lifestyle, and so forth. You may come into your meetings with some colleges already in mind. Your counselor will also make suggestions; you might add names discovered through an online search, reading, or conversations with relatives or classmates.

Your preliminary list may well include institutions unfamiliar to you. Research them nonetheless. They are there for a reason! *Never* let yourself be guided by “name recognition” alone. Perhaps, in your counselor’s opinion, an unfamiliar school fits your academic and/or extracurricular needs well, or a recent Lawrence graduate with whom you have a good deal in common had a great experience there. It costs nothing to explore! Know that you will learn just as much about yourself as you will about the colleges. It is OK to change your mind (for example, you think you want a large campus, but after visiting you realize that a smaller student body might be a better match) and to explore ideas and places you have never thought of before.

Do not underestimate the importance of research! The goal of your research is to develop a list of colleges that you know a lot about, what makes them unique from other schools, and why each school on the list sounds appealing to you. You need to find out about each college from several sources. From this list you will choose institutions to visit over the summer and, ultimately, to apply to in the fall.

This article is divided into three sections: a list of criteria to consider when choosing colleges, tips on researching, and suggestions for putting together a well-balanced final list of colleges. You should become familiar with these pages early in the search process!

I. Criteria for Choosing a College

Here are some things to consider during your search. Ask yourself, “How important to me is...?”

1. Student Body:

- **Enrollment** - Small (1,000-3,000), medium (3,000-7,000), medium/large (7,000-10,000), large (10,000-15,000), or very large (15,000+) school. Freshman class size. Percentage undergraduate students vs. graduate students.
- **Retention** - Percentage of freshmen that eventually graduate.
- **Background** - Male/female ratio. Percentage Commuter / resident. Geographic origin. Percentage minority. Percentage on financial aid.

2. Location and Surroundings:

- **Location** - New England, West, Middle Atlantic states, the South, a foreign country. Distance from home. Travel costs and convenience.
- **Setting** - Urban/suburban/rural. Weather. Near city or countryside. Recreational opportunities.
- **Facilities** - Library. Laboratories. Study and practice rooms. Student center. Athletic complex. Residence halls, residential options (on, off campus).

3. College Type and Philosophy:

- **Type** - 2/4 year. Private control /state /church. College/university.
- **Purpose** - Liberal arts. Technical/vocational institute. Conservatory. Art /design school. Pre-professional for business, education, engineering, fine arts. Degrees offered.
- **Philosophy** - Traditional/progressive. Deeply scholarly/career oriented. Comprehensive.
- **Calendar** - Semester/trimester/quarter/module. Inter-term program. Acceleration.

4. Curriculum:

- **Academic Requirements** - Proportion of study dedicated to core requirements/major/electives. Required freshman courses.
- **Academic Offerings** - Majors offered in your areas of interest. Breadth and depth of courses offered in your areas of interest. Interdisciplinary courses. Strong departments.
- **Independent Study** - Individual tutorials. Seminars. Research opportunities.
- **Special Study Programs** - Fieldwork. Internships. Exchange programs. Semester/year abroad study. Joint degree programs. Cooperative work/study plan. Pre-professional programs.
- **Standards** - Accreditation. Degree requirements. Grading system. Grading/distribution. Honor system.
- **Course Description** - Sequential/open order. Introductory/ advanced/specialized courses. Courses for majors/non-majors. Number of courses required for major.

5. Admission:

- **Deadlines** - Application. Notification of decision. Deadline to reply to offer of admission.
- **Application Requirements** - Fee. Information forms. Specific high-school courses. Secondary school report. Recommendations. Interview.
- **SAT, ACT** - The school's testing requirements
- **Admission Selectivity** - Percentage of applicants offered admission. Average SAT/ACT scores of freshmen. Percentage of freshmen ranked in top 10 percent of high-school class. Freshman class profile.

6. Academic Environment:

- **Faculty** - Percentage with Ph.D. Origin of degrees earned. Original faculty research/scholarship. Teaching course load. Expectations for teaching/scholarship/advising and other college service. Emphasis on undergraduate teaching and learning.

- **Faculty-Student Relationships** - Faculty-student ratio. Advising. Accessibility for conferences, assistance. Departmental clubs, colloquia, committees with student representatives. Class size, average. Classes under 20 students, over 50 students. Opportunities for discussion/student presentation/exchange of ideas.
- **Academic Demands** - Workload. Course expectations. Type of assignments. Academic pressure/competition.
- **Intellectual Vitality** - Student attitude toward learning. Flexibility/structure for learning. Exchange of ideas. Interest in political, social, or world issues.
- **Career Preparation** - Pre-professional programs. Career advising and information programs. Percentage who go on to graduate school. Graduate school and job placement.
- **Instruction**- Types of teaching/learning situation. In my field of interest, courses and faculty available. Full professors/assistants teaching undergraduates. Advisor system.

7. Campus and Student Life:

- **Types of Students** - Diversity and response to differences. Typical/offbeat student. Importance of money/material possessions/social appearances.
- **Community Type** - Homogeneous? Pluralistic? Cohesive? Fragmented? School spirit. Controversial campus issues. Liberal/directive/restrictive social regulations.
- **Living Arrangements** - Predominantly large dorms/housing clusters/small houses. Availability of single rooms/doubles/suites/multiple rooms. System of housing allocation/roommate selection. Centralized/decentralized dining. Alternate dining programs. Single sex/co-ed dorms. Guaranteed housing.
- **Campus Activities** - Activities related to your interests. Emphasis on social life, fraternities, sports, or other dominant interests. Clubs and organizations: traditional/creative/competitive/ issue oriented. Presence of religious, ethnic or cultural groups. Cultural opportunities on campus or in community. Focus of social life on campus/fraternities/community/other college campus/home.

8. Costs and Financial Aid:

- **Costs** - Minimum-maximum total costs per year. Student budget for tuition and fees/room and board/books and personal expenses/travel costs. Admission and enrollment fees.
- **Family Resources** - What your family can pay toward college expenses. Your earnings and savings.
- **Awards** - Percentage of students receiving aid. Range of awards. Average award.
- **Financial Aid** - Based on need/merit/or funds available. Loan and job expectations. Off-campus work opportunities.
- **Application** - Forms required. Deadlines.

9. **Legacies:** A family history at the college from which I might benefit.
(WARNING: this may not carry a lot of weight!)

10. **Intangibles:** Appeal of the institution's ambiance.

II: Researching

Now that you have a better sense of possible questions to ask yourself about colleges, you need to begin the process of obtaining information for schools on your preliminary list. *You* are the crucial factor in this step; not your parents, not the College Counseling Office. You need to do this researching when you are alert and motivated. Researching colleges, as with any of your other subjects, takes time if you are going to do it well and thoroughly. You will need to take notes, so always have a pen and paper handy. When using the Internet, as you surely will, you might have to copy down a school's URL. Here are possible avenues to explore:

1. *The Internet:* The World Wide Web is now a primary source of information for anyone involved in the college search. You can search college databases by location, size, major, and cost to find the right matches for you; you can request view books, applications, and course catalogs by built-in e-mail; you can take a virtual tour of a campus; you can browse the curriculum, and in a great many cases you can send in your completed application electronically. Have fun and go beyond the admission office website. Read student and faculty bios, read course syllabi, find out what they are serving for dinner that night. Explore!

Here is a short, and by no means complete, list of useful websites. When you begin to search, stay alert for particularly great college sites; jot down the Internet address and let us know what you have found so that we can keep up to date. Have fun!

Peterson's Guide	www.petersons.com
The College Board:	www.collegeboard.com
CollegeNet	www.collegenet.com
College Guide	www.mycollegeguide.org
Common Application	www.commonapp.org
Stanford Test Prep:	www.testprep.com
American College Testing	www.ACT.org
Naviance Family Connection	www.connection.naviance.com/lawrence

Be wary of unauthorized websites such as College Confidential as well as student blogs (*unless* they are networked through the admission website). What you are reading, often times, is *hearsay* and *rumors* about admissions and particular colleges. Be an educated researcher and utilize different on-line sources to make sure you are well informed.

2. *General College Guides:* A number of publications provide general information about America's colleges. These include The College Board's *College Handbook*; Barron's *Profiles of American Colleges*; Peterson's *4 Year Colleges*; Edward B. Fiske's *The Fiske Guide to Colleges*; The Princeton Review's *Complete Book of Colleges*; and *The Insider's Guide to Colleges*, from *The Yale Daily News*. Remember that these are someone else's assessments and views of a given school; do not let one source make a decision for you. We recommend that you read about each college in several sources, then move on to the next college. Consider acquiring your own personal copy of one of these guides. Several are always available in the College Counseling Office.

3. *Friends and Family:* You may have friends and family members who are either in college or who have already gone through the college selection process. They can be a useful resource *if used with care!* Question them about their reasons for choosing certain colleges and avoiding others. See if those reasons fit *your* idea of preferred colleges; *never cross a school off your list merely because a friend did not like it.* Think for yourself!

4. *College Counseling Office:* The College Counseling Office has a library of college materials in all media. Your college counselors, too, have specific information about colleges that will be helpful in your search.

5. *College Admission Officer Visits:* Many colleges send representatives to Lawrence Academy in the fall to answer questions about their schools. An up-to-date schedule of these visits is posted on the College Office News conference online, in Naviance Family Connection, on the Lawrence Academy website, and on various bulletin boards. You need your teacher's permission to meet with representatives before you can miss a class.

6. *Contacting the Colleges:* You can usually request materials directly from a college's website. If you choose to write to a college to request information by mail, type your note or write it *neatly*. Give your name, your complete address, and a telephone number where you can be reached. (Boarders should include their home address and telephone number as well as a school address.) Include the name of your school, the date of your expected high-school graduation and college entrance. You should briefly mention academic and extracurricular interests, and request financial aid information if needed. Admission officers will send appropriate materials and may also ask coaches, drama directors, orchestra conductors, and others to get in touch with you. The more information you provide, the more specific the response is likely to be.

7. *College Fairs:* You will receive invitations to college fairs throughout the spring, summer, and fall. Lawrence Academy will sponsor a trip to the BISCCA College Fair at Milton Academy in late April. We will also recommend that you stop by the Boston National College Fair at the Bayside Expo Center in May. These events can be overwhelming, but they are helpful because they expose you to a wide variety of institutions from around the world. A college fair provides you with the opportunity to ask college admission directors questions, submit requests for additional information, and learn more about colleges that you have never heard of before. If you are interested in applying to arts programs, we recommend that you attend the NACAC Fine Arts Fair in the fall of your senior year. It affords another great opportunity to speak with representatives about programs, admission requirements, and portfolios.

III. The Balanced List

The ultimate goal of the college search is to create a **balanced** list of **six to eight schools** that fall into four categories, based upon likelihood of admission. The terms we use - likely, possible, reach, and far reach - are *relative*, not absolute. In determining where a given school falls for a particular student, we use our best judgment based on experience with recent Lawrence graduates (this information is recorded in college-specific scattergrams in Naviance Family Connection) and with trends we are seeing at that particular institution. Obviously, your academic record is important here as well. If we believe certain schools are unrealistic, we will tell you so. Changes in academic performance during the junior and senior year may well move certain colleges "up" or "down" on the list. We offer frank advice to help you

evaluate your chances at a particular school, not as a judgment of your performance during your time at Lawrence. Ideally, your final list should be so constructed that, if things work out well, you will be admitted to most of the colleges on it. If they don't, you should still have *at least* two or three good choices.

We define the four categories of colleges on your list as follows:

Likely: Most Lawrence students with your grades and scores have been admitted in the recent past. These are schools where your credentials are very competitive, and we are confident that you will be admitted, assuming your application has been done well and your interest in the school has been demonstrated through an interview and/or a campus visit. *We consider it essential to find “likely” schools where students believe they can be happy and productive!*

Possible: Some Lawrence students with your grades and scores have been admitted, and some have not. Your credentials are competitive and you are qualified academically. This may also be a school where factors beyond pure academics can influence admission. Many of the same principles of the “likely” schools apply here. Your application needs to be completed carefully, you should show interest by means of an interview, follow-ups, and so on.

Reach: Lawrence students with your grades and scores have sometimes, though not often, been admitted in the past. You will need to have a special strength—something other than pure academics—in order to have a chance of admission. You should discuss these choices carefully with your college counselor.

Far reach: There is virtually no way you will get in. Not only are your credentials not as strong as other students who have been admitted from Lawrence recently, but also the overall percentage of admitted applicants, in most cases, is extremely small.