

Activity 5: Finding the Right College Fit

According to the Higher Education Research Institute, more than three-quarters of students are accepted by their first-choice college! That means that, if they prepare properly, many college-bound teens have a great chance of getting into a school that is a good fit for them. That's what this family discussion starter is all about!

College exploration conversations can be overwhelming. After all, there are many factors to take into account as your child builds a list of possible schools. While it's important to consider the academic programs and opportunities for growth that each campus offers, it's also important to consider other factors, such as:

- the size and location of the college/university.
- how far your child will have to travel to and from school.
- what the campus culture is like.
- what kinds of facilities the campus has.
- the cost of tuition and the scholarship opportunities that may be available.

How can you and your child learn about all the college options? How can you assist your child in finding the right college fit? With thousands of public, private, community, and junior colleges in the United States, it's important to create a roadmap. The best place to start that roadmap is by helping your child know him/herself.

Begin with some questions

A good college fit means something different for everyone. An important first step is to help your child determine what's important to him/her, to identify strengths and weaknesses, and to find out who s/he is and who s/he hopes to become. These questions are a good starting place. Ask your child:

- What has been your most stimulating intellectual experience in or out of the classroom, and why?
- Which of your accomplishments give you the most pride?
- Are your ACT/SAT scores an accurate reflection of your ability? Why or why not?
- What kinds of surroundings are essential to your well-being?

Encourage your child to continue to ask self-reflective questions. It's also a good idea for your child to brainstorm with the school counselor/advisor and share responses to the questions listed above in order to develop a list of colleges/universities that would provide a good fit.

Rank and Discuss

There are many factors to consider when building a list of potential colleges. Encourage your child to use some or all of the questions below to identify what's most important as s/he looks for college/universities that could be a good fit.

	Not at all Interested	Somewhat Interested	Very Interested
Campus Setting -- Do you see yourself:			
At a large campus in a big city?			
A rural campus in a small town?			
A medium-sized school in the suburbs?			
At a school close to home so you can visit your family?			
At an out-of-state school?			
Academics – Does the school offer the courses/programs you're looking for?			
Study Abroad Program?			

Offer internship opportunities?			
Start in major early (i.e. freshman or sophomore year)?			
Complete general education courses before concentrating in major area of study?			
Social Activities - Do you like:			
The outdoors?			
Student government?			
Community service?			
Athletics?			
Greek (fraternity/sorority) life?			
Other:			
Campus Life - Would you prefer a school that's oriented toward:			
Academics/Research – discussing ideas, theories, the latest research, and conducting experiments/projects to prove and disprove ideas?			
Collegiate Life – socializing with friends, attending athletic events and games, joining a sorority/fraternity?			
Liberal and Creative Arts – attending performances, going to galleries, discussing books, and theater with friends?			
Social Causes/Special Interests – organizing and fighting for causes and social change?			
Specialized Professional Studies – talking about law, medical, or business school, start-up companies, graduate school, and post-graduate work?			

Organize - Do Some Research

Once your child has answered these questions, it's time to start looking into specific colleges. This is where you can help your child begin to narrow down the list of schools to those that truly interest him/her. Ask your child, "What are you looking for in a college?" Things you should both consider include:

- What are the admissions requirements?
- How do my grades and test scores compare to how selective the college is? (Some colleges are more selective than others when admitting students. But don't let the average GPA, test scores, and other admission criteria keep you from applying to colleges that you're interested in!)
- Where is the school located?
- What is the school's size?
- Is the community diverse?
- What courses and curriculum are you interested in? (Review each school's programs and courses to make sure you'll be able to pursue your interests there.)
- What special academic programs does the college/university have?
- What types of student facilities does the campus have, and what condition are these facilities in?
- Does the college/university have study abroad opportunities?

- Does the college/university offer any student internship programs in the field(s) of study you're interested in pursuing?
- What are graduates doing post-graduation?
- Who will be teaching the courses (i.e. Tenured professors? Teaching assistants? Graduate students?)
- What is the professor-to-student ratio?
- What is the academic advising system?
- What types of financial assistance are offered?

A note-taking sheet, labeled "College Research Notes" is provided below. Your child can stay organized by keeping this information and all notes together in a binder. Dividers with labels on them for each school would be very helpful. This will make it even easier for your child to refer back to all the information that's been collected when it is time to narrow down the list for applications.

Next Steps

Visit colleges

Just being on a college campus for a few hours can tell you and your child a great deal about the community and culture. Visit a college campus nearby and you'll both begin to learn what your child likes and doesn't like, as well as what to look for in future campus visits. Encourage your child to talk to actual students enrolled in the college and ask what they think about the school. A good place to find students who are available to connect with and talk about their experience is the student center.

Some campuses also offer "virtual" tours. These are very useful if your child would like to "visit" a campus that's far away. Encourage your child to check the college/university's website to see if this is a possibility. Be sure to "debrief" with your child after each campus visit.

Help your student develop a college list

One key to a good college list is research and an open mind. Your child should explore a wide range of schools before narrowing down the list. As your child continues to do research, he or she should add schools that are appealing, and/or delete schools that no longer fit.

Once your child has looked at a number of schools, s/he can start focusing on finding a good place to be successful, happy, and challenged. It is recommended that your child narrow down this list to 6-10 colleges with a range of selectivity criteria. Encourage your child to be open to the possibilities!

Resources:

Remind your child not to be afraid to speak with his/her network of friends, family members, and contacts to help get "insider" information. Encourage him/her to talk to teachers, counselors, family members, college representatives, alumni, and/or current and former students at the college to gain firsthand knowledge. There are many sources of information that can be used – books, websites, etc.

Some helpful websites to help your child research include:

College Greenlight: www.collegegreenlight.com

College Board: <https://bigfuture.collegeboard.org>

National Center for Education Statistics: <http://nces.ed.gov/collegenavigator>

COLLEGE RESEARCH NOTES

College/University: _____ Location: _____

What was the touch point of your research? Check ALL those that apply.

- Virtual Campus Tour/College Website
- Campus Visit
- Meeting with College Representative
- College Fair
- Alumni Interview
- Fly-In Program
- Other: _____

According to **YOUR** college selection criteria, rate each of the campus factors important to you on a scale from 1 to 4, with 4 as a great fit.

Criteria #1: _____ Rate it: 1 2 3 4

Criteria #2: _____ Rate it: 1 2 3 4

Criteria #3: _____ Rate it: 1 2 3 4

Criteria #4: _____ Rate it: 1 2 3 4

Criteria #5: _____ Rate it: 1 2 3 4

Criteria #6: _____ Rate it: 1 2 3 4

Overall Impression/Notes:
