

Choosing a College When You Can't Visit Campus (A Guide for Students)

Answer Questions

Answer the questions below about each of the colleges you are seriously considering. Most of this information (and more) is available from the [College Navigator](#), a searchable database of information for colleges in the United States. You'll find information about costs in the award notifications you received upon acceptance, or you can estimate costs using this [net price calculator](#) or on the College Navigator website.

Question 1: How supported and satisfied are freshmen?

Look at the retention rate for full-time students in the Retention and Graduation Rates section of College Navigator. The Retention Rate describes the percent of full-time students who returned to the college as sophomores. Think of the Retention Rate as the "freshmen satisfaction score," because it describes the percent of students who were satisfied with and supported by the college enough to return as sophomores.

Question 2: How many students make it to graduation?

This information is also in the Retention and Graduation Rates section of the College Navigator. Pay particular attention to the Graduation Rates for Students Pursuing Bachelor's Degrees section, where it indicates what percentage of freshmen make it through to graduation at that college in four or six years. Also make note of the Transfer-out rate, which tells you the percent of students who transferred to another college before graduation.

Question 3: How likely am I to have close interactions with professors?

You can find the student-to-faculty ratio up near the top of the page in the College Navigator. Colleges with lower student-to-faculty ratios tend to have more small classes, while colleges with higher ratios tend to have more large lecture hall type classes.

Question 4: How many other students are in the major(s) I am interested in?

In the Programs/Majors section of the College Navigator, you can find how many people received bachelor's degrees across all of the programs offered. Review this list for two reasons. First, ensure the college offers programs you are interested in. Second, take a look at how many students graduate with degrees in the areas you are interested in. The number of students graduating with the degrees of interest to you can lead to other questions. For example, if only three people graduate with a degree in a program you are interested in, you may want to find out why.

Question 5: How diverse is the student body?

In the Enrollment section of the College Navigator, review the Undergraduate Race/Ethnicity information to see how ethnically diverse the student body is. While most of the categories here make intuitive sense, note that the "nonresident alien" category refers to international students.

Question 6: How much will it cost to attend this college?

The best source of information to answer this question will come from the college itself, communicated in a financial aid award notification to you. If this isn't available, use the net price calculator for the college or information provided in the Net Price section of the College Navigator to estimate first year costs. Other questions to consider when thinking about costs are: "How do I maintain scholarship eligibility?" and "How much are costs likely to rise over the next few years?" These are questions a financial aid or admission counselor from the college can likely answer easily. Also, try to think about the difference between price and value as you reflect on your findings. For example, if College A (\$12,000/year) has smaller classes and more programs of study you are interested in than College B (\$10,000/year), College A may be the better value for you even though it has a higher price. When you have a good idea of how much each college will cost, take it a step further on your own and figure out what your monthly loan repayment will be.

Question 7: What is the average salary of graduates?

Collegescorecard.ed.gov shows the starting salary range for graduates. Navigate to the Fields of Study section and review the Highest Earnings for the 10 top earning majors at the college. You may be able to find a specific major of interest by exploring this website further.

Debunk College Myths

Myth 1: “The college I choose determines the next four years of my life.”

Fact: Students can and do transfer from one college to another all the time. In fact, [about one in three students transfer at least once](#) before finishing a degree. Of course, it's easier if you do not transfer colleges.

Transferring may lead to lost credits and delay your graduation, for example, but to think you can't change your mind later is not helpful or accurate.

Myth 2: “I have to decide on a major before I get to college.”

Fact: Knowing what you want to study can be helpful, but it's OK if you aren't sure. Most colleges give you time to explore before formally declaring a major. About [one in three students change their major at least once](#). In most majors, you have time to explore and figure out what you want to study and still graduate within four years, although some STEM majors are an exception.

Myth 3: “There is only one college that is right for me.”

Fact: There are many good colleges; making a college choice is a good problem to have. You are likely making a choice among many good options. You are more responsible for your success than the college you attend.

You create your own success; the college does not create it for you.

Myth 4: “A college education is not worth the money.”

Fact: People with a bachelor's degree earn [\\$461 more each week](#) than people with a high school diploma.

That's nearly \$24,000 a year and nearly \$1 million dollars across a 40-year career. College is expensive, and we all wish it were cheaper, but it is a sound investment for most people.

[Use this chart](#) to record your answers.

What's Next

Assembling all of this information in one place about the colleges you are considering should make it easy for you to think critically and carefully about each college. The goal of this activity is not to necessarily have you determine a numerical rank and then use that number to determine which college you should attend. However, the facts you assembled about each college provide a solid foundation upon which to make sound, reasoned judgments and maybe even gather more information. For example, you may find that the retention or graduation rate at a school that you really like is a bit lower than all the other colleges on your list. Reach out to an admission counselor to ask about it, and see if they have made any changes recently.

Lastly, have conversations with people you trust and know well to discuss your choices – your school counselor, parents, mentor or a trusted family friend. Take the time to present the facts you have learned, and, ultimately, justify why the college you are choosing to attend is the best one for you. As you do this, be open to gathering and learning new information with the feedback you receive. Taking the time to gather and process this information will result in an informed decision you can feel good about – in spite of not being able to visit the campus.

SOURCE: The American School Counselor Association – Provided by Timothy A. Poynton, Ph.D., and Richard T. Lapan, Ph.D., University of Massachusetts