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Chapter 1: An Introduction to the College Search Process

Beginning the post-secondary exploration process can be a time defined by mixed emotions: excitement, anticipation, uncertainty, fear, or any combination thereof. While the unknowns of future planning can, at times, be overwhelming, they also present an opportunity for growth, self-reflection, and ownership. Perhaps you already have firm ideas of where you would like to go to college or how you want to spend your time after high school. Maybe you've started to eliminate some possibilities. Wherever you are in this process, this guide is designed to support you.

Remember that applying to college is a highly personal and individual process. Even though you may be navigating the various phases and steps of the process at the same time as your peers, that does not mean that every decision you make will be aligned. Your criteria of what type of college will meet your needs best may look drastically different from that of your friends and classmates, and that's okay. The goal of this process is to discover a range of institutions where you will feel happy, fulfilled, intellectually challenged, and supported. Approaching the college search with this perspective in mind will lead to smooth transitions and sound decision-making.

As tempting as it might be to fast track your timeline, remember that the college process is not something that can be rushed. It plays out on a predictable and relatively set timeline with a beginning, middle, and end. For some students, this may be one of your first exposures to a multi-step, long-term research process. Your energies are best spent investing deeply in the stage of the process at hand, rather than trying to skip ahead and tackle decisions that aren't ready to be made yet. Pacing yourself and chunking out this work is one of the best ways to reduce stress and minimize overwhelm. Ideally, along the way, you will not only identify a list of colleges and universities that excite you, but you will also build beneficial skills in long-term planning and organization, effective communication, accountability, and perspective.

Because the process of selecting a college is very personal, it begins with self-reflection.

Consider your goals, strengths, areas for growth, and reasons for going to college. Genuinely ask yourself the question “why do I want to go to college?” and discuss your answer with the people supporting you through this process. Starting this process without a solid answer to that question is a missed opportunity.

When you begin thinking about yourself and the criteria you’ll base your college search on, be realistic. It is okay to dream as long as you are keeping one foot on the ground. Consult your parents, guardians, school or college counselor, and others about your process, but keep in mind that it is your future and that you must eventually make the decisions.

Take advantage of available support systems throughout this process

Your school-based counselor is often the first and primary resource for you during the college search and selection process. They will know the various steps in the admission process and can help you establish and keep an admission application schedule. Just as important, your counselor can help you better understand yourself, your interests, and your needs. In addition to school-based counselors, many students may also work with community-based organizations or local non-profit organizations to receive support and guidance when applying to college.

Regardless of where your support is coming from, be open to receiving guidance from those willing to provide it and who have years of exposure and experience navigating this process. Work with your counselor or other support systems to determine the factors—from location to academic offerings—that matter most to you. Using the information from these conversations, you and your counselor can begin to develop a list of colleges that meet your established criteria. Self-assessment, evaluation, patience, persistence, organization, and above all, good humor and perspective are the elements of a happy transition from high school to college.

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Chapter 2: Junior Year & Getting Started with College Research

When it comes to college preparation, freshman and sophomore year should largely be focused on adjusting to high school, finding a level of academic rigor suitable to your needs, building strong study and work habits, and exploring extracurricular opportunities that genuinely excite you or serve an important purpose in your life. Again, this process cannot be rushed. High school is not simply a means or stepping stone to a collegiate end; it is an enriching and exciting opportunity in and of itself, and should be treated as such. Students who navigate high school with tunnel vision toward college often miss out on fulfilling and meaningful experiences as a result—there is an important balance to be struck between being forward thinking and allowing yourself to be in the moment. Leading with authenticity and exploring topics, subjects, and opportunities of interest to you in those first two years will naturally prepare you for what’s to come in the college search process.

Types of Colleges and Universities & Terminology

Before diving into identifying your college criteria and college-specific research, it’s important to know the different kinds of institutions of higher education available to you in the U.S. Below is terminology to help you navigate this opening stage of your college process.

Undergraduate Degree: Two-year (associate) or four-year (bachelor’s) degrees entered into after the completion of secondary school (high school).

Graduate/Advanced Degree: A degree completed after the bachelor’s degree. This can include Master’s Degrees and Doctoral Degrees (PhD, MD, JD, etc). Master’s Degrees typically take anywhere from the equivalent of one to three years of full-time study. Doctoral Degrees typically take anywhere from the equivalent of three to four years of full-time study.

College: An institution at which students study toward two- or four-year undergraduate degrees after completion of secondary school. Colleges typically do not offer graduate or other advanced degrees.

University: An institution that usually offers both undergraduate and graduate degrees. Universities are typically made up of different undergraduate colleges or schools based on academic discipline.

Public College: An academic institution financed by tuition, endowments, and state or local taxes. Tuition for in-state students is reduced and programs and policies are state-regulated. Some public colleges have set guidelines on the percentage of in-state students represented in the student body.

Private College: An academic institution financed primarily by tuition and endowments that is not regulated by local or state government.

Community College: A public academic institution typically offering two-year Associate Degree and Certificate programs with open enrollment policies for students who have received a high school diploma or equivalent. Community colleges, also sometimes known as junior colleges, typically serve a local population as there are usually many community college campuses throughout a given state. Most community colleges do not offer on-campus residential living and may also have limited extracurricular opportunities. They are often a more affordable option and can have valuable, strategic transfer pathways to the public, four-year institutions in the same state for students interested in ultimately earning a Bachelor's Degree. Community colleges can also offer extensive workforce training and English language acquisition programs.

Trade or Technical Schools: Trade or Technical schools offer practical training and instruction for specific jobs and fields. Unlike community colleges, which leave room for exploration of different areas of focus, trade schools let you dive into hands-on training in a specific trade or skill of interest that usually culminates in a certificate or license in that area. Most trades schools have programs for aspiring electricians, plumbers, dental hygienists, chefs, pharmacy technicians, mechanics, information technology support staff, and more.

Research University: An academic institution with both undergraduate and graduate programs focused on educating students through research that its professors conduct and produce. Research universities are typically broken up into smaller sub-colleges organized by academic discipline that can include pre-professional courses of study, such as business, engineering, and nursing, in addition to traditional arts & sciences majors. Research universities are typically medium-to-large in size and can be public or private.

Liberal Arts College: An academic institution with undergraduate degrees that focuses on providing a well-rounded, broad education across a variety of disciplines with an eye toward developing strong writing and critical thinking skills that can be useful across many professional fields. Liberal arts colleges are typically small in size (usually less than 5,000 students) and private.

Arts-Focused Institutions & Conservatories: Academic institutions focused specifically on the fine, visual, or performing arts that prepare students for professional careers in their artistic disciplines through intensive and dedicated instruction in theory and practice. Given the strong focus on professional artistic preparation, some conservatories and arts institutions may not offer the same breadth of extracurricular opportunities on campus as do traditional universities. For those that want the best of both worlds, some research universities have conservatories and/or Colleges of Fine Arts housed within them that provide the same intensive, pre-professional instruction but in a more traditional university environment. If you are passionate about your artistic endeavors but are not interested in pursuing them professionally, many liberal arts colleges have strong Bachelor of Arts and Bachelor of Fine Arts programs that still allow the flexibility to take classes across a variety of other disciplines.

Historically Black Colleges & Universities (HBCUs): As recognized by the U.S. Department of Education, HBCUs are academic institutions whose core purpose is, and has been, the education of Black Americans.

Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs): As recognized by the U.S. Department of Education, HSIs are academic institutions where at least 25% of their undergraduate full-time enrollment is Hispanic students.

Tribal Colleges & Universities (TCUs): As recognized by the U.S. Department of Education, TCUs are academic institutions located on or near tribal reservation lands that predominantly serve Native American students and aim to preserve and celebrate traditional tribal cultures and provide accessible higher education to Native American students.

Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander Serving Institutions (AANAPISIs): As recognized by the U.S. Department of Education, AANAPISIs are academic institutions where at least 10% of their undergraduate, full-time enrollment is American and Native American Pacific Islander.

Women’s College: Academic institutions, most typically liberal arts colleges, whose undergraduate enrollment is entirely or almost entirely women. Many women’s colleges have moved, or are moving, toward more inclusive enrollment policies that welcome transgender and non-binary students in addition to cisgender women.

Military Service Academies: Undergraduate academic institutions that provide education and training to future members of the U.S. Armed Forces. The service academies include the U.S. Military Academy (West Point), the U.S. Naval Academy, the U.S. Air Force Academy, the U.S. Coast Guard Academy, and the U.S. Merchant Marine Academy. Each military academy will have its own unique admission requirements.

Other Specialized Institutions: Academic institutions dedicated entirely to a specific discipline or area of study. Examples include colleges and universities exclusively focused on instruction in science and engineering or business.

First-Generation Student: A student whose biological parent(s) did not receive a four-year baccalaureate degree. First-generation students are often referred to as the first in their family to attend college. At many colleges, first-generation students have access to additional support programs and personnel to help navigate their undergraduate experience.

A solid and balanced college list begins with an authentic and reflective list of criteria

Typically, the post-secondary search and research process begins in earnest during a student’s junior year (11th grade). With the support of your high school counselor, a community-based organization, or other support systems, you will explore the range of opportunities available to you, whether that’s a gap year, a four-year institution, community college, military service, full-time work, and more. For those with an eye toward higher education, you will begin developing a college list that reflects your wants and needs. The foundation of this exploration is self-reflection and authenticity—without those factors, your list may not be representative of what works specifically for you.

Developing a list of specific criteria should always come before choosing colleges to add to your list. To decide on specific schools without a solid sense of your wants and needs is a backward and unhelpful approach, often leading students to focus solely on colleges they have already heard of. You likely wouldn’t purchase an item of clothing before knowing your size, your style preferences, what fabrics are most comfortable to you,

your budget, and more—the same logic should be applied to the college search. As much as you can, avoid the temptation to gravitate only to what is already familiar. Open-mindedness is the key to a balanced and effective college search process.

Start by making a list of what's important to you and discuss it with your counselor. Some students have a strong sense of what they want from the start, while others may need more time and exploration to determine what is truly important to them. What is most important to remember is that criteria can grow, change, and evolve throughout this process. What you want at the beginning of your junior year might look very different from the beginning of your senior year, and that is normal. As long as you remain flexible and self-aware, you will be able to build a list of colleges reflective of your needs. Use these prompts to get started:

- Why do I want to go college? What are my long-term goals?
- Do I want a two- or four-year institution?
- What adjectives would I use in describing my ideal student body and/or campus culture?
- How important will costs be in my final choice? What kind of financial assistance will I need? Are opportunities for part-time jobs important? What qualifications do I have for scholarships? How will travel to and from school impact affordability?
- Do I want to stay near home, or am I prepared to visit my family only a few times each year?
- What kind of setting is most appealing to me? Urban, suburban, small town, or rural?
- How do I learn best? In a smaller classroom environment or larger lecture setting? With hands-on or experiential learning opportunities, a more traditional approach, or a combination? Do I benefit from additional academic supports?
- Is there a special area of study that I'm particularly interested in, or do I want to pursue more general studies? Do I want an open curriculum or am I okay with a range of distribution requirements? Are there certain academic requirements that are wholly unappealing to me?
- Do I want to attend a small, medium, or large institution?
- What career(s) am I considering?

- Am I interested in a diverse student body? What kinds of diversity are most important to me?
- Do I want a demanding academic environment? Do I plan to go to graduate school? Am I comfortable with a curriculum that offers a great deal of independent study? Do my academic interests require specialized facilities?
- What type of mental health support is available on campus?
- Are there certain activities or opportunities it's important to me to have access to (i.e. a strong music or arts scene, a certain type of cuisine, outdoor and wilderness, etc.)?
- Do I prefer on- or off-campus housing? Am I interested in fraternities or sororities? How important are intramural or intercollegiate athletics? Do I want a campus that regularly offers cultural events? How important is school spirit to me?

Feel free to add and consider your own questions and don't be reluctant to express your true feelings. Perhaps you're unsure about some of the questions and answers or need more information before answering thoughtfully. Maybe you think you're not ready to go away to school. It's OK to be apprehensive or uncertain. Not everyone knows exactly what they want at this time and many of these answers evolve and change over the course of your junior and senior years.

Good decisions are made by gathering good information and by being organized.

Once you have a preliminary set of criteria, you're ready to begin college-specific research. You are in control; you are doing the research and selecting the colleges that meet your needs to add to your list. At times, it seems there is an endless supply of information (some more reliable, some less) about both the college admission process and specific institutions. Part of maintaining a strong sense of perspective and accountability in this process is learning how to delineate between fact and opinion, objective and subjective point of views. There is likely more unreliable information out there than not, so it's important to be an informed and aware consumer when researching. In this section you'll find recommendations on not just where to seek out information, but also how to discern what's helpful from what's reductive, and ultimately how to keep the information you find organized and accessible.

A helpful question to ask yourself throughout your research process is “*why this college?*” Not only will some colleges ask you to write essays answering that very question (more on that later), but it is also a mechanism to keep you accountable to your own criteria. If you can’t specifically articulate why a school is interesting or compelling to you and how it specifically aligns with your stated criteria, that is likely a good indication that a) more research is required or b) that school might not actually deserve a spot on your list.

There are a variety of online and printed resources available to you as you begin to navigate this research—from college websites to reference books and materials to social media and review-based search engines. College visits and information sessions, which are also great opportunities for research, will be covered in their own specific chapter.

College Research Search Engines: Online search engines can be an excellent tool in identifying colleges that align with your established, working list of criteria. Your counselor may have provided you with a list of suggestions based on your criteria and conversations as well, and search engines can help you expand that initial list if you’re interested. Platforms, such as College Board’s BigFuture, Cappex, or College Navigator (a search engine maintained by the U.S. Department of Education’s National Center for Education Statistics), allow you to search among thousands of higher education options both in the United States and abroad. When using these search engines, make liberal use of the filters that allow you to narrow results by your stated criteria, whether that’s size, location, academic programs, affordability, admissions criteria, religious affiliation, and more. The more granular you are with the filters, the smaller the list of suggestions will get, so be sure to strike a balance and maintain flexibility. Being too restrictive upfront may eliminate colleges that meet most of your criteria and could be a great fit.

College Websites: An institution’s website is always going to have the most up-to-date, accurate information on their admission and financial aid policies, academic programs, extracurricular opportunities, campus life, and more, and should therefore be a foundational part of your research. The undergraduate admissions portion of their website will provide information on required materials, deadlines, events and information sessions, FAQs, and more. This is your first stop for any process-related questions for a particular college. Beyond the admissions section lives a treasure trove of information about life as a student. Most colleges will devote sections to their academic program and offerings, campus and residential life, pre-professional advising and opportunities, campus news and events, and more. These sections of the website are largely designed for current students, meaning that

prospective applicants can gain a window into the day-to-day of the student experience both in and out of the classroom in just a few clicks. Be sure to go beyond the landing pages of each section and dive deeply into each school's specific, unique offerings. Whether it's exploring the course catalog, the available clubs and organizations, college traditions and lore, and more, the more time and effort you devote, the better, more comprehensive picture you'll come away with. Use your criteria to guide you in seeking out relevant information—does the school have the specific classes, clubs, or opportunities you've identified as important to you?

Guidebooks & Reference Books: In addition to online materials, there are also many print, hard-copy resources that compile data, statistics, and comprehensive information about colleges to provide prospective students with a well-rounded view of a variety of institutions. *The Fiske Guide to Colleges*, *Colleges that Change Lives*, *The College Finder*, *College Match: A Blueprint for Choosing the Best School for You*, are a sample of these resources that are updated regularly in the service of supporting prospective students in accessing accurate, trustworthy information on a wide range of colleges.

Student Newspapers & Alumni Magazines: A limitation of college websites and guidebooks is that they can lack direct access to student perspectives that haven't been filtered through a marketing lens. For a more authentic student perspective, student-run newspapers can be an excellent resource for prospective students. Nearly every college newspaper is available online, which provides a window into the issues, topics, and ideas current students are discussing and debating and events and happenings on and around campus. Alumni magazines can also be a helpful resource, as they provide a glimpse into the wide range of paths graduates have taken and how their college experience prepared them for their next step—practical and useful information as you weigh the benefits of a given institution.

Review-Based Sites: There are a growing number of websites devoted to ranking or providing report cards for colleges based on the perceived strengths of a variety of factors such as their academic offerings, social life, athletic programs, diversity, affordability, and more. They typically also include a section where current students or alumni can provide reviews of their experience of the institution along with a rating. While these types of first-person accounts can be helpful at times, they should be taken with skepticism. Just like any other review-based platform, they often attract students whose experiences exist on the extreme ends of the spectrum—either overwhelmingly positive or overwhelmingly negative—so the information often lacks nuance. You certainly should not eliminate a school from your list solely based on your impression from these types of sources.

Social Media: Every college (and sometimes specifically the admissions office) will have its own verified accounts on major social media platforms that will provide similar information to the website but in more manageable, bite-sized snippets. They are a great way to see what’s happening on campus live and how the college officially responds to current events—a solid gauge of their values and whether they’re in alignment with your own. In addition to these verified accounts, current college students may also create their own accounts or channels devoted to reviewing colleges, providing advice on the admissions process, and more. Just like review-based sites, these posts need to be consumed with a healthy dose of skepticism. What works well for one student in the admissions process or at a specific college may not work for you, so always remain vigilant and avoid taking non-professional advice as hard fact. A good general rule of thumb is, if a person is guaranteeing certain results (i.e. “*here’s how I got into [x school] and you can too!*”), it is likely not accurate, measured, or informed advice. Social media can be a powerful research tool, but only when employed with that advice in mind. As much as you can, avoid the instinct to believe that there is one right way to navigate this process.

While you are looking for colleges, the colleges are also looking for you. Colleges obtain lists of students and their contact information from the College Board’s Student Search Service, the ACT’s Educational Opportunity Service, and other organizations and use them to initiate contact with students via regular mail and, more commonly, email. When registering for the ACT or SAT you may indicate whether you want to share your name with these services. If you participate, count on receiving contact from many colleges. As these emails and viewbooks arrive, keep an open mind and do your due diligence. Just because you haven’t heard of a college that’s reaching out to you does not mean it doesn’t deserve your attention or consideration—it could wind up being an excellent match for your criteria.

In evaluating a college through these methods of research: Be methodical, look for specific information, and READ—don’t merely skim or look at pictures.

It's important to keep your notes on colleges organized and maintain complete and accurate records.

Develop an organizational approach that works best for you. Whether that's keeping a notebook with handwritten notes and reflections on each school or a similar, digital approach in a spreadsheet or document, having your thoughts neatly laid out will become increasingly beneficial as you move through this process. You can structure these notes however makes sense to you, but it is always helpful to make sure you're squaring the information you're receiving with your criteria to ensure there is alignment and consistency. Don't feel obligated to read the material all at once and form an opinion immediately—that's why you're taking notes.

In your research process, you'll likely find that there is a great deal of overlap in what different colleges can offer you both academically and socially. Ultimately, that's a good thing—it means that many institutions can meet your needs! However, when it comes time to articulate *why* you want to attend a certain institution, whether in writing or an interview setting, you'll want to be able to provide specifics beyond your general criteria (size, location, academic program of interest, etc.). This is why it is particularly important to make note of the details that are unique and individual to a given college. As you navigate your research, document interesting, school-specific programs, traditions, services, and more so you can demonstrate the high level of research you've conducted. These are excellent elements to reflect on as you continue to ask yourself the question: "*why this college?*"

Your ultimate goal is to generate a list of colleges and universities that are representative of your criteria and reflect a necessary balance of admissions selectivity. Your counselor will be able to help you determine whether or not a specific college is a Challenge, Possible, or Likely school based on a conservative estimate of admissibility. Your final college list should strike an appropriate balance between Challenge, Possible, and Likely schools.

- **Challenge (also known as Reach):** Your GPA, rigor, and testing (if submitted) are below average based on the college's admitted student profile and/or your high school's application history
- **Possible (also known as Target):** Your GPA, rigor, and testing (if submitted) are around average based on the college's admitted student profile and/or your high school's application history
- **Likely (also known as Safety):** Your GPA, rigor, and testing (if submitted) are above average based on the college's admitted student profile and/or your high school's application history