

Go Big or Go Small?

How to choose the college that is right for you?

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Developing a list of colleges to apply to is a process that can begin as early as sophomore year. With thousands of great schools to choose from this process can seem daunting. You will be ahead of the game if you give yourself enough time to both explore and understand your options. One of the best ways to narrow down your list is to decide the type of setting; a big or small school - a campus or city school.

Large schools appeal to students who are motivated by the many options a big school has to offer. Big schools have: a wider variety of majors to choose from, state of the art facilities, a vast amount of student activities and academic opportunities, a thriving sports program, a strong Greek life as well as various options for housing. Students who will excel in the large school setting tend to be more extroverted and can navigate their way through the large institutions and their facilities. At a big school, these students are excited by and welcome the many opportunities available.

Small schools attracts students who thrive with personalized attention. These schools tend to provide: small classes, hands-on learning experiences, customized majors, a strong advising team as well as courses taught by professors and not teaching assistants. The smaller school tends to have a close-knit and deep sense of community. Here students receive strong support and are able to get to know their professors well. However, most small schools do not have the same level of funding for their sports teams and research facilities.

Here are a few questions to ask yourself about your child: Would your child feel overwhelmed or excited when entering a lecture hall of 300 plus students? Would your child be able to concentrate on the material in front of them? Would your child thrive in a classroom with 15--20 students where their professors use the Socratic Method? Does your child prefer exams (traditionally given in larger schools) or group projects and term papers (usually given in smaller schools)?

In addition to large schools versus small schools, another big decision that will drastically narrow your search is a campus school versus a city school? Campus schools tend to be quite picturesque with columned buildings surrounding the greenery on the quad. These environments create a feeling of community. For example, at Tulane University, every Friday is welcomed with TGIF, a party on the quad. While some students may enjoy this sense of being all together; other students might enjoy being incognito in a city. Larger campus schools like Michigan University or University of Wisconsin - Madison revel in their school spirit found at team sports. Would your child prefer the camaraderie of the large group or would they rather navigate on their own in a city setting? At my recent visit to George

Washington University college students were intertwined with the residents of Washington DC. The café at the local Whole Foods was a mix of tourists, residents and G.W. students. Does your child crave the independence and excitement of a city or do they prefer the quaintness of a campus? Or maybe it's a happy medium, a campus school with a city close by?

With over 5000 colleges to choose from, zeroing in on the setting your child prefers will help you narrow down the choices. You can make this decision by having ongoing conversations using the questions I outlined above. Also consult your child's teachers on their opinions on where they think your child would best fit. Another step in making these decision are to take your child to visit local colleges, even if it is not one of their choices. This way they will get an idea of what a campus / city school means. For example, make an outing to New York City and tour NYU and Columbia University. Both provide a good example of city school and a campus school. Another suggestion is to sit with your child and compile a wish list of everything they would want in a school, be it a particular major or certain activities. Then share this list with your child's guidance counselor and/or college advisor so together you can devise a list of schools. Encourage your child to dialogue with older friends and family as to how they selected and what they liked best about their college.

Once you begin to create a list of schools, visit their websites and take virtual tours. Also talk to friends who currently go or are recent graduates of your choice schools. Make sure your child's test scores and their GPA are in the realm of the schools requirements on your list. Once you come up with a list of 15 or so schools, if possible begin to visit your top choices. Your final list of schools should be 10 – 12 schools, with 4 safety schools, 4 on-target schools and 4 reach schools.

Whatever you decide, be it a big school or small, city or campus; the most important thing to remember is that this is an exciting time in your child's life. Throughout the process continue to have an open mind to ALL the possibilities available. While this is by far a big decision, please remind yourself and your child; "the college you attend doesn't make who you are, it is only a chapter in the great book of YOU!"



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