How to Finalize Your College List, By The Big Future, The College Board

Once you’ve made a list of colleges you’re interested in, the next step is to narrow down the list to colleges you’ll apply to. Most counselors recommend that students apply to five to eight colleges — more than that usually doesn’t make sense. Here’s how to make your college list manageable.

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**Narrow Down Your List**

If you’re at this point in the process, you’ve probably already looked into things such as location, size and majors offered. Here are some other things to research:

* Variety of academic programs offered
* Special programs, such as study abroad
* Clubs and activities on campus
* Housing options
* Available facilities, such as labs, theaters and gyms

A great way to narrow your list is to start making [college visits](https://bigfuture.collegeboard.org/find-colleges/campus-visit-guide/campus-visit-checklist), if possible. You can also make virtual [campus visits](https://bigfuture.collegeboard.org/find-colleges/campus-visit-guide/10-ways-to-learn-about-colleges-online).

**Sort Your List**

Once you have a list of colleges you think you will be satisfied attending, sort it into three categories:

**Safeties:** These are colleges that you feel you have a very good chance of getting into and that you think you can afford to attend. They should also be colleges you would be happy to attend.

**Good matches:** These are colleges that you feel you have a good chance of getting into and that are good matches for you overall.

**Reaches:** These are colleges that you think may be more of a challenge to get into. Getting in is not a sure thing, but it’s realistic enough to be worth the effort of applying.

**Balance Your List**

From your sorted list, you should choose:

* One to two safeties
* Two to four good matches
* One to two reaches

Think before you apply to more than eight colleges. It’s probably not necessary and could be a waste of effort. With college applications, quality is better than quantity. You must complete each section of an application carefully, and admission officers can tell if you’re not serious about their school. In fact, they look for students who seem to really want to go to their school.

If you have successfully identified one good safety school on your list, you should feel confident that you will receive at least one acceptance letter.

**Use Your Support Network**

You don’t have to go through this process alone. Your parents, school counselor and teachers can help you think about your decisions and choose which schools to apply to.

Remember, there will be more than one school that’s right for you. What you’re doing now is narrowing down your options to good possibilities. After this step, you should be able to choose again — from those colleges that offer you a place in their freshman class.