

HOW TO CHOOSE

THE RIGHT SCHOOL FOR YOU

Choosing a college can feel like a lot to take in – so many choices, so many voices, and so much pressure to get it “right.” This tool cuts through that noise by helping you focus on what genuinely matters to *you*. Rather than telling you where you should go or pointing you to a single “best” school, this tool empowers you to create a curated list of schools that align with your goals, values, and priorities.

PERCEPTIONS &

INFLUENCERS



Long before most students actually dive into the college search, they already have a mental shortlist – schools they’ve heard of, grown up around, or just recognize from TV or social media. Those early impressions usually come more from familiarity and exposure than from anything related to academic fit. Because of that, a small handful of colleges can take up a lot of space in your imagination, even though there are thousands of options out there.

Pop culture adds to this. A favorite college sports team can make a school feel special long before you know what majors it offers. Social media, movies, and news coverage tend to highlight big-name universities – especially the Ivy League – which can make it seem like prestige is the only thing that matters. When you see the same schools over and over, you start to feel automatically “better,” even if they’re not the right match for you.

Family and friends shape these ideas too. A parent's alma mater can turn into a dream school by default, simply because it carries memories, pride, or expectations. And when everyone at school is talking about applying to the same popular university or state school, it's easy to feel like that's the safest or smartest choice. You may also know more about nearby colleges just because those names come up the most in everyday life.

None of these influences are bad on their own. They can be helpful starting points. But they can also narrow your view without you even realizing it. Once you understand where your perceptions come from, you can pause and ask deeper questions about things like academic programs, campus culture, cost, and personal goals. That awareness makes it easier to choose a college for the right reasons, not just out of habit, hype, or familiarity.

Let's begin with a no-pressure, everything-goes list of schools.

One of the most important steps in the early college search process is creating a broad list of potential schools. This list is not about narrowing choices or making final decisions. It's simply about exploration. A strong starting list gives you the freedom to compare options, discover new possibilities, and avoid limiting yourself too early based on incomplete information or outside influence.

When compiling this list, you should aim for variety. Include schools of different sizes, locations, and types, public and private universities, large research institutions, and smaller liberal arts colleges. Looking beyond well-known or highly publicized schools can uncover colleges with excellent programs, supportive campus cultures, and strong outcomes that may not be household names.

A broad list is a tool for discovery. By starting wide and curious, you set yourself up for a more thoughtful and confident college decision, grounded in personal fit rather than assumptions or limited exposure.

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NOW LETS TALK ABOUT REACH, MATCH, AND SAFETY SCHOOLS

As you begin to curate a balanced college list, you should generally aim to have:

- 2–4 “reach” schools on your list
- 4–6 “match” schools on your list
- 2–3 “safety” schools on your list

REACH

Definition

Colleges where admission may be unlikely based on your academic profile or the school’s overall selectivity, even if your application is very strong.

Typical Characteristics

- Acceptance rates are low (often <20–30%)
- Your GPA/test scores are below or just at the school’s middle 50%
- Highly competitive majors (engineering, nursing, business, CS)
- Or schools with unpredictable holistic admissions (Ivies, elite privates)

Rule of Thumb

A reach school is not a bad idea—it’s just a school where outcomes are less predictable. Apply because you *love* it, not because you *expect* it.

MATCH

Definition

Colleges where your academic profile aligns well with the school’s typical admitted student and admission is reasonably likely.

Typical Characteristics

- GPA and test scores fall within the middle 50% of admitted students
- Acceptance rates are moderate
- You meet or exceed program prerequisites
- Your interests, activities, and goals align with the school’s mission

Rule of Thumb

If the application is solid, this school should be a realistic possibility.

SAFETY	
Definition	Colleges where admission is very likely, and you would be happy to attend—academically, socially, and financially.
Typical Characteristics	• Your GPA/test scores are above the school’s average • Acceptance rates are high • Major/program is not capacity-restricted • The school is affordable without relying on uncertain scholarships
Rule of Thumb	A school is not a true safety unless: • You’re likely to be admitted and • You can afford it and • You would actually attend it

Now it’s time to narrow down that broad list you just created.

JUST LIKE ONE OF THOSE HOME SHOWS...

Even if you’ve never bought a home yourself, you’ve probably watched a house-hunting show. Buyers always come in with a clear list of must-haves and non-negotiables:

Good school district	Safe area/low crime	Commute time
Number of bedrooms	Number of bathrooms	Open floor plan
Office/workspace	Bonus room	Large/fenced yard
Big closets	Attic/basement/shed	Move-in ready
Energy efficient	Within budget	HOA/ammenities

If a buyer finds their “dream home” but it’s missing even one non-negotiable, it can quickly become a dealbreaker. Your college search should work the same way.

WHAT’S ON YOUR COLLEGE WISH LIST?

Before falling in love with a school’s name, ranking, or campus photos, you should clearly define what you need, what you want, and what you absolutely cannot compromise on. The right college—like the right home—is one that truly fits your life, goals, and future.

Distance from home	Urban, suburban, or rural	Weather/climate
Campus size/walkability	Nearby opportunities	Strong program in major
Honors program	Research opportunities	Class size/faculty ration
Academic support/tutoring	School spirit/traditions	Accreditation/reputation
Study abroad program	Course flexibility/electives	Total cost of attendance
Scholarship availability	Generous financial aid	Travel costs
Work study/campus jobs	Freshman housing	Roommate matching
Greek life	Athletics	Code of conduct
School culture	Clubs and organizations	Career services
Internships	Alumni network	Graduate school
Safety	Access to healthcare	Counseling services
Disability services	Religious affiliation/mission	ROTC/military programs

Make a list of at least three, but no more than 10 “must-haves.” Once you have that list, rank them in order and then rewrite them in order of rank.

List 3-10 of your “Must-Haves” in a college.	Now rank them in order.	Using this ordered rank...	...Rewrite your “Must-Haves” in order.
		1	
		2	
		3	
		4	
		5	
		6	
		7	
		8	
		9	
		10	

These are your “college shopping” non-negotiables. Now compare this list to your broader list of schools and see where each school fits. I don’t usually endorse using AI, but in this case, asking AI to help you compare schools – or even find new schools – based on your list of “must-haves” can be helpful. Once you’ve narrowed down your list, you can then finalize that list by organizing it into the categories of reach, match, and safety.

YOUR FINAL COLLEGE LIST



REACH SCHOOLS

1.

2.

3.

4.

MATCH SCHOOLS

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

6.

REACH SCHOOLS

1.

2.

3.