



Finding Fit: Creating Your College List

The best college lists do one thing: give you lots of options. "Best" means what is best for you. The following advice is meant to help you find several great options and to help you avoid two scenarios:

- 1) You apply to your set of schools and only get into one or two.
- 2) You get into a few schools, but can only afford one.

Figure Out What You Are Looking For

The most important factors are those that are particular to you. That might mean "good business program, affordable for my family, located in a city" or "collaborative learning environment, opportunities to play trumpet (but not major in music), good core program since I don't know what I want to do" or "something really different from here, engineering options, fun sports environment" or "open curriculum, diverse student body, study abroad programs."

Yes, other things have to work out, but all of the schools you apply to should be places that you would like to be and where you would accomplish your goals. Choosing a school because someone you know went there isn't quite enough of a reason unless you have similar goals, learning styles, or ambitions.

Pay Some Attention to Acceptance Rates

- Don't have lists that include only schools with admission rates below 10%. That gives the schools too much power. You want to have choices and make decisions for yourself about your future.
- Do not regard low acceptance rates as an indicator of quality.
- Try to not regard denials as personal rejections. Some schools get tens of thousands of qualified applicants.
- Don't think that all schools have low acceptance rates. Search: "XYZ College acceptance rate". A few: Gonzaga University 68.1%; Linfield College 76%; Purdue University 59.2%; UW 55%; Earlham College 68%; UPS 52%.

Know Factors That Affect Acceptance Rates

Different schools weigh parts of the application, or student factors, differently. Give yourself advantages.

- Go to CollegeData.com, plug in a college name then go to the "Admissions" tab to see how it weighs factors.
- Geography. Oftentimes schools want geographic diversity. Consider applying far away!
- Demonstrated interest often counts. Be in contact with schools, attend events, and don't be a stealth applicant.

Find your Numbers Fit

Even though numbers are only part of the entire scenario, they can give you an idea of range. You should be in a school's general GPA/ test score range to put that school on your list.

- In Naviance use: College Compare; SuperMatch; College Lookup with graphs/ scattergrams.
- Search "XYZ College freshman profile" to see the GPA and test scores of admitted students for a school.
- Go to CollegeData.com and search for a school. There will be an "Admissions" tab that has all sorts of information. Scroll down for GPA & test scores.
- Unweighted GPA: Some states have weighted GPA (AP grades are worth more), so some ranges will be over 4.0. The Common App and all schools know that Washington State has an unweighted GPA, so they will make a fair comparison. If you fill out the Common App, indicate that your GPA is unweighted.
- About GPA: A myth sometimes circulates that you need to have a 4.0 to go to college. That is completely untrue.
- About test scores: More and more schools are realizing that test scores are not the best predictors of college performance. If your test scores are not an asset, then consider test-optional schools. More than 900 schools are test-optional or test-flexible (details vary). Check Fairtest.org or search "test optional schools".
- Optimal place to be in the range: students in about the top 25% of the range will get the most money at schools that offer their own merit scholarships.
- If your GPA and/ or test scores do not reflect who you are as a student, then do two things: if the school you are applying to has an "Is there anything else you want to tell us" question, answer it with an honest explanation of what affected those numbers. And, talk with your counselor about your concern. He or she could back you up in the counselor recommendation.