



Shopping for Schools

Factors to Consider When Choosing a College

BY MELANIE SCHWED, SPECIAL TO USA TODAY

There is a lot of pressure on high school seniors to know themselves well. Well enough to decide where in the world or country they want to live, what career path they want to pursue and what kind of environment they want. It's important that students set benchmarks and stick to them, ignoring pressure from parents or friends. "Define your criteria, what's important to you," says Dennis Reynolds, a counselor at Walter Johnson High School in Montgomery County, Maryland.

Here are a few factors to consider when choosing a college.

SIZE

Do you want to be one in a sea of many, or is it important for you to be recognized as an individual on campus? Size affects what your daily life is like,

and how the school treats its students. A larger university may have more difficulty tracking and meeting all needs, and this can mean longer waits to meet with counselors or teachers — and even lines at the cafeteria and gym. You will also want to investigate opportunities for social interaction, including dormitories, fraternities and sororities, or other groups that can help you connect.

LOCATION

Where in the country are you interested in living? Is going abroad a possibility? And would you rather live in a smaller, more rural environment or a big city? Also consider how important it is to be near your family and how much cost and travel time moving away would entail. (You will miss them more than you think!) And there is weather

to think about. Harsh Northeast winters may be fun for weekends on the ski slope but can last a long time. Too much sun, on the other hand, can make it tough to spend time in the library.

CULTURE

This consideration can be easily overlooked yet is important to many prospective students. An institution's reputation can say a lot about factors that may or may not appeal to you. Are academics the primary focus, or is a good balance between work and social life? Is Greek life the major social scene, or is it all about athletics? It's good to find out if many students leave campus on weekends. The right atmosphere and priorities will greatly impact your next four years.

COST

Cost is a critical question, if not the most critical consideration, in determining what school you attend. Many of your choices may fall outside the abilities of your family to pay, which will mean seeking financial assistance, including student loans and scholarships. It is important that you are aware of what you and your family can reasonably take on and consider other options as necessary, including which school may offer you the most attractive aid package, and whether starting your college career at a junior college might be a good option.

ACADEMIC PROGRAMS

Once you've considered what studies you might like to pursue, look for a school that offers a strong program in your desired field and then speak with students who have gone through it. If you don't yet know what you want to study, how will the school help you explore your options? When do you need to declare a major?

Alan Goodwin, the recently retired principal at Walt Whitman High School in Bethesda, Maryland, wisely says to remember there is a college suited for every student.

"There are thousands of schools out there," says Goodwin, and students don't only have to strive for the big names.

"Students and families should take a long look at schools that they may never have considered," Goodwin says. ■