

SELECTING COLLEGES FAQs

Question: How do I decide to which colleges I should apply?

There are many factors that go into this important decision. Most notably among them are...

- Your cumulative average as of the completion of Junior year.
- Your scores on standardized exams.
- Your interests in potential majors and careers.
- The geographic location of potential colleges (urban/suburban/rural and how far from Chicago).
- The ability of your family to pay tuition/housing/food and the willingness to finance through loans.
- Faculty-Student ratio, overall size of undergraduate population and the college as a whole.
- Internship placement and research opportunities available to undergraduate students.
- The admissions data for each individual college in which you have an interest compared to your academic achievement as of the completion of Junior year, and to achievement on standardized exams (admissions data available in college guide books and from web sites).

Question: What are some online resources to assist me in selecting colleges for which I am eligible?

Use Choices Planner and become a registered user on www.CollegeBoard.com and familiarize yourself with its many resources, including the "College MatchMaker" and "College Search" functions.

Question: To how many colleges should I apply?

We highly recommend at least five.

Question: What grades will colleges first review when considering me for admission?

The cumulative GPA average as of the end of Junior year.

Question: Do my Senior year grades matter for college admissions?

YES! But the cumulative average you have earned as of the end of Junior year— along with your standardized exam scores— is the greatest indicator of your eligibility for particular colleges as based on their published admissions data. Most colleges will not consider an outstanding Fall term or Senior year as the deciding factor for admissions since this will not greatly impact on your cumulative average for the past three years. An under-performing Fall term or Senior year, on the other hand, can damage your ability to be considered for admission into more competitive colleges. Students have even had admission revoked by colleges, or were made to take extra tutorial classes, if their academic performance suffered significantly in Senior year. Senior grades should be consistent with or exceed past levels of performance.

Question: Do my extracurricular activities, volunteer efforts, and special academic programs matter for college admissions?

Absolutely. But the first and primary factors in gaining admission to a particular college are always the academics! If you are a few points shy of a college's stated average range or ACT range, or are in the 25th percentile of GPAs admitted to the college, then proven and documented commitment to worthwhile activities may make some difference. The most competitive colleges use long-term participation in quality extracurricular activity, volunteerism, and special programs as ways to distinguish among candidates of similar academic and testing achievement who fall within their admissions criteria.

Question: Do I need to decide my major or future career when selecting colleges to apply to?

Not necessarily... but it would help! If you have a range of interests about which you are serious but undecided— for example, Biology, Business Finance, or Psychology—then the colleges to which you apply should ideally offer majors in each of these disciplines (or two out of three) to allow you the opportunity to investigate each major and eventually make a decision. If you legitimately have no clear sense of what you want to major in, then your best bet is to apply to comprehensive liberal arts colleges so you have the widest range of options open to you. You can always check "undecided" on your applications if you are truly undecided.

Question: What is a “reach” college?

A “reach” college is a college which you do not necessarily have the ideal or upper-range academic criteria for admissions but are close enough to probably still merit consideration, especially if you have significant outside learning or research experience, or strong extracurricular service, or strong community service that balances out the deficit in cumulative average and in standardized test scores. It is highly recommended that at least one application should be made to “reach” colleges.

Question: What is a “safety” college?

A “safety” college is a college for which you exceed the upper range of the admissions criteria and are therefore fairly “certain” to be admitted. Many students treat “safety” colleges dismissively and put little thought into their selection. This is a mistake since a “safety” college is still an institution that should meet your interests and for which you feel an affinity. Students should complete a minimum of one application to “safety” colleges.

Question: What is a “match” college?

A “match” college is a well-researched college for which you fall comfortably within the stated range of admissions criteria and in which you have a strong interest in attending. MOST APPLICATIONS SHOULD “MATCH” APPLICATIONS.

Question: What is the value of visiting colleges?

Seeing a college—especially those that are residential— during active periods is an invaluable way of getting a sense of the facilities, student body, and educational rigor. Campus tours are important, but just sitting in the cafeteria or Student Union and observing, or initiating conversations with students, offers more of an insider perspective of the colleges. Finally, sitting-in on classes (when allowed) will give you a sense of the academics and class sizes. Please note that college visits are encouraged but should take place during high school vacation periods when the colleges are in session. Most colleges offer a Summer session and so this may be the best time to schedule a visit even though the student population will be much smaller.

Question: What is the role of the counselor in advising students as to selection of colleges?

The counselor is available to advise students regarding the array of opportunities available to you, to help identify schools and scholarships for consideration, and to help focus your energies on the important responsibilities you carry in Senior year. Any questions about the applications process should be directed to your counselor.