



Barnum Financial Group

John F. Pearson, CPA, CASL, CIC
Financial Planner
225 High Ridge Road
Stamford, CT 06905
203-658-1951
jpearson1@metlife.com
www.barnumforcollege.com



Research Tips When Choosing a College

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It seems like only yesterday you were bandaging scraped knees and waving at the school bus, and now it's time for your child to choose a college. You may think a hands-off approach is best to avoid interfering, but it's important to help your child research schools. Not only will you be able to offer guidance and suggestions, but you'll likely have your own issues to consider (cost, for one). Although your child will also have his or her own agenda, you can make sure that the final wish list is something you both agree on by collaborating.

When should you start researching colleges?

Most students start investigating colleges in their junior year of high school, though you can certainly start earlier if you want to. Beginning the search a full year before your child needs to apply to college should allow plenty of time to compare schools and help you feel in control of the process. Remember, your child will be spending the next four years at this college--you'll want to take the time to find a good match. You don't want your child picking a school solely because his or her best friend is applying there!

Where can you find information?

Most colleges have websites where you can find detailed information on admissions, academics, financial aid, and student life, as well as take a virtual tour of campus. In addition, other education-related websites provide general information on selecting a college, careers and majors, "best of" lists, and student reviews. Keep in mind that some websites may be more reliable than others. In addition, college guidebooks describe and compare colleges down to the smallest details. Ask your local reference librarian or your child's high school guidance counselor to recommend some of the best resources.

The goal of your research is to create a list of colleges that match up well with your child's interests and abilities, and your pocketbook.

Look at the big picture

The logical place to begin a college search is with general criteria like size, geographic region, and location (i.e., rural, suburb, city). These are all factors that most students have a keen opinion on. Talk to your child about the type of college environment that he or she prefers.

Make the grade

Next, consider academic factors. If your child knows the subject that he or she wants to major in, make sure to note that program's availability and strength. This criterion alone may supersede any general criteria in importance. You'll also want to look at the median grade point average and SAT/ACT scores of the most recent class. This information will give you an idea of your child's chances for admission. Do your child's academic accomplishments place him or her in the top 5 percent of the class, 25 percent, 50 percent, 75 percent? Keep in mind that highly selective colleges usually accept only those students at the very top of the applicant pool. College guidebooks can verify the competitiveness of any particular college. It's important to be realistic about your child's admission chances.

Other academic factors to consider include:

- Overall course requirements for graduation
- Opportunity to earn a double major or to switch majors (especially important if your child doesn't know what he or she wants to major in)
- Average class size
- Availability of faculty outside teaching hours
- Use of graduate-level teaching assistants for undergraduate courses
- Availability of co-op programs where your child can intern in a certain field and gain valuable experience
- Availability of study abroad programs

Take care of your wallet

It's likely that you'll be more interested in financial factors than your child will be. In fact, your own financial constraints may limit your child's ultimate choice of colleges. It's important to evaluate colleges from a financial standpoint during the research process so there won't be any surprises down the road.

First, ask yourself whether the college provides an overall good education for the price. Remember, tuition is not the only cost. Your child will need money for room and board, books and supplies, transportation, and other miscellaneous fees. This combined cost is known as the cost of attendance. Compare the cost of attendance at colleges that interest your child. Next, see whether the college offers any special cost-cutting measures. For example, is there a flexible tuition payment plan that lets you spread costs over 10 or 12 months? A three-year degree program? A five-year joint graduate/undergraduate degree program? A tuition discount for siblings or alumni? An opportunity to take courses on-line?

You'll also want to examine the college's record on financial aid. What percentage of students receive need-based financial aid? Of these, what percentage of students have 100 percent of their need met? If costs are a main concern, you'll want to target those colleges that consistently meet a high percentage of their students' financial needs. This statistic is readily available from college guidebooks or the college's own website. You might also ask what percentage of students take advantage of work-study programs. Does every student who requests a work-study assignment get one? Also very important--does the college offer merit aid (not based on financial need) for academic, athletic, musical, or other abilities? If so, does the student need to fill out a separate application to be considered?

While you're in the financial arena, now is a good time to discuss any financial concerns with your child. For example, will you expect your child to contribute to his or her education? With savings? With earnings from a summer job? With student loans? And how much? It's important for your child to have an awareness of the financial implications (for you and for him or her) of choosing a college.

One final note: Even if a college's sticker price is daunting, your child should consider applying if the college is otherwise a good fit. Remember, the college may award your child a generous financial aid package that may translate into a lower actual out-of-pocket cost for you over four years, compared with a less expensive school on your child's list that didn't offer as generous an aid package. Consider setting a financial limit on what you can afford to pay before the acceptance letters start arriving--it may be hard to resist the lure of an acceptance offer from a prestigious university, even if it means overextending yourself financially.

Think about quality of life

Beyond the general, academic, and financial factors, you and your child will want to consider factors that relate to quality of life. Here are some questions to think about:

- Would your child prefer an active campus, with a wide variety of clubs, social organizations, athletics, and extracurricular activities, or a quieter campus?
- What is the condition of the dorms, dining halls, student union, library, and recreation center?
- Are there any special housing requirements (e.g., students must live off-campus for a year)?
- Have you and your child researched the college's crime statistics (available at the United States Department of Education's website) and the safety of the surrounding neighborhood?
- Does the college offer free van or bus service around the campus? If so, is transportation provided late at night?
- Does the college offer a mentoring program for freshmen?
- What is the college's alcohol policy?
- Are there fraternities and sororities?
- What does the college's social life primarily consist of (e.g., off-campus parties, trips to the nearest town, campus-sponsored events)?
- Do the students seem generally happy? Does the school get mostly positive reviews from students?

A campus visit can be very helpful when comparing colleges. During such a visit, you and your child should feel free to seek out the opinions of students, teachers, and other employees. Your child may even be able to sit in on a class or "shadow" a current student for a day.

What should the final list look like?

Ideally, you and your child should end up with a manageable list of colleges to apply to. On the list should be a couple of "stretch" schools (it's a stretch your child will be accepted), a core group of schools where your child fits in well academically (it's likely your child will be accepted), and a couple of "safety" schools (it's very likely that your child will be accepted). If possible, your child should apply to schools that directly compete with one another for students (e.g., two small, highly competitive liberal arts colleges in the same geographic region). The reason is that most colleges don't mind losing students to a more competitive or less competitive school, but they generally don't like losing students to a direct competitor. As a result, they may compete to offer your child the best financial aid package.

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