

# How to Do College Research Right: Step-by-Step Guide

College research can be an overwhelming task, and it's not easy to know where to begin. In this article, **I'll help you sort through your options and [find your dream college](#).** If you work through the following four steps, you'll be well on your way to compiling a list of schools that fulfill all your most important criteria:

1. Identify your priorities
2. Search with an online college finder
3. Consider your chances of admission
4. Finalize your list

In the next few sections, we'll cover how to research colleges in a straightforward and effective way.

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## **Step 1: Identify Your Priorities and Preferences**

- The first step in tackling the college search process involves **thinking about what you want out of your college experience.**
- There are some essential qualities that differentiate colleges from one another that you should consider first, such as **location, size, cost, and academic programs.**
- You should also contemplate what you want out of the social scene and academic climate at your college. Then, you can **search for schools that fit your needs across a variety of different dimensions.**
- **Primary Factors:** Here's a list of the first four factors you should consider when searching for colleges:
  - **#1: Location:** Do you want to be **far away** [or close to home?](#) Attending an [in-state school](#) can mean a lower tuition price, but it may stunt your college experience if you continue to rely on your family and old friends. You should also consider whether you're interested in a **rural, urban, or small town** college environment. The surrounding area can have a big impact on your happiness and comfort level.

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- **#2: Size:** [Large and small colleges](#) often have very different vibes. You're more likely to get personalized attention at [small colleges](#), but they might have fewer resources and less diversity amongst students. You should research each college individually, but there are certain characteristics shared by most large or small colleges that might lead you to prefer one type over the other.
- **#3: Academics:** You're going to college primarily to learn stuff, so academics should be up there on your priority list.
  - **Just how serious of an academic environment are you looking for?** Do you want a school that focuses on undergraduate teaching or [research](#)? What types of programs interest you? If you have any ideas about your potential major, keep that in mind as you search for schools so you can apply to places that offer the best programs for you.
  - **Selectivity and reputation also come into play here.** Based on your test scores and GPA, you can predict your admissions chances at different schools (more about this later). It's advantageous for you to attend the most competitive school possible based on your stats. This will provide you with the greatest number of opportunities both in college and in your post-graduate endeavors.
- **#4: Cost:** Tuition prices are something you should think about in your college search, but don't let a high price prevent you from applying if you really love a school. Right now, you should just **work on determining whether cost is an issue for you**. If so, focus your search on schools that offer generous [financial aid](#) and [merit scholarships](#). You can also investigate colleges with [no application fees](#).

## Step 2: Search for Schools Using an Online College Finder

- After you've figured out your preferences, the easiest way to find schools that you like is to [use an online college finder tool](#) to search based on your criteria.
- One option that you might consider initially is [College Navigator](#). You can specify location, size, major program, public or private, tuition, test scores, and more in your search. **This tool will give you all the statistics on different schools** and help you locate options that seem like the right fit.
- As you investigate the results of your search, add schools to your "favorites" and compare them side by side to see how they differ. This might eliminate some options based on factors like cost and admissions rate.

**Name of School**  
Type name of school here

**States** (use map for more than 1 state)  
No Preference  
Alabama  
Alaska  
Use Map


**ZIP Code** Miles from


**Programs/Majors**  
0 Items Selected  
Browse for Programs

**Level of Award** ?  
 Certificate  Associate's  
 Bachelor's  Advanced

**Institution Type** ?  
 Public  4-year  
 Private non-profit  2-year  
 Private for-profit  < 2-year

+ **MORE SEARCH OPTIONS**

 **Show Results**

 [Guide Me](#) | [Clear Search](#)

*A screenshot of the College Navigator search tool*

- Another site to investigate is [Cappex](#). Cappex is a college matchmaking site where you can fill out a profile and get matched up with schools that align with your preferences. The site provides suggestions for schools that you might like

after you complete your profile. It has a pretty complete overview of each school including student reviews and information about campus life that might not be included in the College Navigator statistics.

- **If you find schools that you like, you can add them to your running list and compare them against each other.** Cappex also links directly to the application pages for schools on your list of favorites, so you can check out what materials you're expected to submit.

Overview > **Your Fit**

Admissions >

Tuition & Costs >

**Your Fit** ▾

- Fit Score
- Home States

Deadlines

Academics & Majors >

Photos & Videos >

Colleges > By State > New Jersey > Princeton University > Your Fit

### Cappex Fit Meter

**94%**  
GREAT FIT

Nice! A lot of your preferences match what this school has to offer.

CAPPEX FIT METER

*The "fit meter" that you'll see on every school's page on Cappex. It shows you how well you match up based on your preferences.*

### **Step 3: Consider Admissions Chances and Reputation**

- Once you've figured out what you want from a college and have gotten some solid suggestions from search sites, you should **step back and take an objective look at your results.** It's important to maintain realistic expectations in the college application process, so you should choose schools where you have reasonable chances of admission.
- Though the sites I mentioned above may give you statistics for a school's average test scores and GPA, it's difficult to understand your chances of admission just by looking at statistics. I would recommend that you **Google "(name of**

**school) PrepScholar admissions requirements"** to access our database pages about each school. Use the tools on these pages to enter in your GPA and SAT scores and calculate your chances of admission.

- In general, if your chances are below 30 percent the school qualifies as a [reach school](#). A school with an admissions rate that's below 15 percent is a reach school for all students regardless of scores and GPA. If all or most of the schools you're interested in are reach schools, it's time to adjust some of your criteria to allow for other options. **Only a third of the colleges where you apply should be reaches.**
- This is also a good time to check ranking lists like US News and Forbes to see whether the colleges that interest you have decent reputations. However, **[be careful when considering these rankings!](#)** If two schools are within ten or so ranks of each other, there probably isn't much of a difference in quality between them.
  - Rankings are a tool to be used *after* you've already picked out schools based on other factors. If you're trying to decide between two schools and the lower ranked school is a much better fit for you, then you should still apply to that one.
  - **Rankings are more of a tie-breaker to be used when all other measurements are equal.** Prestige can be important because it generally means a more intellectual student community and greater academic opportunities, but you should put your personal goals and priorities above the prestige of the school.
- After consulting these resources, you'll end up with a better sense of the quality of your preliminary list of schools. This leads to the next step, making your final college list!

## Step 4: Make a Final List

- Now that you've gathered all of this information, it's time to tweak your list of schools so that it has a nice balance of different options. As I mentioned in the previous section, it's important to have reach schools, but they should only make up about a third of your list. Another third of the schools should be likely options, and the last third should be [safety schools](#).
- You can use the same process as above to look up potential schools and check your admissions chances. **Safety schools are schools where you have at least an 80 percent chance of admission.** Likely schools are schools where you have a 30 to 80 percent chance of admission. These can be further divided into "possible" and "probable" options. Possible options will be in the 30-50 percent range, and probable options are between 50 and 80%.
- Most students end up applying to around **5-8 colleges in total**. Start out with three schools in the reach category, three in the likely category (two probable and one possible), and three in the safety category. Then, if you find that

you're overwhelmed by the [application fees](#) or the supplementary essays, you can always cut out 2-3 schools. **Be honest about whether you can realistically see yourself attending all of the schools on your list.**

- You should also do some research to check whether the schools on your list use the Common Application or if they require you to fill out separate applications. This can have a big impact on the time you spend on the process. You might decide to eliminate a school from your list if you're not super attached to it and it's the only option that requires an individual application.
- Once you've balanced your list, begin brainstorming your application essays and deciding which accomplishments and activities you want to highlight for colleges. **Read this article about [how to create a versatile application](#) for some more tips!**

## What's Next?

Now that you know how to do research colleges, you should also be able to put it into practice. Learn more about the [application deadlines that will be most critical for you](#).

College ranking lists can be helpful tools if you use them in the right way. Find out about all the [college ranking lists you should read](#) and [how much you should rely on them](#).

Looking to attend a top-notch liberal arts school? Here's a list of [the 28 best liberal arts colleges in the country](#).