

Starting Your College Search

(Nancy Nitardy)

Starting to begin the college search process is a dilemma many high school students and their parents encounter. Whether you are a highly recruited scholar athlete, with every Top 10 team in the country knocking on your door, or you are the average student athlete interested in finding a college to compete at, the following ideas can help you organize the process.

Begin with a self assessment. Stop and think for a moment about who you are, why you want to go to college, and what you want out of your college experience. This is an important first step because the whole search is about finding the best match for you. A good choice for your best friend is not necessarily the right choice for you. Likewise, your parents' alma mater may be a great pick; but then again it may not. So, stop for a moment and think about YOU. What makes you tick? What successes have you had and why do you think you succeeded? What type of environment do you think you work best in? What do you want in your future? A great book that can help you do a self assessment is *College Match* by Steven R. Antonoff and Marie A. Friedemann.

Do an academic assessment. Knowing your academic picture will help you determine which colleges are within your reach for acceptance and which ones may be a long shot. The criteria you need to access is your Grade Point Average (GPA), your Class Rank, and your SAT and/or ACT test scores. Your guidance counselor can figure out your GPA after your freshman year.

Class rank is an important piece of the admissions puzzle. Some schools require that you rank in the top 10% of your class, others prefer top 30% and still others top 50%. The higher your class rank, the greater number of colleges you will have to choose from. Find out from your guidance counselor your class rank.

The PSAT test is given prior to your senior year. This test is used as a warm up to the SAT. Most colleges require the SAT or ACT test scores. Different colleges require different test scores.

It is highly recommended you take the SAT and ACT exams in the winter or spring of your junior year. Then retake them in the fall of your senior year. Many students improve their scores the second and third time around.

Also, do an athletic assessment. Your coach is usually the best person to help you assess your athletic abilities. Other sources are camp coaches, your opponents coach and national team tryouts. Have your coach help you determine what level of college athletics you should consider Division I, II, III, NAIA, or Junior College. To find out more about the different levels of college athletics contact the NCAA by phone at 913-339-1906 or on the Internet at www.ncaa.org.

You now have a picture of yourself academically and athletically which can now be applied to your college search. There are thousands of colleges to choose from and, ideally, you should be able to come up with at least 3-5 different ones you would be happy to attend.

The next step is determining your key areas of consideration. To help get you started here are five main areas to consider: 1) Academic Interests, 2) Athletic Role, 3) Location, 4) School Size and College Division, and 5) Finances. Determine your highest & lowest priorities.

Make a list of questions for each area. For example: Does the school have the major you're interested in? Does it have your second choice of major? What are the requirements to get into the programs? How will you fit into the team? How many current team members play your position? How does the program differ from what you're used to? Is the college located in a hot or cold climate? Snowy or rainy climate? Near water or mountains? How far from home? How large is the college? Is it in a city or small college town? Do I need a scholarship? Will you qualify for athletic aid or any other financial aid? These are just a few questions you can ask yourself.

Now that you are ready to start searching, there are a variety of resources available to you. Head to your guidance counselor's office, the library or the bookstore and you will find guides to colleges. The following are excellent guide books: *Barron's Profiles of American Colleges* by Barron's Educational Series, *The College Handbook* by The College Board, and *Peterson's Four Year Colleges* by the Princeton Review. You will find facts, such as school enrollment size, academic requirements, sports offered, cost to attend, etc.

If you have access to the Internet, look up www.ncaa.org and you can find out which colleges offer your sport at each level. You may even be able to click onto each college's web site from the NCAA site. Other web sites to check out are www.collegeboard.org, www.kaplan.com, www.petersons.com, and www.review.com. These sites have lots of helpful information about colleges in general.

Additional resources include your guidance counselor, coaches, friends, neighbors, and family members. Anyone who has been to college and gone through the whole search process may have some good advice and ideas that can help you. Also, College Fair Night at your high school is a chance for you to meet with a representative from various colleges across the country.

Keep in mind, choosing which college to attend is the first major adult decision you will get to make. This decision will have an effect on the rest of your life. So, do some research, make a well-informed decision and choose the college that best fits YOUR expectations.