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Coming Up With a Short List

A step-by-step approach to identifying colleges that feel right, have what you need—and might actually take you

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Would you believe...29? That's the number of college applications one student in Fairfax County, Va., submitted this year, says Judy Hingle, career connections specialist for the county's public schools and former director of professional development at the National Association for College Admission Counseling. There's no denying that the advent of the common application and the increased ease of applying online have fueled a rise in the number of schools to which students apply. But that doesn't mean you have to join the trend.



Campus visits are the single biggest factor in deciding where students apply. (MIT)
(Jeffrey MacMillan for *USN&WR*)

Indeed, narrowing your list to a reasonable number—for starters, think single rather than double digits—can yield benefits that go beyond financial savings (after all, those application fees do add up). You *will* have to make up your mind at some point. And though some students believe they're raising their odds by applying to a dozen schools or more, they may be spreading their efforts too thinly. If you think the "individualized" answers you've been churning out to the "why I want to go to your school" question have started sounding blandly interchangeable, admissions officers probably will, too.

To winnow the list, break down the process step by step.

STEP 1. There are no "must-apply's." Rather than searching for a perfect match that meets your preconceived notions of college life, reframe what you're looking for as "one of many good matches," says Michael Popkin of *activeparenting.com*. "There are many colleges that [students] will be happy at and will prepare them for a successful life."

Those schools aren't necessarily the most prestigious or famous—or the ones all your friends are looking at, either. Although his father encouraged him to apply to his alma mater, Dartmouth, one student from a public high school in central Pennsylvania decided the Ivy League wasn't for him; he preferred a lower-pressure academic environment. Another public high school student, this one from New York, felt so strongly about supporting American troops in Iraq that he applied only to schools that offered ROTC.

STEP 2. Know Thyself. For the majority of high school students, even familiar-sounding names (Big Ten, Ivy League, Mom's alma mater) "are just names they've heard or pictures they've seen," points out Mike Riera, head of Redwood Day School in Oakland, Calif., and author of *Staying Connected to Your Teenager*.

By contrast, they do know about themselves. Students who take "a few hours to think, talk, and write about" the places, activities, and settings they enjoy, the learning styles that suit them best, and the subjects that motivate them begin to develop what Riera calls "an internal map" of what they're looking for.

The challenge, then, is to find schools that value those strengths. Maybe your learning style is better suited to a work co-op program than sitting in a lecture hall. Perhaps you need a school that lets you explore different areas before you commit to a major. As to school size, Riera suggests thinking about whether you like to know most of the students whose faces you'll see or whether you like being surrounded by lots of faces you may meet or may never get to know.

Career counselors and online assessment tools can help you articulate your interests and needs. And as you explore your interests, you may discover that what you originally *thought* you were looking for isn't what you wanted, after all.

STEP 3. Identify a place to live. After looking inward, look outward: Imagine the environment where you'll want to spend the next four years. Think about where you live, where you've traveled, areas of the country you've enjoyed—or have not—Popkin suggests. Do you want the urban energy of a city or a small-town atmosphere? Is climate a factor?

Are there outdoor activities you long to pursue and be near? A hiking and mountaineering enthusiast from Connecticut, for instance, applied to schools in Colorado to be close to western national parks. A New York student limited her applications to schools with access to riding stables.

Another aspect to explore: How closely, or not, do you wish to replicate the atmosphere of your high school? Did you thrive at that very large-or very small-school? Is it time for a change, or do you want more of the same?

Distance from home matters to some students more than to others. Joy Silberg and her husband, Richard, of Baltimore asked their three daughters during their college search: "Why go across the country when there are fabulous schools in close driving distance?"

All three of them ended up in a different type of school in a different geographic area, one in a southern town (University of Virginia, in Charlottesville), another in New York City (Barnard), and the third in the Pennsylvania countryside (Franklin and Marshall).

STEP 4. Safety First. For the most part, "campuses are probably safer than many public areas, and most campuses are doing a good job" on safety issues, says Robin Hattersley Gray, executive editor of the trade publication *Campus Safety Magazine*. But, as the saying goes, better safe than sorry.

Most colleges post emergency and safety information on their websites. In addition, Brett Sokolow, president of the [National Center for Higher Education Risk Management](#), has compiled a list of questions that range from residence hall issues (are exterior doors locked? must guests sign in and out?) to general security concerns (is there a campus police force? what is the crime rate of the surrounding area?) to broader considerations (what services are offered for mental health issues? are there educational and counseling programs about substance abuse? are there policies about stalking or relationship violence?).

Families should also discuss their own emergency plan. For one New York City parent whose son is about to enter college in New Orleans, for instance, that meant he would heed any hurricane warnings, be prepared to evacuate—and call home to let his parents know he was safe.

STEP 5. Information, Please. Popkin, of [activeparenting.com](#), says getting facts about colleges from guides and websites is probably easier than ever before. But brochures or virtual tours are not a substitute for a campus visit. Indeed, visiting the college campus was the most commonly cited factor in determining where students applied, according to a 2006 survey of 600 high-achieving high school seniors conducted by the research and marketing firm Lipman Hearne. (Seventy-four percent cited a campus visit; factors such as talking with a student at the school, brochure, friends, and Mom's advice were mentioned by 52 to 59 percent. Dads were close behind at 49 percent.)

The reason that "college visits can be real helpful for discovering what's comfortable, where you feel at home," says Popkin, is that "until you put feet on the ground, you won't necessarily know." Riera, the California principal, similarly recalls many students who returned from a college visit and said, "I know I want to go to that college'—because the comfort level is there. It feels familiar, what they had actually described as wanting." Even preliminary visits before you decide where to apply can help crystallize types of schools by size, location, or departmental strengths. Pay attention to your own response, not your friends' or parents', Riera advises. "If the school resonates with you, there's probably a decent shot that you will resonate with the school as well."

STEP 6. Be Realistic. Look at your high school profile from the point of view of a college admissions officer, suggests Holly Thompson, a former college admissions officer and high school college guidance counselor who now teaches high school in Palo Alto, Calif. Especially when applying to the most selective schools, Thompson says, "it is

useful to step back and say: 'Well, there are 22,000 applicants,' and rather than letting that paralyze you, view it with a cool eye and evaluate more objectively."

Just as important to achieving a realistic perspective is putting the admissions process in a larger context—your life. Colleges apply "a very narrow test, with a very specific set of criteria," says Thompson. Rather than letting the list of colleges to which you apply define you, define for yourself who *you* are, and let the list follow from that.