

6 Questions to Ask When Researching Colleges

Research is the most important thing that students will do when building their balanced college list. Knowing where to start and what to look for can be daunting, especially when there are thousands of colleges and universities in the US. There are a few things that students should ask themselves when researching for their colleges list in order to learn more about those institutions and why they might be a good fit.

Keep in mind: Everything you've done for your college prep has led up to this point. You've explored your interests, performed well in class, and you have a good sense of what you want out of your college education. Now it's time to find the institutions that can help you achieve those goals.

By now, some students have an idea of one or two schools that they're interested in. Start there and branch out, by working with your college counselor and doing your own research, to find other schools that might be a good fit for you. Once you've identified some schools of interest, do more in-depth research to learn more about them. But what exactly should you be "researching?" Things like location, size, and majors are standard, but there are other, less quantitative elements, that students should consider when doing their college list research.

Here are six questions that students should ask when researching colleges, both online and in person.

What about this school excites me?

Is it the location? Maybe you're ready to move to an urban setting after growing up in the suburbs. Is it the academics? Different colleges have different academic programs and opportunities – some more in line with your interests than others. Is it the name? Many students consider a school's reputation when deciding where to apply. Or is it the potential for a high starting salary after graduation? Take time to think about exactly why that school has piqued your interest in the first place. Identify one or two things, like the major and location, and learn as much as you can about those aspects of that school.

Where does this school fit into my balanced college list?

More specifically, if you were to apply is this school a "target," "reach," or "likely" college? This is important information to find out in order to set realistic expectations when it comes time to apply. Look on each school's website to find information on the most recently admitted class, including median GPA, test scores, and more. But, as we said before, it's not just about the numbers. Is this a highly selective college? If so, great grades and test scores are not enough to help you stand out. Have you made an impact in your activities and in your community? Do you have focused interests? Do you think you can get great teacher and counselor recommendations? All of these elements should factor into whether you consider a college a likely or target school – or if it's a far reach.

It's a social and academic fit – but what about financial?

College is expensive, and more and more students are weighing ROI when making decisions about where to apply to college. A college or university can look great during your initial research process, but don't forget to check out information on financials, too. Tools like College Navigator or the college cost calculator on a school's website can help you get a better picture of what it will actually cost to attend that school – and whether that school will be a good financial fit or not. Remember, a school's listed tuition isn't necessarily what you'll pay, so do your homework. You never know – a school that seems expensive at first might actually end up being affordable.

What classes, professors, and activities interest me?

Clicking around on a website can give you a good picture of the academic programs, but students should dig a lot deeper when thoroughly researching a college. Look up specific professors, courses, research opportunities, and more. When it comes to life outside of the classroom, see what activities, campus organizations, and other opportunities for engagement on campus are available. This is where you can really start to imagine the things you'll do if you end up attending. These details are also important when applying – you can use them when answering school-specific essay prompts.

Can I visit?

One of the most critical pieces to the college research puzzle is the campus visit. You can learn a lot about a school by researching their website, social media, and talking to current and previous students, but nothing substitutes actually seeing and experiencing the campus first-hand. See if visiting that college is realistic and, if it is, what you need to do in advance in order to plan a great visit. Sign up for information sessions, register for a campus tour, make a plan to visit points of interest off campus, and more.

Can I see myself living and studying there?

College isn't just about academics. It's about finding a new home where you will learn, grow, and explore new interests. When researching colleges it's important to imagine yourself actually taking advantage of the classes, activities, and culture present on campus. A school can look great on paper, but if the location, campus, and overall atmosphere don't appeal to you, should you really apply? This is where the college visit element of your research comes into play – actually seeing the campus and experiencing things like eating in the dining hall, visiting a dorm, or sitting in on a class can really help you imagine yourself as a student there. This is a critical element of your college research and an important question to ask yourself in order to build the best college list possible.

Doing proper research is key to building a balanced list of best-fit colleges. Take your time to thoroughly vet every college you're interested in – as well as some that you discover along the way that you might not have considered before.