

10 Things You Need to Know About a School Before You Apply

By Kate Hunger

Everyone always says that the first step in choosing a college is researching colleges, but no one ever says what that actually means. When researching colleges, there are a few key things to look up and know. Here are ten things to look for when you're researching your (potential) school.

1) Type of college

Did you know that there are “types” of colleges? Key terms to look for: religious, public, private, regionally accredited, proprietary, secular, college, university, liberal arts, conservatory. Each of those terms indicates a different type of institution.

For example, private schools are privately funded, but still follow accreditation guidelines.

This often means that they have higher “sticker price,” but also have higher endowments (and scholarships!), and have different requirements for admission.

Public schools, on the other hand, are publicly funded as part of a statewide system, so tuition structure (in-state vs. out-of-state), scholarships, and class sizes may be different.

It is especially important to know if the university is religiously affiliated -- and how that will impact your daily life. For example, the University of Notre Dame is a Catholic university and Marquette is a Jesuit university. As such, there are strict rules about student housing to adhere to the religious traditions. Additionally, students must take theology classes to graduate. Decide if that's something you want.

Key takeaway: the type of college will have a big impact on the type of experience you may have.

2) College traditions

Most universities have traditions -- no matter how small or elaborate. You can often find what they are by looking through the “student life” pages of the school's site. For example, at Northwestern University, the students paint a giant rock every year in the front of the school.

At IUPUI in Indianapolis, students have debates over various topics written on a public whiteboard in their student union. These traditions speak to generations of students that came before you, and they are important to student life. Understanding the traditions is important to know what the student life is like at that university. For example, the University of Alabama reveres their football team and have many unique gameday traditions. If you do not like football, will you be happy in an environment where the college gameday looms over campus?

Key takeaway: traditions tell you about the student life experience.

3) Rankings

It seems obvious, but it's trickier than you might think. The rankings often justify higher costs or other considerations. The Princeton Review rankings are the most commonly used as the definitive ranking. Notably, there are rankings in many categories. For example, if politics are important to you, it would be worthwhile to look up the most politically active campuses in the country and apply to those. Additionally, there are regional college rankings that are especially important if you want to stay in your current region. These are found with US World and News Report, another reputable ranking website. There are also rankings based on majors with both sources.

Key takeaway: find rankings for the region and programs you want.

4) Persistence rate and graduation rate

Persistence rate refers to the number of freshmen who continue on as sophomores. This number tells you a lot about how much support freshmen get and how well most freshmen are suited to the school. If most students who enter as freshmen do not continue, what does that mean for you? Many students leave because of financial issues, but not all.

Equally important, the graduation rate is how many students graduate with an earned degree. Often, there will be multiple rates: who graduated on time and who took extra years. It is important to know how long it takes for most students graduate with a four year degree in four or six years. Extra time equals extra money, and some federal or state dollars do not cover extra time.

Key takeaway: persistence rates tell you about the first year experience, graduation rates tells you about the rest.

5) Transferability between colleges in the university

What many seniors do not realize is that all college admissions are not the same. For example, to be admitted into the Indiana University College of Business, there are separate requirements. For high school students, you can be admitted into this college to get a business undergraduate degree. If you change your mind, however, and want to transfer to business as a sophomore or junior, you must complete a separate application to be admitted into the business school.

Similarly, not all credits are equal when you transfer. At the University of Texas - Austin, for example, you must complete a certain number of credits and particular classes to apply for an internal transfer into the College of Science if you change your major drastically. A good first step is to look at how the university is structured -- what is the difference between a college and a major? How do the requirements differ between programs you're interested in? How can you transfer majors or colleges? When do students declare their majors?

Key takeaway: find out how easy it would be to change your major once you get in.

6) Sticker price vs. true cost

The sticker price of college is often a shockingly high price tag. CollegeBoard details the average tuition price by state. That said, oftentimes, the true cost of a college is much lower because of the average financial aid package. For example, University of Pennsylvania has pledged to meet all financial needs of their students for four years. As college costs are skyrocketing, it is crucial to look at the value of the tuition price. There are tools like collegerealitycheck.com that will tell you the net price of the schools you are interested in along with other important statistics as well, like job placement rates, etc.

Key takeaway: don't be too put off by the sticker price -- the true cost is sometimes a lot less.

7) Mascot

It seems like a little thing, but it's really not. You'll want to know if you are rooting for the Bulldogs or the Bullfrogs. Also, the mascot can tell you a bit about the school. If the mascot is prominently featured on the website or you have heard of it before, chances are there is a sports tradition at the university. If you are a huge basketball fan, would it be enjoyable to root for the Division 3 Bullfrogs when you really want to cheer on the Division 1 Cinderella story, the Butler Bulldogs?

Key takeaway: a mascot's presence indicates the importance of athletics.

8) College size and location

There is a huge difference between large and small colleges. From class size to amenities to financial aid, college size is a big deal. To figure out which you like better, the best solution is to visit campus. Could you walk from class to class on a large campus? Could you find enough to do at a small school? Look around at the students, at the student union, at the classes and see if you can picture yourself there. If you think you would stick out like a sore thumb, it might be worth looking at other options as well. Similarly, the location of a school is a huge consideration. Is this school rural or urban? If you do not have a car, how can you get to class? Is it close enough to home? Is it too close so your mom will stop by all the time? Besides just location, it is important to think about how you want to interact with your family and high school friends while in college. Do you imagine seeing your high school friends every weekend? If so, moving 2000 miles away might be tricky. When you research where the school is located, also think about its proximity to cities for travel or other needs. It is important to think about how the location will impact your daily life, and what you want your lifestyle to be.

Key takeaway: where the school is located can be just as important as how big it is.

9) Brief history of the university

Attending a university with a storied tradition that goes back generations is amazing. Living in the same dorms that the university founders lived in is not so great. Knowing the basics of the university can clue you in to what your daily life will be like. It is also good to know if the university is involved in any scandals that would directly impact your experience, like sexual assault lawsuits or hazing incidents. Additionally, the history can clue you into the alumni network as well. A newer school might have great dorms, but you might not have a great alumni network to lean on when you graduate.

Key takeaway: know where it's coming from to see where it's going.

10) Living arrangements

Where will you actually live? How expensive is it to live there? Universities have different rules for when you can live on or off-campus. This is an important factor in your decision. Most people want the dorm experience, but rarely like the actual dorm when they get there. Make sure you know if the dorms are single sex or co-ed, and then know what you are comfortable with. Similarly, know how financial aid is impacted by the living arrangements. When you receive a financial aid package, that is a question to know: will your aid be impacted if you move off-campus? Finally, it is helpful to know what most students do. Is there a strong student life in the dorms? Do students join fraternities or sororities? How and where do most students live? The best way to see if that is what you want is to visit.

Key takeaway: depending on your view, housing can be an added expense or an awesome living experience.

Now that you know what to look for in a potential school, now you need to decide how many schools you should apply to in the first place. Good luck, and remember, you can do it!

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