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Why Our College?

By Elizabeth LaScala, Ph.D.

Private colleges often ask the question, "Why do you want to attend our school?" The way you respond lets the college know if you have done some research and understand what the college offers, and how the school can meet your needs. The student who has struggled to understand what she wants and needs, and who thinks seriously about how she learns best, is in a far better position to write an authentic and thoughtful response. My goal in this article is to encourage students to get clear about the reasons they are applying to particular schools so that they can address this important essay question.

Virtually every college has a mission and associated values. The student's job is to learn what that mission is and what values it reflects. Then compare your needs with the college's mission. The more information students acquires, the greater the likelihood of a making a good match.

Here is what you should learn about each college before you apply:

- Understand the educational program and the substance and thinking behind it.
- Know the core curriculum and what classes satisfy these requirements. Some colleges offer a structured core, reflecting the belief that liberal arts education should focus on root intellectual skills in a wide range of subjects; other schools are more flexible and allow the student to define the course of study.
- Acquire an understanding about how the core curriculum classes, or absence of these requirements, relate to the mission of the school. Put simply, understand the school's educational philosophy.
- Get acquainted with the social climate of the campus—does it lean more toward competition or collaboration?
- Get a handle on how faculty teaching and research obligations fall relative to each other; in particular learn the degree to which faculty teach and advise first year students.
- High standards often equate to higher levels of learning. What are the expectations and standards set by the college?
- Frequent assessment and prompt feedback still rank among the best strategies for helping students learn. Find out how the college measures up.
- Find out what the teaching practices are in classes you will take as a freshman and think about whether these are the ways you learn best (e.g., lectures versus small group seminars or a little of both)
- Learn about how and when students can access faculty (e.g., regular office hours; availability after class, email messages)

Here are strategies to use to learn about the schools on your list:

- Use multiple sources; read several guidebooks and compare reviews. If you find conflicting information, ask an undergraduate admissions officer at the college to clarify.
- Talk to advisors who know colleges well enough to add to your information base.
- Use the web and dig deep. Go beyond the marketing of the college's website to glean all the information you can about the college's "personality." Look at the depth of course offerings in areas that interest you; check out special seminars and guest speakers; read the school's newspaper to get a feel for "hot button" issues, often reflective of student body's political and social orientation. "Google" the college and find news articles or even the most recent baccalaureate address.
- Email faculty and students who are doing things that interest you. Ask a well-researched question. Do you get a response in a timely way? Do you get a

response?

- Contact your regional admissions representative and introduce yourself. Then ask several well thought out questions that you could not easily find answers to yourself.
- Visit the college, preferably after you have done good research. Stay overnight, talk with students about their experiences, and arrange to sit in on one lower and one upper division class in subjects that interest you.
- Arrange an interview. College selection is a two-way street. If you have done your research, you will shine in the interview and learn more about the school. You are going to spend at least four years at college. So it is you, the student, who needs to be selective. My advice is to identify about 15 schools you might be interested in and take a preliminary look. Select 10 for further study and try to answer the question "Why would I want to go there?" In the end focus on a handful of colleges you are truly interested in. Do your homework and you will be applying to colleges that meet your needs, interests, and learning style. Your effort will pay off. If you know what you are searching for in a college, you will increase your chances of acceptance, in part because you will do a far better job articulating your hopes and interests in your application essays.

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