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Beyond Fit in College Admissions

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that many students take a course in the summer quarter following their senior year and are not included in the four year graduation rate. A much larger problem is a low four year graduation rate linked to students' inability to get into their major classes.

4. What are the class sizes for specific years, required courses, and courses in your major area of interest?
 5. What is the composition of the student body? Examine breakdowns by gender, minority group, and geography. Will you be happy with a student body that is 65% female? What about being one of the few out of state residents in your class? Remember that diversity tells you at least two things about a college: the institution is attractive enough to draw students from beyond its own region and a diverse campus offers students the opportunity to learn from each other.

The concept of "fit" in college admissions has so penetrated our community that, to use a youthful phrase, students and their parents are "all over it." By now, most seniors have considered factors such as region (east, west, north, south), location (urban, residential, rural) and type. Seniors should understand the differences between a small liberal arts college that is more focused on undergraduate teaching, a larger research university that houses several different colleges, and a specialty school like a music conservatory, art institute and military academy. Some liberal arts schools have names that include the word "university" and universities often house a "college of arts and sciences." Nomenclature is less important than the actual mission of the school-which is exactly what you need to know. This article goes beyond general notions of "fit" to help students focus on specific information they need to make informed decisions about where to apply. Juniors can use these suggestions over the next year. Seniors should focus on recommendations that are critical to their current college search and carry them out in some depth right now.

Collecting Basic Information

Often the most difficult part of understanding something is deciding what questions to ask. Here are some important ones:

1. What is the academic profile of the typical freshman and how does your academic profile compare? Here you are trying to ascertain if the school offers the right amount of challenge for you and assess your chances of admission.
2. What percentage of the freshman class returns for sophomore year? Less than 70% is cause for concern. You want to know why students do not return. Concerned deans, attentive advisors, proper admissions decisions, and strong academic programs should be able to keep rates high.
3. What percentage graduate in four years? A six year graduation rate is commonly reported, but you should learn the four year rate. Also, understand the factors that may influence these rates. A small concern is finding out

6. Financial aid questions are always important. Carefully research the school's financial aid options.

Tip: CollegeBoard's 2009 College Handbook is an excellent resource to obtain some of the above information.

How well does the college prepare students for life after graduation?

What percentage of the student body applies to graduate school (professional schools like medical and law as well as masters and doctoral programs). How many of these are accepted and to which schools? How many and which companies recruit on campus? Which majors are most heavily recruited and into what type of jobs? What is the average salary range for these positions? An active campus Career Counseling and Placement Office will have this type of information.

What is there to do for fun?

It is a truism that you learn as much out of the classroom as in it. Whatever college you attend, it is going to be your home for the next four years. It is important to know as much as you can about what activities are both on campus and in the surrounding community. If you love rock-climbing, does the athletic center have a wall? Or is there an affordable gym nearby that does?

What about the campus visit?

It is better to see with your own eyes than rely upon the views of others. The campus visit is the most valuable experience you can have to evaluate a college. You may consider the visit as an educational insurance policy.

Visiting can rule out a school or bring much needed passion and sincerity to your college application essay (in particular the question "Why our college?"). You will have the opportunity to evaluate what students wear, how they live, your reactions to them, the campus and the nearest town or city. Take time to observe and try to do some active participation: attend a class, eat in the cafeteria, visit the library, work out at the gym, and arrange an overnight stay if possible.

University of California Update: Budget constraints will limit UC travel this year. To provide students with timely information the UC is sponsoring UC Day: An On-line College Fair on Oct. 1 (9 a.m. to 7 p.m. PST). For more information visit www.CollegeWeekLive.com.

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