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Beyond 'Fit' in College Search and Selection

By Elizabeth LaScala and Stuart Nachbar



Elizabeth LaScala, Ph.D. draws on 27 years of higher education experience to expertly guide and support the college and graduate or professional school admission process for students and their families in our local communities and throughout the US. Each cycle, more than 80 percent of Elizabeth's students get into their first or second choice school. Call Elizabeth (925) 385-0562 or write elizabeth@doingcollege.com. Visit www.doingcollege.com for more information about her services. Stuart Nachbar publishes EducatedQuest.com, a parent-focused blog that provides timely advice on the college search and the best values in higher education.

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How do you learn in your weaker subjects? Colleges may have required courses in subjects that were a challenge for you in high school. They might also be important subjects to learn-like calculus in a business program. Some schools offer an extensive network of tutors who can teach you the material. Others expect you to go to the professor for help. Discover how a school supports

WCollege costs are skyrocketing and the job market is undergoing rapid and exciting change. Students and their families must go beyond the basics of college "fit" like location, size and weather to make more informed decisions about where to apply and ultimately enroll to get a good education and value. Here are important questions and some resources to get the information that supports wise decision-making:

What is the academic profile of last cycle's entering freshman class? How does your profile compare? Here you are trying to ascertain if the school offers the right amount of challenge and assess your chances of admission. But understand there is more to assessing your chances than your GPA and test scores. Strong applicants show leadership and commitment to extracurricular activities and/or employment, write effective personal essays, and submit strong recommendation letters. Hooks such as legacy, ability to pay and special talents also play into the mix.

What percentage of the freshman class returns for sophomore year? A retention rate below 80 percent is cause for concern.

What is the four-year graduation rate? Less than 2/3 is a red flag. Your goal is to graduate in four years. To support this graduation goal, the school should offer strong academic advising and maintain a Web portal where you can track progress toward your degree. Ideally, colleges should schedule courses in a way that all students can graduate on time, even if they change their major. Map out a hypothetical four year plan with knowledgeable admission staff after you are accepted, but before depositing.

What are class sizes at different grade levels, required courses, and courses in your major area of interest? The introductory courses at most small schools are less than 40 students. The professor does the teaching and helps students outside of classes. At larger schools, introductory classes in popular majors, like biology and psychology, have very large enrollments. The professor delivers the lecture, and teaching assistants do the actual teaching in smaller groups. Also, if you choose a large university that houses several smaller colleges, each college may have its own core requirements in addition to the requirements for your major. Be aware of these requirements and how you would meet them in your four-year plan.

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student learning; today more than ever before, it is important to graduate with the degree you want with the best grades you can earn. This is important in the job market as well as if you go on to graduate or professional school education.

What is the makeup of the student body? Examine breakdowns by gender, ethnic group, and geography. Will you be happy with a student body that is 65 percent female? Or being one of the few out-of-state residents on campus? There are no right or wrong answers, just be sure to be aware of the demographics on campus.

How are you going to pay for college? Schools award aid based on need as well as merit (scholarships that do not need to be paid back). Merit awards are often renewable, as long as you maintain a minimum GPA. Do you believe that you can maintain the grades necessary to keep the award while earning the degree you want? It makes little sense to pursue an "easier" major to maintain a scholarship or graduate on time, if that major does not take you in the direction that you want to go toward further education or a rewarding career.

If you're interested in graduate or a professional school, does the area around campus offer opportunities to gain relevant experience? If you attend college near or in a large, economically robust city you could work or volunteer year-round to build your resume in paid and unpaid positions. If you go to college in a more isolated location, you are less likely to pursue these experiences during the school year.

What is the academic calendar for the school year? Many schools work on a semester system; you take four to six classes over four months with a break in between. Others work on a quarter system; you take three or four classes over 10 weeks. The calendar affects the amount of time you have to work during the school year, time you have off, and time available for study abroad or study away. The workload in quarter systems comes faster, but it enables you to take more classes and may speed degree completion and/or your ability to double major. Understand each school's academic calendar and its impact on your learning and goals.

Where do alumni live and work? Suppose you want to go to college on the East Coast, but hope to return to California. Some schools have large alumni bases in the Bay Area to help you find an internship, maybe even your first full-time job.

How do you get into the major? Sometimes admission standards for a particular major are higher than they are for the school as a whole. Some schools admit you directly into your major, while others require you to apply during your sophomore year. Some performing arts programs require auditions, others do not. Some schools offer pre-engineering programs so those without necessary high school prerequisites still have a shot at earning an engineering degree. There are many ways to complete a degree program that will fit with your prior skills and experiences.

How well does the college prepare students for life after graduation? What percentage of the student body applies to graduate and professional schools? How many are accepted and where? Which companies recruit on campus? Which majors are most heavily recruited and into what type of jobs? At what salary ranges? An active Career Counseling and Placement Office reaches out to alumni, faculty and employers to gather this information and prepare you to make the right contacts. Visit this office when you visit colleges and explore these questions.

Where can you find some of this information? College Board's Big Future, (<https://bigfuture.collegeboard.org/>) has a good deal of information and direct access to each college website. LinkedIn's University pages (<https://www.linkedin.com/edu/?tab=schools>) will help you to learn where a school's alumni work and the companies that employ them.

You can find rather superficial data through the schools' guidebooks, but more in-depth analysis requires actually visiting to college campuses and searching school websites for "Common Data Sets" which most colleges maintain. The examples I chose below have actual Web addresses, as opposed to requiring a data download:

University of Delaware: <http://www.udel.edu/IR/cds/cds1415.pdf>

Boston University: <http://www.bu.edu/oir/cds/>

University of Oregon: <http://ir.uoregon.edu/sites/ir.uoregon.edu/files/CDS20142015ForWEB.pdf>

Information gathering takes time, but it is worth the effort to become an informed consumer of education and its true value to you and your goals.

Reach the reporter at: info@lamorindaweekly.com

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