

Breaking Down The College List

A Guide to Determining Your Reach, Target & Safety Schools

Every student should have a healthy mix of safety, target, and reach schools on his or her college list. Remember, a school that is a safety or reach for one student may not fall under the same category for you. It's important to think objectively and critically when rounding out your college list. It is equally important to focus not only on getting in but also on finding schools that are good fits. You're going to live there for four years! It's important that the schools to which you apply have the right academic options and the campus life you want.

Safety

A safety school is one that will almost certainly accept you because your stats are well above the median 50th percentile figures for GPA and test scores, and the rest of your application, such as your essay and resume, present a strong, positive image of you and your academic goals that make you stand out from the rest of the pack. Unless some major problem crops up (e.g. a missing piece of the application, a disciplinary issue, a negative letter from a teacher), you and your counselor can have confidence that this school will say yes.

Most importantly, a safety school should be a school you are willing to attend. There is no point in applying to a school if you have no intention of actually attending.

The Advantages

You have a virtual 'sure bet' in the mix. You can start thinking concretely and confidently about what it would be like to attend that school.

But Remember!

If you didn't do the necessary research on these schools, your only options come spring may be a gaggle of schools you don't really want to attend, so it's important to submit applications only to schools you would be happy attending. Find safety schools that appeal to you through online research, campus visits, and talking with alumni, counselors, and students.

The Outcome

If you did the right research and found safety schools that have what you're looking for, then you can feel confident that you'll receive acceptance letters from them. A safety school may or may not have everything you want, but adding a number of these schools to your list will likely secure some real options you'll be proud to share with your friends.

Target

A target school is one that is a good fit for you, not only because it has the academic programs and campus life you want but also because your GPA and test scores fall comfortably within or even exceed its admissions profile. You are not a shoo-in at a target school, but you and your counselor should feel that, given your scores, grades, and the rest of your application package, you have a good shot of being admitted.

The Advantages

You should feel pretty good about applying to and getting into these schools, as long as you follow all directions and produce a quality application package that shows admissions who you are.

But Remember!

You still can never assume that you'll be accepted into any particular school. Know that there are probably other applicants who look similar to you on paper, so it's important that you do your best to set yourself apart. That's why it's so essential to put forth your best effort on these applications. Don't rush through them, and don't give admissions a reason to knock you out of the pile.

Making predictions in the college application process is like forecasting the weather. If there is an 80 percent chance of rain (or you'll get into a certain school), there is still a 20 percent chance the outcome will go the other way. Expand your options so that you're not relying on only one or two choices. This is admissions. Nothing is a guarantee.

The Outcome

If you have met or exceeded requirements, if your test scores and GPA fall within published profiles, if you have thoughtfully completed your application, written an excellent essay and created a solid resume, then the odds for admission are in your favor.

Reach

First, it's important to note the difference between a far reach and a reasonable reach.

A far reach is a school where you may fall short in more than one area (e.g., test scores, GPA, coursework rigor). Your application meets most or even all published standards but has no real way to stand out from those of other applicants.

A reasonable reach is a school where you may fall short in one or two areas, but you clearly make up for it elsewhere. Perhaps your GPA is lower than the 50th percentile, but your test scores are far above that mark. Maybe your stats are middling, but you have already established a clear academic direction through successful experiential learning, such as an impressive internship.

The Advantages

Strictly by definition, it is unlikely you'll be accepted to a reach school, but it's still a possibility as some students are accepted into their reach schools every year. Maybe you'll be one of the fortunate ones – you'll never know unless you try!

But Remember!

It's likely that the school will review applications from students who are just as qualified as you or even more so. Remember, there are only so many spots available, and these schools have plenty of applicants from which to choose. If you don't get in, don't let it get you down. It doesn't mean you couldn't cut it at that school or that everyone who got in is better than you. It just didn't work out.

The Outcome

You gave it a shot, you did your best, and – oh my gosh – you got in! Or... maybe you didn't. At least you tried. Had you not, you'd never know, and it's better to know for sure! Remember, if your reach school is truly your dream, this is not the end of the road. You can keep working toward the possibility of reapplying, transferring to, or attending graduate school at this institution.

