



Building an Ideal College List & How to Know What Colleges are Evaluating

WESTMINSTER SCHOOL AT OAK MOUNTAIN
COLLEGE ADVISING

Part 1: Building an Ideal College List

College acceptance is a fit to be made, not a prize to be won...

4 Types of “Fit”

1. Geographic
2. Academic
3. Social
4. Financial



Geographic Fit - Location

Many students begin their college search by setting a limit on how far away from home they want to be. This might be an easy way to narrow the many options out there, but it doesn't mean you'll find the best colleges for you. Keep your mind open. Ask yourself questions like these:

- How close to home do I want to be? Close enough for meals and laundry, to visit on weekends, or to only come home on breaks?
- Do I want to stick to an environment I'm used to or try something new?
- If I look just a little farther— a few more miles or another half hour away— what are other opportunities open to me?
- Am I staying close because I think it will be less expensive? Could some out-of-state schools be more affordable?
- Am I more comfortable in a rural, urban, or suburban setting?
- Do I prefer a warm or cold climate? What if I want to enjoy all the seasons? Do I want to be near the mountains or beach?



Academic Fit - Majors & Learning Environment

As you know, college is about learning. It makes sense to choose a college with the majors you are considering as well as your ideal learning environment. Don't limit yourself to a college's reputation, rank, or selectivity. What's more important is how well a college's academic degrees and style suits you. Ask yourself the following questions:



- What do I want to do after college? Which majors can make that happen?
- Does this college have a range of majors in case I cannot decide? Do I want to take classes in many different subjects or devote most of my time to one?
- What are my favorite subjects? What do I like doing when I'm not in class?
- Do I learn best when I'm academically comfortable or challenged?
- Do I prefer to be part of small group discussions or to listen to lectures? How much interaction do I want with my professors?
- What sort of balance am I looking for between studying and social life?
- Do I want to choose most of my classes myself, or do I prefer more structure?



Social Fit – Campus Life

Many students say that campus size and feel were a big part of their college choice. Whether or not you already have a mental image of what college life should be like, visiting a college and talking to students is a perfect way to get to know a campus. Think about what matters to you:

- Do I see myself at a college with lots of students or in a smaller community?
- Do I want to be at a college where students stay on campus most of the time? Do I want to live in a resident hall?
- Do I want to be around people with different interests or to be mostly with people with interests similar to mine? Christian or secular college?
- Do I want to be at a school where sports are a significant part of student life? Do I want to be around people who are highly academic?



Financial Fit - Cost

For many families, cost is a big concern— understandably. But it doesn't have to be such a big hurdle. College is usually more affordable than you think. Here are a few things to consider:

- Do I have the facts about what colleges will cost? Students don't usually pay the published price because of financial aid. You shouldn't rule out colleges early in your search just based on their cost.
- Will I qualify for financial aid? You should apply for aid, whether or not you think you'll qualify. Many students get financial help from the government or the college itself.
- Am I eligible for scholarships? Certain characteristics or accomplishments might qualify you for private or college scholarships that award money you won't have to pay back.
- Will I need a loan? Student loans can help build credit, but they can also be a burden to some people. Consider the types of jobs available upon graduation with your degree or certification.

Start the Journey

1. Make a list of what is important to you
2. Use tools such as [Scoir](#) or [College Search](#) to help with Academic and Geographic Fit
3. Visit different types of colleges within your area just to know your Academic & Social Fit
4. Use [Net Price Calculators](#) to find Financial Fit
5. Use [College Scorecard](#) to compare
6. Create initial [list](#) of colleges that match these Fits and go visit, record how colleges you visit line up
7. Research your chances of getting into each of these colleges and organize your school list by “reach,” “target,” and “likely”
8. Narrow down your results into your final list of colleges and apply!





“Reach,” “Target,” and “Likely”

- A “Reach” college is where you have a lower than 25% chance of acceptance. Bear in mind that there are some highly selective schools, such as the Ivies and top 10 colleges and universities in *U.S. News*, that are reaches for everyone, no matter how strong your profile is.
- A “Target” school is one where your statistics, including GPA and test scores, fall within the middle 50% range of accepted students (25th-75th percentile). While you can’t predict your chances of admission based on your academic credentials alone — there’s a lot more to consider, such as the rigor of your courses and your extracurriculars — this figure will give you a rough idea of your likelihood of acceptance.
- A “Likely” or “Safety” school is one where you have a greater than 75% chance of acceptance. Again, you should compare your statistics against those of the school’s admitted students to gauge this number.

Ways to Visit Colleges



1. Virtual – All colleges have amazing websites with live virtual information sessions
2. College Fairs – [NACAC](#) and [Christian College](#) fairs are all over the country and can also be virtual
3. High School - Check with [College Advising](#) if any college admissions officers are scheduled to visit
4. On Campus - Arrange an on-campus visit by visiting the college's admissions website
 - Attend information session: An admissions representative will talk to you about the college's distinctives
 - Student-led campus tour: You'll see the main parts of the campus and have a chance to ask questions.
 - At many colleges, you can also arrange to:

Attend a class

Meet with a professor

Meet with the financial aid office

Attend a club meeting or sports practice

Eat in a dining hall

Spend the night in a student dormitory

Resources

[College Match Self-Survey](#)

[College Planning Values Assessment](#)

[Qualities That Will Make A College Right For You](#)

[College Visit Worksheet](#)

[My College List \(Excel spreadsheet\)](#)





Part 2: How to Know What Colleges are Evaluating



What do colleges look for

- Academic excellence
- Character strength
- Diversity or first-generation college
- Leadership and service
- Willingness to take risks
- Initiative
- Sense of compassion
- Special talents or abilities
- Demonstrated interest

Learning Experience		Proficiency Level	Duration	Type
2009–2010				
English 9	3.5	Year	Honors	
History 9	3.0	Year	Course	
Geometry	3.0	Year	Course	
Spanish I	3.5	Year	Course	
Earth Science	3.0	Year	Course	
Art 1	3.0	Year	Course	
2010–2011				
English 10	3.5	Year	Course	
History 10	4.0	Year	Honors	
Algebra II	4.0	Year	Course	
Spanish II	3.5	Year	Course	
Chemistry	4.0	Year	Honors	
Drama	4.0	Semester	Course	
2011–2012				
English Language and Composition (AP)	3.5	Year	Honors	
US History	3.0	Year	Independent	
Calculus	3.5	Year	Course	
Spanish III	3.5	Year	Course	
Physics	3.5	Year	Course	
Software Development, Inc.	3.5	Year	Internship	
2012–2013				
English 101	4.0	Semester	Dual-Enrollment	
Mountain Biotech Industries (STEM)	3.5	Year	Internship	
Physical Education	4.0	Semester	Course	
Statistics (AP)	3.8	Year	Course	
Health	4.0	Semester	Course	
Psychology (AP)	4.0	Semester	Honors	
Graduation Standards: Cross-Curricular Skills				Proficiency Level
Maine Learning Results Guiding Principles		Clear and effective communicator		3.0
		Self-directed and lifelong learner		3.25
		Creative and practical problem solver		3.50
		Responsible and involved citizen		3.75
		Integrative and informed thinker		4.0
Academic Summary				
GPA: 3.75				
Magna Cum Laude				
SAT/ACT Scores				
Academic Awards				
Academic Achievements				
Title of Capstone Project				
Grading System				
3.6–4.0: Exceeds Proficiency				
3.0–3.5: Proficient				
2.0–2.9: Partially Proficient				
1.0–1.9: Insufficient Evidence				
Graduation Requirements				
Demonstrated Proficiency				
Maine Guiding Principles				
English Language Arts				
Mathematics				
Science and Technology				
Social Studies				
Health Education and Physical Education				
World Languages				
Visual and Performing Arts				
Career Education and Development				
Additional Graduation Requirements				
Capstone Project				
Service Learning Requirement				

Character Strengths

- **Extracurricular activities:** What you do outside the classroom reveals a lot about you. But remember, it's not the number of activities that counts. It's more about what you've learned, your impact on the surrounding community, and how you've grown from participation
- **Summer jobs and activities:** Your summer experiences provide insight into your character. Holding a summer job at a fast-food restaurant can build as much character as attending a prestigious [summer learning program](#). Even staying at home to help out with babysitting or household chores like cooking for the family shows character. It's all about what you've gained, what you've learned and how you communicate that.
- **College essay:** The [college essay](#) gives you the opportunity to show the admission officers who you are and how you will contribute to the college campus. What are admission officers looking for in a college essay? Creativity, self-awareness, and a good command of grammar top the list.
- **Letters of recommendation:** [Recommendation letters](#) can tell a lot about the kind of person you are. A teacher who knows you well can give insight into your leadership ability or your collaborative approach to team projects. A school counselor or administrator can also offer valuable information about your service to the school community.





Diversity or First-Generation College

Colleges and universities believe strongly that racial and ethnic diversity should be one factor among the many considered in admissions. The reasons include:

- *Diversity enriches the educational experience.* We learn from those whose experiences, beliefs, and perspectives are different from our own, and these lessons can be taught best in a richly diverse intellectual and social environment.
- *It promotes personal growth-and a healthy society.* Diversity challenges stereotyped preconceptions; it encourages critical thinking; and it helps students learn to communicate effectively with people of varied backgrounds.
- *It strengthens communities and the workplace.* Education within a diverse setting prepares students to become good citizens in an increasingly complex, pluralistic society; it fosters mutual respect and teamwork; and it helps build communities whose members are judged by the quality of their character and their contributions.

Diversity is often associated with race, ethnicity, gender, or sexual identity. However, to colleges, diversity might also include income level, first-generation status, culture, background, and interests. According to [U.S. News & World Report](#), “Colleges emphasize a diverse class because different perspectives allow students to learn from one another.”



Leadership & Service

Your extracurricular activities show time management skills, commitment, creativity, team-building, and leadership skills.

But remember, depth, not volume. Listing dozens of extracurricular activities on your resume does not help you stand out. Instead, showing an ongoing commitment to a few activities, particularly if they are all focused around a specific cause or topic, is much more effective.

Volunteer work on college applications conveys the leadership skills and value you'll bring to their campus.

“Our ideal candidates are inspired to emulate our founder Benjamin Franklin by applying their knowledge in service to society, to our community, the city of Philadelphia, and the wider world,” states the University of Pennsylvania on its admissions page.

Oberlin College says it seeks “individuals who care about the world, who believe they can make it a better place, and who have the courage to try.”



Willingness to Take Risks

- Risk-taking doesn't necessarily mean engaging in high-risk activities like bungee jumping or mountain climbing — it means venturing out of your comfort zone, be it in the classroom or other areas of life. Taking a risk can be joining the debate club even though you have a fear of public speaking, trying a new activity, or taking a challenging class. Colleges want students who are not afraid to make mistakes — and who understand that mistakes are part of learning.
- As set forth on the website of Massachusetts Institute of Technology, “When people take risks in life, they learn resilience because risk leads to failure as often as it leads to success. The most creative and successful people — and MIT is loaded with them — know that failure is part of life and that if you stay focused and don't give up, goals are ultimately realized.”



Initiative & Sense of Compassion

- Initiative is one of the top qualities that colleges look for. Students who show initiative will likely bring that take-charge attitude with them to college, where it will help them contribute to the campus.
- Georgia Tech lists “compassion for others” as one of eight character traits it values. Syracuse University states, “You are a strong candidate if you strengthen and support those around you, even as you are working to develop yourself.” UCLA looks for “demonstrated concern for others and for the community.”
- Showing compassion is not just about expressing empathy for others, it’s also taking action to help them. Engaging in community service work, tutoring struggling students at your school, willingly taking care of siblings to help a parent working multiple jobs, or political activism can all be fueled by compassion.



Special Talents or Abilities

- Colleges want a well-rounded class, which means they look for students who excel in certain areas or have interesting passions. This diversity is something that all colleges strive for in their classroom cohorts
- Extracurricular activities or non-academic hobbies can highlight several positive qualities: passion, dedication, persistence, commitment, time management, prioritization. Mastering any activity or achieving some level of excellence requires the above great qualities in abundance. This shows the authorities that you have what it takes to meet the challenges of any academic program.
- Having a special talent, interest, or hobby gives you something interesting to talk about in your personal essay. It will add character and dimension to your essay and make your essay unique to you. It gives the reader an exclusive glimpse into your personality that does not come through in your grades and test scores.



Demonstrated Interest

Colleges use a database system to track every contact you have had. Not all colleges track demonstrated interest, but for those that do, showing your “interest” in the school will help with the final admissions decision.

- **Emails** - Open emails from a college. It shows admissions that you’re engaging with their communications.
- **Website** - Click the links. Colleges will know that you are researching about their school’s programs.
- **Visits** - Register for a visit and either attend or cancel. If you are a no-show, the college takes note. This includes virtual.
- **Admission Counselor** – Connect with them. They are the ones who will read your application and advocate for you.
- **Inquiry Cards** - Fill those out. Colleges keep track of the students they interacted with on the road.
- **Apply early** - The sooner you submit, the better!

Common Data Set – What is important

Relative importance of each of the following academic and nonacademic factors in your first-time, first-year, degree-seeking general (not including programs with specific criteria) admissions decisions.

	Very Important	Important	Considered	Not Considered
Academic				
Rigor of secondary school record	X			
Class rank	X			
Academic GPA	X			
Standardized test scores		X		
Application Essay	X			
Recommendation(s)		X		
Nonacademic				
Interview			X	
Extracurricular activities	X			
Talent/ability		X		
Character/personal qualities	X			
First generation			X	
Alumni/ae relation			X	
Geographical residence			X	
State residency			X	
Religious affiliation/commitment				X
Racial/ethnic status			X	
Volunteer work			X	
Work experience			X	
Level of applicant's interest				X

Search a university's Common Data Set for the what they emphasize in application



- Rigor, rank, GPA and essay are #1
- Character and activities also important
- Test scores, talent, and letters of rec #2
- Also considers geographic residence, volunteer work, ethnicity, legacy, interview, and first generation
- Does not track demonstrated interest

Common Data Set – Where you stand



Search a university's Common Data Set for the Test statistics on current freshman class

- Average SAT is 1530
- Average ACT is 35
- For most students - Reach
- If ACT lower than 35 – can apply score optional
- Must also be in top 10% of class to be considered

	Percent	Number
Submitting SAT Scores	29%	468
Submitting ACT Scores	32%	519

For each assessment listed below, report the score that represents the 25th percentile (the score that 25 percent of the first-time, first-year population scored at or below) and the 75th percentile score (the score that 25 percent scored at or above).

Assessment	25th Percentile	50th Percentile	75th Percentile
SAT Composite	1490	1530	1570
SAT Evidence-Based Reading and Writing	730	750	770
SAT Math	760	780	800
ACT Composite	34	35	35
ACT Math	32	34	35
ACT English	35	35	36
ACT Writing	8	9	10
ACT Science	33	34	35
ACT Reading	34	35	36



*"Listen to advice and accept instruction,
that you may gain wisdom in the future.
Many are the plans in the mind of a man,
but it is the purpose of the Lord that will stand."*

-Proverbs 19:20-21

For more information
see [website](#) or contact

Kim Fulcher

kfulcher@westminsterknights.org

Sarah Brannan

sbrannan@westminsterknights.org