

college selection process: factors to consider

Using school catalogues, Web sites, books, college visits, and other resources, research and compare schools based on the following characteristics.

Major/academic program

What do you want to learn? What fields of study interest you?

A “major” is a field of study, such as engineering or English. It’s typically the first thing students consider as they begin to identify college options. College guidebooks (like the ones published by the College Board), as well as certain Web sites and online college search tools, enable you to create a list of schools that offer the fields of study you’re considering. Students who have more than one interest area need to cross-reference majors to identify schools that offer what they are considering.

Remember that it isn’t necessary that you declare a major when you search for schools. In the U.S. today, the most commonly declared major for entering freshmen is “undecided,” and many students change their major several times throughout their college years.

If you’re not sure what you’re interested in but would like to investigate or create some options for yourself, use the **VT Guidance Central** interactive online tool. Go to www.vsac.org and select “VT Guidance Central” in the Quick Links box on the home page. Once you’re in VT Guidance Central, use “Choices Explorer” and “Choices Planner” to take some self-assessments, search for majors, and look for schools that match your interests.

Selectivity

What is your grade point average (GPA)? How are your SAT/ACT test scores?

A school’s selectivity is usually based on the average GPA, class rank, and SAT/ACT scores of its students, as well as the percentage of applicants accepted. The following is a list of criteria needed for each level of selectivity (language and criteria may vary by college):

- **Most selective** — top 10 percent of high school class; ACT 29+; SAT 1965+; less than 30 percent of applicants admitted
- **Moderately selective** — top 50 percent of high school class; ACT 18+; SAT 1515+; between 25 and 50 percent of applicants admitted
- **Less selective** — bottom 50 percent of high school class; ACT 19 and below; SAT 1515 and below; up to 95 percent of applicants admitted
- **Open admission** — everyone accepted with high school diploma or GED; may or may not require placement tests and/or SAT/ACT

There is a direct correlation between selectivity and academic achievement. Refer to each college’s specific admissions requirements, which you can find in its guide or catalogue, or on its Web site.

Source: www.petersons.com

Cost-saving tip

Applying to schools at which you’re near the top of the applicant pool academically may qualify you for more grants or scholarships from the college (usually, these do not have to be repaid).

Applying to schools at which you’re in the lower half of the applicant pool academically may mean that the school will offer you more loans, which have to be repaid, with interest.

Cost and financial aid

What is the cost of attending the school, and what type of financial aid is offered?

Pay attention to the total cost of attending the school, including tuition, room/board, fees, books, and personal expenses. Don't let cost determine whether you apply to a college or not, but be sure to consider the financial aid offered. It's important to apply to a variety of colleges for admissions and financial aid reasons; not only must you be accepted, but you have to be able to afford to attend! The affordability of a college may not be evident until you've been accepted and have an actual financial aid award from the school.

- Have you applied to several colleges at varied price ranges?
- Do you have information from each college on its financial aid and application process?

Type

Are you interested in training to enter a trade, or do you want to pursue a broader academic path? Do you want to study with leading researchers or with professors who focus on teaching? Consider the following types of schools:

- **Community college and vocational-technical college** — One- or two-year(+) schools that offer a more focused and practically oriented learning experience. These schools offer specialized job training programs or more general education programs. Degrees granted: certificates, associate's degrees, and bachelor's degrees.

Note: Associate degree programs are either “transfer” or “terminal.” Transfer degrees enable a student to transfer associate degree credits to a bachelor's degree program at a four-year school. Terminal degrees typically do not offer the transfer option for most credits.

- **Four-year college or university** — Four-year programs include general education requirements in addition to specific courses related to major fields of study. Emphasis is on broad intellectual development. Degrees granted: bachelor's degrees, master's degrees, doctoral degrees, and professional degrees.

Do you want to attend a private school or a public school? Here are the factors that distinguish public schools from private schools:

- **Public** — Public schools are subsidized by the state; therefore, students attending a college/university in their home state pay lower tuition than they would at out-of-state public schools. (Generally, if the name of the college or university is “XYZ State College” or the “University of State Name,” it's likely to be a public institution.)
- **Private** — Private schools are funded through endowments, tuition payments, and donations. These schools are not state-affiliated; therefore, there is no distinction between in- or out-of-state students; everyone pays the same tuition to attend the school.

Each student's college wish list will look different. Think about the environment that'll best help you meet your goals. Take friendly advice with a grain of salt; instead, focus on what will work for you and on the factors that seem best for you and your family.

Cost-saving tip

By taking general education coursework at a community college and then transferring to a four-year program to focus on your major, you may be able to cut your college costs substantially.

Academic atmosphere

What type of atmosphere do you want, and how much of a focus do you want to put on your academics? It's important to ask yourself how demanding you want your college coursework to be. Here are some things to consider:

- How academically challenged do you want to be? How much time do you want to spend on academics each day/week?
- Is there an academic support network on campus?
- Which type of academic calendar best suits you (semester, trimester, quarter)?
- Is independent study required?
- Are internship opportunities available?
- Are there any “quiet dorms” or “quiet dorm floors” for students who wish to study in their rooms?

Size

What size student body, campus, and classes are right for you?

Smaller colleges have anywhere between 1,000 and 5,000 students. A larger college can have anywhere between 10,000 and 20,000 students. At small colleges, you'll more likely know most of the other students and will receive a lot of individual attention; on the other hand, larger colleges will usually have more diverse curriculum. Larger schools can also provide individual attention, but will require more initiative on your part.

- What is the average class size? Can you picture yourself in a large auditorium with 250 people? Would you prefer to be in smaller classes with fewer than 30 students?
- What is the student-faculty ratio? Do you want regular access to and contact with faculty? Do you want faculty to know you by name?
- Do you prefer lectures or small group discussions?

Student population

What type of diversity do you wish to have on your campus?

The demographic make-up of the students on your campus (where they're from, what background they have, etc.) is another variable to consider. Some schools draw mostly Vermonters or students with similar backgrounds, while other schools seek to attract a more geographically diverse student population.

- How important is it that students come from a variety of cultural, geographical, religious, and socioeconomic backgrounds?
- Do you prefer to be with people who have similar backgrounds as you or who are different from you? Does it matter to you?

Location

What type of community and location are you looking for?

Choose an area that appeals to you. Some students feel more comfortable staying close to home, some want a little distance, and some can't wait to live in an entirely different part of the country.

- Do you want to live in a rural, urban, or suburban area? In the city or the country? (Burlington is considered suburban by most standards.)
- Have you ever been away from home? How did you handle the experience(s)? If not, do you feel prepared to be away from home for the first time? How can you better prepare yourself for leaving?

Student life

What type of “personality” does the campus have? What opportunities are available?

Every campus has a different “personality” that can best be evaluated by visiting the campus and talking with students. It’s fine to trust your gut reaction when you visit — you may have a similar reaction should you choose to attend — but remember that first impressions aren’t always accurate. Examine the school newspaper; read the catalogue; check out the Web site and student blogs; talk with students, faculty, and staff; and ask for a list of campus activities and opportunities.

- Are there campus and area activities that interest you?
- What goes on during the weekends? Do people stay on campus or do they leave on weekends?
- What volunteer opportunities are available?



**Vermont Student
Assistance Corporation**

10 East Allen Street

PO Box 2000

Winooski, VT 05404

Toll-free **800-642-3177**

In the Burlington area **655-9602**

Visit our Web site at www.vsac.org

E-mail us at info@vsac.org