

Making Your College List: Step-by-Step

What is a College List?

It's a working list of schools you may apply to. While you're looking, the list can be as big as you want, but you'll ultimately narrow it down to about 3 to 9 or so schools that you'll actually apply to. Your goal is to find a good fit for you. You can begin working on your college list at any time during high school, but it'll be helpful if by the beginning of senior year, you have some idea of schools you're interested in.

Step One: Know Yourself

Even if you think you know exactly what school you want to attend, take some time to really think about it. You may dream of going to a particular school because your parents did or because you love the football team, and it may, in fact, be the perfect school for you, but it is likely only one of many schools where you would thrive. On the other hand, if you have no idea at all where you'd like to go, it's really important to give this step some thought.

There are lots of considerations: academics, social life, size, location, cost, programs, coop or internship availability, religious affiliation, etc. The book *College Match: A Blueprint for Choosing the Best School for You*, by Steven Antonoff, is a great resource, and the worksheets Antonoff provides in his book can all be found at www.schoolbuff.com.

Step Two: Find Schools that Fit Your Needs

Once you know what you're looking for, it will be a lot easier to find it. See the list of college search engines below: just type in what you're looking for and the website will generate a list of schools that fit your criteria. Use several different websites—if the same college keeps popping up, it's probably one that should go on your list. These are just a few of the many websites available.

Step Three: Research

Once you have a list of schools that seem like they might be a good fit, it's time to get specific. Visit each school's website and learn more. Look up programs and departments that you're interested in. Dig deep and read about the professors in your area of interest. Find a syllabus for class that sounds interesting and see what they cover in that class. What general courses are required for graduation? Do they have minors? Are there study abroad or research opportunities that interest you? Are there profiles of students or recent graduates? Take a virtual tour. Think about how you'd get to and from school—does it require a plane trip followed by a bus ride, or if you're driving how long will it take?

Also check social media to see what current students are saying about their experience at that school.

Take advantage of college visits at college fairs in the area. Plan to visit in person schools you're most interested in. Tip: even if you can't visit a school before you apply, if you're admitted you can visit in the spring, before decisions are due.

Step Four: Organize

This is a great area for parents to get involved. Find a system that works for you. It might be a spreadsheet that both you and your parents have access to—you can add columns to compare the most important factors. It may be a notebook with a tab for each school. It may be a file box with a folder for each school. Many of the websites you used to search for schools can also allow you to create a search profile and organize your information, and the Common App site is also helpful for organizing your list. Your organizational system will probably be a combination of things—see what works for you.

Step Five: Include Reach, Probable, and Safety Schools

Your list should include some schools from each category. You'll need to know your GPA and test scores to figure this out. Parchment tells you your likelihood of admission at any school. Or visit the College Board website, choose a school, choose "Applying" from the left side, then choose the "Academics and GPA" tab and scroll down to see information about the high school class rank and GPA of incoming freshmen for that school.

- Reach, stretch, or dream schools are ones where your class rank, GPA, or test scores might be below or barely within the mid-range for the school's admitted students. These are often competitive and admit a low percentage of applicants.
- Probable, match, or fit schools are a realistic choice with a good match between your GPA and test scores and those of the mid-range of the school's admitted students.
- Safety schools are ones where your GPA and test scores are higher than the mid-range for the school's admitted students.

Strong academic students (GPA 3.2 or above) should also consider an Honors College with a Georgia school as a safety option they feel good about.

Also consider **financial reach, probable, and safety schools**, but don't eliminate schools based on their published "sticker price." Many private schools offer the most financial aid, and they can therefore end up less expensive than public schools. Every college has a net price calculator on their website that can help you estimate what it will actually cost your family.

Step Six: Narrow Your List

By October of your senior year, you should begin to narrow your list. You should aim for no more than nine schools that you'll actually apply to. Make sure you pay close attention to application deadlines. If you want to apply to a school that requires SAT subject tests (some of the more selective schools do), make sure you plan to take them no later than October.

Step Seven: Apply!

Once you've finalized your list, it's time to apply. You do not have to wait until the deadline to actually apply!

Resources for Making Your College List

Books:

Steven Antonoff, *College Match: A Blueprint for Choosing the Best School for You* (much of this information is found on the Schoolbuff.com website)

Steven Antonoff, *The College Finder* (interesting lists; much is found on College Express site)

Frank Bruni, *Where You Go Is Not Who You'll Be*

Fiske Guide to Colleges There is an online, interactive version of the Fiske Guide for \$19.99 for a 12-month subscription (collegecountdown.com)

Websites:

[College Essay Guy](https://www.collegeessayguy.com/) (https://www.collegeessayguy.com/)

Find many great college resources, including his guide to finding a college (https://www.collegeessayguy.com/blog/how-to-choose-a-college)

[Schoolbuff](http://schoolbuff.com/worksheets/) (http://schoolbuff.com/worksheets/)

Find questionnaires that will help you know yourself: Self-survey for the College Bound; College Planning Values Assessment; Self-knowledge Questionnaire; Qualities that Will Make a College Right for You, etc.

[Collegexpress.com](https://www.collegexpress.com/) (https://www.collegexpress.com/)

Search a variety of lists for schools outside of the usual rankings (schools for the free spirit, for example), search for scholarships and summer programs, and compare schools. Has many lists from Antonoff's book *College Finder*.

[GAFutures](https://www.gafutures.org/) (https://www.gafutures.org/)

A great guide to in-state colleges.

[College Scorecard](https://collegescorecard.ed.gov/) (https://collegescorecard.ed.gov/)

This site from the US Department of Education offers lots of reliable data and statistics to help you compare schools (four-year and two-year).

[Cappex](https://www.cappex.com/) (https://www.cappex.com/)

Create a profile that goes well beyond test scores and grade-point averages to help you discover interesting schools that you might not have heard of. Scholarship information is available, too.

[College Board](https://www.collegeboard.org/) (https://www.collegeboard.org/)

Search for schools, view statistics on the academic profile of a college's freshman class, financial aid and merit aid stats, available majors, and much more. Also register for the SAT here.

[College Navigator](https://nces.ed.gov/collegenavigator/) (https://nces.ed.gov/collegenavigator/)

This federal website contains tons of data on the nation's colleges and universities.

[College Confidential](https://www.collegeconfidential.com/) (https://www.collegeconfidential.com/)

Search for schools and find lots of great articles and forums on all aspects of the college process.

[Unigo](https://www.unigo.com/) (https://www.unigo.com/)

Search for schools, and also read thousands of reviews from the students themselves.