



# How To Start Your College List



A woman and a young girl are sitting at a table, looking at a tablet together. The woman is smiling and pointing at the screen, while the girl looks on with interest. The background is slightly blurred, showing what appears to be a home or office setting. The entire image is overlaid with a semi-transparent purple filter.

Here is your toolkit for making  
a balanced list of schools that you can love  
and also afford. **Let's do this!**

## What's In the Kit:

- 3 The Big Picture
- 4 Key Guidance
- 6 Resources
- 7 Helpful Terms

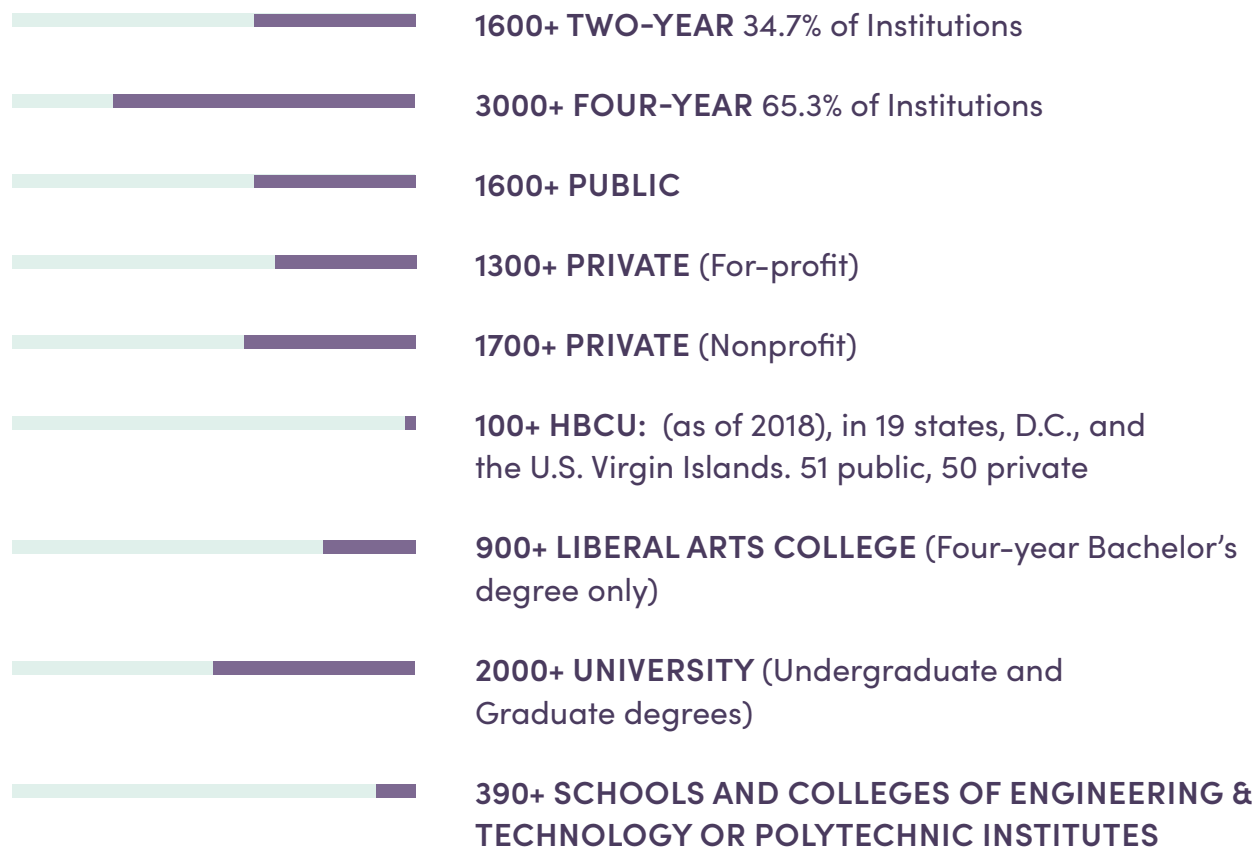


# The Big Picture

## If you want to go to college, you have many options.

There are 4,000+ two-and-four-year, public and private U.S. colleges eager to enroll students.

Breakdown  
by Institutional Type



Source: [NCES Table 1a \(2014–2015 study\)](#)

A majority of students attend in-state colleges or universities within 200 miles of their homes.

Type of institution	IN-STATE Percent attending in home state	DISTANCE FROM HOME Average miles from home
PUBLIC		
Two-year	93.3%	33.6 mi
Four-year	87.9%	88.7 mi
PRIVATE NONPROFIT:		
Four-year	58%	267.4 mi

Source: [DataLab Tables Library \(ed.gov\)](#)



# Do Right Now

## Four Steps to Building A College List



1. Familiarize yourself with different types of colleges and their offerings.  
See [Resources Section](#)

- Community and Technical Colleges
- Public and Private Universities
- Liberal Arts & Sciences Colleges
- Engineering & Technical Institutions and Polytechnics
- Women’s Colleges and Men’s Colleges
- Historically Black Colleges & Universities
- Tribal Colleges & Universities

2. Begin building your list around two key considerations: location and program.

*Initial considerations: campus setting and location*

- How close to home do I want to be?
- Do I prefer an urban, suburban, or rural setting?
- What size college do I want? (Same as high school? Larger or smaller?) Do I want a relatively big pond or a small pond?
- What about regional differences (e.g.,weather, lifestyle, recreational activities, and culture)?
- Do I expect to live on campus or to commute?
- Will I be happiest taking advantage of mostly on-campus activities, as a member of a tight-knit college community, OR do I see myself exploring beyond my college to take advantage of arts and entertainment, as well as internship and job opportunities?

*Initial considerations: academic interest, possible majors, and your career aspirations*

- **If you have no idea what you want to study,** ask college representatives about first-year academic requirements and advising models, advising in the major, and programs designed especially for undecided students.
- **If you have lots of interests,** check out the college’s online lists of majors/ concentrations and the course catalog for interdisciplinary programs that combine several subject areas around a single theme—like environmental studies, data science, or international relations.
- **Within universities, some majors can be more difficult to get into than others.** When you attend information sessions or meet with admission representatives, ask whether some programs are more selective than others are. If the answer is yes, then factor this into your list criteria and look at backup majors or even alternative schools.

3. Balance your list based on both likelihood of admission (selectivity) and cost.

A balanced list of roughly two to three “likely” schools, four to five “target” schools, and two to three “reach” schools can ensure that you have good options later on.

4. Be open to different options

Maybe you’re initially interested in larger universities because you attend a large high school. As you build your list, don’t close the door on smaller colleges, since many offer unique learning opportunities and a strong sense of community. Likewise, if you’re initially drawn to selective private colleges, be on the lookout for specialized programs within large universities, including honors college programs within state flagship universities.



# Keep in Mind...

1. Think twice about location.

You're wise to consider in-state public college options for many reasons, including affordability. But you're also smart to consider out-of-state or even international options, as some of these can be affordable, too. College is an opportunity to experience new regions and explore the wider world.

2. Rankings vs. You

Bottom line: a college's ranking or level of selectivity reveals little about its academic offerings, educational environment, campus culture, and what your lived experience there would be.

3. Fit goes both ways.

Just as you have priorities and strengths, so too do the colleges where you'll be applying. You're unlikely to write a strong application (or be offered admission to a school) if you're not a good fit, so do your homework and choose wisely. Don't make the mistake of thinking you want to attend a certain college merely because of its prestige or "name brand."

4. Embrace the new world of virtual visits.

One advantage of these strange times is that virtual opportunities to learn about colleges can be as meaningful as physical campus visits. Reach out to admission counselors and professors, directly; explore course catalogues; and connect with current students for an authentic read on student life.

5. Love your likelies.

Finding two to three "likely" schools is an ideal way to begin building a great list. See the College Chances Admission Calculator in the Resources section below.

6. A final bit of advice:

Be prepared to fall in and out of love with certain schools as you learn more about the colleges and yourself. Although your list is bound to change, in the end, you should be excited about each of the schools to which you apply.





# Resources

### ***Fiske Guide to Colleges***

*Fiske Guide to Colleges* is a thorough guide to three hundred twenty of the best and most compelling four-year colleges and universities. It has been published yearly for over thirty years and is a go-to resource for students and parents.

### **College Chances Admission Calculator**

By putting in your grades, test scores, activities, and other features of your application profile, you can see the likelihood of admittance to colleges and universities.

### **Roadtrip Nation Career Finder**

Search engine for careers, majors, and classes (input your interests and hobbies)

### **Big Future College Major & Career Search**

Majors and careers search engine that allows you to select and save filters such as test scores, activities, desired majors, financial aid and more.

### **Federal NetPrice Calculator Center**

The Net Price Calculator is offered by the U.S. Government and all colleges. It is used to find what a student pays after subtracting scholarships and grants. Individual college Net Price Calculators (usually featured on college websites) can show a prospective student what students with similar financial situations and opportunities are typically required to pay towards their tuition.

### **College Admission Collaborative Highlighting Engineering & Technology CACHET**

A national coalition of colleges and universities committed to promoting opportunities for students in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM).

### **The American Society for Engineering Education Directory**

This directory provides detailed profiles of U.S. and Canadian schools offering undergraduate engineering as well as engineering technology programs.

### **2018-Engineering-by-Numbers-Engineering-Statistics-UPDATED-15-July-2019.pdf**

This report shows degrees awarded by area of engineering specialization and by school for both women and underrepresented minority student populations.

### **Colleges That Change Lives (CTCL)**

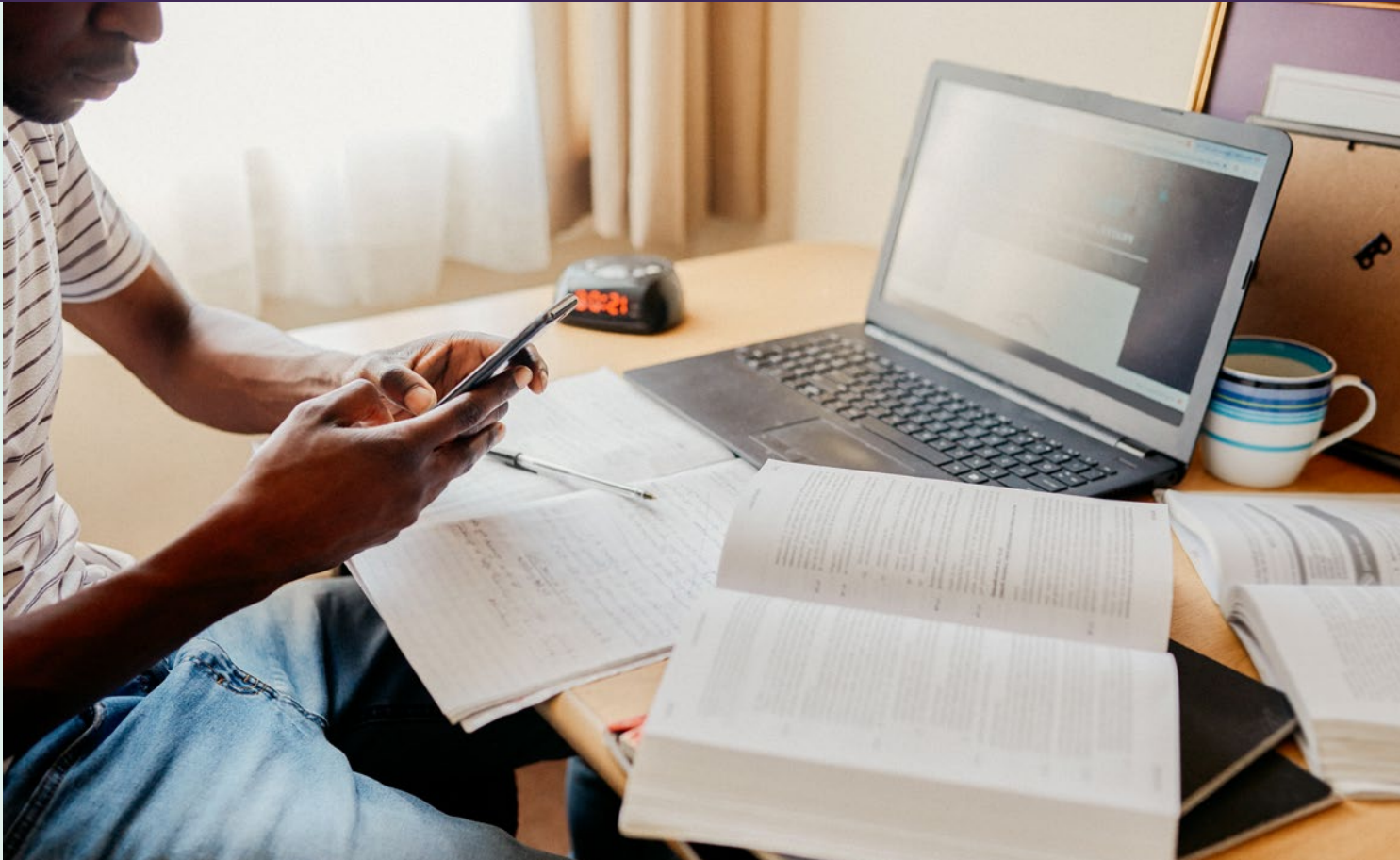
“CTCL is dedicated to the advancement and support of a student-centered college search process. Namely, we work to educate families that the criteria used by most college-bound students and their counselors, such as name and prestige, do not acknowledge the importance of understanding an individual student’s needs and how they ‘fit’ with the mission and identity of an individual college community.”

### **United Negro College Fund (UNCF)**

Thirty-seven historically Black colleges and universities belong to the UNCF network, The Fund provides these colleges and universities with a range of supports to keep their academic programs strong and tuition-levels affordable.

### **Common Black College Application**

Application platform for close to sixty historically Black colleges and universities. This platform is a convenient and affordable resource, enabling students to apply to their top four historically Black colleges and universities with a single application fee of \$20.



### **National Association for College Admission Counselors Virtual College Fairs**

A comprehensive list and schedule of college fairs, performing and visual arts fairs, and STEM fairs:

- FEB. 28: 1–7 p.m. ET
- MAR. 7: 1–5 p.m. ET, STEM
- MAR. 16: 4–8 p.m. ET, Performing & Visual Arts
- Mar. 21: 1–7 p.m. ET
- Apr. 10: 3–7 p.m. ET, Western US
- Apr. 20: 3–7 p.m. ET, Southeastern US
- May 2: 1–7 p.m. ET



**Likely**

A category of schools on your college list where your academic profile (i.e., GPA, standardized test scores, course selection, etc.) outperforms the school's average admitted student profile, indicating a higher likelihood of admission. To ensure that you have options, it is necessary to have schools in this category on your list.

**Target**

A category of schools on your college list where your academic profile (i.e., GPA, standardized test scores, transcript of high-school courses, etc.) match the school's admitted student profile, indicating a lower probability of admission than that of your likely schools.

**Reach**

A category of schools on your college list where your academic profile (i.e., GPA, standardized test scores, transcript, etc.) match the school's admitted student profile but where admission is even more selective than at a likely or target school.

**Fit**

This is a broad term, frequently used by school counselors and admissions officers, that refers to the match between a college and an applicant. Students are advised to aim for the "best college fit," considering the overall environment, as well as academic, financial, social, and cultural factors.

**Minority Serving Institution (MSI)**

- Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) – There are 106 historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) in the United States, located in twenty states and the District of Columbia, including public and private institutions, community-and-four-year institutions, medical and law schools. Over half of all African-American professionals are graduates of HBCUs.
- Women's Colleges – These are single-gender institutions of higher education that only admit students who identify as female. Primarily liberal arts colleges, there are approximately thirty-four active Women's Colleges in the United States
- Tribal Colleges and Universities – These are distinguished by being controlled and operated by American Indian tribes. The first was founded by the Navajo Nation in 1968 in Arizona. Presently, there are thirty-two fully accredited Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs) in the United States.

**Technology Institute or Polytechnic Institute**

These are technical institutions that have curriculum and degree offerings focused on industrial arts (e.g., computer graphics, industrial technology and design, etc.), applied sciences (e.g., applied physics, applied mathematics, etc.), and engineering (mechanical engineering, chemical engineering, electrical engineering, biochemical engineering, etc.).

**Liberal Arts and Sciences Colleges**

These are undergraduate-focused schools that place an emphasis on the development of critical, analytic and creative thinking skills and writing rather than on more narrow pre-professional skills. Students at liberal arts and sciences colleges study broadly across various disciplines and "major" in one or two academic fields.

**In-state**

Describes the status of students with established residency in the same state as the public college they attend. In-state students are admitted at higher rates and charged lower tuition than out-of-state students are.

**Out-of-state**

Describes the status of students who are not residents of the state where they attend a public university. At public universities, tuition for out-of-state students is higher than it is for in-state students. Residency requirements can vary from state to state, so be sure to research conditions for establishing in-state status..

**Public**

Indicates a university that receives state funding, often from taxpayers and the state legislature. Tuition is lower for students who are residents of that state than it is for out-of-state students. Public universities tend to be large and offer extensive choices for majors and academic programs.

**Private**

Indicates a university that does not receive state funding. State residency is less relevant at private colleges and universities, so the student body may have greater geographic diversity. Class sizes are likely smaller and there may be fewer choices for majors; tuition is usually higher compared to a public university.

To be a successful college applicant,  
it helps to know the lingo.

**Need-blind**

Refers to colleges that do not consider ability to pay when evaluating candidates for admission. Some colleges that are need-blind do meet the full demonstrated need of admitted candidates with reasonable borrowing expectations, while others are unable to fully meet admitted candidates' demonstrated need.

**Need-aware**

Refers to colleges that may consider ability to pay when evaluating candidates for admission. Some colleges that are need-aware do meet the full demonstrated need of admitted candidates with reasonable borrowing expectations while others are unable to meet admitted candidates' full demonstrated need.

**Student Affairs**

Describes non-academic operations within a college or university, including residential life, health services, dining services, athletics and recreational sports, student support services, and programs for underrepresented student populations. Most school's Student Affairs offices have as many as forty functional areas.

**College Rankings**

Many publications, including *U.S. News & World Report* or *Forbes*, and search engines such as NICHE, publish college rankings. Each source has its own formula (based on selectivity, graduate outcomes, student satisfaction, retention, etc.) to derive rankings. Be sure to check out the formula used in a college ranking before considering the list.

