

## EDUCATION/COLLEGE

# A Practical Guide to Starting Your College Search

Getting started might be scary, but it's not hard

BY GEMMA ALEXANDER (/AUTHOR/GEMMA-ALEXANDER) |

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There may be some kids in real life who, like the character Rory Gilmore of TV's "Gilmore Girls," know at age 3 that they want to go to Harvard. But most young teens respond to the question "Where do you want to go to college?" with the deer-in-headlights stare that brainiac Rory reserved for social situations. The average middle schooler or high school freshman has no idea how to even begin looking for the right college. But starting the college search doesn't have to be stressful or confusing. In fact, according to Samantha Pacampara, a counselor at Lincoln High School in Seattle, the college search can actually be fun.

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## **Know thyself**

"It might sound cheesy or corny, but I believe that trying to approach it being true to yourself is the least stressful and most fun way possible to pursue the college search," says Pacampara. She says too many families approach the college search as though it were a contest, aiming for acceptance to the most prestigious or competitive schools.

"Think of college less like a trophy," she says, "and more like a pair of shoes. You want the ones that fit best, with some room to grow." After all, your teen will be living with their choice for four years. That's why Pacampara also recommends that students don't use their intended major to guide their search. Comparing specific courses of study across hundreds of universities is confusing, and a teen's interests will often change before it's time to declare a major. Your high school sophomore may not have even heard of their future major yet.

## **So, how do you start?**

It may sound counterintuitive, but Pacampara recommends that high school freshmen don't worry much about college. "There's not a lot of wiggle room in the course options for freshmen," she notes. So instead, students should start building the self-knowledge that will allow them to identify what kind of college will ultimately be a good fit for them. That means asking themselves some fundamental questions, including:

What kind of person am I? What are my values?

How do I learn best?

What kind of classes do I enjoy most?

In addition to these core questions of identity, students should also consider:

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Whether they want to stay close to home or live in a new, distant environment

What kind of place they want to live in – urban or rural? Mountains or beaches?

What kind of community they want to live in – how important is a faith community?

Diversity? LGBTQ inclusion? Opportunities to practice a favorite sport or activity?

“This can be a really fun conversation. For most students, it’s the first time they’ve been asked these questions,” says Pacampara.

## **Broaden the field**

There are nearly 3,000 four-year colleges (<https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=84>) in the United States, but at the time most high school students start their college search, they could count the number of colleges they’re familiar with on their fingers. So, for most teens, the first step is not selecting colleges, but identifying them. In the past, this meant spending hours at the library with thick reference books. Fortunately, there are online tools that make the process of identifying potential colleges much easier for teens today.

Tools like Naviance (<https://www.naviance.com/>) allow students to play around with filters to build a list of schools to research. Pacampara recommends that students start using lots of different individual filters to discover a broad field of schools. Desired distance from home and city size are common starting points.

“Don’t leave out things you are passionate about, whether that’s class size or the ability to attend college football games or anything else that might seem silly,” says Pacampara.

“Don’t lose sight of the things that make you feel fulfilled.” These criteria may not carry much weight once a student starts narrowing their choices, but it’s helpful to include them when identifying schools.

It’s normal for students to generate a list of dozens of schools to look at more closely. Students will become more familiar with different types of schools as they start combining filters and looking at researching individual schools in depth.

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“It’s hard for teenagers to prioritize their criteria,” Pacampara says. She recommends that students think about time allocation to remove some of the pressure of “getting it right.” Spend more time researching schools that fit the most criteria and use tighter filters for the criteria that are most important. But also spend a little time looking for “back pocket” schools that don’t quite fit the profile. For example, a student who expects to live at home may include all Puget Sound–area schools in their initial list, but also build a smaller list of out-of-state schools that meet the rest of their criteria.

## **Face hard facts**

Pacampara recommends that parents talk to their teens early in the process about things that may affect their ability to go to the school of their choice. But while students should know their decision will be affected by these facts, the search itself should not be. Let your teen know your budget and let them understand the impact of grades and test scores, but don’t encourage them to ignore expensive and selective colleges while they are researching schools.

“Often the final decision comes down to money,” says Pacampara. But it’s not a good idea to eliminate schools with high tuition too soon in the process. Obtaining financial aid is such a labyrinthine process that students often won’t know the actual price of a school until after they’ve been accepted.

“It’s not a bad thing to experience the dreamy aspect of looking for the perfect school and then the reality of having to choose a different school. It’s hard to watch your kid go through it, but it’s good practice for future life decisions. It’s actually empowering to walk away from

an impractical choice. I've never had a student say, 'I wish I'd never heard of that school,'" says Pacampara.

## Commit to the timeline

**Freshmen** should focus on settling into the high school experience and learning about themselves as students and as people.

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**Sophomores** can begin to build a robust list of colleges to consider. They can use online tools, family conversations and virtual tours to develop an idea of the kind of college experience they are seeking.

**Juniors** take standardized tests and tour college campuses. They start to consider issues such as cost and competitiveness more seriously, and by the end of junior year, should be narrowing down their list to a dozen or fewer colleges to which they plan to apply.

Fall of **senior year** is when students apply, and unless a student has applied for early decision, the final choice is usually made once all the acceptance letters have gone out in the spring.

There's no need to panic if your student doesn't follow this timeline exactly. Some people like to be prepared, and there's nothing wrong with an eighth-grader browsing Naviance instead of Instagram. Or more likely, a student who is a bit behind schedule can put in some extra effort to catch up. If a senior misses the application deadlines, that might be a sign they would benefit from a gap year.

"There are definitely times of stress in the process, but the whole process doesn't have to be stressful. Try to keep the fun in there," Pacampara advises.

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## What about the pandemic?

For sophomores, the college search won't be much affected this year, when online research has dominated the process. But the pandemic will still have a major impact on the college selection process for all current high school students. The most obvious long-term effects will be financial – many families may not have the same ability to pay for college that they had before the pandemic.

Several schools, including the University of Washington and the University of California, have already announced that they will not be looking at standardized test scores this year. And the very real possibility that the SAT may not even be administered this year could lead to permanent changes in college admissions practices and the way in which academic scholarships are awarded. Even grade point averages won't count in the same way they have in the past, as many schools switched to pass/fail grading last year.

“That means colleges will consider important things that were previously not considered. They'll be looking at different ways that students shine,” says Pacampara. That's good news for many students. It will probably make admissions more equitable, but it makes the process much less predictable.

For seniors who are trying to choose a school this year, and for juniors who cannot travel to visit campuses in person before making a choice, attending school closer to home may be looking like a more attractive option. This is especially true for residents of Seattle, where graduates of public school are able to [attend community college for free](https://www.seattletimes.com/education-lab/half-of-seattles-public-high-school-seniors-applied-for-citys-free-community-college-program-this-year/) (<https://www.seattletimes.com/education-lab/half-of-seattles-public-high-school-seniors-applied-for-citys-free-community-college-program-this-year/>).

Fortunately, Pacampara says, “We are lucky to live in a region where the community colleges are top-notch. And even just looking at Western Washington, you can get almost any kind of college experience you are looking for, from big state schools to small, private, religiously affiliated ones.”

## College Search Resources

The college search tool in [Naviance](https://www.naviance.com/) (<https://www.naviance.com/>) includes several important filters. Students can save their list of schools in the application, then use the tool to apply to those schools.

[Corsava](https://corsava.com/) (<https://corsava.com/>) is an exploratory service using in-depth personal criteria that other searches may not consider. It's especially helpful for students who are feeling lost before they've started.

The search tool on the [College Board](https://www.collegeboard.org/) (<https://www.collegeboard.org/>) website is almost identical to Naviance but has a more intuitive interface and does not require an account.

Perhaps more useful to parents than students, [DIY College Rankings](https://www.diycollegerankings.com/) (<https://www.diycollegerankings.com/>) offers tools and information about the college search, with a focus on paying for college. It includes a handy downloadable booklet, "[7 Days to a Smarter College List](https://www.diycollegerankings.com/7-days-smarter-college-list-download/) (<https://www.diycollegerankings.com/7-days-smarter-college-list-download/>)."

Don't forget your high school counselor! It's their job to help students navigate the process. "Any time a student or family gets stuck, definitely get in touch with your counselor. Sometimes just talking about it and hearing, 'Yes, this is normal,' helps. It's fun for counselors to talk about these things, and we've seen it all before," says Pacampara.

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