

# 7 Crucial Questions to Ask When Choosing a College



What's the party scene like? Where do students go on spring break? While this information might be important to you, these probably aren't the best questions to ask when choosing a college.

Instead, you'd be wise to focus on factors such as location, academics and cost to find the right school for you. That way, when National College Decision Day rolls around on May 1, you'll have your mind made up on where you want to enroll.

## **7 insightful questions to ask when choosing a college**

If you're deciding where to go to college, asking these important questions about college life, academics and affordability can help you make the right choice for your future.

## 1. Do the academic offerings match my goals?

First and foremost, you're heading to college to further your education and earn your degree, so you'll obviously want to learn about the academics of a college before deciding to enroll.

Find out what majors the school offers, along with the reputation of its departments and professors. If you already have a major in mind, check out the classes the college offers to ensure the curriculum piques your interest.

"The college you choose will have an impact on your life longer than just the time you attend it, so this is one of the most important questions to think about," said Lindsey Conger, a college counselor at Moon Prep. "It's OK if you don't have a major figured out quite yet, but check to see if the school does offer the area you are interested in studying."

You might also consider class size, as some colleges skew toward large, lecture-style classes, while others offer small seminars and lots of face-time with professors. So think about your learning style and which approach would best help you advance academically.

## 2. How do I feel about the location?

Location can make or break your college experience, so get clear on what you're looking for. Do you want an urban environment with lots to do? Or do you prefer a close-knit, campus feel in a suburban or rural setting?

Costs can also vary by location — for instance, going to school in the middle of New York City could cost a lot more than a suburban campus — so factor this in when deciding which location would be best for you.

Visiting campuses is a great way to gauge the location, as you can see firsthand what it would be like to live and go to each school. There are ways

you can make college visits affordable, and you might even get to stay overnight in a dorm room to get a real feel for the experience.

### **3. What's my cost of attendance?**

For most students, it's crucial to estimate the cost of attendance before choosing a college. With tuition higher than ever, you'll probably regret committing to a school if it has a sky-high price tag.

"Make sure it is financially feasible for you to attend this school," advised Conger. "While there are options like loans, scholarships and grants, really take a few days to think about what the monetary impact will be on you."

Check out the college's financial aid website to learn about its total costs. At the same time, study your financial aid award letter to understand what you're being offered. Remember, financial aid letters often include student loans as part of your "award," but of course, loans aren't free money.

"If you will have to take out loans, make sure you aren't taking out too much in loans," advised Sabrina Manville, co-founder of Edmit, a company that helps families prepare financially for college. "As a benchmark, many experts suggest estimating the salary you'll make in your first year and comparing it to your total loan amount for all four years. The total loan amount should be less than or equal to that first-year salary."

Make sure you understand all the terms and conditions before borrowing student loans, especially if you also take out private students loans, so you don't take on more debt than you can handle. You might also consider working a part-time job during college to cover living costs and reduce the amount you have to borrow.

### **4. What can I do outside of class?**

Beyond academics, check out what the school has to offer in the way of clubs, teams and other extracurriculars. Are there sports teams you can join, community service activities you can participate in or an a cappella group if you like to sing?

“Students should ask what is there to do on the weekend, and does everyone tend to stay put in the residence halls,” suggested Adam Smith, director of undergraduate admissions at Husson University in Maine. “Some schools may be known as a ‘suitcase’ campus where everyone packs their bags and leaves due to their proximity to home and/or work. This can often cause students left in the residence halls to feel homesick and question their decision to attend.” Outside of clubs, teams and events, find out if your school offers opportunities for internships or on-campus jobs. And if you want to spend a semester or two in another country, learn more about its study abroad offerings.

## **5. What are the facilities like?**

If you’re living on campus, you could be spending up to four years living in a college dorm and eating in your school’s cafeteria. So make sure to tour the campus and view all the facilities (or at the very minimum, check out the pictures online) before committing to enrolling.

While you can’t expect a dorm room to be the most elegant living situation, you at least want to be comfortable where you are. And if you’re having trouble deciding between two schools, the quality of one’s dorms, cafeteria, gym, auditorium, labs or other facilities might just give one an edge and help you pick.

## **6. Do students like it there?**

If you can, reach out to current students or alumni to ask about their experiences there. While different people might see things differently, students past and present can give you firsthand insights into the school’s academics or culture that you wouldn’t hear about otherwise.

Prepare some questions to ask when visiting a campus, as this is your opportunity to hear what the students have to say.

You might also look up data on retention rates, to see how many students return year after year. If the school you're looking at has a very low retention rate, that might raise a red flag about the quality of the education there.

Anna Ren, a college admissions consultant who runs Elite Advantage Prep, similarly suggests looking at the school's graduation rate for insight into how it supports its students.

"It's important to know if a school's four-year graduation rate is low, as that may indicate that the school does not have as many resources in place to help students get to the finish line," said Ren.

## **7. Does it feel like a good fit?**

Finally, don't forget to check in with your gut about where you want to go to college. While all these considerations about location and the quality of the facilities can help you evaluate your options, it's also important to trust your intuition.

"Making your college decision based on how you feel about a school is valid," said Shannon Zottola, vice president and dean of enrollment management at Ursinus College in Pennsylvania. "Do you feel excited about going there? Feel that you will be secure, that you will be OK on that campus? When it comes down to it, let go of all the check boxes and give in to your emotion. If you trust your instinct, it generally will be the right fit."

You have a good sense of what you're drawn to and what you're not, so don't be afraid to let your internal compass guide the way.

**Try to get all your questions answered before choosing a college**

Selecting a college is a big decision, and the answer isn't always clear-cut. Make sure to get all your questions about college life answered so that you can feel confident about your decision.

Of course, you can always transfer if the school you choose turns out not to be the right one for you. Hopefully, though, your answers to these questions above will lead you to the perfect school where you can earn your degree and avoid taking on a burdensome amount of student loan. [Rebecca Safier](#)  
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