

College Planning Values Assessment

Students have different reasons for going to college. Defining your values is an essential first step in identifying the colleges where you will fit in and be happy.

What do you want college to do for you? Here are 12 suggested reasons why you might want to attend college.

1. To learn about different cultures, peoples, backgrounds, etc.
2. To expand my potential lifetime earnings
3. To learn essential life skills so that I can be a better parent and citizen
4. To find a vocational direction in life
5. To gain more independence and a greater sense of freedom
6. To create long-lasting relationships and professional connections
7. To have a fresh start where no one knows me
8. To gain new skills and experiences
9. To enable me to receive a degree from a high-quality school
10. To explore the U.S. and perhaps the world
11. To take advantage of college life: spectator sports, clubs, activities, etc.
12. To get the best education possible at a reasonable cost

To complete this assessment, you will consider these 12 values and record how important the value is to you on a scale from “a most important reason” to “a least important reason.”

There are no “right” answers here. Every student will have a different response to these values. Although several, or even most, of these values may be significant for you in one way or another, the goal (as you will see below) is to decide which three are the most important.

Here are the 12 values:

1. To learn about different cultures, peoples, backgrounds, etc.

People vary in terms of gender, socioeconomic background, religious background, cultural background, and more. We differ from one another regarding what kind of music we like, how we want to spend a Saturday afternoon, and what type of food we eat. In your classes, in the residence hall, and all across campus, you will encounter diversity of all sorts. Coming face to face with diversity helps us see that the little bubble that we come from is but one of many such bubbles that exist worldwide.

Students are exposed to all kinds of ideas in college, and you will often run into situations in which beliefs don't line up with one another. You will encounter instances where your really-smart-seeming professor wholly disagrees with the ideas of another really-smart-seeming professor. Learning how to work with and assess a variety of ideas is an important goal of any college education.

1. How important is “to learn about different cultures, peoples, etc.” as a reason for my going to college?

Most Important Reason	Important Reason	Indifferent	Unimportant Reason	Least Important Reason
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2. To expand my potential lifetime earnings

More money! Yes, college graduates make, on average, thousands of dollars more a year than do those who didn't earn a college degree. Over a lifetime of earnings, this difference amounts to hundreds of thousands of dollars. You will want to think about earning potential, advancement opportunities, and the future market for the careers you consider. You will want to consider this value in your career planning.

Remember, however, that there is no sure road to riches! You not only must pick a career direction carefully but also choose a college where the potential for academic success is high. When it comes to securing a good job or being admitted to graduate school, the name of a particular college is less important than your GPA or contributions to campus life. Even if you find that a particular career has tremendous earning potential, those earnings may come to only those who are most successful in the profession. Look at the average salaries and consider your interests, values, and personality before making your final career choice. Be sure to take advantage of hands-on learning opportunities such as internships that interest you and could give you insight into different occupations. In addition, finding good, career-focused summer jobs can be helpful in determining what fields align with your interests, abilities, and goals.

2. How important is “to expand my potential lifetime earnings” as a reason for my going to college?

Most Important Reason	Important Reason	Indifferent	Unimportant Reason	Least Important Reason
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3. To learn essential life skills so that I can be a better parent and citizen

College life puts you into a community that can serve as a prototype to a more informed life post-college. College gives you the chance to reflect on your values and character and develop a deeper and broader understanding of social issues. Playing an active role on a college campus can foster civic participation over a lifetime. Intellectual discussion can provide you with critiquing, debate, and discussion skills. Facts learned in the classroom about subjects such as history, psychology, business, etc., could provide information you need to answer questions posed by children and ultimately lead to better parenting. If religion and/or spirituality are important to you, college may provide insights that will be helpful in community or family life.

3. How important is “to learn essential life skills to be a better parent and citizen” as a reason for my going to college?

Most Important Reason	Important Reason	Indifferent	Unimportant Reason	Least Important Reason
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4. To find a vocational direction in life

Finding a career that will be fulfilling is one of the most critical choices you will make in your life. Your selection of a college will be your first step toward achieving your career goal. If you have tentatively selected a career, college will allow you to take courses leading to a degree in your chosen field. If you don't yet know what job would suit you, remember that a broad, solid liberal arts foundation is considered good preparation for most professions. College offers you an opportunity to explore different options and areas of interest. You will want to look at opportunities for internships and take advantage of the career planning and placement office at your chosen college. Most schools don't require students to declare a major until the end of their sophomore year. That gives you two years to work on general courses and explore different majors.

4. How important is “to find a vocational direction in life” as a reason for my going to college?

Most Important Reason	Important Reason	Indifferent	Unimportant Reason	Least Important Reason
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5. To gain more independence and a greater sense of freedom

Gaining personal autonomy is vital to many young people. College is, in general, a time for independence, and students are often eager to make their own decisions without parental involvement. If you feel you can handle a high level of autonomy, you will want to look for colleges where there is some freedom in choosing courses and where students are given responsibility for their own lives. If you consider independence a priority, you may want to think carefully about where and how that independence will be cultivated. Some students find a great sense of autonomy when they are farther from home. Others may want to reach an agreement with parents about how much contact is suitable for the level of independence desired.

5. How important is “to gain more independence and a greater sense of freedom” as a reason for my going to college?

Most Important Reason	Important Reason	Indifferent	Unimportant Reason	Least Important Reason
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6. To create long-lasting relationships and professional connections

The college years are a time to make lifelong friends as well as develop relationships with professors and other adults who are authorities and experts in their fields. Given the diversity often found on college campuses, the odds are good you will find people as like you and unlike you as possible, and some of them may become friends for life. If building these kinds of relationships is important to you, consider carefully the composition of the student body at colleges of interest. Where will the friendships you seek be most likely to be created and sustained?

6. How important is “to gain more independence and a greater sense of freedom” as a reason for my going to college?

Most Important Reason	Important Reason	Indifferent	Unimportant Reason	Least Important Reason
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7. To have a fresh start where no one knows me

For the most part, you arrive at college as a blank slate. You can hang out with a different group of people or be a completely different person. Some students who may have been quiet to a fault in high school make a conscious effort to open up in college. Students who didn’t have tons of friends in high school may prioritize widening their social circle of friends or developing deeper relationships in college. Expectations play a role in the person we are in high school, where students are readily characterized as “nerds” or “jocks” or known primarily for being musicians or actors. Sometimes these labels become indelible, and some students feel they can’t shake the expectations others have of them. All that changes in college where a “new you” is possible.

7. How important is “to have a fresh start where no one knows me” as a reason for my going to college?

Most Important Reason	Important Reason	Indifferent	Unimportant Reason	Least Important Reason
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8. To gain new skills and experiences

College is all about growing, personally and professionally. “Newness” is an experience everyone has in college—often every day! New classes, new activities, new milieu. You may envision college as an adventure and will want to pick schools where you can meet your need for stimulation and excitement. Because you value newness, you should not hesitate to attend college in a different part of the country or experience an environment or an entirely different climate from your high school.

8. How important is “to gain new skills and experiences” as a reason for my going to college?

Most Important Reason	Important Reason	Indifferent	Unimportant Reason	Least Important Reason
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9. To receive a degree from a high-quality school

For students who are intellectually focused or academically strong, attaining a high-quality college education may be a long-held goal. If this sounds like you, you’ll want to look carefully at the rankings and ratings for the colleges you’re considering. Be sure to search both the college websites and websites run by independent businesses that evaluate the qualities that verify a college’s claim of being outstanding. That being said, note that there is no single definition of what makes a school a “high-quality” college. For some students, it might mean the percent of graduates from that college that go on to law, medical, or other professional schools. For others, it might mean a range of exciting courses in a particular area of interest. For others, “high quality” might mean “perceived quality” or how others rank the college. But be cautious about seeking only a “name brand” college. Even though it is perfectly acceptable for students to be attuned to a college’s overall excellence, prestige does not equal academic quality. Although it is appropriate to look for a strong faculty and a highly regarded college, ultimately what you want is a college where you will have the greatest chance of academic success. It is your success in college, not your school’s academic reputation or prestige, that will lead to graduate school admission or a broad selection of jobs.

9. How important is “to receive a degree from a high-quality school” as a reason for my going to college?

Most Important Reason	Important Reason	Indifferent	Unimportant Reason	Least Important Reason
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10. To explore the U.S. and perhaps the world

College offers an opportunity to learn about different places and the people who live there. You may choose to attend a college in a part of the country unfamiliar to you, with different types of food, customs, and attitudes. Even if you attend an in-state college, there will be opportunities to visit unfamiliar regions of the state and spend time at parks, museums, and other points of interest. Many students take advantage of college study abroad programs in order to experience a new country, language, and culture. Study abroad programs can be very affordable, usually costing about the same as a semester at college. Any international experience you can acquire will be an asset in the eyes of many employers. They are looking for graduates who have demonstrated that they can adapt to different work styles, communicate effectively with people from various backgrounds, and successfully navigate unfamiliar terrain.

10. How important is “to explore the U.S. and perhaps the world” as a reason for my going to college?

Most Important Reason	Important Reason	Indifferent	Unimportant Reason	Least Important Reason
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11. To take advantage of college life: spectator sports, clubs, activities, etc.

Like the majority of students, you may have reasons for attending college that go beyond getting a solid education. You recognize that the opportunities available both inside and outside the classroom can help you take the critical next steps into adulthood and your future career. Joining clubs and organizations develops confidence while honing essential leadership and teamwork skills. Participating in sports, either as a spectator or participant builds camaraderie and social links. For some students, “college life” may be even more important than “academic life.” If that’s you, you’ll want a college where the academic demands will not diminish your ability to socialize. For you, your chosen school should provide a good balance between the social and educational aspects of campus life. You may want to consider schools with strong sports teams or active fraternities and sororities. Investigating what percentage of students stay on campus over the weekend will give you an idea of how strong the social culture is.

11. How important is “to take advantage of college life: spectator sports, clubs, etc.” as a reason for my going to college?

Most Important Reason	Important Reason	Indifferent	Unimportant Reason	Least Important Reason
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12. To get the best education possible at a reasonable cost

Most people want to use their money wisely or, in the case of most students, their parents’ money. Consider whether an expensive college is worth the cost for you and your parents. There may be circumstances where shelling out big bucks for a high-priced, well-known private school is worth the investment, but it’s not always the case. Yes, a college education is a significant component of improving earning potential, but the relationship between an institution’s academic quality and its cost is a critical component to consider. Part of the consideration here has to do with college loans. Some families take out hundreds of thousands of dollars in loans for undergraduate education, while others don’t consider an education at one particular school worth taking on a mountain of debt. When it comes to determining the value of a degree from a particular university, there are several factors to consider: the price of the school in question, the degree you are pursuing, and your earning potential once you have graduated. Weighing these factors can be difficult for students who want to follow their dreams. Someone deeply interested in the arts may find it a tough field in which to find a job, much less one that pays well. A lesson that many families are learning the hard way is that a costly degree in specific fields of study can turn into a large amount of debt and few promising job prospects.

12. How important is “to get the best education possible at a reasonable cost” as a reason for my going to college?

Most Important Reason	Important Reason	Indifferent	Unimportant Reason	Least Important Reason
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Now go back and identify your top three values and check them below.

1. To learn about different cultures, peoples, backgrounds, etc.
2. To expand my potential lifetime earnings
3. To learn essential life skills so that I can be a better parent and citizen
4. To find a vocational direction in life
5. To gain more independence and a greater sense of freedom
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Finally, in your own words, what do your top three values say about what you are looking for in a college? Has completing this exercise prompted you to think more deeply about what you want out of college and what you hope to experience there? You should write down your response to these questions and share it (and your three highest values) with your counselor, consultant, parent, or others that are helping you find a college that's good for you.