

Qualities That Will Make a College Right for You

When you see numbers from 1 to 5 sandwiched between two statements, check the number that best reflects your level of preference. Check 1 if you have a strong preference for the quality listed on the left. Check 5 if you have a strong preference for the quality listed on the right. Use 2, 3, or 4 to reflect varying levels of preference.

Quality 1—Size

Colleges vary in size from under 100 to more than 60,000 students. As you think about this quality, try to picture the size college that is best for you academically AND socially. The following considerations may help you.

Smaller colleges. Smaller colleges provide students with many benefits. First, they can be just as diverse, fun, and interesting as larger schools. Students at these schools often rave about the range of opportunities and the depth of their friendships.

Second, because classes are more intimate than those at large universities, they allow for greater interaction between student and professor. You'll have more opportunities to contribute in class, and it's likely you'll really know your professors. By knowing your professors, you can benefit from their expertise and they can help you with any academic weak points. Further, they will be able to write you knowledgeable recommendations for jobs or graduate schools. Smaller colleges are best if you prefer discussion classes (where you are a participant) as opposed to lecture classes (where the teacher does most of the talking). You are also more likely to be able to register for the classes you desire. And at smaller colleges, you experience less competition for the use of academic facilities such as library resources and specialized equipment.

In addition, smaller colleges tend to place greater emphasis on personal development. In other words, it's easier for students to learn about themselves: their interests, abilities, and possible career paths. The best preparation for students who are unsure of their career direction is a liberal arts and sciences curriculum found at most small colleges. A college does not need to offer every one of your potential career majors to be a good place to prepare for your future; many studies have highlighted career successes that began with a liberal arts and sciences education. At smaller colleges, teaching is usually the top priority of faculty members—research may be less important. This emphasis may mean more exciting classroom experiences (which often result in increased understanding and higher grades). At larger universities, in contrast, you may be taught by graduate students, not professors.

Smaller colleges provide greater opportunities to participate in extracurricular activities because you don't have to be a superstar to get involved. If you don't find the club or organization that feeds your particular interest, you can always start one. You might enjoy a smaller college if you want to fairly quickly find a place in a new community.

Because it is difficult to get “lost,” small colleges often facilitate the development of student confidence. Don’t discount the advantages of being a significant fish in a small pond—it can do wonders for your self-esteem and sense of accomplishment.

Larger colleges. Larger colleges also offer many benefits. Here, you’ll find great range and variety in the courses offerings. You may be able to explore (and perhaps take classes in) two different fields of study—for example, arts and sciences and engineering. Also, students who are very undecided about the subjects they want to study may feel that large universities (offering many strong majors) are their safest educational choice. In addition, special advanced facilities and equipment are available at many large universities. Students whose learning style is more listening-based may prefer lectures to classes that are more discussion-oriented. Many students may appreciate the anonymity that a large school offers.

At large universities, students invariably find more activities from which to choose. Nationally known and popular sports teams not only increase a school’s name recognition but also promote school spirit and camaraderie among students. At colleges with large student populations, there are organizations and clubs that focus on an array of interests and serve all kinds of social groups.

Be cautious about generalizations. Important as they are, size considerations often cause students to limit the field of potential colleges too early in the process of choosing a college. Students who cross all larger colleges off their list before they even begin should be aware that larger colleges may vary in terms of how much personal attention is available from teachers, career advisors, and others. Some large universities may have honors colleges, a more intimate, academic program that creates a smaller community. Students who reject smaller colleges as too vanilla or boring should know that small colleges can be just as diverse and just as fun. They’re also overlooking the more than 80% of private colleges in the U.S.—and almost a quarter of the nation’s public colleges—that have enrollments under 2,500.

Just because you attended a large high school doesn’t mean you should attend a large college or that there is something regressive about going to a small college. On the other hand, students from smaller high schools should not assume they are now “ready” for a bigger school. It’s also true that students from smaller high schools aren’t necessarily happier at a small college. Some students make false assumptions when comparing high school size with college size. The reality is that college is very different from high school, and your consideration of size is dependent on many factors, including the dimensions you see outlined in this worksheet.

High desire for accessible teachers.	1	2	3	4	5	Low desire for accessible teachers.
I would likely get better grades in small classes.	1	2	3	4	5	I would likely get similar grades in small or large classes.
More discussion-oriented classes.	1	2	3	4	5	More lecture-oriented classes.
I learn best discussing ideas and interacting with the instructor and students.	1	2	3	4	5	I learn best by reading, listening, taking notes.
Desire for tutors/ extra assistance.	1	2	3	4	5	No desire for tutors/ extra assistance.
A close-knit, family-like environment.	1	2	3	4	5	A place where I can blend in with the crowd.

First, look at the following size distinctions. (These distinctions are arbitrary and are intended merely to assist you in considering general size parameters.)

Small size—fewer than 3,000 students

Medium size—between 3,000 and 10,000 students

Large size—between 10,000 and 20,000 students Largest size—more than 20,000 students

Now, on the basis of the discussion and your checked responses above, check those sizes that you feel are best for you.

_____ Small _____ Medium _____ Large _____ Largest

Any comments/further thoughts about the size of your ideal college?

Quality 2—Academic Environment

To determine what kind of academic environment will be right for you, you will need to think about the intellectual intensity you are comfortable with and the level of academic pressure that motivates you without making you feel stressed out or frustrated.

Naturally, since college is an academic undertaking, classes and other academic concerns make up the bulk of your collegiate experience. Finding the appropriate level of academic challenge is important to your choice of colleges. Think about how much intellectual intensity is right for you. Do you want a college where you must work hard and study hard, or would you prefer one where you could earn respectable grades without knocking yourself out? Think carefully about how much time you want to spend on academic pursuits in college. If you truly enjoy talking about ideas and intellectual subjects, you may choose the “very academic” side of the “Intellectual Intensity” scale that follows.

Also, think here about your response to academic pressure and competition from others. Are you at home with a tremendous workload? Do you prioritize well? Can you discipline yourself? If your answers are “yes,” you should select a vigorous academic environment. If, however, you prefer to perform consistently at the top of your class, if you become distraught with a grade lower than an A, or if you don’t work well under stress, you may respond better to a college with normal academic pressure.

Intellectual Intensity

Very academic/ scholarly emphasis	1	2	3	4	5	Balance between academic/ social sides of campus life
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Academic Pressure

Ready/able to handle the most vigorous academic environment	1	2	3	4	5	Ready/able to handle normal academic pressure
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Other Academic/Curricular Qualities

In addition to offering certain concentrated areas of potential study (majors), colleges vary in terms of other academic qualities. Would you enjoy more freedom or more structure insofar as courses you are required to take? Would work experiences, internships, or the availability of independent study enhance your academic success? Would you like a particularly strong study abroad experience? Do you want to prepare for the military? Many academic variables are included on the following list. ***Check any that you would like in your college.***

- _____ internships/work experiences
- _____ learning resources (learning center, tutors, extra time on tests, etc.)
- _____ considerable freedom in choosing courses
- _____ programs for students with learning style differences (LD, ADD, ADHD, etc.)
- _____ independent study options
- _____ applying what I learn to real world problems
- _____ preparation for the military
- _____ more hands-on learning opportunities
- _____ counseling/psychological/medical services
- _____ courses geared to my specific academic/career interests
- _____ excellent study abroad programs
- _____ research opportunities
- _____ personalized academic advising
- _____ personalized career advising
- _____ writing center

***Is there anything else related to the academic environment that is important to you?
If so, describe it here:***

Quality 3—Academic Offerings

This category refers to your potential college major and not your potential career. It's important for you to keep that distinction in mind. A major is a subject you enjoy and would like to study in college. Do you enjoy English or history? Does math or communication sound interesting?

In this section, you are asked to mark where you stand on the continuum between “A liberal arts and sciences college is best” and “A college that will prepare me for a specific career after four years of college is best.” Liberal arts and sciences is the term used to describe the most general and most common form of undergraduate education in the U.S. It includes the humanities (English, languages, music, art, philosophy, etc.), the social sciences (psychology, history, political science, etc.), and the “hard” sciences (biology, mathematics, geology, etc.). Many liberal arts and sciences schools also provide coursework in business and engineering. The liberal arts and sciences often serve as a springboard for future study (for example, graduate school, law school, medical school, or business school) and for the world of work.

If you are uncertain about your career, then you should select a liberal arts and sciences curriculum where you can gain a broad education. On the other hand, you may want to take more courses in an area that already interests you. The classes in career-oriented schools will more directly relate to careers in such areas as engineering, business, physical therapy, or architecture on completion of your undergraduate degree.

It is perfectly okay not to know what your ultimate career will be. Most high school students do not know, and many who enter college with a career picked out change their mind (and major) at least once before graduating. In some ways, coming to the wrong conclusion too early about a career is worse than not knowing. Most high school students have not been exposed to many career alternatives, making a final career decision premature. The undergraduate years can be a time of discovery about yourself and your career goals.

A liberal arts and sciences college is best.	1	2	3	4	5	A college that prepares me for a specific career after four years of college is best.
I want a broad-based education so I can consider several careers.	1	2	3	4	5	I would like to focus on classes that are relevant to my current career interests.

If you already feel confident in your selection of a career goal and want a college that offers your particular program, enter the name of your program in the space provided below. If you're still unsure, what subjects would you like to learn more about? And/or which subjects will you consider as a major? (Some colleges allow you to have more than one major.)

Possible programs, majors, or subjects of study:**What career(s) have you considered? If none, say so.****Quality 4—Cost/Availability of Financial Aid**

Costs vary greatly from one college to another. Many students, however, make too many assumptions about cost too early in the process of choosing a college. There are many forms of financial aid available. Although most aid is given (naturally) to those who can demonstrate need (by the results of a standardized financial aid analysis using forms such as the Free Application for Federal Student Aid), aid is also available for students who have achieved academic excellence or those with special abilities. Most students take out loans to pay for their college education. Talk to your parents and advisors about the pros and cons of accumulating debt.

Perhaps no factor in college selection is as potentially limiting as cost. There are so many myths associated with cost. Students and families may believe that little money is available, that only poverty-stricken families receive aid, or that students need to be super scholars to receive money from colleges. The truth is that enormous resources are available for families who take the time to explore financial aid opportunities.

On the following continuum, indicate the extent to which cost/availability of aid is a consideration in your choice of a college. It is quite important to talk this over with your family.

Cost is a major factor in choosing a college.	1	2	3	4	5	Cost is a minor factor in choosing a college.
I need to do a thorough search of my financial aid options.	1	2	3	4	5	No search of financial aid options is necessary.

Cost will lead me to an in-state college. . . or one that costs less. . . or one where I can get a scholarship.	1	2	3	4	5	Cost will not lead me in these directions.
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Comments about cost/financial aid in your college search:

Quality 5—Religion

The extent of religious influence varies from college to college. Some colleges have very little or no religious influence. Other schools may be related to a particular religious denomination, but are not governed or influenced by the church; these schools also tend to have very little religious influence. There are other colleges—Christian colleges, for example—that have far closer relationships to a denomination that extend to required religion classes and/or religious practices (such as chapel services).

Regardless of the extent of religious life, you might desire a college where many, if not most, of the students belong to your religion. Is this factor important to you in selecting a college?

Religious life is an important factor in choosing a college.	1	2	3	4	5	Religious life is not a factor in choosing in a college.
I want a college where religious life is emphasized.	1	2	3	4	5	I do not care about whether religious life is emphasized.
I'd like to be at a college where many students share my religious background.	1	2	3	4	5	Having many students of my religious background is not a significant college planning variable.

Comments about religious influence:

Quality 6–Ethnicity

Latino, Latina, American Indian, Asian, and African-American students may benefit in many ways by attending a college with a high number of students who belong to the same ethnic group. For example, for the African-American student, predominantly Black colleges offer students the opportunity to interact with Black role models, to develop a network of contacts who can be helpful in getting jobs, and to learn in a comfortable environment. Many respected leaders in government, education, and other professions are graduates of these institutions. Similarly, students who might feel isolated on predominantly “white” campuses often benefit from the camaraderie and closeness that comes from being with others who share their heritage.

Would the presence of other students of your heritage foster your sense of belonging? Would you feel like an outsider if you were one of only a few students of your ethnic background? Are you interested in specialized programs for minority students?

It's important that I attend a college where many students share my ethnic/racial heritage.	1	2	3	4	5	It's unimportant that I attend a college where many students share my heritage.
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Comments about racial/ethnic issues in my choice of college:

Quality 7–Coeducation or Single Sex

This consideration is predominately for women, although there are some fine all-male colleges as well. Don't be too hasty here. Both women's and men's colleges offer special educational advantages and ought to be carefully considered. For example, several studies have found that students at women's colleges are more academically involved in classes, are more likely to pursue advanced degrees, and show more intellectual self-esteem, compared with their counterparts in coeducational institutions. Furthermore, a women's college offers women more opportunities for academic success in an environment where they don't need to compete with men for both classroom time and positions of campus leadership. Women's colleges are just as fun, just as interesting, and, in many ways, can be just as “real world” as coed schools.

What kind of school would you consider?

_____ Coed _____ Men _____ Women

Quality 8—Student Body Characteristics

Identifying the characteristics about students with whom you will feel most at home can be meaningful as you contemplate your college choices. Think about the traits that you would like to see in your fellow students. What follows is a list of words and phrases that describe people and personalities. ***Check those qualities that describe members of the student body at a college you would like to attend. In the blanks provided, list any other characteristics that you would like to find in your future classmates.***

Keep in mind that most colleges enroll a wide variety of students. This exercise is designed to identify the personality characteristics and values of students at a college that is a good match for you. As you research colleges and as you visit, pay attention to words or phrases used to describe schools of interest to you. See if there are similarities between your words and college descriptions.

adventurous	dress-conscious	motivated	spirited
aggressive	energetic	nonjudgmental	spontaneous
ambitious	entrepreneurial	open	supportive
artsy	focused	opinionated	tightly knit
athletic	friendly	outdoorsy	tolerant
balanced	fun	patient	traditional
career-oriented	good values	politically active	unconventional
caring	goofy	practical	understanding
compassionate	idealistic	realistic	well-behaved
conservative	independent	respectful	interested in cultural activities
cosmopolitan	innovative	risk-taking	interested in learning for learning's sake
creative	involved	scholarly	
disciplined	laid back	sensitive	
diverse	liberal	serious	
down-to-earth	moral	social	

If you checked more than five qualities, now go back and put a check mark next to the five that are most important to you.

Other characteristics you'd like to see in your fellow students:

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Finally, take a look at the following continuum. Students at the colleges on the left side of the continuum are traditional; in other words, they are like students you'd find on most campuses. Students at the colleges on the right side of the continuum are more alternative, free-spirited, and independent-minded. The distinction here is arbitrary (and involves generalizing), but your response can be helpful in thinking about broad categories of students at your "good-match" college. If you can't decide, or if this variable is unimportant, or if you could fit into either side, check 3.

A more traditional student body is best for me.	1	2	3	4	5	An alternative, free-spirited, independent-minded student body is best for me.
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Comments about the students at your ideal college:

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Quality 9—Student Life

Colleges differ from each other in many ways, and many of these differences relate to student life. Your satisfaction with your college choice is likely to depend on how comfortable and content you feel on campus. ***Check any of the following characteristics that are important to you.***

- ☐ most students live on-campus
- ☐ lots of spectator sports
- ☐ an environmentally concerned student body
- ☐ going to athletic games is a big social event
- ☐ lots of students participate in intramural sports
- ☐ fraternities/sororities are available
- ☐ specialized programs for women/gay/multicultural students
- ☐ lots of weekend activities
- ☐ the food is good
- ☐ a safe campus
- ☐ a beautiful campus
- ☐ ramps/easy access to buildings
- ☐ many leadership opportunities available
- ☐ nice residence halls/living spaces
- ☐ where a sense of community exists
- ☐ where I'm recognized for accomplishments outside of class
- ☐ where I don't feel like a number
- ☐ community service/volunteer opportunities
- ☐ very spirited

What are some other characteristics of student life that will make your college experience a better one?

Quality 10—Activities (Including Athletics)

You may desire a normal variety of activities, or you may be looking for a college that offers some specific activity. You might want to continue a high school activity or you might want to develop new interests. For example, you might want to get involved in clubs that relate to your career or professional interests. Would you like to participate in sports? Which ones? At the varsity, club, or intramural level? Do you want to be a leader and/or develop your leadership skills? Are you looking for theater or art or music involvements? Are there other clubs or organizations that appeal to you in such areas as religion, international students, outdoor/recreation, community service, ethnic/culture, political, or academic?

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Quality 11—Big Name School or Best Fit School?

Students vary in the priority they place on attending a well-known college or university. Students who are very focused on attending a “name” college or university sometimes put that desire above other factors in choosing a school, and as a result, totally disregard whether the “name” college is a good overall fit for them. On the other hand, students looking for a school that is a good match for them look at all the factors or qualities that a college possesses—its size, programs offered, characteristics of the students, quality of faculty, location, and so forth. It’s fine for an “A” student to want to attend an excellent quality college. But remember that dozens and dozens of colleges have superior professors, outstanding academic facilities, and a high percentage of graduates admitted to top graduate schools. Most colleges have excellent networking possibilities after graduation. Lastly, other factors beyond academic prestige are also important, such as your happiness and your success!

Both name and fit may be important to you. But, given the distinction between “name” and “fit” described here, where would you put yourself on the following continuum? Your position may change over the college planning process, but for now, rate yourself on this factor based on where you stand today.

The “name” or prestige of a college is most important in my college search.	1	2	3	4	5	The fit of the college (social and academic atmosphere, size) is most important in my college search.
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Quality 12—Admission Difficulty

Think about the level of difficulty of your courses and the extent of your curiosity, independence, and organization.

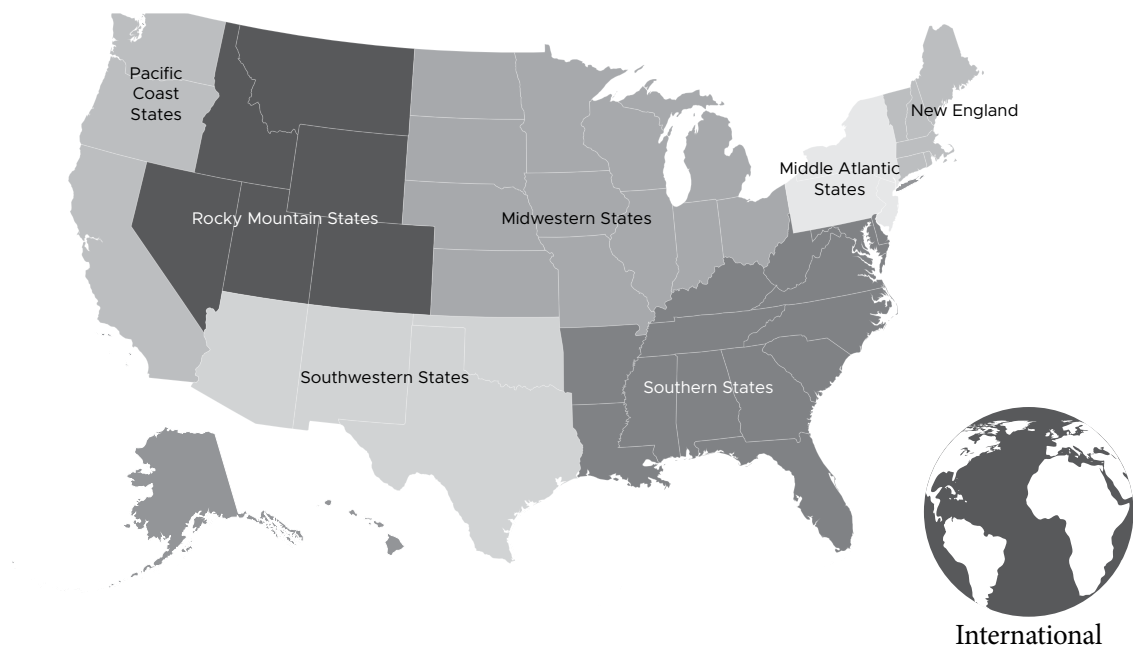
When you compare yourself with others in your own high school graduating class, where do you think you stand? What level of admission difficulty do you feel you fit into? Being realistic is essential here.

The most selective colleges are appropriate for me.	1	2	3	4	5	Less selective colleges are appropriate for me.
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Quality 13—Location

The first task here is to decide the relative weight of location in your college selection. Is location more important than other factors such as overall quality of the college and its academic offerings, size, or cost? Or is location a relatively low consideration on your college choice list? Do you want to attend school close to home? Will you want to come home often? (Even the least homesick student may want to come home occasionally.)

Location is the most important factor in choosing a college.	1	2	3	4	5	Other factors are more important than location in choosing a college.
I'd like a college that is close to home.	1	2	3	4	5	Closeness to home is not particularly important to me.



Think about the following in regard to the location of your college:

Regions of the country where you would prefer to go to college

Are some parts of the country or world more appealing than others? Do you prefer certain types of climates?

How concerned are you or your parents about the ease and expense of traveling to and from the college? Do you have relatives or close friends in particular states that you would like to be near? (A relative or friend can be a valuable support system when you're away from home for the first time.)

Keep in mind that you're choosing an academic environment where you will spend four years—you are not choosing a vacation site! Referring to the regional boundaries as defined on the map on the opposite page, check those regions of the country you will consider in choosing a college:

☐ Pacific Coast	☐ Rocky Mountain	☐ Middle Atlantic	☐ Midwestern
☐ Southwestern	☐ New England	☐ Southern	☐ International

Specific states in which you would prefer to go to college:

List any states that you particularly like. Try not to think of specific colleges within a given state, but rather think about states where you would enjoy going to college.

Close to a city?

Consider the following three possibilities:

1. ***A college in a major city.*** Being in a medium or large city allows you to take advantage of a number of amenities. If you follow major or professional sports teams or enjoy cultural institutions such as art museums or the symphony, a college in a city or nearby suburb may best satisfy your needs. Will you go crazy if you don't have at least one large shopping mall and several movie theaters within 15 minutes of your dorm? Then this option will be best.
2. ***A college near a large city, but not in it.*** These colleges are located on the outskirts of the city or in the outer suburbs. With this option, students have access to a city but also enjoy a campus with a distinct "feel" that often includes large, grassy areas.
3. ***A college in a small town or a rural location.*** If you prefer a more serene or relaxed college atmosphere, a tranquil location such as a rural college in a small college town may suit you best. Such colleges may be one or two hours or more from a medium to large city. Typically, the towns in which these colleges are located show great support for college students and their activities. Store owners may call you by

name and cash your check without identification. In small towns, many of the services (pizza places, dry cleaners, etc.) cater to students. Furthermore, colleges farther away from a city tend to go to great lengths to bring concerts, speakers, and other programs to the campus.

Which of these options sound appealing to you as you think about the kind of place in which you will be comfortable? Check any or all that apply:

- _____ 1. In a major city
- _____ 2. Near a large city, but not in it
- _____ 3. In a small town or a rural location
(or where the college is the focus of the town)

Are there any other location factors that are important to you? For example, do you want to be near a beach or close to outdoor/nature activities (hiking, streams, mountains, kayaking, etc.)? Are you a city person who thrives in the downtown of a big metropolis? **Use the space provided to note any other location characteristics that matter to you.**

Quality 14—Academic Success in College

Look carefully at all the factors you’ve identified as being important to your search for “best fit” colleges. Is there anything else a college could provide to help you accomplish your academic goals and do your best? For example, if you need quiet in order to study well, you may want to check whether a college’s residential halls have spaces set aside for this purpose; after all, depending on time of day or weather conditions, you may not find it convenient or feasible to head to the library every time you want to study. It might be worth investigating the possibility of whether single occupant rooms are available to freshmen and at what additional cost, if any. If you prefer studying with others, many colleges offer guidelines and suggestions for forming a study group that is effective and productive for all members.

Would you be reluctant to go to the college’s academic advising office with questions about courses, professors, or grading? Then look for schools that have a strong peer academic advisor program; these students, who have demonstrated their ability to handle the academic load at their school, can give you the inside scoop on the best courses and professors (as well as directions to the closest all-night coffee shop). Make a list of these and any other factors that you feel will affect your academic success in college.

Your academic success is also influenced by your desire to be in college. Are you not only prepared but eager to go to college immediately after high school? Or have you found yourself wondering about taking a gap year or working for a year before enrolling? A student who is self-motivated to attend college will

be the most successful. And sometimes that self-motivation may lead a young person to postpone college to explore the working world or a particular interest before resuming academic endeavors. On your list of items necessary for academic success, include whether you have made the decision to go to college by yourself and/or whether you'd like to consider taking a year off between high school and college.

Quality 15—Fitting In/Being Comfortable in College

Again, look carefully at the factors you have said are important in choosing your college. Are there other qualities a college could provide that would lead to your overall comfort with your college? If you were to visit a college tomorrow, is there anything else you would ask about or look for in addition to those factors you listed on this worksheet? ***List any additional factors below. Examples include a large number of days of sunshine (or snow), access to public transportation, a lively music scene, or space for a hobby in your dorm room.***

Ranking Your Most Important College Qualities

College selection involves trade-offs. While you may want many qualities in your ideal college, some factors will matter more to you than others. When you know your top priorities, it becomes much easier to evaluate colleges and make confident, informed decisions. Review the list of college characteristics below. These represent important variables that differentiate one college from another, but they may not rank ALL of the factors you feel are important. Think carefully about which factors are most important to YOUR college experience and future success. Rank the factors in order of importance by placing a number next to each one. Put “1” next to the factor that is most important to you, “2” next to the second most important factor, and so on. There are no right or wrong answers—only what matters most to you.

Example:

If religious life is your top priority, write “1” next to that factor. If cost is your second priority, write “2” next to it, and continue until you’ve ranked all factors. Be honest with yourself. Students sometimes think they “should” prioritize certain factors (like academic majors), when other factors (like distance from home) may actually be more important to their happiness and success. Optional: Place a check (✓) next to any factor that is a deal-breaker—something that is imperative in your college search.

- _____ A balanced academic/social experience
- _____ Accessible teachers
- _____ Availability of academic support services
- _____ Campus life, activities, and school spirit
- _____ Close to home
- _____ Cost/affordability
- _____ Geographic location (region, climate)
- _____ Hands-on/experiential learning
- _____ Prestige/name recognition of the college
- _____ Religious, ethnic, or cultural environment of the campus
- _____ Specific academic programs/majors I am interested in
- _____ Student diversity (ethnic, geographic, perspectives)