



Empowerly's Guide to



**UNDERSTANDING THE
COLLEGE LIST**

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Introduction

You may think you know what a college list is, in basic terms. For many, it's just "that list of schools you will apply to," when you're a senior in high school. In other words, the list of universities you are considering attending, sometime in the long run. But for college hopefuls, it's suddenly huge: **these are schools where you will invest in your future.**



Hold on; that sounds really important. Can we start again at the beginning?

It's true, the college list is an important part of your overall process. In fact, there are a few key perspectives that we at Empowerly encourage all students to review. It's not just a shopping list; it's a huge decision. So before you even roll up your sleeves, let's dive into how to prepare for your college search with a winner's mindset.

Let's talk about understanding and preparing for the college list to set yourself up for success.



Expecting the Unexpected

How can one prepare themselves to expect the unexpected? Well, in college admissions, that's more or less the name of the game. We start with making backup plans, increasing our odds of admission, and working to secure good simultaneous options.

For example, **have you thought about what you would do if you were waitlisted at many schools?**

You may be asking yourself, “The **waitlist?** The college **waitlist?** My student is a [freshman, sophomore, junior]! **Why would I worry about the waitlist?**”

While your application season is still months away, that doesn't mean your college prep should wait until then. In this guide, we'll discuss the specific reasons why thinking about the waitlist when your student is in 11th grade instead of 12th grade can help you through the process. **[And guess what? The earlier, the better.]**



Right off the bat, it's important to lay a strong foundation of communication in the college search to avoid tension and stress building between you and your student. Thinking about all aspects of the college admission process at the start can help avoid unexpected reactions to decisions later in the process.

Common Pitfall 1: The Dream School Conundrum

Too often, parents and students focus on the dream colleges on their list. While it is always nice to dream, and you want to encourage your student to reach for the stars, it is actually best to **be sure you and your student are comfortable with every choice on that college list**. Once you have come to an agreement on where your student will apply, invest the same amount of energy and commitment to each college.

In actuality, it is harder to find a “safety” college with which you and your student would be happy than it is to fall in love with a dream school. Do the hard work of falling equally in love with a sure-thing admission.

Next, assume that there is a possibility of being waitlisted at the most competitive colleges on the list.

- **How would you and your student react to that outcome?**
- **Would it be devastating news? Manageable news?**
- **Would your student choose to accept the spot on the waitlist or simply choose to enroll in another college?**



By discussing these responses ahead of time, if your student is waitlisted, you will already have a plan in place, thus diminishing the element of surprise and lowering the stress.



Common Pitfall 2: Not Thinking Far Enough Ahead

Here are some further considerations when discussing a possible waitlist outcome for each school:

- Is your student willing to wait?
- Is your student willing to put in the time and effort to present new material to the admissions office, such as updated grades (are they as good as they were in the fall?), a new essay explaining commitment to the school, new information of awards or experiences that will enhance the initial application, etc?
- Are you willing to forgo any chance of financial assistance in the form of scholarships, grants, or aid? If taken off the waitlist, financial awards are often unavailable.
- Are you willing to deposit at another college by May 1, and then lose that deposit if accepted off the waitlist?
- Have you researched the percentage of students accepted off the particular college's waitlist? It may be as low as 4%.
- How much emotion do you want to invest in an uncertain outcome?



If a waitlist response feels devastating, it is time to revisit the initial list of benefits of attending each college you and your student recorded. Look at the list of benefits with fresh eyes and bring yourselves back from the edge.

By doing your due diligence upfront, you and your student will find the college admissions process more manageable and less stressful. That's exactly what we mean by preparing to expect the unexpected in the college admissions process.



The Dream School is Out, the Best-Fit School is In

That's right, you heard us correctly before. We fully support you finding colleges you're enthusiastic about; and we always look forward to hearing about your big dreams for the future! But in combination, the "dream school" situation is actually something we need to talk about.

Why do we hear this question so often? It's phrased as if everyone must have a dream college, and as if the inquiry is simply a matter of deducting which school is your dream college. Here are our top reasons focusing only on one "dream school" doesn't really line up with Empowerly's mission.

Extra Stress

If anything, having a dream college can lead to unnecessary pressure and anxiety during the college application process. **It may blindside you to equally-wonderful schools or even worse, prevent you from eagerly pouring your energy into applications for other colleges because those colleges aren't 'the one.'**



Big Disappointments

Like it or not, you might not get in. And what then? Oftentimes, people place all their hopes and expectations on that one golden school, and they feel crushed after not being accepted. This is dangerous. **Where you go to college does not define who you are or who you can become, and it certainly isn't any indication of your intelligence or future potential.** College applications are like a gambling game that you play just once in your lifetime – how you take in the result is up to how you want to perceive it.

False Pedestal

A dream college may also narrow your perspective and lead you to look over other schools that are just as good a fit for you or that may be even better for your needs as a student. Take a moment to reflect or research – **is your dream college really as amazing as you think it is?** Take caution especially if you have a dream school that's been teasing your mind for years or that you've been in love with since you were a little kid. Just because your parents went there or because it's prestigious or because it has a gorgeous campus doesn't merit you banking your dreams on it.

Instead...

It's okay to not have a dream college. In fact, I think it's better. You're able to judge each potential college for the bare bones of best fit, instead of any emotional attachment coloring your journey of the application process.



When you get rejected to places, which will inevitably happen, you'll understand that it doesn't matter in the long run. **After all, it's not like it was your dream college.**

We suggest following the Empowerly method of finding out which colleges are the best-fit campus for you! That means that you know your priorities and how to decode the college search process in order to unlock the best possible college experience for yourself as a student. Next up, let's discuss what "best-fit" can look like for you.

How to Find Best-Fit

We know. It's one thing for adults to say that sometimes, your dream school isn't the flashy first choice you thought it was. But it's different to hear from someone in your shoes. Let's look at a case study to explain the most important ways to recognize when a school will be a great fit for **YOU**.



"I got lucky. When I went to UC Santa Cruz, I thought it would be the worst. I really wanted to be at the ever-prestigious and renowned UC Berkeley, and even with a high SAT score, my relatively low GPA wasn't enough to cut it.

But by my second year in college, I realized: UC Santa Cruz was the best place for me.

The teachers were dynamic and encouraged discussion. The city was beautiful, relaxing, and the perfect place to study. The student body was small enough so I could stand out. In fact, it was perfect: my best fit school."

Melanie, Empowerly Writer



1. Know How You Learn

Knowing your **learning style** is important. Your “learning style” is defined as the **best way you engage with the learning process**. When you use your learning style, you are very comfortable learning material. When you’re not, it can be a challenge. One example of a learning style is called “interpersonal.” This is when you learn by engaging socially with others.

So, if there is a big school where lectures are crammed with students, and you are an interpersonal learner, this may not be the school for you. While there are ways to work around it, you may be happier at a college with smaller class sizes. Professors tend to encourage more engagement and discussion from their students in these environments.

2. Know Your Interests; or How to Find Them

If you already know what you want to be, great! For those of you who want to be a doctor, I’m sure you’ve already researched the best schools for medical science. If you don’t know what you want to be, and you don’t even really know what you’re interested in, don’t worry.

The best thing to do in this case is do a **process of elimination**. If you know without a doubt that you are not interested in math or science, pursue a school that fits you and your learning style. But if you don’t want to cross that off the list—and it’s a good idea not to—then look for a well-rounded college that will offer a wide variety of programs.



3. Location, location, location!

People overlook this often, but it shouldn't be taken lightly: **where your school is can be a deal-maker or a deal-breaker.** If you need to be accessible to your family, you'll have to pick one close to home. If you know a small town will bore the death out of you, look for the big city. But also be cautious about your reasons: if it's because you want to be close to friends or you're scared of moving too far away, be honest with yourself. These are not things that should weigh on an important life decision.

Melanie concluded with this reminder:

“Being honest with yourself is really the biggest piece of advice I can give you. I hope these three hints have been helpful in finding your best fit school! If you need more guidance on building a school list, or choosing from offers you’ve received, book a consultation [with a counselor]. There’s no time to waste.”



How to Use Rankings

So, if the “dream school” isn’t all it’s cracked up to be, and best-fit is the better choice, how do national rankings factor in? Shouldn’t the top ranked schools obviously be better?

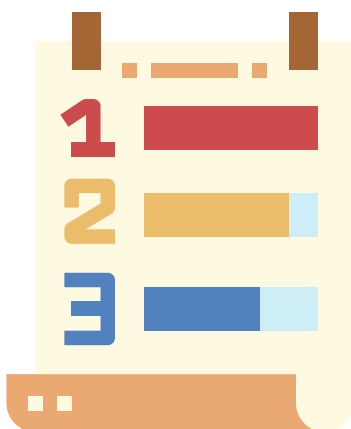
For instance, when family urges students to aim for the most prestigious schools they can qualify for. In and of itself, that’s not the worst piece of advice to give in the general sense... Why should an all-star student settle for second-best? But, as it turns out, school rankings can have significant effects on how a college experience plays out.

Let’s investigate how we need to change the narrative to college fit (vs. college rankings) when we support students with applications.

Remember, a school’s ranking alone may not be enough to determine how strong your specific department will be. Especially if the ranking applies to the school generally; or to certain fields of study that do not encompass your own.

Understanding Rankings

First and foremost it is utterly vital to understand that **no two lists will rank schools in identical manners.** Before you commit yourself to tens of thousands of dollars in student loans, ensure you know exactly what you’re going to get out of those loans in the first place!



Most ranking lists will consider the important factors: student retention, academic value per dollar spent and some form of nationwide weight granted based on drawing power a degree from a given institution might afford you. On the other hand, some lists take the basic tenets of ranking and go several steps further. Safety, though not the first topic on any school ranking list, might be more vital to some students than others.

Some lists will add or subtract points based on professor satisfaction, location, student preferences or any other number of qualifying statistics. **It's important to know what factors your chosen list considers to be important. It's doubly important to take the word of several lists into consideration, just to ensure there is no hard-set bias at work.**

Ranking Schools: Common Issues

At its core, ranking one institution versus another is a tricky proposition. How is it possible to boil down the core educational experience into numerical values when each student might favor those values differently? It may not be possible, to no one's great surprise. Accurately weighing abstract ideas via numbers can be just as subjective as rating a movie on a scale of one to ten: You're probably not always going to agree with the rating.





Further compounding the issue is how a given school's data is collected. Many schools supply their own facts and figures without third-party auditing. The only real sense of fact-checking comes in the form of other schools comparing data with their competitors, but it's difficult to know just how accurate it all is in the end.

Then comes the issue of how the school's internal rankings apply to students, too. Every school contains its own student ranking criteria that could make or break a hopeful student's chance of attending a specific place of learning, only for the school's reputation or its ranking numbers culling students who might otherwise qualify and fit in properly.

[School Rankings and You: The Bottom Line](#)

At the end of the day, a school's rank may not be the determining factor for you. How you end up choosing your future school should not come down to which is #4 vs #5 on a ranking list.

If you think you'll miss being away from home and want to visit as often as possible, stay close to home. If you don't want to move away from a budding relationship you may not want to go cross-country on a whim.



Conclusion: How to Use Rankings

To sum up, you need to remember that though college rankings [do hold a lot of merit](#), **college fit** needs to be the most important deciding factor. Make sure you do thorough research before you make a four-year commitment to any place. Apply to schools that you are excited about attending.

And if anyone pushes you to argue college fit vs. college rankings, **remember that you are the one who will ultimately attend the school.**

How to Prioritize Your Needs

Okay, so hopefully we've got you convinced: best fit is the most important part. But how do you go about prioritizing your needs in the first place? That seems like the first step to finding what you need in a school. Let's take it back.

To build a satisfactory college list, you first need to decide on criteria for selecting a college. These [8 suggestions](#) provide an overview to get you started.

Here's the basics. Most agree that college is one of the most exciting parts of life... but not everyone has the same college experience! There are a vast number of universities all across the country that are each unique in their own ways.



When it comes to deciding which school to attend it's essential to take everything into account. After all, college is a substantial investment and it'll be your home for four years. Here are eight important things to look for while selecting a college:

1. What Majors are Offered and What Programs the School is Known For

This is a very important criteria for selecting a college. Most universities offer a wide range of majors to choose from, but that doesn't mean they offer what you want to study. Furthermore, even if they're a top ranked school and offer a major you're interested in, it doesn't mean they're a premier school for that program. For example, Carnegie Mellon University is a top 25 school and famous for subjects such as computer science, engineering, and drama. While they have many great majors to choose from, if you know you want to study English there are many better options for you.

Not to mention, as **Empowerly** counselor **Quincy J. points out**, it's also common that even among top schools students find **"the same major being different from campus to campus."**

Depending on the school's approach to education or style of teaching, you might find a better home elsewhere. The example Quincy gives is studying film at UC Berkeley (emphasis on theory) as opposed to studying film at the University of Southern California (famous for hands-on learning).



2. Location

There are great schools all across the nation. We have the UC's on the West Coast, University of Michigan in the Midwest, Ivies on the east coast, and Vanderbilt in the South. If you want to go to Harvard, make sure you're okay with long winters and lots of snow. Spending four years in weather or climate you hate can affect your mood as well as your academics. Moreover, your school's location can influence future job opportunities because you're more likely to receive job offers close to where you attend college.

3. Cost and Financial Aid

Many private universities cost north of a quarter million dollars to attend over the course of four years. If you're able to pay that much out of pocket then congratulations, but if you're like most people you'll need help to pay such high costs. Most colleges offer reduced tuition costs for lower income families, but the amount of reduction varies from college to college. To get an estimate on how much financial aid you may receive you can go to each university's website and find a net price calculator.

4. Campus and Student Body Size

Large, densely populated schools offer a very different feeling than small, liberal arts colleges. Some students like big campuses with lots of students because there's never a lack of things to do, but others feel overwhelmed by such schools. On the other hand, some students like small campuses because of things like small class sizes, but some students at these schools feel like there's not nearly enough people.



5. Study Abroad Programs

For many students, studying abroad is an integral part of the college experience. Some schools emphasize traveling abroad while others don't have abroad programs at all. If traveling abroad is important to you, make sure your university can help you out.

6. Organizations and Greek Life

School organizations and Greek life are often sparsely considered while selecting a school. Many students use organizations as a way to connect with other students. Also, many colleges have very competitive organizations that look great on resumes. There are many universities with limited amounts of clubs and no Greek life, so make sure you investigate these before deciding where to go.

7. Academic Environment

Are the students around you motivated and able to push you to be a better student? Are there academic support systems to ensure that you will succeed at your school? These aspects are important in determining how academically successful you will be at your college. Furthermore, succeeding in academics is a crucial part of enjoying your college experience so make sure to consider schools that can help you out when you're struggling.



8. Overall Environment

Ultimately, it's important that you'll be happy while you're in school and when you graduate. Picking a school just because of its rigorous reputation or its fun parties isn't all that matters. Pick a school where you feel challenged but comfortable and happy.

These criteria are 8 of the most important to consider when building your final list of programs. We hope the criteria for selecting a college we discussed today helps you form a more insightful list.

Why Social Fit Matters

Now, before we go much further, we also need to discuss social fit and why it is so important. You might hear this factor referred to as **culture fit, or campus environment fit**. In essence, there are a multitude of reasons finding your best fit school matters in the social realm, too. From networking to supportive mentors, the human side of campus matters.



1. Academic specialty should be a priority for all students.

Often schools develop a reputation for a specific subject. For example, New York University has a reputation for having a great film school. Harvey Mudd is a great school for STEM students. University of Virginia has an excellent undergraduate business program. **Create a list of schools based on the quality of their curriculum in your interested major rather than simply picking universities with great overall ranking and prestige.**

You can dive even deeper into your academic specialty and take a look at the professors within the department you're interested in and the research they're doing. Departmental websites typically have information on the subjects that professors are researching. For example, a college could have a top ranked chemistry program but if the research is predominantly focused on biochemistry, and you're more interested in materials chemistry, it might not be the right school for you.

2. Remember that you're not just going to school, you're joining a community.

Whichever school you end up choosing, you're going to permanently be part of the community of students who have gone there as well. It's important to make sure that **the school is somewhere you want to spend time at, somewhere you can find friends with commonalities, and somewhere where you find ideologies that align with your own.** Do you care about having great sports teams to support? Are you interested in being a part of a thriving multicultural student body? Is Greek life a must for you or a detractor?



Asking yourself questions like these is important to make sure you end up at a school where you feel fulfilled outside of academics.

These kinds of considerations are also incredibly important when you consider how stressful college can be. It is notoriously a time where some students struggle with their mental health and having a strong community that you find supportive and nurturing makes the stressful times more bearable. Happiness in your personal life makes it that much easier to focus on being successful academically while in college.

[3. Work backwards from your dream job to see how others have gotten where you want to go.](#)

There are many highly successful people who came from big name schools but there are just as many who came from schools you might not recognize as quickly. If you're concerned about job prospects after college, **start looking into people who have the job you hope to have, and see where they went to school.** If you're considering a university, visit their career counseling page and learn about their statistics for job placement. Most schools are very forthcoming with this information and take a lot of pride in the success of their students.

Every year thousands of students get into hundreds of schools and are on their way to achieving their dreams. There are many factors to consider when making your college choice, and prestige is certainly a hard factor to keep off that list. Personal pride can be very valid and appropriate; but pride should come from you and your accomplishments, not the name of the school you went to.



Keep these factors in mind when picking a university. But then, of course, we face our next question... how can we discover more information about a particular college to understand what the social fit will be like? Tune in.

Campus Visits

The best way to get a feel for a campus' social life is to go there yourself.



You can meet students, sit in on classes and events, and get a feel for what the average student is like there. And, as [Empowerly counselor Quincy J. points out, you can set up a dorm tour to even see where you might be living.](#)

While you do this, note the similarities and differences between the students and your current social circle. For example, how do most students spend their free time? Where do they hang out, and what do they do? Do you see yourself fitting into a [similar social experience](#)? At some colleges, students tend to hang out in coffee shops and read or discuss current events. At others, they tend to go to large parties or sporting events. Most colleges will have a mixture of this, but some will lean more heavily towards one type of social experience.



Student Groups

You'll also want to consider the kinds of student groups on a campus. While many colleges have a wide variety of campus activities, **you can tell a lot about a college's social life through featured or popular activities.** Outdoor activities may be popular at one college, while arts groups may take the stage at another. Finding the best social fit in a college includes considering your favorite past times and which colleges seem to share these past times.



You can also peruse online groups affiliated with a college to learn more. This works particularly well if you're unable to visit a college in person, or if you want to talk to current students on a more regular basis.

Location

The location of a college can factor into the college's social life a great deal. A small college in Ohio will likely have a very different social feel than one in New York City just by virtue of its location.



Furthermore, some students choose a college based on its location for what the location has to offer. Thinking about where you do or do not want to live can have a surprising effect on your college experience socially.

In Conclusion: Finding the Best Social Fit

A college may offer amazing academics, but if you fear becoming socially isolated there, it may not be the best fit after all. Finding the best social fit in a college matters – you'll be spending the next four years of your life there. It's also an intensely personal decision. When you have friends, family, or teachers encouraging you to go to one college because they went there or love it in some way, make sure you always keep in mind whether you think you'll love it, too.



Conclusion

Curious how to utilize data in your college list building process? Check out [this new tool](#) that Empowerly is developing to help you out. We hope this guide provides a helpful perspective and guidance for understanding how to prepare for the college search. Best of luck!

