

Tips for Researching US Colleges

Vicky Leung (Harvard Class of 1991) gives some tips on how to go about narrowing down the thousands of US colleges that provide undergraduate degrees into the half dozen or so that you will eventually apply to. It is interspersed with her own experiences of the application process (which are shown in italics at the end of each section).

With over 2,500 colleges to choose from, there is something for everyone. There is no shortage of websites and printed materials to guide you in your quest for the right college. Rather than rehash what you can glean elsewhere, I want to use my own experience to illustrate what are, in my opinion, the most important factors you should consider when choosing a US college:

Admissions requirements

Reach high but be realistic about your abilities. Make sure you meet the minimum academic requirements of the colleges you are applying to. Check their websites and, if possible, talk to students and alumni to see how your credentials stack up against those of recent admits. If you decide to take the SAT or ACT standardized tests (now optional at most colleges), use the college websites to compare your scores with those of typical students who gain admission.

College admission is not an exact science. Even if you are top in your class and are the best all-rounder, you simply stand a better chance of being admitted than your peers, but this is not a guarantee. Have a couple of 'safety' schools lined up (i.e. schools that are less competitive).

I applied to Harvard, Princeton and Stanford and three British unis. I got into Harvard and Stanford but was waitlisted by Princeton. All three schools had roughly the same acceptance rate yet my application was viewed differently by each of them. Competition is more intense now than several years ago. If I were to apply now, I would definitely include a couple of less selective schools.

Courses

Do you have a specific field of study in mind? Do you want to explore options before committing? Certain colleges stand out for their excellence in certain fields (e.g. MIT for science and technology, Oberlin for music) and these should be your first ports of call if you have your heart set on a particular subject area. Other colleges, like Harvard, are deeply committed to liberal arts education and do not offer degrees in pre-professional courses such as medicine, law, nursing or journalism, although many students will continue on to graduate professional programs after completing the first degree. All undergrads get a bachelor of arts degree regardless of concentration and the only bachelor of science degree granted is in engineering science.

Think about your desired balance between optional and required courses and check the degree requirements of your selected schools. Some colleges have degree requirements

beyond those associated with the area of concentration (e.g. the general education requirement at Harvard may take up 25% of your coursework).

Having focused on maths and the natural sciences in secondary school, I wanted to tip the balance and study humanities and languages in college. I definitely wanted a liberal arts college that offered a broad curriculum, and one that would allow me to explore new horizons. I was not concerned about my choice of major as I did not think that what I studied needed to be related to my choice of career.

Cost

When considering the cost of attending college in the States, take into account tuition fees, room and board, travel from the UK and pocket money. The colleges with the highest tuition fees may not be the most expensive, as they may also be the most generous with financial aid. Acquaint yourself with the college's financial aid and scholarship policies. Some schools are need-blind and will accept students regardless of their requirement for aid. Other schools do not offer aid to non-US students. Others are need aware and will evaluate applications based on the applicants' ability to pay. Some colleges offer scholarships on academic merit or sports. Be familiar with differences in aid packages. E.g. Harvard offers need-based scholarships and student employment but not loans.

All US colleges are required to have something called a 'Net Price Calculator' on their website to help individual students see what their estimated cost would be after financial aid is applied. Some of them do not work for international families, but many do, so it's worth checking those out.

Among my chosen US colleges, financial aid packages were comparable. However, I did not consider the fact that I would not be allowed to work off-campus for extra pocket money as I was not a US citizen. When comparing aid packages, you might wish to also check the availability and flexibility of on-campus employment as a means to fund discretionary spending and temper your expectations accordingly.

Location

East coast or west coast or the Midwest? City or country? The different regions of the US offer diverse culture, climate, landscape, food and pace of life. While a few colleges are located in cities (e.g. NYU), many do have vibrant neighbouring communities and others are more isolated.

It's a choice that could impact the ease of travelling home. It can affect your ability to pursue activities that you love (e.g. skiing, sailing or rock-climbing). Think hard about what you want to call home for the next four years - an idyllic setting or bustling metropolis? Do you enjoy experiencing four seasons in a year or do you want temperate weather year-round? Do you have family or friends in the US and wish to be close to them? Your college life will be your reality, not an escapist retreat. Is it easier for you to focus in a quiet environment? Do you feel stressed if you have no access to 24-hour conveniences?

I was torn between the east and west coasts as my parents were in Hong Kong and my sisters were in the UK. In the end, I felt that New England would be less of a culture shock than other parts of America as I felt at home in the UK and Continental Europe.

Size

Do you want a more intimate setting with a few hundred students or a large community comprised of thousands? Are you more at home in small classes or do you like the energy of a large lecture hall? Do you like seeing familiar faces all the time or do you like meeting new people at every turn? Do you want an exclusively undergrad experience or would you like higher learning options? Is it important to you to be in a “research-focused” institution? Your answers help you narrow down your choices among thousands of undergrad colleges and larger universities that offer both undergrad and post-grad studies.

Coming from a small school in the UK, I felt strongly that, while being a big fish in a small pond is fulfilling for many others, I would go further and not be tempted to rest on my laurels by being in a large, diverse community.

Diversity of student body / Gender

Historically, many colleges were gender-segregated but, as colleges for men started accepting women in the 1960s and 70s, co-ed colleges became the norm. There are still single-sex four-year colleges but the options are more limited. As a practical matter, be aware that, if you feel strongly about going to a single-sex college, you will be ruling out the majority of colleges. In any college, you will most likely share rooms with your own gender but will be sharing the dining hall, sports facilities, lecture halls with people from the opposite sex.

Having spent most of my schooling in a girls' school and two years in a co-ed boarding school, I was at home in both environments and just wanted the best college.

Extracurricular interests

Some of you may have non-academic aspirations that cannot be put on hold for four years. You may be an aspiring ballet dancer or cellist or Olympics-bound athlete. A liberal arts degree is an excellent way to combine academics with extracurricular pursuits but some colleges may be more conducive to furthering your passions than others. See if there are on-campus student clubs for your interests, platforms to perform, nearby professional organisations or performing groups, coaches or mentors.

As the performing arts (i.e. music and dance) were very important to me, I naturally gravitated towards a college with numerous orchestras, choirs, chamber ensembles and dance groups and a strong track-record of student productions.

Examples of resources

Websites – Universities' own websites will provide the most comprehensive and accurate descriptions of the institutions. Also check out:

The US-UK Fulbright Commission 'Going to the USA' page
<https://www.fulbright.org.uk/going-to-the-usa>

Peterson's College Search Tool
<https://www.petersons.com/college-search.aspx>

Big Future College Search
<https://bigfuture.collegeboard.org/college-search>

College fairs – Good opportunity to compare and contrast multiple colleges within a short space of time. The biggest college fair in the UK is the Fulbright Commission's 'USA College Day', which is held in West London at the end of September each year.