

Choosing the Right College

By Diana Johnson

College! Over the last ten years that word has become a regular part of our household vocabulary. During that time, our older children have attended four different institutions of higher learning. They have been students at our local junior college, a state university, and two private Christian colleges. Two students stayed in our home state of Texas. One is presently attending college out of state.

Our experience hasn't included any Ivy League schools, but what we lack in prestige we make up for in variety. We have learned a lot! As I share our experiences, I would like to address my comments directly to high school students. Perhaps I can save you a few steps, help you avoid a few pitfalls, and give you a few thoughts to chew on. And mom and dad, please listen in!

Look at college where you can comfortably fit in.

The College Board, creators of the SAT college entrance test, has an excellent website, www.collegeboard.com. The college search area provides basic information on many, many colleges, along with links to each college's website. What are you looking for? Do you want to stay close to home or spread your wings on a cross-country adventure? Are you looking for a rural, suburban, or city campus? A small or large student body? What is the average SAT score of the other students? Will you be competing with students of a similar ability or are they all geniuses operating over your head? What extracurricular activities are offered? Do you want a secular or Christian campus? The answer to these and many other questions will determine whether a college is a comfortable fit for you.

Don't look at the price tag first.

This advice goes against everything in my frugal nature, but when considering colleges we have found this advice to be true. We happen to live in a college town, having both a well-respected junior college and a branch of our state university in our backyard. With no room and board expenses, an education from either is quite affordable. Throughout the years, we have made successful use of both institutions for dual enrollment, transfer credit, and for one of our children, a bachelor's degree. Yet one thing was lacking that we really wanted: a Christian college experience. Unfortunately the price tag seemed impossible, because frankly, it was. At least it was until we learned this next lesson.

Find a college that wants you.

Colleges vary tremendously in how actively incoming freshmen are courted. A prestigious college, which many students clamor to attend, may or may not have scholarship money for you, even if you are an exceptional student. (After all, all their applicants are exceptional and they can only accept half of them.) Yet another university offering an excellent education, but with less name recognition, may be very interested in you—and prove it by backing their interest with extensive scholarship money. Whether speaking of jeans or schools, quality can be delivered without name recognition!

Plan on taking college entrance tests early and more than once.

For exceptional students, testing will probably begin with the PSAT/NMSQT (Preliminary

Scholastic Assessment Test/National Merit Scholarship Qualifying Test). Some students take it in October of their sophomore year for practice, and again in October of their junior year for consideration as a National Merit Scholar. Excellent scores will bring colleges to your doorstep. For the rest of us, our testing may begin with the SAT (Scholastic Assessment Test) or ACT (American College Test). It is often wise to take these tests more than once, as your scores can usually be improved. If the college or your choice bases scholarship money on test scores, this extra effort may be richly repaid! If you dislike the idea of either paying for or sitting through multiple testings, purchase a test preparation book that includes practice tests on a CD-ROM. These practice tests will give you a good indication of how you will fare on the real test and provide a good trial run for the actual event. Start this practice during eleventh grade, so you'll have plenty of time to finish up your testing early in the fall of your senior year. Why so soon? Because early decision programs for college enrollment often require admissions paperwork by November or December of your senior year.

Every scholarship road begins with the FAFSA.

The Free Application for Federal Student Aid is a government form that requests information about your family. In order to be eligible for any federal or state grants, loans, or work study programs, the FAFSA must be filled out. Colleges will usually not release private scholarship funds either until they have your FAFSA results. This means your parents will need to set new records in getting their income tax filled out. No more mailing it from the last postal pickup on April 15! Scholarship money is often dispersed by March, so FAFSA and income tax forms need to be complete as soon as the last W-2 arrives.

Read the fine print on merit scholarship awards.

They are not all created equal and our experience has been quite varied. One of my students, in order to keep all of his scholarship money had to maintain a 3.3 GPA (grade point average). In other words, any C earned required two As to counteract it. This required excelling in every course and being average in nothing. That's pressure! Another of my students, also receiving merit scholarship money, was only required to make "reasonable progress" in his college-level work. This policy, not strictly tied to his GPA, allowed some breathing room and did not require him to perform equally well in all classes.

Don't despise small schools.

Sometimes a huge, thriving university offers the resources you need. But being one person in a student body of tens of thousands can be a lonely existence. Depending on your personality, you may find a better fit in a smaller school. Small colleges have advantages of their own. Classes are generally taught by the professor. Class size can be small, with help for the individual. Contrast that with the large university, where you can expect to share the lecture hall with perhaps as many as five hundred freshmen. The professor's position may require extensive involvement in research projects, necessitating his graduate assistant to do most of the teaching. Which scenario do you prefer?

Don't make any final decisions without visiting the campus.

Anything can look good on paper and in still photographs. Expect all the students pictured to be beautiful, smiling, and having a great time while diligently studying. If possible, visit the campus more than once. Attend classes. Stay in the dorm. It's only through visiting that you will begin to

learn the feel of that college community and whether it's a comfortable fit for you.

If you are a Christian, be sure that the college you choose will nourish your faith. Sometimes the college years can be a time of straying from the faith of your childhood. This can lead to deep regrets that aren't easily overcome. Rather, strive to make your college years a time of growth in Christian maturity, when your walk with the Lord deepens into something that is distinctly your own. Then the academic degree you earn will mark not only a growth in knowledge, but also a growth in wisdom. The Lord bless you in the college decision before you!

Biographical Information

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