

College planner: Before your teen falls in love with a college, check these 5 key factors

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Aaaaah, February! The month where, out of the doldrums of winter, dozens of long-stemmed roses are gifted to the objects of our heart's desires!

From homemade elementary school Valentine mailboxes to heart-shaped containers of questionable chocolates, it may seem like everyone is sharing in the Hallmark holiday. For families with college-bound teenagers, however, there may be a different kind of love in the air.

From shiny websites filled with pictures of landscaped grounds and alluring architecture, to popular brand names with potential bragging rights, it is easy to fall in love with a college without knowing what lurks behind the cultivated images that flirt with us. Before swiping left or right, it is important to consider elements of actual fit for a student before we decide which messaged candy heart to bestow upon it.

Before asking a school to "Be Mine," consider these five elements that families often overlook when researching schools.

1. Acceptance rate by major (not overall acceptance rate)

This can be difficult to determine, as many colleges don't report this on the Common Data Set or departmental websites. You can, however, make an educated assumption that certain impacted majors, especially at highly selective universities, are more difficult to get into than others. These include architecture, engineering, computer science, nursing, business and other STEM disciplines.

To make it more confusing, some schools, like Duke and Vanderbilt, admit students to the university itself, while others, such as the University of Texas and Purdue (engineering), admit by major. One thing students can do for highly selective colleges (with less than 15% admit rates) is to check out transfer difficulty both internally or externally. If a major is "closed to internal transfer," that indicates that a school builds its freshman class by major.

If students are applying to the most popular majors at any school, the admit rate for that major may be significantly lower. Balance your college list accordingly.



2. First year course access (what classes can freshmen actually take)

Imagine making the cut and being admitted to your dream college, only to be wait-listed for the classes needed for your major. Most families don't realize that this is a real issue for many freshmen, who get stuck in large lecture halls, unable to take the foundational courses required for their intended major.

Take a look at how many credits freshman usually complete in their first year, and check out how many courses have a wait list. Are key introductory classes within your major reserved for upperclassmen? This may take some digging, but is a great question to ask on a departmental tour, or even when speaking with current students within that major at the college.

3. Four-year graduation rates (not just retention rates)

While second-year retention rates can tell us much about student satisfaction within a college, the number of students who actually graduate within four years is also a telling statistic.

If four-year graduation rates are low, it can indicate a bottleneck in course trajectory, poor advisory resources and an overly rigid major pathway. Students should be able to navigate their college experience efficiently. Extra semesters are not free.

4. Career placement or Med/Law School placement outcomes

Take a step back and look critically at the object of your college affection, and recall the purpose of going to college in the first place. If you are going to prepare you for a fruitful career in your field of study, it is wise to take a look at employment rates post-graduation, and what work-based learning experiences are typical for students throughout their education.

If a post-grad degree is in your future, what percent of students successfully matriculate to medical or law school? How many students actually participate in multiple internships or co-op programming? Are these opportunities reserved for seniors or just a select few students? If so, you may wish to consider a different school where work-based learning and excellent job placement are the norm.

5. Financial stability and cost creep

Look beyond the tuition cost and review the total cost of attendance, then think about the amount of debt you are willing to tolerate. Many popular schools are not cheap dates, as they come with a high sticker price and tuition that creeps up year after year. How often does tuition increase at the school? Are there GPA requirements to retain scholarships? What about the average student debt for graduates?

Sometimes a great social and academic fit is not a great financial fit. Don't set your student up for failure to launch. Talk about debt tolerance, funding options and costs early and often and remove the rose-colored glasses.

Families should take all of these things into consideration before extending a marriage proposal to any college on their list. Although transferring is preferable to divorce, it can be an almost equally expensive mistake (not really). If you take it slow and do your homework, however, it will be easier to make a decision with your head in addition to your heart. Best luck!



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