

Step 4: Research, Build, and Finalize a College List

Step 4.1 to 4.4 includes instructions on how to create an effective college list. It helps to speak with a knowledgeable, professional counselor who can help you add appropriate colleges to your list. Complete **Step 4.5** with a Short List and **Step 4.6** with an Essay Writing and Work Plan to write, revise, and complete the applications.

Step 4.1 Begin with Writing Colleges that You Know

Most students know of a few colleges and universities through friends, sports, visits to campus, or research online about them. Use this table to write down every college or university that you know something about, not just schools that you’ve just “heard of,” but places that you are familiar enough with to have a conversation about attending them.

As you write the names of possible colleges, write down what you know and why you are interested in each college. A student could write, “My friend says CMU is challenging, but lots of fun” and hyperlinks to a specific program, such as “Game Design.” Finally, based upon what you know, fill out the column that ranks your current college choices. It is more important to consider lots of colleges and reasons why or why not in Step 4.1 than it matters to be certain about a specific choice.

4.1	College Choice	What do you know about this college? Why are you interested in this college?	Rank	
	Example: CMU	I went to summer tech camp at Carnegie Mellon University. Took campus tour with beautiful buildings. I like the idea of living in dorms and walking to campus. My top choice of major is the program in Game Design .	#	

Step 4.2 Identify Positive and Negative Qualities of Prospective Programs

Review your College Lists from **Step 1.1** and **Step 4.1**. Are there similarities in the colleges you ranked highest? Maybe they are all near your home, or have student body sizes below 3,000 and great programs in Biology? Similarly, look at the schools that do no interest you what do they have in common? Where DON'T you want to go? Finally, in Table 4.2, write down bullet points that list all the positive and negative qualities that you identified in your college preferences.

4.2	Positive Features to Find	Rank	Negative Aspects to Avoid	Rank	
	Ex: Computer Science Program		Ex: Over \$40,000 total per year		

Step 4.3 Add New Colleges to Your List

After completing Table 4.2, conduct research to increase your list in two ways:

1. Do your own online research to learn about different degrees and colleges
2. Talk with counselors and experts with knowledge about colleges and universities

The fastest way to find new schools is to research lists online, but the best way to find colleges that fit your needs and dreams is to talk to a professional college counselor. Discuss the reasons for ranking your schools and explain the positive and negative qualities that you identified. Seek recommendations and search for colleges in order to find the positive features and avoid the negative aspects of educational programs.

There are plenty of resources that provide information about colleges:

- [Naviance](#), software licensed by many high schools, offers search features for students and parents that utilize student admission data from previous years.
- [College Board](#), the organization behind SAT and AP, utilizes test data in the search tools available to the public.
- [Fiske Guide to Colleges](#) has published a popular guide every year for 32 years.

Other popular resources are [Princeton Review](#) and [U.S. News & World Report Rankings](#); however, looking at college rankings may cause more harm than benefit, since rankings are largely driven by business sales interests rather than on offering a student a scientific procedure for admissions success to a college that fits your personal, social, and financial goals.

Yesterday, it was okay to only know about few colleges; but now, it is time to become familiar with more than 100 colleges, and delve deeper into 1-2 new colleges, everyday. Use the table below to add potential colleges to your list. Take notes on what you learn and include hyperlinks to easily access this information in the future.

4.3	College Choice	Why is this college a good addition? Hyperlink to admission requirements and profiles		

Step 4.5 Make a Short List to Focus Application Work

Now is time to refine your list into a final list, so that you may focus attention on writing effective personal statements for schools you identified as Targets in Table 4.4. Use 3 criteria for the Short List:

- 1) **Include at least 6 colleges and no more than 12 applications:** Do not limit your options or spread yourself too thin. If the colleges share an application or require no additional work, such as the 9 campuses of the University of California schools, that counts as one application.
- 2) **Include at least 2 schools from each category:** *Safety* schools are colleges that you attend if something goes wrong; personal statements are not required for less selective colleges. It is a waste of time to include too many *Reaches* because the chance of college admissions does not increase when you apply to lots of colleges; however, a calculated risk for 3-5 colleges with selective admissions can pay off without driving you crazy with too many applications.
- 3) **You must be excited to attend each school:** There are 4,000 colleges and universities in the United States. You can find 6-12 colleges that work for you. If you're having a hard time finding enough schools from **Table 4.4** to fill up every category, it's time to go back to **Steps 4.2 and 4.3** to do some more research.

4.5	Safety	Target	Reach	

Congratulations! You have a College List, often called your “Short List.” It is time to apply to these colleges; however, as you conduct further research, talk to people, and visit campuses, you may choose to add or subtract colleges as necessary. Now, you should feel confident that you have a list of well-balanced options that offer a great college education to meet your life goals and fulfill your dreams. It is time to create a detailed plan to write essays and complete each application to the colleges on your list.

Step 4.6: Create an Essay Writing and Work Plan to Complete Applications

Refer to your Short List from **Step 4.5** to write each college in Table 4.6. First, decide if Early Admission is an option to your favorite college. Then, plan your work for Target, Reach, and Safety Colleges with specific deadlines. Requirements for applications and personal statements vary by college; but often include two essays, a list of activity descriptions, and a letter of recommendation. Use Table 4.6 to plan and monitor work.

Log into each online application to copy/paste the essay prompt into Table 4.6. Confirm deadlines and application requirements, such as activities and letters of recommendation. Include hyperlinks for easy reference to all pertinent information for each application on your list. Note whether colleges have the same essays, count the total number of essays, and write deadlines to complete each draft.

Schedule time to receive feedback from others and complete final essays at least a week before the application deadline. You need time to review the whole application. Use this Essay Writing and Work Plan to track progress on essays and application requirements.

4.6	College Info	Detailed Descriptions and Deadlines to Monitor Work Plan Progress								
	Target College 1 Early Admission? Hyperlink to Application	Essay Prompts 1 2								
	What College Program or Major?	List reasons why have you chosen this college and major/program?								
	Application Deadline: Schedule essay reviews	Brainstorm	Outline	Draft 1	Feedback 1	Draft 2	Feedback 2	Draft 3	Proof	Final Review
	Check when each task is complete	Personal Major	Grades Tests	List of Activities	Essay 1	Essay 2	Letters of Rec	Sup Materials	Proof	Submit
	Target College 2 Hyperlink to Application	Essay Prompts 1 2								
	What College Program or Major?	List reasons why have you chosen this college and major/program?								
	Application Deadline: Schedule essay reviews	Brainstorm	Outline	Draft 1	Feedback 1	Draft 2	Feedback 2	Draft 3	Proof	Final Review
	Check when each task is complete	Personal Major	Grades Tests	List of Activities	Essay 1	Essay 2	Letters of Rec	Sup Materials	Proof	Submit



6 Steps to Admissions Success

U.S. Colleges, 2016

	Target College 3 Hyperlink to Application	Essay Prompts 1 2									
	What College Program or Major?	List reasons why have you chosen this college and major/program?									
	Application Deadline: Schedule essay reviews	Brainstorm	Outline	Draft 1	Feedback 1	Draft 2	Feedback 2	Draft 3	Proof	Final Review	
	Check when each task is complete	Personal Major	Grades Tests	List of Activities	Essay 1	Essay 2	Letters of Rec	Sup Materials	Proof	Submit	
	Reach College 1 Hyperlink to Application	Essay Prompts 1 2									
	What College Program or Major?	List reasons why have you chosen this college and major/program?									
	Application Deadline: Schedule essay reviews	Brainstorm	Outline	Draft 1	Feedback 1	Draft 2	Feedback 2	Draft 3	Proof	Final Review	
	Check when each task is complete	Personal Major	Grades Tests	List of Activities	Essay 1	Essay 2	Letters of Rec	Sup Materials	Proof	Submit	
	Reach College 2 Hyperlink to Application	Essay Prompts 1 2									
	What College Program or Major?	List reasons why have you chosen this college and major/program?									
	Application Deadline: Schedule essay reviews	Brainstorm	Outline	Draft 1	Feedback 1	Draft 2	Feedback 2	Draft 3	Proof	Final Review	
	Check when each task is complete	Personal Major	Grades Tests	List of Activities	Essay 1	Essay 2	Letters of Rec	Sup Materials	Proof	Submit	
	Safety College Hyperlink to Application	Essay Prompts 1 2									
	What College Program or Major?	List reasons why have you chosen this college and major/program?									
	Application Deadline: Schedule essay reviews	Brainstorm	Outline	Draft 1	Feedback 1	Draft 2	Feedback 2	Draft 3	Proof	Final Review	
	Check when each task is complete	Personal Major	Grades Tests	List of Activities	Essay 1	Essay 2	Letters of Rec	Sup Materials	Proof	Submit	



6 Steps to Admissions Success

U.S. Colleges, 2016

	College Hyperlink to Application	Essay Prompts 1 2									
	What College Program or Major?	List reasons why have you chosen this college and major/program?									
	Application Deadline: Schedule essay reviews	Brainstorm	Outline	Draft 1	Feedback 1	Draft 2	Feedback 2	Draft 3	Proof	Final Review	
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