Touring colleges can be exciting and inspirational – but it can also be a bit overwhelming. To help you remember which things you liked about the schools you visited – and how they compared with each other – Explore Colleges has created a simple, but revealing, College Rating Tool.

The following is a list of eight general factors (or “criteria”) students consider when evaluating colleges:
About the Tool

The Explore Colleges College Rating Tool is designed to help you grade each school, on a scale of 1-5, according to each of these criteria. So, if you really like the size of a particular school, the layout of its campus and its rural setting, you might give it a 5 in this area. But if you don’t think it’s a highly prestigious school, no one in your family went there and it is unlikely to have an influential alumni network, you may give it a 2 for that criteria.

As you consider each of these, you will probably find that a few of the criteria are more important to you than others; for instance, you may consider the size of the school to be critical, but where it’s located is not as important to you.

That’s why this tool allows you to determine the weight of each factor, in addition to what rating you think the school deserves for it. Ultimately, by focusing on the criteria that matter most, your selection process – and your final decision -- will be easier, less stressful and more effective.

let’s get started
1. Academics

*Does the curriculum match your current needs and interests?*

The majority of high school students have only a vague idea of what fields of study or future careers interest them and most students do not declare their majors until the end of their sophomore years in college anyway.

However, if you have a fairly definite idea of what you want to study, then ask questions about the school’s programs, faculty, facilities and opportunities for internships, jobs and graduate studies in this area. At most schools, the admissions officers can refer you to the appropriate faculty to answer your questions, or they can schedule a tour of the department and facilities for you.

2. Enrollment, Campus Culture and Environment

*Does the school’s personality fit?*

One exercise to help define your ideal college environment is to visualize yourself interacting on an imaginary campus. How large and how diverse is the student body? What social activities are popular (attending sporting events, gathering in coffee houses, joining fraternities or sororities)? How do faculty and students interact (in large lecture halls, in small classrooms)? What does the campus look like (a collection of downtown buildings, a pastoral compound)?

Now, compare each of the schools that you are considering to this idyllic one.
3. Prestige, Legacy, Ranking

How will you benefit from an education at a “name” school?

There are many valid reasons why a college’s reputation (either in the media, among your peers or within your family) may influence your judgment about a school.

An academically prestigious school may offer an advantage for future job opportunities; an athletically prestigious school (e.g., a Big 10 basketball school) may offer a dynamic campus environment and a strong alumni network; and a legacy school may offer a generation-tested education and promote a sense of family pride.

Be aware that a school’s reputation may be based on its graduate school or faculty research programs—not necessarily on the undergraduate education it provides. The issues to weigh now are how important these factors are to you today and over the next four years and whether the schools themselves meet your current academic, social and emotional needs.

4. Location

What is the right distance between school, home and/or another important place for you?

This question requires you to examine your relationship with your family and friends at home or your desire to be near something else (e.g., a city with job prospects, the beach, a special training facility, etc.) Would you feel comfortable and secure living a significant distance from home? Or do you prefer familiar surroundings and the closeness of loved ones? Do you anticipate needing to leave campus often for work or other activities?
Finally, when traveling from school to home, will carpools with other students be available? Is bus, train or air travel convenient? Will the financial burden of tuition or other expenses prohibit frequent travel home?

5. Campus Housing & Facilities

Will you be able to live comfortably at school?

If you value space, light and modern amenities, a crummy old dorm may make your freshman year a bit more challenging. But, keep in mind that most students make the best of the 8-9 months spent in freshman housing – and generally, their happiness has more to do with their attitudes and the friends they make rather than their accommodations.

(Note: There is often a wide variety of housing offered to students – ranging from spacious and spanking new residences to ancient, musty dorms. You can ask to tour the residence halls, and even to spend the night in one, but rarely are room assignments made before the May 1 acceptance deadline.)

Be sure to check out other on-campus facilities and services that may be important to you, such as dining halls, athletic facilities, computer labs, outdoor areas, studios or rehearsal space, the library, etc.

6. Security

How safe will you feel at school?

Your parents may be more concerned about this than you, but it’s wise to ask exactly how safe is the campus or the areas where you may be studying, working or traversing? Has there been an upward trend in crime or violence at the school or in the community over the past year? How has the school responded to these? Does the school have an emergency preparedness plan?
Federal law requires colleges to divulge their annual security records and their emergency response times. If security is a nagging concern, request these records.

### 7. Gut Feeling

*Is there something else that makes the school an attractive option?*

Sometimes it’s the little things that leave big impressions during the selection process. Maybe it was the friendliness of the admissions staff and students you met, or the beautiful grounds and history-steeped campus? Or, is there someone whom you admire who attended this school?

These are examples of impressions that can create a favorable gut feeling. Negative impressions can have an equally strong effect. Was it a cold and rainy day when you visited the school? Was the student guide a dorky dresser whose enthusiasm for entomology really bugged you? It is important for you to acknowledge impressions like these, but also to evaluate the degree to which they truly represent the entire campus environment.

### 8. Cost

*Are you or your family able to afford this school?*

In 2015, the average annual cost for tuition and fees at a public institution is $9,139 for in-state and $22,958 for out-of-state; the average annual cost at a private institution exceeds $31,231. This does not include housing or meal plans. For most, cost is a major consideration, but there are many ways to avoid having to pay the full rate of tuition. Unless you have a firm limit and no prospects for tuition assistance, try not to eliminate schools immediately based on cost.
Explore Colleges: College Rating Tool

Before reading ahead, take a few moments to evaluate the importance of each of the previous factors to your decision. This is the “weight” of the criteria.

Beginning with the rows that run down the side of the page, each of which lists a particular criteria, rate its importance between 1-5 (“5” indicating the most important) in the weight column. Continue down the page.

Along the top of the chart, list the names of the schools to which you are considering applying. Grade each one according to the factor in the left column with a rating of “1” to “5” (five indicating that the school ranks very high for that factor).

**Note:** The final numerical score for each school is not intended to render a binding decision, but rather, to provide you with a quantifiable means of evaluating your options.

Multiply each school rating by the weight that you assigned this particular criteria, as in the following example:

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<tr>
<th>Criteria</th>
<th>Weight</th>
<th>School Rating</th>
<th>Score</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Academics</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>20</td>
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This tells us that this student considers academic programs to be a pretty important factor in his decision – and that State U. has excellent academic programs in the area he wants to study. Continue down the list of criteria – omitting “cost” -- then add all of the numbers in the “Score” column.

**The highest total score at the bottom of the chart will indicate which school best satisfies the criteria that you consider most important.**
Calculation Table

Note: This initial exercise purposely omits “cost” because it is valuable first to evaluate a school solely on its merits ... then to determine if its value justifies seeking more financial aid, taking out an additional loan, participating in work/study programs, etc.

Now go back and add the score associated with “cost,” then compute a revised score total.

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