

The Top 10 College Search Mistakes



College**IQ**

For many people, selecting which college they will attend is one of the biggest decisions they'll make as they transition to being an adult. It's a big (and oftentimes expensive) decision that shapes who you are and what you will be when you "grow up." It's also a decision most make just once in their lifetime, so it's understandable that you aren't an expert at the process.

At [CollegeIQ](#), we're here to assist you with this big decision by helping you find colleges that are a fit for your interests and budget. In this handy guide, we discuss ten common mistakes people make when building their college lists.

1. Looking only at the sticker price

Colleges post a sticker price (aka list price). It's common to have sticker shock after seeing it! Many schools now cost over \$90,000 a year to attend, meaning you might spend over \$350,000 to get your undergraduate degree. But the list price for the college isn't the full story because many people qualify for need-based aid or merit aid.

Need-based aid is based on your family's financial situation, including income and assets. For each college profile on CollegeIQ, we share the average net price that students actually pay to attend the college. And because this can vary widely depending on your family's finances, we also show average net price by income.

Merit aid is scholarships that colleges give to students to encourage them to choose their schools. This aid is typically granted based on the student's profile strength, rewarding high grades and extracurricular activities.

CollegeIQ shares what percentage of the most recently enrolled class at each college received merit aid and the average amount awarded. We combine this into the *Merit Price™*, which is the average price a student who did not have need-based aid paid after deducting their merit scholarships.

We also show a *Merit Meter™*, which indicates if the school gives a lot or just a little merit money to incoming students.



Take into consideration all of these prices when deciding if you can afford a school or not. You might find that a school with a high sticker price isn't as far out of reach as you think.

[For more details about types of aid, read this primer.](#)

2. Not considering all of the costs

While the list price and Merit Price are helpful for understanding the cost of college, it's not the full story. Each school publishes costs it controls (e.g., tuition and on-campus living expenses), but other costs can vary depending on your situation.

For example, schools include an estimated range of travel costs for the year. The University of Michigan estimates that travel costs are \$400 for out-of-state students. Unless you live within driving distance of campus, it's likely you'll spend a lot more to travel to school, even if you only go home over the winter holidays.

There's also a hidden cost that many students face: health insurance.

Some schools require students to pay for an approved insurance plan even if they have health insurance through their parents. [This can cost several thousand dollars per year.](#)

But there's some good news for parents on the cost front. You'll likely spend less on food when your teen leaves the nest. You'll pay for the campus meal plan, but at least you'll save on your own grocery bill.

3. Not casting a wide net

Many people start their college search by looking at the big-name colleges (big state schools and highly-ranked schools). They research schools close to them and schools their friends or teachers have mentioned.

The pool is much bigger than that: there are about 3,000 four-year colleges in the U.S.!

CollegeIQ is here to help you discover some of these schools that might be a fit for you. You might discover a wonderful school that's a better match for you and costs a lot less than other schools you're considering. You might discover a school with great academics but smaller class sizes than your closest state school.

While you don't have to apply to every school that might be a fit, it's important to create a big list when you're first starting your search.

4. Fixating on rankings

There has been a lot of controversy about college rankings in recent years. Schools have figured out how to game the system to move up the rankings. Other colleges question the ranking metrics used by popular college lists and some schools have opted out of participating in rankings at all.

The reality is there are a million ways to rank colleges, and you need to rank them based on what matters most to you. Colleges aren't one-size-fits-all, and you should look beneath the headline stats to figure out where you are most likely to thrive.

5. Thinking you're unique

You've got a 4.0. Maybe you aced the SATs. You're student body president.

Congratulations! But you need to check your ego in the college application process.

Many people get 4.0s and 25,000 people graduate at the top of their class each year. 125,000 students score at least 1400 on the SAT. And every high school has a student body president.

This means you have to do more to stand out than just check the boxes for good grades and activities. Schools care about a lot more. Every year, students with great grades and resumes get rejected by schools, and we're not just talking about the Ivy League. Sometimes it can be baffling why one student got in and one didn't.

On our Admissions pages for colleges, you can see the factors schools say are important to them when reviewing applications. Before you apply to a school, you should dig deeper. Take a look at the school's website to see what matters to the college when selecting students, and be sure to craft your application to the college.

And regardless of your grades and resume, don't worry, [there's a school for you on CollegeIQ](#).

6. Believing a school is courting you

It's great to feel wanted, and you should expect schools to market to you to get you to apply to the school. But it's important to understand that their overtures aren't always unique.

Schools try to get as many qualified students as possible to apply. Some schools even try to get unqualified students to apply. They reject these kids, making the college look more selective and helping them move up in college rankings.

While receiving a brochure from a college means they might be interested in you, don't read too much into it. Some schools are notorious for sending brochures to every living and breathing high school student in the country. (We're looking at you, University of Chicago!)

7. Not taking standardized tests

One of the biggest changes to applying for college in recent years is the test-optional and test-blind trend. Test-optional schools only consider test scores if you submit them, and test-blind schools don't look at them at all.

So test scores don't matter? Well, at test-optional schools, another way to look at it is that tests can only help you. If you take the SAT or ACT and do well, it's a bonus for your application. If you do poorly, you simply don't submit the score to the school.

This means sitting for the tests doesn't involve as much risk as it used to. So you might as well take the tests and see how you do. At a minimum, take a practice test and see how you score. If you score well for the colleges you're considering, sit for the actual test.

8. Not understanding a school's reported test scores

One impact of the test-optional movement is that schools are reporting much higher test scores than they used to. The reason is simple — only students who score well submit their scores.

And it's a self-fulfilling cycle, leading to ever higher reported test scores.

Consider a hypothetical school that used to require test scores. When it required scores, it reported the following SAT range:

25th percentile: **1200**

50th percentile: **1300**

75th percentile: **1400**

Now it's test optional. Students who score near the lower end of the range don't submit their scores because they don't think it will help their application. So the next year, the school reports the following:

25th percentile: **1300**

50th percentile: **1400**

75th percentile: **1500**

Now the bar is even higher. This year, students don't submit their scores unless they are even better. The school shows higher average scores yet again. So don't let high average test scores at a test-optional school scare you away from applying. Even if the 50th percentile score at a school is higher than your score, that doesn't mean that it's the true 50th percentile of all applicants.

CollegeIQ shares the percentage of students at a school submitting SAT and ACT scores, although this data is somewhat delayed because it relies on government data.

Another important note: colleges might look at more than just your test score. Some schools look at your test score in the context of how people at your school typically perform on the test. Think of it like grading on the curve.

One reason Dartmouth reinstated a test score requirement is that it found some people weren't submitting scores because they were below the school's average, even though the score would have helped the students' applications.

9. Not visiting campuses early

It's helpful to visit a college campus before committing to go there for four (or more) years of your life. You learn so much more about a school's vibe by walking around campus than you can ever learn from a website or brochure.

Many students wait until the spring of their junior or senior year of high school to visit campuses. One of the busiest times is after students have been accepted.

Let's face it, junior and senior year are busy times for students.

The earlier you start visiting colleges, the easier it will be. Taking a summer vacation early in high school? Look up colleges in the area that might be worth visiting. Have a school that's high on your list? Make it a point to schedule a visit.

And when you're on campus, [be sure to ask the right questions!](#)

10. Falling in love with one school

For some high schoolers, it's love at first sight. They find a college that they absolutely must attend. Maybe they grew up as a fan of the school's football team. Perhaps they like a unique program the college offers. Or they want to go to a prestigious school they've heard a lot about.

There are two problems with falling in love with just one school.

One is disappointment. Disappointment is part of the college application process, and it's OK to experience it. But if you put all of your eggs in one basket emotionally, it can be that much more crushing if you don't get your top pick.

The other reason to not fall in love with one school is cost. Until you apply and are accepted, you won't know what your true cost of attendance will be. Falling in love with one school could mean you end up spending more on college than you should. Getting offers from several schools helps you make a better financial decision.

You're much more likely to walk away from the process happy if you have a few schools at the top of your list rather than just one.

Now, take a deep breath...

These are some of the common mistakes high school students and their parents frequently make. But remember, it's OK to make mistakes. You will make mistakes in this process and learn from them.

Our goal at CollegeIQ is to help you limit critical mistakes and find the right college for you.

[Get started searching for schools at CollegeIQ!](#)