HOW TO CREATE A GREAT COLLEGE LIST

This post was informed by podcast episode 109 with Steven Antonoff (Author, College Match and The College Finder) and episode 110 with Ted Fiske (Author, The Fiske Guide to Colleges). You can hear those episodes by clicking here and here.

PART 1: HOW DO I FIGURE OUT WHAT I'M LOOKING FOR?

When I asked Steven Antonoff, who literally wrote the book on this process, for the best way for a student to discover college preferences if they were to spend only one hour, he advised going somewhere quiet, like the top of a mountain, and really thinking about two things: who you are and what do you want? That could work, if you have a mountain nearby.

But if you don't happen to have a mountain nearby, I recommend the 80-question "Self-Survey for the College Bound", and not because he is paying me to say that but because it is awesome. But say you're too unable to buy the book (or just too lazy) and just want the worksheet? Get this: he gives it away on his website.

Click here to download the Self-Survey for the College Bound.

And if you want to learn more about yourself, use these guides:

- College Planning Values Assessment
- Self-Knowledge Questionnaire
- Qualities That Will Make a College Right for You
- Activities and Experiences Worksheet

These aren't meant to be exhaustive, says Dr. Antonoff, but instead meant to start a conversation. Complete these exercises over the course of an afternoon and you'll have begun that conversation.

What are some other ways to get to know your interests and preferences?

Another way is to start with the key characteristics that might differentiate colleges from each other. For this, I love Corsava. It's a free tool that you can use to sort and rate your preferences in a way that will help you figure out what you want (and don't want) from your college experience. Dr. Antonoff and I both like Do What You Are and I'm a big fan of YouScience. I also recommend the "Sizing Yourself Up" section at the start of the Fiske Guide to Colleges (more on that in a moment) and on the podcast, Dr. Antonoff mentions a half-dozen other great self-exploration tools, including Knowdell's card sort, the True Colors survey, and O*NET online, all of which you'll find links to on the show notes page at this link.

Once you've spent some time thinking about your interests and preferences, it's time to start thinking about...

PART 2: WHERE DO I START FINDING THE RIGHT COLLEGES?

Use collegexpress.com to search according to your interests.

Why College Xpress? Because after 30 years spent eating, sleeping and breathing colleges, Steven Antonoff published his amazing set of lists in his book The College Finder (which I recommend if you like reading books with actual pages) but they are available (and searchable!) at www.collegexpress.com. So you can type in anything from "Schools for the Free Spirit" to "Great Private Colleges for the B Student" and you'll get results. It's pretty much my favorite resource ever.

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Another thing I love is that Steven doesn't rank schools, which is pretty tough to do anyway.

Here, I'll make it even easier for you. Check out The Amazing College List below. All the links are clickable.

I'm interested in studying…

Automotive	Education	Humanities	Music
Anthropology	Engineering	Interior Design	Outdoor Studies
Aviation	English	International Relations	Photography
Biology	Entrepreneurship	Hospitality Management	Physics
Chemistry	Ethnic Studies	Journalism	Political Science
Computer Science	Equestrian	Landscape Architecture	Psychology
Criminal Justice	Film	Law	Religious Studies
Culinary Arts	Finances	Liberal Arts	Robotics
Dance	Fashion	Marine Science	Sociology
Dentistry	Foreign Language	Mathematics	Theater
Ecology	Graphic Design	Medicine	Voice
Economics	History	Meteorology	World Business

Click any of the links to go directly to the list

|		
Colleges for Specialized Majors	Colleges Giving Academic Grants	Colleges with Unusual Majors
Colleges for Students Needing a Second Chance	Colleges with Greatest Diversity	Colleges for the Socially Conservative
Colleges with Strongest Academic Pressure	Best Cooperative Education Colleges	Colleges for the Improved Student
Colleges that Do Not Consider Standardized Test Scores	College with Most International Students	Colleges that Offer A Lot of Financial Aid Opportunities
Colleges Most Like Hogwarts	Colleges with Highest Percentage of Fraternity Students	Colleges that are Underrated
Expert-Chosen Unknown College Gems	Colleges Going Green	Colleges for Video Game Lovers
Colleges with Interesting Traditions	Colleges Offering Grants to Students Without Financial Need	Colleges for Sea Conservation
Colleges with the Best Honors Colleges	Colleges with Unconventional Grading Styles	Best Undergraduate Colleges Overall
Top Ten Slacker Colleges	Wealthy Colleges Offering Enrolling Needy Students	Colleges with Great Living Spaces
Most Christ-Centered Colleges	Colleges with the Most Peace Corps Volunteers	Most Beautiful College Campuses
Colleges with Meditative Spaces	Alma Maters of Astronauts	Colleges for Creative Writers
Colleges with Most Devoted Sports Fans	Colleges to Consider for Online Learning	Top Ten Activist Schools
Colleges Most Tolerant of Different Perspectives	Gay-Friendly Colleges	Colleges with Campus Spirit
Colleges for Socially Awkward Students	Colleges for the Most Fun-Loving	Broad-Minded Colleges
College Promoting Internationalism	Private Colleges for the Underachiever	Colleges for the Independent Learner
Colleges with a Strong Sense of Community	Colleges Making a Difference	Colleges Offering Community Service Scholarships
Top Ten Colleges with All-Time Most Football Wins	Colleges for the Scholar	Colleges Where All Students Live Off Campus

What do I do next?

1. Notice which colleges are coming up repeatedly.

Example: maybe you've never heard of Brandeis, but you see it on the lists for "Colleges with Excellent Political Science Programs," "Colleges with Fine Music Programs," and "More Colleges for Creative Writers" (and you want to major in Poly Sci, you play the violin and like to write poems in your spare time). Put in our list. Which list? This one…
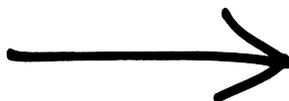
2. Make a copy of this Google spreadsheet. How? Go to "File" and click "Make a copy…"
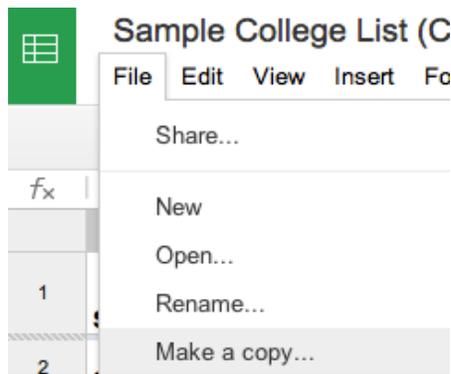
3. Type your list of schools into that doc, like this:

	SCHOOL	general % acceptan	How many students?	How many students?
1				
2	Site	x		x
3	Login/password	x		x
4	REACH	1-24%	ANSWER THESE QUESTIONS:	
5	Amherst	12%	1800	
6	Wesleyan	20%	3200	
7	Tufts	21%	around 10,000	
8				
9	MAYBE	25-75%		
10	Brandeis	39%	around 5,000	
11	Hampshire College	63%	1500	
12	Mt. Holyoke	42%	2400	
13	Emerson College	48%	4500	
14	Boston College	28%	13000	
15	MATCH	76-100%		
16	Wheaton College	64%	1600	

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Share this list with anyone who is helping you (your counselor, friend, or parent) using the "Share" button in the top right corner. And list a bunch, like 15-20. You'll whittle it down. How? Through research.

So where should I research colleges?

Stay on www.collegexpress.com and type in the school name. Then click "Lists" to see what other lists that school is on.

For the pro perspective, go to collegecountdown.com where for $20 you can get online access to the Fiske Guide to Colleges, which is (ask any counselor) the go-to guide for college research. This $20 is optional, but totally worth it. Why else should you get this book? You'll find out in podcast episode #110, which you can listen to here.

For the student perspective, go to unigo.com where you can read real students' opinions on their schools. But don't just read 1-2 reviews, read a bunch of them, in particular the "What's the stereotype of students at your school?" and "Is the stereotype true?" You'll get a sense of the school vibe pretty quick.

How many schools should I apply to?

Pick nine schools. Why nine? Because nine allows you to pick three of each of these:

- 3 Reach (1%-24% chance of acceptance)
- 3 Maybe (25%-75% chance)
- 3 Match (76%-99% chance)

Keep searching and researching until you're in love with all nine — yes, even the "match" schools where you'll likely get in. (Bonus tip: If you're applying to the University of California schools, count them as one, since the application and essays will be the same for all of them.)

How do I know my chances of getting in?

In general, it's tough to perfectly predict your chances at getting into any college. Even for schools that you feel are clear "maybe" or "likely" schools aren't always sure bets. Why?

Colleges often have institutional goals that they have to meet that you have no control over and are tough to predict, including ensuring that they admit students to certain majors, from diverse backgrounds or geographic areas, like in-state vs. out of state. This is why it's super important to have a balanced list of colleges, and the four categories I've outlined above are a good guideline.

So to find out generally whether a school is a Wild Card, Reach, Maybe, or Likely, it can help to look at three main factors:

- The school's general acceptance rate
- Average weighted and unweighted GPA for last year's incoming freshman
- Average SAT/ACT scores for last year's incoming freshman

There are other factors that can impact your chances of acceptance and become important factors for very selective colleges, including:

- Whether you have a "hook" or unique story that helps you stand out among thousands of other applicants
- The popularity or competitiveness of your major (e.g. Computer science or other STEM majors tend to be much more competitive)
- What you are doing outside of class (extracurricular activities)
- Whether you are applying Early Decision, Early Action, or Regular Decision

But rather than spending endless hours debating whether a school is a reach or a wild card, it's best to use general acceptance rate, GPA, and test scores as a good guide in deciding whether a school is a Wild Card, Reach, Maybe, or Likely.

Here are a few of my favorite tools for assessing your chances.

Mark Moody's Quick and Dirty College List Builder is one of my favorite tools for helping students get a rough idea of their college admissions chances. The short version is this:

- Find the color zone that most closely corresponds to your GPA and test scores. This your home zone and covers your Maybe/Target schools (Mark calls them POSSIBLE)
- Colleges above that color are your Likely schools, or colleges that you have better chance of getting admitted to. (Mark calls them LIKELY, while others call them SAFETY schools)
- Colleges below your home color zone are your Reach schools (Schools that are not likely to admit you.)
- In general, regardless of your GPA and test scores, a college with an acceptance rate below 10% should be considered a Wild Card for almost everyone that applies.

Cappex provides a great tool that allows you to input your weighted and unweighted GPA, your test scores, and your college preferences, and it will match you with schools that meet your preferences but will also provide a rough sense of your chance of admission. Bonus: Cappex also will give you the average Net Price paid by students (which is different from the sticker price) as well as the merit scholarships that are available at each school to which you are applying under the "Scholarships" tab. This will show up once you've added your colleges on Cappex.

CollegeData, as its name suggest, has TONS of data on the average test scores, general acceptance rates, and average GPAs of incoming college freshman. But it also provides great data around average financial aid packages offered, specific financial aid packages offered to students who were admitted, and loads of other numbers that might help you and your family plan for college costs. Keep in mind this is mostly self-reported data, so use it with a grain of salt.

Naviance (ask your counselor if your school uses this) often has helpful scattergrams that will show the average test scores and GPA for students who applied to certain colleges from your high school school. Keep in mind that these scattergrams only include a few data points. Just because the average GPA and SAT scores for students getting into Brown at your school was 3.85 and 1510, that doesn't mean Brown is a target school if you meet those numbers. Scattergrams don't include important data like extracurricular involvement, the quality of college essays, legacy status, intended major, or other factors that can be super important. In addition, the data may be more biased towards acceptances since students tend to be more likely to report their scores and GPA data when they are accepted, rather than denied. While it can be helpful, it should just be one of many tools you use in assessing your admissions chances.