



*I've been accepted at two schools that I really like, but I can't decide between them. What kinds of things should I consider in order to decide?*

Here's a question we were asked recently, one that we find many seniors struggling with now that college decisions have been announced. The date is approaching when you must finally decide "where to go": May 1. If you didn't apply Early Decision and get accepted earlier in the admissions process, now is when you will have to put down a deposit at one college and make your plans for this fall. Perhaps you have been able to narrow your decision to two schools, or perhaps there are three or more attractive acceptance offers competing for your attention. What should you do to make the best decision you can?

First of all, try to decrease the weight or importance of this decision in your life. This is not necessarily a "forever" decision. You are not choosing your life partner, or where you will live for the rest of your life. The most important thing for your future is not where you are going to college, but the fact that you are going to college in the first place. If you do well and graduate from the college you pick, you will be more likely to have career success, a decent lifestyle, and higher levels of personal intellectual and social development. You will continue on your journey toward becoming a life-long learner. In the worst case, if you choose a college that turns out not to be a great fit, you can transfer to another institution.

That said, your goal is clearly to narrow the odds of choosing a place that is a bad fit. We hope you have already decreased that likelihood by developing an appropriate college list of institutions that could each work for you, though perhaps in different ways. Thus, you probably can't make a "bad" choice right now. You should know that the most important factors in college success include

*finding the right academic program*

,  
*getting great faculty and teaching*

, and

*interacting with the right students that fit your personality and interests*

Academic program is key, and, even if you don't know exactly what you want to study, you should spend a lot of time on the colleges' Web sites delving into what they have to offer in your likely areas of interest. What classes can you take? What special programs are available? Internships? Study abroad? Research opportunities with faculty? What classes must you take in order graduate, both in and out of your major? How do these general distribution requirements vary from school to school? Consider emailing, calling, or talking in person with representatives of departments or programs (whether artistic, musical, theatrical, athletic, or academic) of

interest to learn more about them.

Great teaching will help you succeed and keep you engaged in your learning. Look at data the colleges offer about faculty-student ratios, class sizes, use of teaching assistants, and so on. What will your learning experience be like? Talk with students on campus or through phone calls and chats – some colleges are having students call accepted applicants and/or are making students available online – to ask about their academic experience and their faculty. Our experience shows that if you have good faculty and the right academic program, you are much more likely to do well and persist in your college.

Whom you study with and engage with outside of class (remember, most of your college time is not spent in the classroom, which is a big difference from high school) strongly impacts your happiness and connectedness. If you are not happy socially, then you are unlikely to do your best in your classes, and are more likely to seek a transfer. Thus, revisits to campus to see and interact with current students and other admitted applicants will help you to see what it's really like. Sit in on a class if you can. Eat lunch in a cafeteria. Stay after 10PM and see what's happening at night. Go to a sports game. Do some of the things you'd likely be doing as a student and see what your prospective peers are like.

Put these three big factors together and make a list of pros and cons for each of your college choices. Sometimes the obvious one emerges, and other times you really will be torn. The key is to do what you can now to make the best decision possible given what you know, what you are able to learn, and what you know about yourself at this stage in your life. You'll notice we have left food, fancy dorm rooms, climbing walls, and other elements off this list. That's because those aspects of college life really aren't that important in the long run. Size of the school, proximity to a city, on-campus versus off-campus living, Greek life, and so on, can make a difference, to be sure, but you will likely have thought through some of those factors as you shaped your list. Financial aid and the Total Cost of Attendance at difference colleges also could be a factor for you and your parents to consider, but that's a subject for another day. So, open your mind, take in a lot of information , and combine your instinctive feeling about your choice with as much rational analysis as possible. Trust yourself. You'll make a good decision