INNOVATIVE COLLEGE PREP

GUIDE & WORKSHEET

Building a Balanced College List

Weigh academic fit, affordability, location, preferences and admissions likelihood

For: Juniors, seniors, families and counselors

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Revised November 2026. General guidance only. Admissions policies and deadlines vary by college and change; always confirm with each institution.

A list you would be glad to choose from

A balanced list contains colleges you would be glad to attend, that you can afford, and that include a realistic range of admission likelihoods. Admission is never guaranteed, even at colleges where you look strong on paper.

Step 1: Know what you want

Before looking at any college, write your own priorities. Rank each from 1 (must have) to 3 (nice to have).

Priority	Rank 1–3	Notes
Programs, majors or academic experiences I want (or want the option to explore)		
Size and feel of campus and community		
Location, distance from home and climate		
Cost I can afford and aid I need		
Support services, accessibility, learning needs		
Activities, athletics, arts, faith or cultural community		

Step 2: Gather facts from official sources

- College websites for programs, requirements, deadlines and net price calculators.
- College Scorecard and College Navigator for graduation rates, typical costs and more, noting each figure's year and scope.
- Admitted-student information (such as the Common Data Set) describes a group. It cannot predict your individual result.

Step 3: Think in categories

Category	How to think about it	Typical share of a list
Reach	Admission is less likely even with a strong record. A college that admits a small share of its applicants is a reach for everyone.	1–3 colleges
Target	Your record resembles typical admitted students.	3–5 colleges
Likely	Your record is above the typical range, and the college meets your needs and budget.	2–4 colleges, including at least one you are sure you can afford

These proportions are a common rule of thumb, not a formula. Your counselor can help you decide what is realistic at the colleges that interest you.

Step 4: Check affordability

Run each college's net price calculator and record the estimate. Compare the **net price** (what you might pay after grants and scholarships), not the sticker price. Remember that estimates are not offers, and costs usually rise each year. Merit scholarships are not guaranteed, so make sure at least one likely college is affordable without them.

Worksheet: My college list

College	Category	Fit with my priorities (1–5)	Est. net price / yr	Admission plan & deadline	Notes

Step 5: Review and refine

- ☐ Would I be glad to attend each college on the list?
- ☐ Can my family afford at least a few of them, with realistic aid?
- ☐ Is there a mix of categories, rather than only reach colleges?
- ☐ Did I verify each college's requirements for my year?
- ☐ Have I discussed the list with my counselor and family?

Official sources: College Scorecard · College Navigator (NCES) · College Board BigFuture · ICP College search

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