

Choosing and Applying to Four-Year Colleges

by Wes Beach

Some general thoughts

There are some things I'd like to suggest for you to think about when you are in the process of choosing a four-year college. Many people never think beyond the large state-run colleges and universities. While these systems may be local, relatively inexpensive and highly regarded, they do not represent anywhere near the range of choice that you have when choosing a college. You may very well end up choosing to go to a state-run school, but I believe that even if you do, you'll have made the wisest pick if it's from the full range of options. Did you know that there is a highly rated college in California that has an enrollment of exactly 26? That some universities have enrollments of tens of thousands? That there are colleges where you can design your own major or even your own courses? That there is a fully accredited college in Vermont that accepts only people who have different learning styles (so-called learning disabilities)? That colleges exist in the centers of cities and in very rural locations, and on the plains, in the mountains and at the edge of the sea? That financial aid can put expensive private colleges within your reach? That at some schools you can study some very unusual subjects, like pulp and paper science; horsemanship; puppetry and hotel, restaurant, and institutional management? That you can earn a degree from a fully accredited college without ever setting foot on the campus? That some colleges you never heard of can provide you with an education that is better in many ways than what you can get at Stanford, UC Berkeley or Harvard?!!!

High prestige / a good fit

There is a massive amount of evidence (2600 separate studies are reported in How College Affects Students, by Ernest T. Pascarella and Patrick T. Terenzini, both college professors) that going to a very selective and prestigious college does not in and of itself provide you with any kind of significant advantage in your life. Your intellectual, emotional and social growth depend much more on your individual interests and talents. These authors have this to say, also: "In the area of earnings, even our most liberal estimate is that less than 2 percent of the differences in earnings is attributable to college quality." You can safely choose a solid college that fits you without worrying about whether or not its reputation puts it at the very top of the heap.

Taking time out

One thing you may have heard is that it's dangerous to take time off from school, that it's really hard to get going again when you've been out of school for a while. Interestingly, many college admissions officers are offering exactly the opposite advice. Here is a passage from a book titled Getting In, by Bill Paul. ("Hargadon" is Fred Hargadon, Dean of Admission at Princeton.)

The majority of applicants...haven't had...compelling [life] experiences. For them, Hargadon has a suggestion: Take a year off between high school and college--a gap year, he calls it. A gap year builds character and exposes a young person to a different way of life, he said in a speech to parents of students at Princeton High School.

"There are all kinds of programs that one can participate in" during the gap year, Hargadon told the parents. "One can go to the American Field Service and spend a year in another

country. One can go off and help build a cabin in the mountains. One can work on a sheep ranch in Australia. All sorts of things. One can go to a foreign country and concentrate on the language of that country, working in a menial way to earn the money to live there." It's been his own experience, the dean said, that young people who take a year off between high school and college enter college with more perspective and maturity, and "slightly more" wisdom. "If I had my way," he added, "I think it would be great" to admit a class of students who, almost without exception, had had a gap year

For some people, the gap can turn out to be more than a year. I graduated from UCLA in 1961, and began work on a master's degree in 1987 at age 48. You can go to college - or back to college - at any point in your life.

Getting advice

You may work, at least briefly, with a high school or community college counselor, and you may want to initiate an extended dialogue. This can be very beneficial, but there are some things to watch out for. Some people I've worked with have felt that the counseling they've gotten has been very informative and supportive, while others think they've received superficial attention and bad advice. Not long ago I called a community college counselor to get some information about preparation for admission to medical school, and I was told stuff that I knew was wrong. If you ask for advice - from counselors or anyone else - ask several people, and expect different answers in many cases. If the issue is a purely subjective one, listen to everything, then take the advice that fits you. If the issue revolves around getting correct information you've got to seek out the necessary facts, get them from as close to the source as possible, ask focused questions, get at what you're seeking in more than one way and double-check it. Don't, however, get paranoid and paralyzed. Life goes on, and it is never possible to know absolutely everything before acting.

Here, by way of example, is what I mean by getting information from as close to the source as possible. If you're attending Sunshine Community College and you want to transfer to Rainbow University, the counselors at Sunshine may (or may not) be willing and able to give you useful information. But the source of the information is at Rainbow U, and conversations with a counselor there would most likely yield the most complete and accurate information. Reading literature from Rainbow and talking to more than one person would also be useful.

College Guidebooks

I'm going to suggest that you begin your search with a set of books. The ones I recommend are listed below. Take a look at them and, if you can afford to, buy the ones that seem most useful. This way you can use the most recent ones (all but Allen and Pope are updated yearly), take notes in them, highlight important sections, etc.

- ***The Fiske Guide to Colleges***, by Edward B. Fiske. This is, in my opinion, the single best tool to use in selecting a college. It is a "subjective" guide that is based on surveys of college officials and students; 300 of the "best" schools are included. Each campus is described in two or three pages of English prose, giving you a good sense of the feel of the place. Basic facts like strongest programs and cost are also given.
- ***10 Minute Guide to Choosing a College***, by Joseph Allen. This is an excellent, step-by-step guide. The author provides many detailed lists of things to consider but leaves the choosing to

you. He also offers a number of very solid guidelines. For example: "Suppose there was some agreement on a way of identifying the best college in America. Would that make it the right college for you? The best college for you is the one that meets your personal criteria."

- ***Looking Beyond the Ivy League***, and ***Colleges That Change Lives***, by Loren Pope. The first book refutes myths (for example, the myth that you need a high school diploma to get into a good four-year college or university) and provides thought-provoking arguments and solid data indicating that you can get a better education at many relatively little-known liberal arts colleges than at high prestige places such as UC Berkeley, Stanford and Harvard. It also offers valuable guidelines and advice about preparing college applications. The second book presents some of Pope's favorite colleges. He provides detailed descriptions of the 40 schools he includes in the book. What he writes is interesting and useful, but of course you're not Loren Pope, and your preferences may be different from his.
- ***Bear's Guide To Earning Degrees Nontraditionally***, by John B. Bear & Mariah P. Bear. The title describes the focus of the book. You'll learn in it, for example, that there are fully accredited, state supported colleges from which you can earn a degree without spending any time at the school. They work like Beach High School - they have no campuses, no faculty, and no classrooms; what they do, basically, is award degrees based on portfolios. I offer you a high school diploma based on a minimal portfolio because I believe that you are filled with solid personal attributes and that high school is empty. The colleges I'm referring to here won't give you a college degree without a very rich portfolio. I wouldn't either if I were running a college rather than a high school.
- ***The College Handbook***, by The College Board. This book includes all colleges, not just the ones selected by the authors as the guides above do. It includes objective information such as majors offered, special programs, enrollment at each school, etc. This book is a very useful reference tool, but I would not use it as my primary source because it's too dry.
- ***Index of Majors and Graduate Degrees***, by the College Board. This book lists schools by available majors. For example, if you want to major in dance, you turn to this section and find all the schools in the country that offer a major in dance. (But see the cautionary note below.)
- ***College Handbook for Transfer Students***, by the College Board. All the books I've described so far focus on freshman admission. This book gives you the basic facts - and only the basic facts - you need to know about admission as a transfer student.

There are all kinds of college guidebooks you might find useful. There is a guide devoted entirely to art programs and schools, and another somewhat broader one on visual and performing arts. (This is where I learned that you could earn both a bachelor's and a master's in puppetry at the University of Connecticut.) There's a guide to hospitality programs, and there's one on vocational and technical schools. Arco publishes a guide titled 100 Colleges Where Average Students Can Excel. Most bookstores have a section devoted to college guides; scanning these sections will give you an idea of what's available.

Of course, I think these books are useful; otherwise I wouldn't recommend them. But I want you to know that I have never found college guidebooks to be entirely comprehensive or accurate. For example, one student I worked with wanted to major in creative writing, so I went through Fiske and found all the schools listed as having strong programs in this field. I then discovered that some of these schools were not even listed in Index of Majors. Use guidebooks as you begin your search, but when you narrow down your choices, begin to read publications from the colleges themselves--and read their real stuff, like catalogs, not their glossy public relations material. Any school can show you gorgeous photographs of its students and its campus and make grandiose statements about its programs.

Using guidebooks

When you've got your guidebooks, start looking. I can't prescribe any particular way of attacking them; you go at them in your style. Very few people will sit down and read these books from cover to cover, especially not The College Handbook, but if that's your style, do it. I would be much more likely to look at the tables of contents, then start browsing more or less at random.

Fairly soon, as a result of systematic reading or of rummaging around in the guidebooks, you'll discover things that will give direction to your search. Pretty soon you'll be hunting for specific features in schools. Of course, I can't predict what these things will be, but you'll discover them. You may decide that geography is (or is not) very important, or the size of the school, or flexibility of programs or anything else. You may wind up looking for a small school in a rural setting that offers a flexible program in sociology, or a huge school in a large city that offers a highly structured program in chemical engineering.

Getting more information

Don't overlook other sources of information. Family members, friends, teachers, and other people you know may have gone to colleges you'd be interested in, and they can tell you a lot about their schools. Remember, however, that this is your education, and what may have been a perfect school for your third cousin may not be appropriate for you at all.

When you get to the point where you are seriously interested in specific schools, call, write or e-mail for information from them; phone numbers and addresses are in the Handbook and in Fiske (and also in College Handbook for Transfer Students). Feel free to call these schools with any questions that you have.

How many schools should you consider?

I don't know how many colleges you're going to actively and seriously consider--three? eight? One very good piece of standard advice is to apply to several schools and to choose at least one where your chances for admission are almost guaranteed. One of my former students applied to exactly one college--Sarah Lawrence--and figured that if she didn't get in she'd attend a community college for a year and apply again (and to other schools) the following year. (She was admitted.) As with all parts of this process, you're making the rules, and you get to decide what's "right."

Visiting colleges

My own belief is that, beyond whatever basic considerations you have, the most important thing is the feel of the place where you'll go to school. By far the best way to determine this is to visit each college on your final list. Pope has an excellent chapter (Chapter 7, "Sample and Test the Merchandise") on college visits. I'd like to recommend this to you and simply comment on a few aspects of what Pope says. He suggests that during college visits you should ask the questions that are important to you, and of course I agree. He goes on to list very many questions to ask, and he suggests that you spend a day and a night at "at least a couple of the colleges if possible." I would prefer, instead, to visit every college I was seriously interested in, even if this meant just visiting for part of a day (but surely for several hours). And trying to ask all the questions Pope suggests, while ideally a good idea, would be impossible. Again, you decide what's important.

Pope writes, "Reactions to a visit may be as much visceral as cerebral, as are the major decisions of life, but the viscera will operate more truly if the brain is informed." He then goes on in this chapter to describe exclusively how to fill your brain. I think you also need to give your gut a chance. When you visit a college campus, in addition to conducting the kind of inquiry Pope recommends, just "be there" for some period of time - sit under a tree and watch the campus world go by, wander around aimlessly or sit with a cup of coffee and give your brain a time to drift and sort without your pushing things into any kind of shape.

If you can't visit...

If you can't possibly visit college campuses (or all of the ones you've chosen), try to obtain as much information of the kind Pope suggests in other ways. Of course you can't sit under a campus tree without being there, but you can call various people on campus, you can read a lot in various books and in school publications about the campus and you can talk to a number of people who have some first-hand knowledge of it. Just as Pope tells you to knock on faculty members' office doors and ask questions, you can also call faculty members and ask the same questions over the phone. You can get their names from the college catalog and their office numbers through their department offices. For example, call the history department office at the college where you might wind up majoring in history. (Start, if necessary, with the general number of the school.) Look at course titles in the catalog and call professors who teach the things you're most interested in. You can also get phone numbers for students' associations and dormitories, and get students on the phone. If you have access to the Internet, use that.

Sorting it all out

From time to time during your search mentally stack your options in front of you, examine them in a somewhat detached way, and let them sort themselves out. Sooner or later you'll know where you want to go to college. Do keep an eye on deadlines, and make sure you're doing specific things that will keep your options open: take required tests like SAT I and II or the ACT, line up people to write recommendations, begin to think about writing essays (look in a book titled Essays That Worked, by Boykin Curry & Brian Kasbar) and gather application materials. If you need advice in preparing your application, perhaps I can help with that too.

About Applying to Colleges

Here are some suggestions about completing applications to colleges. Make checklists in the form of timelines so that you can reliably keep track of everything. For each school you're applying to you'll be sending some combination of these things: the application itself (including an essay or essays you've written), letters of recommendation, a school report, test scores, a transcript complete up to the time of application, a mid-year report, a final transcript and perhaps financial aid forms. You may be interviewed on campus or off-campus; you may also have an opportunity to submit a piece of your work or a special project.

Of course, you'll want to do your best work on each part of each application. You'll also want to evaluate the work others do in support of your application. I've seen very poorly written letters of recommendation, questions that demanded a paragraph answered with a single sentence and school reports containing errors and omissions. Chances are good that competent work will be done in support of your application, but it's possible that it won't be. Ask to see letters and forms before they're sent in.

If the schools you're applying to ask the people who write letters and reports for you to indicate whether you've seen them or not, it's probably a good idea not to see them; schools may believe that you're going to get a more accurate evaluation if the teacher, counselor, or administrator doesn't show you what he or she says. If this is the case, you'll have to make whatever assessment you can about the likely result of asking this or that person to write in your behalf.

In preparing application forms and writing essays, remember this basic principle: Be yourself. Each college is a real place, and you are a real person. The object of the game is to find a real fit, and you won't succeed if you present an invented self that you think admissions committees will like. Your application materials will have far more power if their contents come from the center of your being. If a college doesn't like who you are, why would you want to go there? Make photocopies of blank application forms and practice on a copy; you can find the best way to fit everything in. Fill each form out completely, accurately and neatly. If some vital piece of information doesn't fit or isn't asked for, find a space in which to insert it. I'm not talking here about paragraphs, but phrases or maybe sentences that add critical information. For example, when I fill out application forms, I have to contend with the fact that I've attended nine colleges and universities and earned degrees from only two of them. When I'm filling in charts I have to draw lines to divide line spaces in half or simply write a note in the space that says, "See attached sheet." (Of course, you won't attach sheets if the application specifically forbids it.) If there's a column for my major at each school, in seven of these spaces I insert an asterisk, and then write in an available nearby space "*coursework in education and natural science." When you've completed each application, make a photocopy of it before you send it off.

For advice about writing essays, I'm going to turn you over to Loren Pope, author of Looking Beyond the Ivy League. Read Chapter 13 in this book, entitled "A Good Application = Open Sesame." Pope provides some sample essays in this chapter; if you'd like to look at more essays that won places at colleges for their authors, I recommend looking in Essays that Worked, by Boykin Curry and Brian Kasbar. Obviously you'll write your own completely original essays, but it may help to see what other people have done.

You may participate in interviews (either required or offered) at some of the colleges to which you're applying. Here again I'm going to turn you over to Loren Pope; read Chapter 14, titled "The Interview? Relax!"

We've covered the basics. If you have any questions, or if at any point in the process of applying to colleges you get stuck or want help, please contact me.

Wes Beach directs Beach High School, which offers teenagers the freedom to pursue their authentic interests and develop their natural talents outside of a traditional high school. Wes has been doing this kind of work in one form or another for over 20 years. Prior to working independently, he had 32 years' experience in grades K-14 in public and private schools as a teacher and alternative education program director.

The website for Beach High School is: <http://www2.cruzio.com/~beachhi/home.html>