



THE INS & OUTS
OF COLLEGE
ADMISSIONS

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Over the years during which I have advised families regarding the college admissions process, I have seen a lot of

kitchen countertops. A common sight is a wobbly stack of letters and brochures from colleges and universities. Scanning these materials and then throwing them on the pile is better than nothing, but it is no way to conduct a college search. A lack of an organizational plan, coupled with procrastination, is the major impediment to an efficient college search. Choosing a college can be a life-changing decision, and it is one that comes with a price tag of \$100,000 or (much) more. When feeling overwhelmed, a common human response is just to shut down. I encounter students and parents in this state of paralysis constantly. But just staring at the pile of college literature and mentally fretting about the work ahead will not get the job done. You need to take control of the task and organize it into manageable portions. I have found that creating a spreadsheet goes a long way toward reaching this end.

Of course, you begin your spreadsheet with deciding which colleges to enter. Include a wide range of schools, both public and private, that spans the continuum of acceptance chances: safeties (a "slam dunk" you will get in), matches (between a "free throw" and a "two-pointer"), and reaches (a "long three-pointer" or more). Initially, err on the side of including too many schools. As you conduct additional research, you can always remove some; if some schools are not included on your first pass, you may end up forgetting them.

Once your schools and their websites are entered on the horizontal rows, you need to determine the criteria for naming your vertical columns. There are certain subjects that I believe are a must, but there are some topics you may want to add, depending upon your own priorities. This column will focus on the "musts."

Whether a school is public or private is important, as

Feeling Overwhelmed? Creating a Spreadsheet May Help

well as its location (city, state, miles from home, etc.). Regarding location, consider creating a type of key that tells you whether the school is in a large city, suburban area, small town, rural area, etc. For schools that are a considerable distance away, listing the closest major airport is not a bad idea. I have seen students and families ultimately choose a school that is more distant than others, but the convenience of airport access outweighed the driving time and expense.

It is always best to learn the name and contact information of the individual in a school's admission office who will be primarily responsible for your application. Create columns that list her/his name, phone number, email address and even keeps track of your contacts with her/him.

Of course, another necessity is the size or enrollment of the school. Pay particular attention to the undergraduate enrollment, but also to the ratio of undergrads-to-graduate students. I prefer colleges where the undergraduates are a decisive majority; many large universities devote considerable financial and faculty resources to their graduate students, delegating undergraduate education to a somewhat lesser status.

Your spreadsheet should also help you determine your admission chances, as well as the demographic and/or academic profile of typical students. Include a column on the acceptance rate, as well on the 25th-to-75th percentile of ACT scores for admitted students. Much of this information can be obtained from the federal government's excellent College Navigator website/database. Some schools list the academic profile of admitted freshmen on their websites, thus you may want to list the 25-to-75th percentile for high school GPAs and even class rank (although this latter category is going the way of the dinosaur).

Include a column on the type(s) of application that the school accepts. The majority of private schools (and some publics) accept the omnipresent Common Application, but many public universities (including those in the University of Wisconsin System and the state of Minnesota) have their own applications that can be accessed on their websites. Additionally, there is now a "new kid on the block" (the Coalition Application) and you may encounter a school that calls for it.

There are four major admission plans that schools make available, although no single school includes all four: Early Decision (ED), Early Action (EA), Rolling Admissions and Regular Admissions. I have written previous columns on the distinctions – and the pros and cons – of each, but your spreadsheet must account for these various plans and allow you to place a checkmark on the one you choose. Application deadlines are key; they will vary depending upon the available application plans, thus your spreadsheet must include this information. Also, the time frame when admission decisions arrive will differ between schools and admission plans, thus devote a column to it.

No spreadsheet would be complete without some columns devoted to costs and financial aid. All colleges will require the submission of the FAFSA to apply for aid, but some will also require the CSS/Profile. Check each college's website to see whether they require the FAFSA or both. Also, colleges will list priority deadlines for the submission of these forms. Make sure your spreadsheet does so, too. Create a column that lists annual tuition and fees, as well as another for room and board. Also, research whether the school provides only need-based aid, or makes merit-based aid available, too. You may also want to use a school's Net Price Calculator to determine your approximate financial aid amount, devoting a column to this figure.

Depending upon your priorities, other spreadsheet columns might include four-year and six-year graduation rates, job placement figures, retention rate (after freshman year), racial/ethnic profile and percentage of international students, geographic diversity, AP credit policies, percentage of students in Greek organizations, etc. Frankly, the list could become virtually endless. What counts, though, is what is important to you, and creating a spreadsheet will help keep your college search in order.

Happy hunting!

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