

Know Thyself

There are over 3,000 four year colleges in the United States. How do you sort through the options to find the schools that are the best fit for you?

First step: know thyself. Don't even open a college guidebook until you have a clear picture of who you are and what you want and don't want for the next four years.

Sounds simple, right? Yet, many people never get around to actually thinking about what type of school fits their personality until after the applications are in the mail. That's unfortunate, because, not only can self-knowledge help you pinpoint what you're looking for, an understanding of why a certain college is right for you can help you prepare a better application and boost your chances for admission.

Where to start? Begin at the beginning with an assessment of who you are and what matters to you. Here are three simple exercises to help you get started on figuring it out.

1. How would you describe yourself to someone who doesn't know you? List three positive adjectives that best sum up your most important characteristics. (Example: are you happy, thoughtful, smart, outgoing, hard-working, fun-loving...or?) Next, list three negative adjectives that could be used to describe yourself. (Example: are you shy, lazy, pushy, cautious, etc.) Now, ask your parents and your best friend to do the same thing: three positive adjectives and three negative adjectives. How does all of this relate to finding the right college? Simple. The right college atmosphere will strengthen your positives and help you overcome your negatives.

2. Which class in high school has been your favorite and why? Which class was your least favorite and why? Note: I'm not asking you what your favorite and least favorite SUBJECTS were here. I'm asking you to think about how the classroom environment, how the classes were taught, and which fit (or didn't fit) your personal learning style best. Was your favorite class the one where you felt like you were personal friends with the teacher by the end of the first semester? Or, maybe your favorite class was the one where you felt like you could just blend in with the class and not be noticed? Do you prefer classes with lots of writing and discussion or do you thrive in classes that are lecture based? Did you hate the class where the teacher assigned lots of group projects? Or, did you hate the class where the teacher never reviewed homework assignments? The answers to these questions can help you pinpoint what type of classroom environment works best for you --- if you thrive in classes where there's lots of discussion, for instance, a college or university that stresses small seminar-style classes might be right for you. If you hate writing, then a school where the curriculum is writing-intensive may not be the right choice. If you like to "blend in" you may do well in a school with many large lectures. If you value one-to-one relationships with teachers, a smaller school where faculty is focused on undergraduate teaching may be a good choice.

3. How would you describe your best friend? Don't laugh - knowing the type of person you feel most comfortable with is important in finding the right college. Is your best friend conservative, liberal, religious, preppy, athletic, outgoing, a goth, artsy, or quirky? What type of school is most likely to have people like that? And, don't overlook the fact that you may just be ready to break out of the mold and find friends who are very different from your high school friends. Keep this in the back of your mind when reading guidebooks and visiting colleges: do I see people who either seem like me or who seem like people I'd like to hang out with?