

Finding the Right College for You



The Right Fit

Trying to figure out the best college for you? While it's easy to embark on a mission to find just one best college for you, there are likely several colleges where you could be successful and accomplish your goals. The key to finding the right fit for you is considering academic, social, and financial factors, and then applying to a reasonable number of schools. Whether you end up at your first choice or your fourth, in the end it's you, not the college you choose, that will make the biggest difference.

Career Interests and College Choices

While you do not have to have your career mapped out as soon as you finish high school, it does help to have a general idea of the types of careers that interest you. To explore career possibilities, start with the Plan for a Career section of CFNC.org. You can take free career assessments and learn about your interests, skills, work values, and personality. After you complete the career assessments, you'll be able to view suggested careers and even compare your results with people already in the workforce. You'll find over 2,400 detailed career profiles on CFNC.org along with information on the programs and education you will need.

Educational Options After High School

Choosing a Major

A major is the subject or academic area you specialize in during college. A major prepares you for a career field and usually reflects personal interests and talents. Knowing which programs and majors most interest you is very helpful to your college search, however you do not have to pick a major before you start college. If you are unsure about your major, choose a college that offers study in your general areas of interest. For instance, if you enjoy reading and writing, look at schools with strong programs in English, literature, and languages. If you like math, find colleges known for computer science, engineering, or physics programs. Some colleges offer a wide variety of majors and allow you to experience many different subjects before you have to declare a major.

Taking time now to really consider potential majors (and careers) can save you time, energy, and money in the long run. To learn more about choosing programs and majors, check out the Plan for College resources at CFNC.org.

At community colleges, you can earn...

Diplomas and Certificates

These demonstrate that you have a set of skills for a particular occupation. The length of time required varies by occupation, ranging from six months to less than two years. Certificates and diplomas are available in subjects like auto mechanics, welding, cosmetology, and practical nursing (LPN).

Associate's Degrees

These are two-year degrees that provide preparation for a career or for a transfer to a four-year college or university. Examples of careers that require an associate's degree are dental assistant, teacher assistant, and electromechanical technologist. Students can also earn an associate's degree, then transfer to a four-year school to earn a bachelor's degree.



At four-year colleges and universities, you can earn...

Bachelor's Degrees

A bachelor's degree is awarded after four years of study at a college. The bachelor of arts (BA) and bachelor of science (BS) are the most common, and both require general education courses, a major, and electives. This degree is also called an undergraduate degree. Examples of careers requiring bachelor's degrees are teaching and engineering.

Master's Degrees

A master's degree is an advanced degree earned in a specialized field after the completion of a bachelor's degree. Most master's degrees take two or three years of full-time study and include writing a thesis or taking comprehensive exams. School counselors, physical therapists, and social workers are examples of people with master's degrees.

Doctoral Degrees

A doctoral degree, also known as a doctorate (PhD), is the highest educational degree you can earn. A doctoral degree indicates expertise in a specialized field. Doctoral candidates often spend 3-5 years after earning a master's degree completing courses and research and writing a dissertation.

Professional Degrees

Professional degrees are advanced degrees in fields like dentistry, ministry, law, medicine, pharmacy, and veterinary medicine. These degrees are earned after completing a bachelor's degree, and the length of study required varies for each profession.

Different Schools Fit Different Students

Student Body Composition

One of the strengths of college is the opportunity to meet new people and to be exposed to new ideas and cultures. The makeup of the student body varies significantly from campus to campus within North Carolina. For instance, some colleges draw students from across the country and around the world. Others draw students primarily from within North Carolina or from a small region of North Carolina. Other elements of the student population you may want to consider include the ratio of males to females, racial diversity, and average age. While you are likely to meet interesting and different people wherever you go to college, it is important to consider what kind of student body is right for you.

Location

North Carolina colleges and universities are located in a variety of communities, large and small, from the mountains to the coast. If you are entering a four-year college, you may be a part of the local community for four years or longer. You may also want to consider the associated costs with traveling back and forth from home, climate, recreational opportunities, cost of living, and opportunities for part-time employment and internships. For example, if you are preparing for a career in finance, you may want to attend a college located in a city with a high concentration of banking industries that can provide internship placements. North Carolina's community colleges are located so that you can commute from where you currently live.

Cost of Attendance

The cost of attending college is an important factor. A variety of expenses make up the total cost. Some costs, such as room, meals, books, supplies, personal items, and travel, are about the same at every college within a geographic region. The cost of tuition, however, varies depending on whether you attend a public two- or four-year college in North Carolina, an independent college, or a college in another state.

You should not rule out any school based on cost alone prior to finding out what amount you could receive in financial aid. North Carolina's public colleges and universities are supported by state tax dollars; independent colleges and universities, also called private colleges and universities, are not. Even though initial tuition and fees may be lower at a public university, keep in mind that scholarships, grants, and work-study opportunities might make an independent college or university just as affordable. Visit the Pay section of CFNC.org for more information about scholarships, grants, loans, and savings programs for North Carolina students. If you plan to begin college in the next year, be sure to contact the financial aid office at the college(s) you are considering.

Academic Match

Many college planning experts encourage finding both a good college "fit" and a college "match". Fit often refers to a broad range of aspects like location, size, and student body composition, whereas match refers to GPA and test scores. Recent research shows that students are more successful at colleges where their GPA and test scores are similar to other students. Comparing your GPA and test scores to the college's current student body can help you consider the aspect of match as well as your likelihood of admission.



Different Schools Fit Different Students (continued)

Consider School Size

The size of a school has a major impact on your college experience. Smaller colleges and larger colleges both have advantages and disadvantages, so it is important to consider whether a large or small setting would be the best fit for you.

	Larger Schools	Smaller Schools
Diversity of Academic Offerings	Larger schools have more professors and usually offer a wider variety of courses. They may also have more money to buy highly specialized equipment and keep larger research libraries. If you want to study a very specific field, a larger college may be better.	Smaller schools have fewer professors, so there may be less variety in the courses offered. However, many smaller colleges develop special programs in selected fields and can match the opportunities at a large school in specific programs.
Focus on Research and Graduate Students	Most large universities offer master's and doctorate degrees, so their faculty members spend considerable time doing research and working with graduate students. Introductory courses may be taught by graduate teaching assistants instead of faculty members. To thrive as an undergraduate, you will need to be self-motivated and seek out your instructor when you need direction.	At schools that offer few graduate degrees, faculty members are more involved in teaching undergraduate courses and may be more accessible.
Class Size	At larger universities, you may be in classes that vary in size from 25 to 500 students. The amount of direct contact with the professor in a very large class may be infrequent.	At smaller colleges, class size may vary from five or six to 100 people. There may be a greater chance of developing personal relationships with faculty members.
Diversity of Student Activities	At larger colleges and universities, there may be more cultural events and a greater variety of activities. It might be easier to find a club or group of people (with similar interests) in a large student body.	Smaller colleges offer fewer activities and student groups, but you may have more opportunities for leadership roles. For example, at a smaller school you could more easily be the editor of the school newspaper or play in the concert band.

College Priorities Worksheet

Different students have different priorities when selecting a college. To help determine what is most important to you, rate each characteristic below on the scale from one to five. As you research colleges, pay close attention to the characteristics that you rank highly. When it is time to select schools to visit, eliminate schools that don't measure up on factors that are important to you. If other people, such as your parents, play a role in your college decision, have them rank their priorities on the chart in a different color of ink.

Write in or check priorities on this side

Rank (circle) the importance on this side

	Not Important	Somewhat Important	Very Important
Availability of a specific major I am interested in these majors: <hr/> <hr/>	1	2	3
Availability of programs for adult students I am interested in <input type="checkbox"/> evening programs <input type="checkbox"/> weekend programs <input type="checkbox"/> childcare availability	1	2	3
Academic reputation My college should have a good academic reputation <input type="checkbox"/> locally <input type="checkbox"/> regionally <input type="checkbox"/> nationally	1	2	3
Cost of attendance, including financial aid <input type="checkbox"/> I do not want to take on any debt. <input type="checkbox"/> I am willing to take on some debt for the right school.	1	2	3
Setting I want to be in a <input type="checkbox"/> small town <input type="checkbox"/> midsize town <input type="checkbox"/> large city	1	2	3
School size <input type="checkbox"/> Large (Greater than 10,000) <input type="checkbox"/> Medium (5,000-10,000) <input type="checkbox"/> Small (Fewer than 5,000)	1	2	3
Distance from home <input type="checkbox"/> Close to home (within 1 hour) <input type="checkbox"/> Fairly close to home (within 4 hours) <input type="checkbox"/> Not close to home (more than 4 hours)	1	2	3

College Priorities Worksheet (continued)

Write in or check priorities on this side

Rank (circle) the importance on this side

	Not Important	Somewhat Important	Very Important
Class size <input type="checkbox"/> Small classes <input type="checkbox"/> Medium classes <input type="checkbox"/> Large classes	1	2	3
Availability of faculty <input type="checkbox"/> Easily accessible <input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat accessible	1	2	3
Geographic diversity of student body I want to be part of a student community that is <input type="checkbox"/> predominantly from North Carolina <input type="checkbox"/> predominantly from the Southeast <input type="checkbox"/> from all parts of the United States <input type="checkbox"/> from the United States and other countries	1	2	3
Student organizations I want to be involved in these activities or join these student groups: <hr/> <hr/>	1	2	3
Athletics <input type="checkbox"/> I want to play this sport on a college team: <hr/> <input type="checkbox"/> I want to play this sport on an intramural team: <hr/>	1	2	3
Placement rate into <input type="checkbox"/> jobs <input type="checkbox"/> graduate school	1	2	3
Housing I want <input type="checkbox"/> to commute from my current home <input type="checkbox"/> to live in an on-campus dormitory <input type="checkbox"/> adult student housing <input type="checkbox"/> a nice apartment close to campus	1	2	3
Other college attributes I am interested in a <input type="checkbox"/> women's college <input type="checkbox"/> religiously affiliated college <input type="checkbox"/> historically black college <input type="checkbox"/> other _____ <input type="checkbox"/> military college _____	1	2	3

Get Informed: Click, Call, and Visit!



After you have decided on a career direction and considered the different college characteristics, you will want to collect information on colleges that interest you. Use the College Search tool on CFNC.org to filter colleges based on your criteria, visit college websites, call admissions offices, and then visit colleges that interest you!

Click

The College Search tool on CFNC.org allows you to search for both NC colleges and out-of-state colleges. You can filter based on factors such as majors offered, type of college, and admission competitiveness. You'll find quick profiles of NC colleges and links to all their websites.

Call

Contact the admissions office at each college that interests you. Tell them that you are considering their institution, and ask about the next steps they recommend. You may want to ask about visit opportunities, and ask some questions related to your most important priorities from your "College Priorities Worksheet".

Visit

Visiting campuses is the best way to find out which colleges and universities would be good matches for you. Walking around campus, talking with current students, and meeting faculty and staff members will tell you much more than websites and brochures ever can. To set up a campus visit, call the admissions office. You will receive loads of information if you attend an open house, and you may also want to visit on a typical day when you can sit in on a class and do some exploring on your own. To make the most of your time on campus, have questions prepared based on your interests and your research about the college.

During your visit, make sure to do the following:

- Talk to students about their experiences. Are students helpful and friendly?
- Ask faculty about facilities, equipment, and classes. Are they helpful and open with answers?
- Tour residence halls, science and computer labs, and the student union building. Are they in good condition?
- Sit in on a class. Is the faculty member approachable? Are the students engaged?
- Eat in the school cafeteria. What are the meal plan options?
- Read student bulletin boards and the school newspaper, and ask for an alumni magazine.
- Think about how you feel on campus. Do you feel comfortable? Will you fit in?
- Take notes about what you like and dislike about the campus. Taking pictures is also helpful if you will be visiting several campuses.

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Compare

After you have collected information and visited campuses, it's time to compare them based on what's important to you. Using the criteria you ranked highly on the "College Priorities Worksheet," make a list of the schools that meet your needs and wants. If you have a long list of schools, put them in order from most favorite to least favorite. Be sure to ask yourself if you fit in at the college and if you can be comfortable there. These steps will help you narrow down your list of colleges so that you can start the application process. Remember, however, that just as there is no such thing as a perfect person, there is no such thing as a perfect college!



Apply to Colleges

It's your senior year. You've decided what you want from a college, and you've visited and compared campuses. Now it's time to apply for admission. A good strategy is to apply to schools within a range of competitiveness based on your academic credentials: the most competitive school at which you could possibly be accepted, one or more at which you could probably be accepted, and one at which you know you will be accepted. All should be high on your favorites list and should meet most, if not all, of your wants and needs.

Do not drop a college from your list because it may look too expensive. Contact the college financial aid office if you don't think you can afford it. More costly colleges may offer financial aid that offsets higher tuition costs.

CFNC.org 866.866.CFNC

Helping you plan, apply, and pay for college

