



## How to Begin Learning About Colleges from the Comfort of Home

Finding the best schools for an individual student entails getting a handle on the campus culture. It's helpful to think about the type of environment where you'll be most comfortable both in and out of the classroom and then to use books and internet sources that provide information about the specific aspects of the student experience that matter to you.

### Figuring out what you're looking for

Are you the kind of person who will feed off the energy in a large school and whose professors will get to know you even in lecture classes because you will speak up frequently and meet with them regularly during their office hours? Or are you seeking a school where most of your classes will be small and discussion-based even when you're just a freshman? Do you learn best on your own and does a competitive environment bring out the best in you, or should you seek out schools with a focus on cooperative project-based learning and extensive internship opportunities? Do you get excited by ideas and want a place where others do too? What percentage of your time are you willing to spend on school work, and what percentage do you anticipate spending engaged in extra-curricular activities?

What do you like to do in your free time? Are you looking for a place where students have lots of school spirit and many attend sporting events to support the teams? Do you anticipate joining a fraternity or sorority? In some schools students begin pledging almost immediately, but in others pledging isn't allowed until sophomore year. Be aware of this distinction when reading statistics on the percentage of the student body involved in Greek life because 50% participation in a school where the option is not available to freshmen indicates that well over half of the eligible students participate.

In some schools with little or no Greek life, the residential houses, clubs and student organizations sponsor events and performances most weekends. In others, most socializing takes place in students' dorm rooms or off campus. Some schools attract outdoorsy or preppy students, and others more artsy ones. Some student bodies are more diverse than others, some care more about justice issues than others, and some are just plain more friendly than others.

## Resources that Can Help You

**The Fiske Guide to Colleges**, revised annually, provides a sense of what it's like to go to school at each of the 350 or so colleges Edward Fiske has selected as the best in the U.S. A former education editor of *The New York Times*, Fiske devotes several pages to each school, providing information he has gathered through campus visits, conversations with students, and questionnaires he gives them to fill out. He has a decidedly positive take on all of the schools he writes about although he gives each a rating out of five possible points in the following categories: Academics, Social, and Quality of Life. He also writes about what each school does best, what the academic environment is like, what the social life is like, and what students do on weekends. (Note: The Fiske Guide is available online free of charge to students whose counselors subscribe, as I do, to MyCCA or Guided Path.)

**Colleges that Change Lives** was originally written by another *New York Times* education reporter, Loren Pope, but it is currently revised regularly by other people subsequent to his death. This book focuses exclusively on 40 small liberal arts colleges across the nation that are somewhat less selective than the larger, more well-known Ivies, but which the authors believe are providing students with an education that is not merely equally good, but actually superior. Their contention is that faculty at the most prestigious schools are more interested in their own research than in teaching and that the student outcomes there are good not so much because of the education provided as because the students they admit were bound to succeed no matter what. The forty colleges described at length in this book are all places with a focus on undergraduate education, where students typically develop close relationships with faculty who often mentor them in research, internships and study abroad opportunities. Although they are somewhat easier to get into, the student outcomes are quite impressive, with large numbers of alumni attending prestigious graduate and professional schools, garnering awards like Rhodes and Fulbright Scholarships, and going on to positions of importance in the world.

**The Insider's Guide to the Colleges** compiled and edited by the staff of the Yale Daily News is another useful book for high school students trying to get a sense of what it's like to be a student at the slightly more than 300 colleges covered. Since it's compiled by students for students, it includes information on things like how much drinking and pot-smoking really goes on and what it's like for students who don't wish to partake. In addition to covering the academic requirements at each school and a fair amount of demographic information about the populations, the reporters take on the stereotypes of their schools and discuss how much truth there is to each of them. They also review the housing and food, and they end each entry with "FYI: If you come to X, you'd better bring. . . What's the typical weekend schedule? If I could change one thing about X, I would. . . Three things every student at X should do before graduating are. . ."

Similar information is now available about all these schools as well as a great many more through a variety of Internet sites, the best of which for gathering preliminary information are [www.unigo.com](http://www.unigo.com) and [www.collegeprowler.com](http://www.collegeprowler.com). On Unigo, if you click “College Guide,” then “College Search,” and enter the name of the schools you’re interested in, you’ll come to a page with links to reviews, videos, a list of similar schools, and the opportunity to talk to a current student online. You’ll also find student ratings in the following areas: Intellectual life, Political activity, Arts and Culture, Alcohol Use, Professor Availability, Campus Safety, Sports Culture, Greek Life, and Drug Culture.

Entering the name of a college on College Prowler brings you first to a page with the weekly rankings in a whole slew of categories. These should be taken with something of a grain of salt, but they are interesting nonetheless. Each school receives a letter grade in categories ranging from Academics, Athletics, Dining and Housing, to things like Girls, Guys, Local Atmosphere, and Nightlife. If you drill down further, you can find the “sub-rankings” on which those grades are based, so you can find out information like what percentage of students polled identified their professors as “very smart” or “caring” and what percent are happy with their course variety, their school’s technology, and the flexibility of their curriculum. You can see individual reviews as well as a compilation of what the reviewers identified as the best and worst features of their schools. Finally, you can enter the names of two schools in order to obtain a point-by-point comparison.

[www.collegeconfidential.com](http://www.collegeconfidential.com) is another popular site where users can ask questions and, if they’re lucky, receive answers. You need to sign up (for free) in order to use this site, and then if you click on “Discussion Menu” and “Campus Vibe,” you will come to a blog where high school students are encouraged to post photos of the colleges they visited and write about their impressions of the schools. Current students as well as admissions officers respond to some of the questions and comments.