YOUR

SMART

BLUEPRINT

FOR

SELECTING COLLEGES

8

Steps to Creating a Strong College List

By Lynn O'Shaughnessy

THE COLLEGE SOLUTION

Creating a solid college list is critically important to a student's chances for academic and post-college success.

With such high stakes, it's only natural to feel paralyzed or at least daunted by the task ahead.

To make the job easier for you and to boost your chances of success, this list-building blueprint shares eight steps to conduct a successful search.

Once you have gone through this eight-step process, you can tweak it and modify it any way that you wish to meet your needs.

College List Blueprint

Here are the eight steps that you'll discover in this resource guide:

1. Understand the four main types of higher-education institutions.
2. Explore different types of schools.
3. Collect names in a broader search.
4. Look at schools in a state or region.
5. Link schools with majors.
6. Check a school's return on investment.
7. Research schools on the department level.
8. Check graduation and freshmen retention rates.

1 Understand the four main types of higher-ed institutions.

While people use the terms *college* and *university* interchangeably, these institutions represent significantly different academic animals for undergraduates.

Four main types of institutions for undergraduates exist. It's important to understand what the unique institutional missions are for each of these options.

- Research universities
- Master's level universities
- Colleges:
  - Liberal arts colleges
  - Baccalaureate colleges
- Specialty schools

School Choices for Undergrads

Here is background on each type of schools.

RESEARCH UNIVERSITIES

Research universities are the best known institutions and are the schools that capture the most media attention.

These schools offer a huge array of majors and these are the institutions where you will find academics who are leaders in their field. Research universities are typically large schools that offer lots of cultural and sporting events and student organizations.

Access to professors at research universities will often be limited for undergrads. The primary contact for these students will typically be graduate students and part-time instructors who are often tasked with grading and interacting with undergrads.

The No. 1 focus of these schools is professor research and secondly the education of graduate students. Undergraduates represent the third priority and, in the words of Jeffrey Selingo, the former top editor of *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, these students can be an "afterthought."

The educational experience a child receives at a research university can vary dramatically within academic departments. This is also true with other types of higher-ed institutions. You'll learn more about evaluating academic departments later in this resource guide. The academic experience can also be quite different for undergrads who qualify for admittance to an honor college, which many research universities offer.

Examples of research universities:

- Clemson University
- Massachusetts Institute of Technology
- Montana State University
- Rice University
- Rutgers University
- University of California, Los Angeles
- University of Chicago
- University of Florida
- Washington University St. Louis
- Yale University

✔ **Read more about research universities:**

What Is a Research University? Part I

What Is a Research University? Part II

MASTER'S LEVEL UNIVERSITIES

Master's level universities offer bachelor's and master's degree programs, but few if any doctoral programs. The dearth of PhD programs can be an advantage for undergraduates if a university puts more of its institutional focus on educating students pursuing bachelor degrees.

Arguably, the master's level universities are the hardest type of institution to evaluate because their dedication or lack of dedication to undergrads will vary by institution. These schools can be more like research universities that focus on improving and boosting their research output, which can include spending their resources to attract top academics, who have no interest in teaching. Other master's level institutions will be more like colleges in terms of making educating undergrads a top priority.

When researching master's level universities, you'll need to get a sense of how important undergrads are on a campus.

Examples of master's level universities:

- Baldwin Wallace University (OH)
- Bryant University (RI)
- Butler University (IN)
- Drake University (IA)
- Elon University (NC)
- James Madison University (VA)
- Rockhurst University (MO)
- San Diego State University (CA)
- SUNY–New Paltz (NY)
- Trinity University (TX)
- Villanova University (PA)
- Whitworth University (WA)

✔ **Read more about master's level universities:**

What is a Medium-Sized University?

COLLEGES

There are two types of colleges—liberal arts colleges and baccalaureate colleges.

Liberal arts colleges

At liberal arts colleges, which are considered the more prestigious of the two types of colleges, more than 50% of the degrees that students earn are supposed to be in the humanities and sciences. It is less likely for liberal arts colleges to offer vocational degrees although to compete with universities, many of them offer a degree in business, which is the most popular major.

These schools only provide undergraduate education or have extremely limited graduate programs. These colleges offer small classes and a personalized education since lecture halls are rare. It's easier to have meaningful connections with professors at these institutions.

Many families mistakenly believe that liberal arts colleges don't offer science, but these schools represent an excellent option for science and math majors. These are challenging majors and the chances of success can be higher in a class of 20 students or less rather than hundreds.

Students are also more likely to eventually obtain a graduate degree if they attend a liberal arts college. Here is a list of Colleges for the Aspiring PhD that includes the schools that have produced the highest percentage of eventual PhD recipients in the humanities, natural sciences and social and behavioral sciences. The list is based on statistics from the National Science Foundation. Of the top 25 institutions on the list, only two universities (CalTech and Princeton) are represented. All the rest are liberal arts colleges.

You can find other interesting college lists on the website of College Transition, a educational consulting firm that is run by Andrew Belasco, PhD, who has conducted higher-ed research through the University of Georgia's Institute of Higher Education.

Examples of liberal arts colleges:

- Amherst College (MA)
- Beloit College (WI)
- Centre College (KY)
- College of Wooster (OH)
- Goucher College (MD)
- Hendrix College (AR)
- Macalester College (MN)
- Middlebury College (VT)
- New College of Florida
- St. Mary's College of Maryland
- St. Vincent College (PA)
- Whitman College (WA)

✔ **Read more about liberal arts colleges:**

What Size is a Small College?

5 Reasons to Attend a Liberal Arts College

You can learn more about liberal arts colleges by visiting the website of Colleges That Change Lives, which is a consortium of 40 of these schools. These colleges are also mentioned in the popular book with the same name.

Baccalaureate colleges

These schools tend to exclusively educate undergraduates or have modest graduate programs. As with liberal arts colleges, this means that professors will be teaching and interacting with undergrads rather than teaching assistants.

Most of the students attending baccalaureate colleges major in vocational or practical degrees such as business, nursing, journalism, parks & recreation and education.

These schools will be lesser known than the most prominent liberal arts colleges. They can also have lower price points than better-known liberal arts colleges.

Examples of baccalaureate colleges:

- Carroll College (MT)
- Champlain College (VT)
- Elizabethtown College (PA)
- Flagler College (FL)
- High Point University (NC)
- Lebanon Valley College (PA)
- Marietta College (OH)
- Meredith College (NC)
- Messiah College (PA)
- Stephens College (MO)
- Taylor University (IN)

SPECIALTY SCHOOLS

As the name suggests, specialty schools focus on a specific academic interest. Institutions in the specialty category include art institutions, music conservatories, business schools and stand-alone engineering schools.

Institutions in this category won't be as attractive an option to as many students because

they are tightly focused on a specific niche. Students who are absolutely passionate about their academic pursuit can be ideal candidates for these schools, but they can be risky choices for those who are prone to changing their minds.

As a practical matter, many specialty schools can provide poor financial aid. Among the higher-ed institutions with the highest net prices, according to federal statistics, are art and music conservatories.

Examples of specialty schools:

- Art Center College of Design (CA)
- Babson College (MA) business
- Bentley College (MA) business
- Berklee College of Music (MA)
- California Maritime Academy, marine technology and engineering
- Cleveland Institute of Music (OH)
- DigiPen Institute of Technology (WA) video game design
- Franklin W. Olin College of Engineering (MA)
- Rhode Island School of Design (RI) art
- Rose-Hulman Institute of Technology (IN) engineering
- San Francisco Conservatory of Music

2 Explore different types of schools.

Avoid falling into the trap of focusing on just one kind of school. Smart, ambitious students are more likely to draw up a list of schools that's composed exclusively of research universities, which are the best known higher-ed institutions and are widely considered the nation's trophy schools.

Don't limit your search to just one category of school. Even if you are attracted to big name research universities, explore at least one other type of school. Check out liberal arts colleges, for instance, or master's level universities.

Throwing a wider net can also help reduce the stress level when searching because it will help you realize that there are more than three or four dozen schools (i.e. brand name research universities) worth applying to. Doing so can also shrink the price of a bachelor's degree.

3 Collect names in a broader search.

Generating names of schools should be your next step.

Don't stress if you don't know how to find the names of colleges, master's level universities or even research universities. Here are two resources that identify these schools by their institutional categories:

- U.S. News & World Report's guidebook and website
- Center for College Affordability and Productivity

Here is how to use each resource to generate ideas:

U.S. News & World Report

I want to emphasize that *U.S. News'* college rankings are terribly flawed which is why they have been dogged by controversy for years. The rankings represent a superficial beauty contest with the biggest ranking factor linked to what schools think of each other.

To learn more about why rankings are harmful, read this post:

How U.S. News' College Rankings Can Hurt You

Despite what I've just said, here's why you should consult the lists that *U.S. News* generates:

The actual lists can be helpful if you use them exclusively as a tip sheet to generate names of promising schools in the various institutional categories. This is a valuable feature because outside of research universities, people know few if any names in other categories.

When consulting ***U.S. News'*** lists, take a look at the schools in the categories below:

Type of Institution	*U.S. News* Category
Research universities	Best National Universities
Master's level universities	Best Regional Universities
Liberal arts colleges	Best National Liberal Arts Colleges
Baccalaureate colleges	Best Regional Colleges

Important: When looking at these lists, don't put stock in the numerical rankings of a school. A university ranked No. 10, for instance, isn't automatically better than No. 25 or No. 50 or (heaven forbid) a school that didn't crack the top 100.

Center for College Affordability and Productivity

This think tank, which is dedicated to "researching the rising costs and stagnant efficiency in higher education," creates the annual college rankings for *Forbes* magazines.

The same admonition applies here. Be careful about putting stock in these numerical rankings. I do think, however, that the methodology, which the center uses to create the Forbes rankings, is better than what *U.S. News* relies upon.

On the center's website you will see the rankings sliced and diced in a variety of helpful ways and you can download all the lists as PDFs. You'll find rankings from 2011 to 2014. It's not a problem that the site doesn't have its most recent rankings posted because these lists are only supposed to be giving you ideas!

For the task at hand, you'll find the schools listed within these following institutional categories, which are slightly different from *U.S. News'* categories:

- Research universities
- Baccalaureate colleges (includes both types of colleges)
- Master's colleges and universities

Download the lists that you want. You may also want to check out the lists that combine schools in all the institutional categories by the following geographic areas:

- West
- South
- Midwest
- East

Luckily, the geographic lists identify each school by its institutional (Carnegie) category, which is a plus. Here is an example that shows what the center concluded were the top schools in the Midwest:

School	State	Carnegie Classification	Control	Total Score	Midwestern Regional Rank
Carleton College	MN	Baccalaureate Colleges--Arts & Sciences	Private	89.37	1
University of Notre Dame	IN	Research Universities (very high research activity)	Private	89.08	2
Northwestern University	IL	Research Universities (very high research activity)	Private	88.07	3
University of Chicago	IL	Research Universities (very high research activity)	Private	86.85	4
Kenyon College	OH	Baccalaureate Colleges--Arts & Sciences	Private	82.32	5
Oberlin College	OH	Baccalaureate Colleges--Arts & Sciences	Private	82.32	6
University of Michigan, Ann Arbor	MI	Research Universities (very high research activity)	Public	80.22	7
Grinnell College	IA	Baccalaureate Colleges--Arts & Sciences	Private	76.35	8
Washington University in St. Louis	MO	Research Universities (very high research activity)	Private	75.46	9
Macalester College	MN	Baccalaureate Colleges--Arts & Sciences	Private	74.97	10

4 Look at schools in a state or region.

It will be easier to start with a manageable group of schools if you decide what geographic area or state that you want to focus on first.

The lists of schools from *U.S. News* and the Center for College Affordability and Productivity will include the state where each school is located.

TWO COLLEGE SEARCH ENGINES

Rather than start with a particular state, you may want to conduct a search based on a certain distance from you house such as a 250-mile radius.

Here are two search engines to use to conduct such a search:

- College Board
- College Navigator

College Board search engine

The college search engine on the College Board's website provides a handy tool to locate schools within a certain distance of your home. After clicking on the Location hyperlink within the site's search engine, you can type in your zip code and request schools from 20 to 3,000 miles away.

College Navigator

College Navigator is a federal search engine linked to the massive database that the U.S. Department of Education maintains on colleges and universities. Unlike the College Board's search engine, you can designate specific states to look for schools.

To select certain states via College Navigator, click on the *Use Map* icon on the home page that links to a map of the United States. Once you've pulled up the map, you can click on individual states or on any of eight geographic regions.

COLLEGE SEARCH ENGINE DEFICIENCY

A drawback to all college search engines that I've ever seen is that they don't allow you to search by using the higher-ed categories that I mentioned earlier. You can't, for instance, search exclusively for research universities or master's level universities.

Both the College Board and College Navigator search engines do allow you to select schools by size. It would be easier to isolate liberal arts and baccalaureate colleges by size because most of them will be under 3,000 students, which is a search option.

Using the College Board's search engine, you could select the "Large > 15,000" student category when searching for research universities since they tend to be the biggest institutions.

Picking by size will be imperfect when you are looking for particular schools. That's why it's handy to have the lists from *U.S. News* and the Center for College Affordability and Productivity.

5 Link Schools with Majors

A search can be more productive when a teenager is interested in a particular major(s). Knowing a student's field of interest will help narrow the possibilities.

Ideally, a student should look at two potential majors since it's more likely that one of them will stick. Many students end up switching majors in college.

Once you've generated ideas from looking at the *U.S. News* and Forbes' lists, you can go to each school's website and check out its academic major/minor offerings.

Rather than head to a school's website initially, it can be quicker to use any of the following three higher-ed search engines to discover the majors of a particular school. Just type in the name of a school and click the following applicable link:

- College Board (Majors & Learning Environment)
- College Navigator (Browse for Programs)
- COLLEGEdata (Academic Discipline/Major)

AN ALTERNATIVE

You can also use any of these search engines to throw a broader net when looking for a particular major such as mechanical engineering, psychology or studio art. You could use the search engine to look for all schools, for example, that offer a biology major. The numbers that you generate, however, would be unwielding. For instance, when I used the College Board search engine to look for biology majors, I generated 1,696 institutions!

When fishing for schools using the search engines, the more inputs you use, the narrower the outcomes and the more manageable the list.

Here are some additional inputs that the search engines provide:

- Type of degrees awarded
- Public or private schools
- Enrollment

- Housing
- Campus setting
- Test scores
- Athletics
- Religious affiliation
- Support services

6 Check a school's return on investment

When searching for schools, parents are increasingly asking variations of this question to admission reps:

Will my child get a good-paying job after graduating from your school?

College and university admission staffs will enthusiastically answer yes to that question, but proof is almost always flimsy at best. Schools often brag about high job placement statistics for their graduates because they rely on job surveys of their new alums. These surveys, however, are plagued with low participation rates and those that do participate are usually the ones with jobs!

Ways exist, however, for you to check the return on investment that schools are providing their graduates. And you should do so.

Here's some background on this step:

PAYSCALE

For years the only easily accessible source of salary statistics for individual schools was Payscale, which relies on workers voluntarily sharing their wages if they want to use its salary comparison site. Not exactly ideal. Here is where you can access PayScale's College Salary Report.

COLLEGE SCORECARD

In 2015 the federal government started releasing aggregate 10-year median salary figures for grads who earned bachelor's degrees at individual schools. This salary data, which you can find on the federal College Scorecard website, comes from graduates who either obtained federal grants, most notably the Pell Grant for lower income students, and/or borrowed federal college loans. This method leaves out the salaries of many affluent students who did not qualify for federal grants and didn't need to borrow. The available data fails to cover the salaries of roughly half the graduates. Again not ideal.

PARENTAL INCOME AND FUTURE SALARIES

A huge factor in graduates' future pay is actually whether or not their parents are affluent. Grads are much more likely to earn better wages if they came from a high-income household.

This reality means that it's arguably more important where middle and lower-income students attend college than upper-middle class and wealthy students. These non-privileged students need a college to give them a career advantage that they didn't get by virtue of their birth.

The availability of salary data has led to a keen interest in measuring the value that an individual school adds to a student's future success. Value-added measures attempt to isolate a school's contribution to student outcomes that are distinct from what you might predict based on student characteristics. Here is how the Brookings Institution, which has created a value-added tool, describes it:

Using value-added measures is a "way to compare colleges on a more equal footing by adjusting for the relative advantages or disadvantages faced by diverse students pursuing different levels of study across different local economies."

EDUCATE TO CAREER

To measure whether a school provides its graduates with a career advantage, you should definitely take advantage of the value-added tools from Educate to Career.

Educate to Career has created a college ranking system that enables families to identify schools that provide a ***quality*** education with proven career placement records at the lowest cost possible. ETC defines a quality education as teaching students a skill set that is marketable and that leads to a real career with stable earnings.

In evaluating schools, ETC determines the added economic value that a school provides its students. It defines this value as being the improvement in earnings and employability of graduates that is measured against the total cost of the education.

The tools created by Educate to Career measure the career outcomes of graduates from 1,182 four-year private and public colleges and universities. The site ranks schools based on such factors as the following:

- Percentage of graduates employed in occupations that utilize their field of study
- Average salary earned by recent grads at a school for each academic major (adjusted for region, occupation and other variables)
- Percentage of persons employed within one year of graduation
- Number of years to graduate

- Tuition (in-state), net cost
- Loan default rates
- Basket of input variables which norm students

Using these and other criteria, Educate to Career created what it calls the ETC College Rankings Index.

Among the schools performing the best are some state universities (using in-state tuition rates) that are reasonably priced for many of its residents and that produce grads who do well in job markets.

For the 2016 rankings, these are the schools at the top:

ETC College Rankings Index Results

Rank	College/University
1	University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
2	University of California–Irvine
3	University of Virginia–Main Campus
4	College of William and Mary
5	Citadel Military College of South Carolina
6	University of Michigan–Ann Arbor
7	University of Florida
8	University of New Hampshire–Main Campus
9	University of Vermont
10	University of California–Los Angeles
11	James Madison University
12	Bob Jones University
13	California State University–San Marcos
14	Berea College
15	The College of New Jersey
16	University of California–Merced
17	California State University–Los Angeles
18	Saint Johns University
19	University of California–Berkeley
20	University of Connecticut

Among the private schools that are near the top of the list are Bob Jones University (12), Berea College (14), St. John's University in Minnesota (18), Brigham Young University (21), College of Saint Benedict (24), Saint Vincent College (25), Westminster College in Pennsylvania (30), St. Michael's College (31), St. Mary's College (33) and Wofford College (34).

While schools are ranked, you'll also see an ETC Scoring Value for each one of them, which will show you that many institutions are bunched together. For instance, the top school—University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill—had a scoring value of 99.8 out of 100 while the school in 50th place—Virginia Tech—scored at 92.2.

Educate to Career says that the top third of schools among the 1,182 evaluated share this in common:

- A relatively high percentage of graduates will be employed in their field of study.
- Earnings of graduates are relatively high.
- A majority of student will graduate in four or five years.
- Loan default rates are very low.

Colleges in the bottom third of the list share this in common:

- Graduates are not employed in occupations that utilize their field of study.
- Most students will graduate in six years or later.
- Relatively high percentage of recent grads are delinquent or default on their student loans.
- Recent grads have a high student loan balance.

The middle third of schools are doing okay, but could improve.

The Educate to Career list looks much different than U.S. News' list that relies heavily on factors that favor the wealthiest institutions such as general reputation (biggest factor), applicants' grade point average and SAT/ACT test scores, graduation rates and alumni giving.

Check Salaries by Majors

On Educate to Career, you should also check the average salaries of graduates at a school with a particular academic major in specific occupations.

For instance, you can find out what journalism graduates from the University of Missouri are making versus journalism graduates from Northwestern University, Emerson College, Syracuse University and other institutions that offer bachelor's degrees in journalism.

To find this valuable information, click on the site's Career Counselors link at the top of the

home page and then click on the College and Majors Outcome button.

This tool could arguably be most valuable when comparing schools that attract students with similar academic profiles in a state or region that you are interested in exploring.

Job Search Intelligence, which is a leading provider of information relating to educational attainment and career outcomes, compiles and stitches together the data. Among Job Search Intelligence's clients are more than 5,000 employers, including over half of the Fortune 500.

Educate to Career relies on significantly more data points than any other source that I'm aware of. Job Search Intelligence uses dozens of data sources from such places as the Census Bureau, Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Federal Reserve, and National Center for Education Statistics when generating its college statistics. You can learn more about ETC and its methodology here.

7 Research schools at the department level.

Many families gravitate to what they call "great schools" without having any idea of whether these institutions merit their reputations.

In reality, no college or university is a monolithic entity that is uniformly excellent, average or mediocre. That's why picking schools by relying on general impressions, *U.S. News'* rankings or a campus tour won't be adequate.

Kevin Carey, a preeminent higher-ed commentator, wrote the following excellent article in *The New York Times* that states that the real differences in teaching quality happen at the teacher and department level.

THE FUNDAMENTAL WAY THAT UNIVERSITIES ARE AN ILLUSION

A university could have a tremendous English department that regularly places graduates in top PhD programs, but it could also have a business department that produces weak graduates that regional industries spurn. A college could have a fantastic theater department with a pipeline to Broadway and regional playhouses, but a mediocre chemistry department saddled with poor lab facilities.

When researching your candidates, you'll need to drill down and look at academic departments. Here are some things you can do:

1. **Visit an academic department website and read everything you can.** Once on the website, look for information like this:

- Department's vision/mission statement
- Undergraduate advising
- Scholarships
- Department's description of its undergraduate education
- FAQ
- Courses
- Graduation outcomes—graduate and professional schools, jobs
- Number and background of professors in department
- Number of undergraduates in the major
- Undergraduate research opportunities
- Internships opportunities
- Faculty awards—especially best teacher honors
- Undergraduate awards such as Goldwater, Rhodes and Fulbright
- Departmental newsletter
- Events
- Student organization devoted to the major

Example: Check out the physics department at North Carolina State University to discover what a model academic website looks like.

2. **After identifying a promising school, your child should reach out to one or two professors and ask them intelligent questions about the major including those listed in this section.** If the professors don't respond that should cause concern.

   Ask professors for names of upper-division students and recent graduates in the department. Contact these students and ask questions about the major including:

   - Describe the access that students have with their professors.
   - Is access limited to office hours and, if so, are they sufficient?
   - Do the professors make you excited about learning?
   - On a 1-10 scale, how would you rate the professors in this department? Why?
   - How easy or hard is it to find mentors among the faculty?
   - Have you or other students experienced difficulties finding faculty to provide recommendations for med school, grad school, jobs?
   - Are you assigned a faculty advisor?
   - How would you rate the rigor of the work?
   - Does the faculty make an effort to keep students progressing in the major or do they treat lower-division classes, in particular, as a means to wash out students?
   - What are typical class sizes for lower-division and upper-division classes?

- On a 1-10 scale, how would you rate the academic quality of the courses? And why?
- How much opportunity is there (if any) for undergraduate research?
- What kind of internship opportunities are there?
- What do students with this major do after graduating from this school including grad school, jobs and nonprofit work?
- What support is there for students wanting to attend grad school and what grad schools are students attending?
- Is it possible to double major or have a minor when pursuing a major in this department?
- How easy or difficult is it to switch majors?
- When do you have to declare this major?
- Is it possible to study abroad with this major?
- Is tutoring available for students in this major?
- What questions haven't I asked you that are relevant?

3. **Ideally students should visit colleges and universities that make the final list before applying.** An in-depth campus visit can help determine if a school would be an appropriate choice.

   During a campus visit, a student should make sure to arrange a visit to the department(s) that interests him or her. The student and parent(s) should talk to at least one professor in the department, as well as students in that major and also those with different academic majors.

8 Check graduation and freshmen retention rates.

When building a college list, it's important to check graduation rates. Most college students do not graduate in four years. Here are the rates as complied by the federal government:

Four-Year Graduation Rates	
Public colleges and universities	33%
Private colleges and universities	53%

Six-Year Graduation Rates	
Public colleges and universities	57%
Private colleges and universities	65%

Not surprisingly, the most elite schools, which primarily educate wealthy students, enjoy high four-year grad rates. You will see, however, some significant graduation differences among schools that attract the same kind of student body. Among otherwise similar institutions, according to the Education Trust, the graduation rate can vary by as many as 20 percentage points.

Example: Hampshire College, an expensive liberal arts college in Massachusetts, has a four-year grad rate of 55.6%. Amherst College, a more prestigious liberal arts college in the same town, has a four-year grad rate of 89.5%.

One reason why Hampshire's four-year grad rate is so low is because only 82% of its freshmen return. In contrast, 98% of Amherst's students return after their first year.

When a significant percentage of freshmen leave a school, it hurts the institution's grad rate since the federal calculation counts those departing in a school's overall graduation rate.

CHECK FRESHMEN RETENTION RATES

You also need to check any school's freshmen retention rate, which provides the percentage of students who stick around for their sophomore year.

In addition to being a traumatic experience, unhappy students who leave a school can make a college degree far more costly. Transfer statistics from the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center indicate that an alarming percentage of students ultimately transfer out of their original schools.

Among four-year institutions, 36.5% of students who start at a public college or university end up transferring elsewhere and 34.3% of students at private nonprofit schools transfer too.

GRAD RATE SOURCES

Here are sources of four-year grad rates:

- College Completion: Microsite of *The Chronicle of Higher Education*
- College Results Online: Creation of The Education Trust. This resource also provides freshmen retention rate percentages.

Important: A lackluster grad rate shouldn't be an automatic deal breaker. If a grad rate is troubling, research what it takes to graduate in four years. Being in an honors college at a state university, for instance, could make the path to a four-year degree smoother. In contrast, students pursuing engineering, nursing or some other majors might find it difficult to graduate in the traditional four years at some institutions.