

Myth #5: "The more rigorous the admission standards, the higher the quality of education."

This relationship is tenuous at best. There are many reasons a college might have high admission standards. State universities commonly feel an obligation to in-state students and thus out-of-state admission may be quite restricted. A college may have been mentioned in a national magazine, or its football team may have gone to a Bowl game, so applications—and admission requirements—have increased as a result. Some colleges describe their mission and their requirements so well that few apply who are not appropriate for the college; hence, while they may accept a high percentage of students, they maintain a very high level of admission competitiveness. More to the point, however, is the fact that quality of education is often not directly related to admission standards. Many superior colleges do not have particularly difficult admission requirements.

Myth #6: "Cost is really important in determining where I can go to college, so I will likely have to attend a local school."

Again, not necessarily. Billions of dollars are given to students and families annually to help defray—or in some cases completely pay for—a college education. The federal government, states, individual colleges and thousands of public and private organizations make funds available to college students. Again, research is the important strategy. Investigate colleges carefully and use the resources mentioned at the end of the book to help you and your family search for either lower priced colleges or those where you're likely to receive money to help lower the cost of your education. Don't give up before you've even begun!

Myth #7: "Test scores are the most important criterion in college admission."

Not true. Colleges, now more than ever, are using a wide variety of criteria in choosing students and these are discussed in Chapter 7. The quality of the courses you've taken in high school and your grades in those courses are valued most highly by colleges. In addition, your extracurricular activities and college essays are important. Interviews, while not as significant as they once were in the selection process, are still utilized at some colleges, particularly to alert colleges to your level of interest. Also important are any special qualities you might bring to a college campus. While it is true that some large state university systems rely on an "index" that may use test scores as a central variable, most college decisions are made using many different factors.

Myth #8: "There is only one perfect college for me."

Perfect colleges rarely exist. All colleges have good and bad points and all vary in terms of the attractiveness for any individual student. Your goal is not necessarily to find the perfect college; rather, your goal is to research and find several colleges that best meet your needs.

Myth #9: "I'm a failure if I don't get into College X."

It's hard to convince students that this is not an appropriate way to think about the admission process. There are many reasons why students are not accepted at a particular college. Your academic record may not be as strong as that of other applicants. Or College X may be looking for a particular set of traits and you do not have—through no fault of your own—those particular traits. The college may, for example, be seeking tuba players or a student from a rural background and you may play the violin and be from the city. The reasons for your denial from College X are unimportant. What matters is that you are at a college where you can use your talents, be challenged in class and have a successful experience. If you plan well, you will have such choices.

Myth #10: "Some secret strategy can get me admitted to college."

No way. No strategy—secret or open—automatically unlocks the admission door. Disregard books that suggest otherwise. Students who seek letters of recommendation from a Senator or the head of a major corporation (who typically don't know the student) or join clubs in which they have no real interest are trying to strategize. Students have been known to agonize for days over an application essay without realizing it's not the topic that matters, as long as you answer the question. Students should be themselves as they seek admittance to college. Don't try to "package" yourself in wrappings that are not you. Avoid gimmicks. Trying to gain admission through strategic maneuvering or Machiavellian plotting often results in a major backfire. College admission officers quickly see through these misplaced energies. Choose colleges that fit, not colleges where you feel your fate depends on sophisticated application strategies.

Myth #11: "Relying on magazine lists of 'Best Colleges' is the best way to determine whether a college is right for me."

Being so desperate for information, some students give great weight to college rankings in magazines and newspapers. But colleges are multifaceted enterprises. One size does not fit all. The qualities that make a college right for you might not be a quality that is measured by the magazine authors. In

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resources at your disposal to select the colleges to which you will apply. Finally, after hearing from your colleges, you move to the last step: picking your college.

The essential premise of this book is that by going through the steps as outlined, you will have excellent colleges from which to choose. But you need to be an active participant in the process. You need to take your selection of a college seriously. You have to be open to new information and put aside any stereotypes or preconceived notions about colleges in general or about individual colleges. You need to be open to valid information from wherever it comes. You need to be organized. (Appendices A, B and C will help you keep track of important college planning goals.) You need to consult with people who know you and who know colleges. It's a big decision and while you should direct the total effort, you should also heed the advice of those who are assisting you.

Lucky Thirteen Myths About Choosing a College

For some reason, the college admission process seems to be a breeding ground for inaccurate perceptions and faulty statements. Students and families often hear comments that are made with the best intentions, but which often are not based in fact. Here are thirteen myths about the college selection process:

Myth #1: "Colleges are either good or bad."

Nonsense. By what criterion is a college good or bad? In whose eyes is a college good or bad? Academic quality is not easily assessed and, while some colleges are better known than others, it is not true that these colleges are good and the rest are bad. The key question is *not*, "Is X a good college?" Rather, the question is, "Is X a good college *for me*?" Look for colleges appropriate to your educational background, your goals, your ability and your personality. Equally inaccurate is the notion that, "If I don't recognize the college name, it's probably not a good school." Guard against relying on stereotypes in looking for a college. The "best" colleges are not by definition in the East, for example. And contrary to a popular stereotype, there is great fun to be had at small colleges. Also be careful of relying on word of mouth: "Aunt Betsy went to Stony Bay College and loved it so I would like it too." No. Colleges change and you are not the same person as Aunt Betsy. Erase preconceived notions about colleges. Start with a clean slate.

Myth #2: "Future employers and graduate schools give an edge to those who have degrees from prestigious universities."

Not necessarily. As the general level of quality in colleges has risen over the last several decades, and as more and more colleges have distinguished themselves, employers and graduate school admission staffs can no longer rely on the name of a college as the most important selection factor. What is important is your success in college. As a result, wise students are matching themselves to colleges within which they have the potential to make good grades and contribute positively to campus life. Such students, with distinguished records in college, are highly sought by company recruiters, graduate schools and professional schools. Five years out of college, a person's own qualities will decide whether she gets a raise. Do Ivy League graduates have a lock on lists of the most successful individuals in our society? The richest? The happiest? The most humanitarian? There is no evidence to suggest any of these questions are true.

Myth #3: "Colleges always choose the 'best' students."

Nope, it's not true. College admission staffs work long and hard to choose students, but no foolproof or magic formula exists. Furthermore, what does "best" mean? Their decisions are human and, hence, open to interpretation and judgment. Colleges consider so many variables as they decide on admissions: courses taken, scores, grades, extracurricular activities, as well as geography, athletics, kids of faculty members and a host of other variables. Admission directors often say that in any given year, if they had to go back and make their decisions all over again with the same candidate pool, they would often choose different students to receive letters of admission. So students should be certain their final college list is well balanced in terms of admission difficulty. (In other words, students should apply to some colleges where their admission chances are so-so, and some colleges where their chances are quite good.)

Myth #4: "Schools that cost more are of higher quality."

Why would this be true? A college education is expensive even at a state university. That one college costs double or triple what another school costs says a lot about the size of its state subsidies and its endowment, very little about quality of the undergraduate program, and nothing about whether the college fits you! Many factors go into determining the fee structure of colleges. Students should look at how well a school matches their own college selection criteria (see Chapter 3) and make few judgments about quality on the basis of cost. If you find a college that offers the right environment for you and costs a bit less, hooray! You are a good researcher of colleges.

other words, no ranking considers the “feel” of a college: its atmosphere or what the students are like. No ranking considers every academic field. No ranking measures student engagement in or outside of the classroom. Far better is to rely on the people and the resources described in Chapter 4 in order to find the “best” colleges for you.

Myth #12: “If I don’t know what career I’ll pursue, I can’t really choose a college.”

The fact is, there is only one chance in 10 that a person will be doing anything connected with his/her major 10 years out of college. If you know what you are likely to major in, fine, that may help to narrow your choices. If you don’t know what career is best, it’s OK. Think of what else you want in a college: what type of academic experience? what type of social experience? what are the kids like at your ideal college? These and other types of questions will be discussed in Chapter 3. (Even though you don’t need the answer to your career choice, high school is a good time to consider many career possibilities—to research the vast universe of vocational options.) College choice, after all, is not only about life after college. It is also about life during college. Find a place where you will be happy.

Myth #13: “A good college is hard to get into.”

No. There are hundreds of “good” colleges. The more we have traveled to colleges, the more fine colleges we have found. In fact, a good match college is often easy to get into. A brand name college is often hard to get into.

Beginning to Dream

Start the college selection process with a sense of freedom. Open yourself up to the excitement and the opportunities ahead. Explore colleges in an atmosphere unblocked by preconceptions or myths.

Dream of the future—your success in college and your success in life. Discard the shackles of negativism. Don’t think: “I haven’t done that well in high school,” “I’m not going to have many college choices,” “My test scores are going to prevent my getting into college,” “I’m not as good a student as my sister,” “I’m never going to live up to my parents’ expectations.” Instead, think about the possibilities you will have by carefully examining yourself and your goals and by thoroughly exploring which college options are right for you. This attitude will lead to success not only in choosing a college, but in meeting your other lifetime aspirations.

The college experience will require you to exercise your whole being. You will be called upon to think critically and creatively, to be original, to make

relationships among new ideas and concepts. Dream of what you can become academically and about the personal and professional value of your new learnings and insights. But college is more than just academics, it’s the time for growth in other areas. Dream of cultivating leadership skills, enhancing communication skills, and developing a greater sense of others and yourself. Dream of acquiring practical skills like living on a budget, managing time and lessening stress. Dream about career options so you will feel better about your ultimate career choice. These dreams are the foundation of a successful college experience!

Your first step in transferring your dreams of a successful college experience into reality is picking a college that possesses the right combination of ingredients. The next chapter is designed to start you on that road. Choosing a college will take work, thought and contemplation. But it will be an important lesson in decision-making and reality testing. The right college is where your dreams can begin to unfold.