

FINDING  
YOUR  
**DREAM  
SCHOOL**  
*A Guide*



By Jeffrey Selingo

## Introduction:

# How to Use this Guide

My hope in writing *Dream School: Finding the College That's Right for You* is to shift the mindset about college admissions. We need to widen the aperture of the college search beyond the top-ranked schools, and in the process, encourage a healthy conversation with our teens and families about the achievement culture that drives our desire to get into a “good” college.

This guide is designed to help you put the lessons from *Dream School* into action with four important discussion points.

Here, in this guide, as in the book, I don't want to overwhelm you with conversation starters, exercises, and lists of to-dos. You don't need to read this guide and complete the exercises in one sitting. Indeed, it's meant not only to be a companion to *Dream School*, but also to the college search itself.

Think of it as a “shadow guide” to the books and timelines that you'll follow during high school. To that end, I've laid out the discussions and activities to mimic the college search process.

The process of what comes after high school can include apprenticeships, associate degrees, and shorter-term certificates. I believe those pathways are a good fit for many teenagers, but *Dream School* and this guide focus mostly on the bachelor's degree. (I included some resources in the back you can start with if other pathways interest you.)

### Who is this Guide For?

Like *Dream School*, this guide is primarily designed for families navigating the college search process together. Parents, guardians, and students will find exercises that encourage candid, meaningful conversations about what matters in the undergraduate experience and why.

It's also valuable for high school counselors working with students, independent college consultants, and anyone mentoring young people through this important transition.

Whether you're focused on elite institutions and looking to broaden your horizons, or already considering a wide range of schools and wanting to make the best choice among them, this guide provides a framework to discover your true dream school—not based on rankings or prestige, but on what will genuinely help you thrive.

The goal isn't to “win” at college admissions but to find a place where you can grow, connect with mentors and peers, develop your talents, and prepare for a meaningful future.

## Let's get started.

Throughout, you'll come across these icons:



**Key revelations from *Dream School***



**When you should write your thoughts in a notebook or discuss with family, counselors, or friends**



**These notes list some of the things you should be doing, and when, related to the admissions process. Note: they aren't meant as a replacement for a full admissions timeline.**

# #1 Break free from the Top 25 mindset.

## The College Admissions Process: 9th Grade

- Plan out your schedule for the next four years with your counselor so that you take the courses—and those with the appropriate rigor—that colleges require. So much of the college search happens in 11th and 12th grades, but many parts of the application are baked long before: the classes you take (or don't take), the activities you spend time on, the teachers you get to know.
- Consider AP, IB, and dual-enrollment courses that could potentially offer college credit.
- Start an informal list or journal to track your extra-curricular activities.
- Discuss your interests with teachers, advisors, and other adults to see what majors and careers might interest you (and check out some of the resources at the end of this guide).

Humans are naturally aspirational. We strive for the best, aim high, and encourage our children to do the same. There's nothing wrong with reaching for top-ranked colleges—if they truly align with your needs, interests, and abilities.

But the reality of today's admissions landscape requires a clear-eyed approach.

When we first start the college search, we typically have a mental picture of what a “good college” looks like. Often, this image is heavily influenced by the rankings, the media, and perceptions that prioritize a small subset of institutions.

We might not even realize how narrow our vision has become until we're confronted with it directly.



**Colleges and universities that accept fewer than 20% of applicants received 1.9 million applications in 2023, compared to just 600,000 in 2001. That's more than triple the competition for essentially the same number of seats.**

# Exercise:

## Widening the Aperture of Your College Lens

The following exercise is designed to reveal how our initial college considerations might be unnecessarily limited to the most selective institutions.

This isn't about settling for less—it's about discovering more. When you expand your vision beyond the usual suspects, you often find institutions that offer better financial aid, stronger programs in your major, and a campus culture where you can truly thrive.

By confronting this reality early in your college search, you can avoid the emotional rollercoaster that comes from having too many reach schools and too few viable alternatives on your list.



**STEP 1: Take out a piece of paper or open the notes app on your phone.**

*Then set a timer for 30 seconds.*

**Without consulting any resources, quickly write down the names of three colleges or universities you'd consider attending if cost were not a factor:**

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**STEP 2: Check your list against the colleges below.**  
**Mark off any of these highly ranked schools that also appear on your list:**

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Amherst College                       | <input type="checkbox"/> Middlebury College                    |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Bowdoin College                       | <input type="checkbox"/> Northwestern University               |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Brown University                      | <input type="checkbox"/> Princeton University                  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> California Institute of Technology    | <input type="checkbox"/> Rice University                       |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Carleton College                      | <input type="checkbox"/> Stanford University                   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Carnegie Mellon University            | <input type="checkbox"/> Swarthmore College                    |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Claremont McKenna College             | <input type="checkbox"/> University of California, Berkeley    |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Columbia University                   | <input type="checkbox"/> University of California, Los Angeles |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Cornell University                    | <input type="checkbox"/> University of Chicago                 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Dartmouth College                     | <input type="checkbox"/> University of Michigan, Ann Arbor     |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Davidson College                      | <input type="checkbox"/> University of Notre Dame              |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Duke University                       | <input type="checkbox"/> University of Pennsylvania            |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Emory University                      | <input type="checkbox"/> University of Southern California     |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Georgetown University                 | <input type="checkbox"/> Vanderbilt University                 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Harvard University                    | <input type="checkbox"/> Wellesley College                     |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Haverford College                     | <input type="checkbox"/> Williams College                      |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Johns Hopkins University              | <input type="checkbox"/> Yale University                       |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Massachusetts Institute of Technology |  |

**How many schools did you check off?**



**STEP 3: Discuss as a family or write in your journal.**

**If you checked off 2 or 3 above, consider:**

Why did you initially choose the schools on your list?

How does recognizing that they're highly ranked and selective influence how you feel about putting together your initial college list?

**If you checked 1 or none above, consider:**

What drew you to colleges deeper in the rankings?

How might you use those approaches that attracted you to these choices when compiling your college list?



**In a *Dream School* survey of more than 3,000 parents, only 16% of parents prioritize prestige for their own kids. Yet 61% believe other parents in their community value prestige highly.**

# #2 Know what you're looking for (or not looking for) in a college.

## The College Admissions Process: 10th Grade

- Prepare for standardized testing by taking practice tests (PSAT, ACT, SAT) and sign up for the PSAT, given in some schools in sophomore year, and most schools in fall of junior year.
- Plan summer activities, such as jobs, volunteering, or educational programs that help you explore what might interest you.
- Visit college campuses when you're nearby for vacation or other activities to get a sense of what you might like (or dislike).

Now that you've considered how your initial thoughts about your college list might be more focused on selectivity than you realized, let's think about widening your field of vision a bit. The most prestigious and highly ranked schools may indeed be right for you—but the key is making sure they align with what truly matters to you in a college experience.

The following exercise will help you identify what matters most to you. Whether you're considering highly selective universities or schools that accept more than a third or half of students who apply, this framework will help you evaluate which campuses might be the best fit for your aspirations.

Use this exercise as your compass throughout the college search. Return to it after campus visits, conversations with current students, and further research. Your priorities may shift as you learn more about yourself and the various options available—that's not only normal, but it's also a sign of growth and judgment.



**According to an analysis conducted for *Dream School*, if you work at a Fortune 50 company, your co-workers are roughly four times as likely to have graduated from a college with an acceptance rate above 40% than from a more selective school.**

# Exercise:

## Discovering Your College Priorities

### STEP 1: Learn from your high school experience.

First, think about your high school experience and create a timeline:

- Jot down the key moments when you felt most excited.
- List your favorite classes and what types of learning environments were the most engaging (i.e, lectures, group projects, hands-on labs, etc.).
- Add in your proudest achievements inside and outside the classroom. Include relationships (teachers, peers, mentors) that were most meaningful.



**What are some common themes across these different dimensions that show what you valued most in high school?**

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### STEP 2: Clarify Your College Preferences.

Next, consider what you want out of the college experience by rating these factors on a scale of 1 (definitely don't want or don't care) to 5 (definitely want). If you're unsure whether you want it or haven't really thought about the topic, mark it a 3:

#### Academics

##### Large lecture-style classes

(Don't Want/Don't Care) 1 2 3 4 5 (Definitely Want)

##### Small seminar classes

(Don't Want/Don't Care) 1 2 3 4 5 (Definitely Want)

##### Prescribed core curriculum

(Don't Want/Don't Care) 1 2 3 4 5 (Definitely Want)

##### Choice in courses

(Don't Want/Don't Care) 1 2 3 4 5 (Definitely Want)

##### Broad liberal arts focus to curriculum

(Don't Want/Don't Care) 1 2 3 4 5 (Definitely Want)

##### Career/professional focus from Day 1

(Don't Want/Don't Care) 1 2 3 4 5 (Definitely Want)

##### Research opportunities

(Don't Want/Don't Care) 1 2 3 4 5 (Definitely Want)



**In a survey by the *New York Times* about what's important when choosing a college, small classes were the one thing graduates valued much more after college than high-school students did when they were looking at schools.**

## Location

### A campus that's within a 4-hour drive from home

(Don't Want/Don't Care) 1 2 3 4 5 (Definitely Want)

### A campus that requires an airplane flight home

(Don't Want/Don't Care) 1 2 3 4 5 (Definitely Want)

### Urban

(Don't Want/Don't Care) 1 2 3 4 5 (Definitely Want)

### Suburban

(Don't Want/Don't Care) 1 2 3 4 5 (Definitely Want)

### Rural

(Don't Want/Don't Care) 1 2 3 4 5 (Definitely Want)

## Campus Life

### Greek Life

(Don't Want/Don't Care) 1 2 3 4 5 (Definitely Want)

### Big-time athletics

(Don't Want/Don't Care) 1 2 3 4 5 (Definitely Want)

### Students who mostly live on campus all four years

(Don't Want/Don't Care) 1 2 3 4 5 (Definitely Want)

### Arts scene

(Don't Want/Don't Care) 1 2 3 4 5 (Definitely Want)

### Spiritual focus

(Don't Want/Don't Care) 1 2 3 4 5 (Definitely Want)



### STEP 3:

Look at the factors you rated 4 or 5 and rank them in order of importance.

Look at what you rated a 3 and circle one or two for further research.

Finally, look at what you rated a 1 or 2 and circle three that are the least important to you.



Many prospective students want to know the “vibe” of a campus in the short time they’re visiting during the college search. Some tips:

- Notice how many students are wearing their own college’s merch (tip from college counselor, Allison Slater Tate).
- Pick up the student newspaper or read it online, especially the opinion section.
- Eat in the dining hall or student union and notice if students are interacting at all.





#### STEP 4: Envision your ideal college experience.

Finally, think about the campus experience: What is your ideal day in college, both during the week and on a weekend? Think about what classes you'd want to take, where you'd want to socialize, and how you'd want to spend your free time.

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Review this exercise frequently during the search, examine after campus visits, and revise as necessary.

After you start to figure out what you want (or don't want), you can start building your initial college list. Most guides recommend three buckets: reach, target, likely. But given the "yield protection" techniques of many colleges outlined in Chapter 1 of *Dream School*, the traditional model of building a college list doesn't always serve students well.

So also sort the schools you're considering by acceptance bands: **under 40% acceptance rates, 40-60%, 60-80%, and 80%+.** Be sure to include 1-2 schools in each of those buckets. Most of the campuses featured in the book's "New" Dream Schools list—75 colleges that are accessible and excellent—are in the latter three buckets with acceptance rates greater than 30%.



Be open to a "course correction" throughout the college search. We go through the application process with biases for and against certain schools, and many families double down as they move through the junior and senior years of high school. It's hard to knock a favorite college off the list or bring one up that was dismissed early on. But a course correction is often needed as we learn more about colleges—and ourselves.

# #3 Find where you'll build relationships that last a lifetime.

## The College Admissions Process: 11th Grade

- Create an email address specifically for college-related communications.
- Schedule standardized tests for the spring semester (SAT/ACT). Most colleges are now test-optional. My advice is take a test to see where you score, but there are plenty of colleges for you if you don't want to lean into testing.
- Plan and schedule campus tours during your school breaks in the spring to explore college environments firsthand.
- Identify and approach teachers for recommendation letters.
- Begin brainstorming and drafting your college essays.

The best college experiences often come down to two key elements: mentors who actively guide and support you, and a community that makes you feel welcomed and included. Research shows that students who build meaningful relationships with professors and peers early in college are more engaged academically, happier socially, and more successful after graduation.

Yet, finding good mentoring and genuine community isn't something that rankings measure. It requires asking the right questions, observing campus culture, and trusting your instincts.

College is what economists refer to as an "experienced good." It's difficult to know the true quality of the experience before you enroll—or in the case of college, sometimes until you're a sophomore or junior.

But there are clues outlined in Chapters 7 and 8 in *Dream School* that prospective students should look for in researching colleges. Two attributes, in particular, kept coming up over and over in the research for the book: getting to know your professors (who might become your mentors) and the ease of joining clubs and other extra-curricular activities (where you'll find your sense of belonging but also can connect with mentors beyond faculty in the classroom).



**Don't be fooled by the U.S. News "Best Undergraduate Teaching" ranking that many colleges, including many of the "New" Dream Schools advertise. The ranking relies solely on a peer assessment score, in which presidents, provosts, and admissions deans rate other schools. It isn't clear how those administrators know what's going on in other colleges' classrooms.**

# Exercise:

## Mapping Campus Interactions

On their websites, social media, and visits to high schools and fairs, colleges love to talk about their low student-faculty ratios, caring professors and advisors, and hundreds of clubs that can help you get connected on campus. When you take tours, you'll hear the same speech about student engagement in small classes as guides walk you through shiny new academic buildings and show you undergraduates socializing on the quad.

Every college seems to claim these interactions. These connections to your peers and potential mentors are casual and sometimes superficial. In this exercise, map what colleges tell you (the casual connections) and what you're able to find out on your own (the depth of meaningful connections).

For example, while visiting campuses look for faculty members hanging out after class or coming to the classroom early to chat with students. And go see if professors show up for posted office hours (or ask that question on a tour, since some colleges limit access to academic buildings for nonstudents).

### Notes

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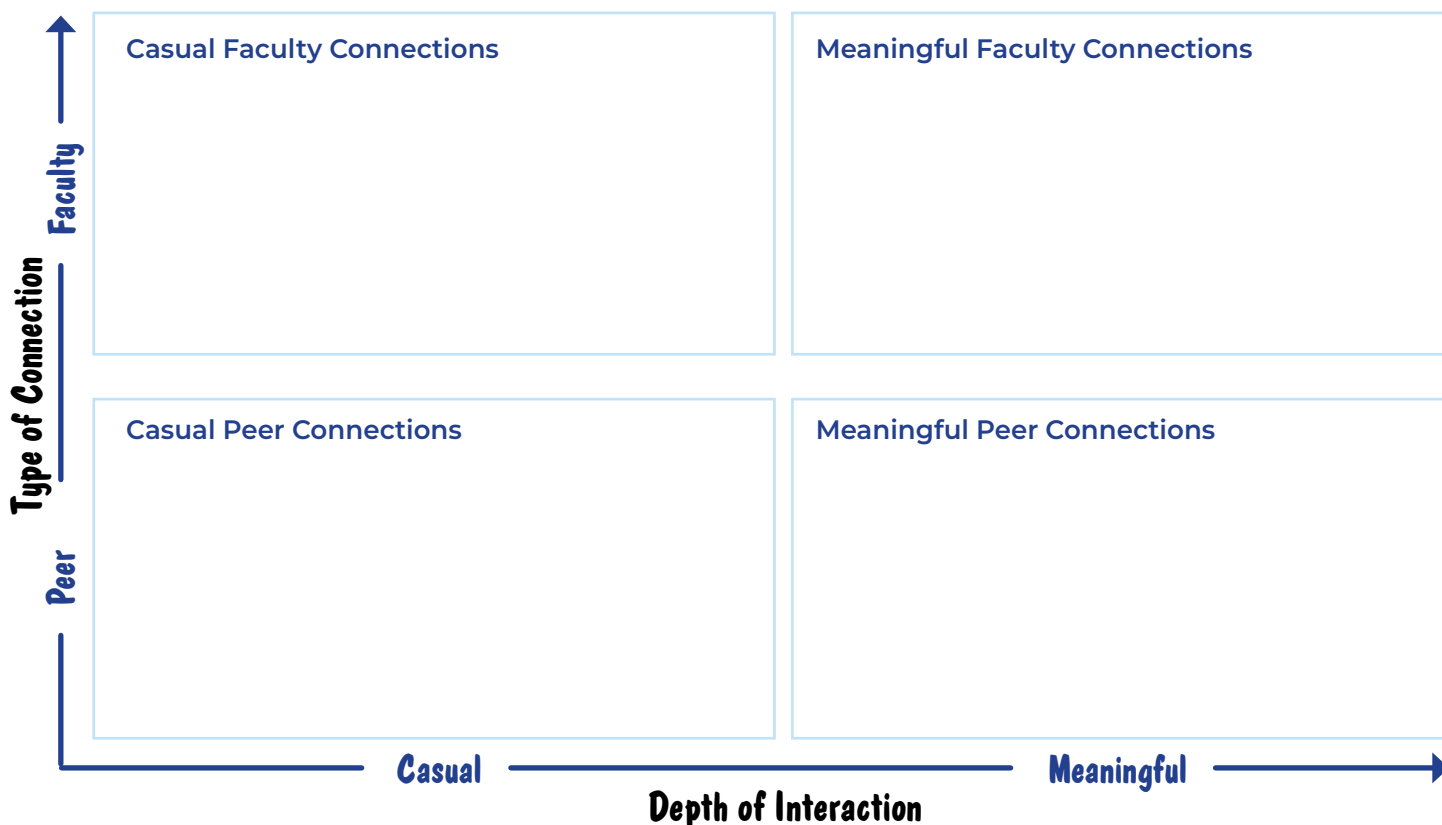
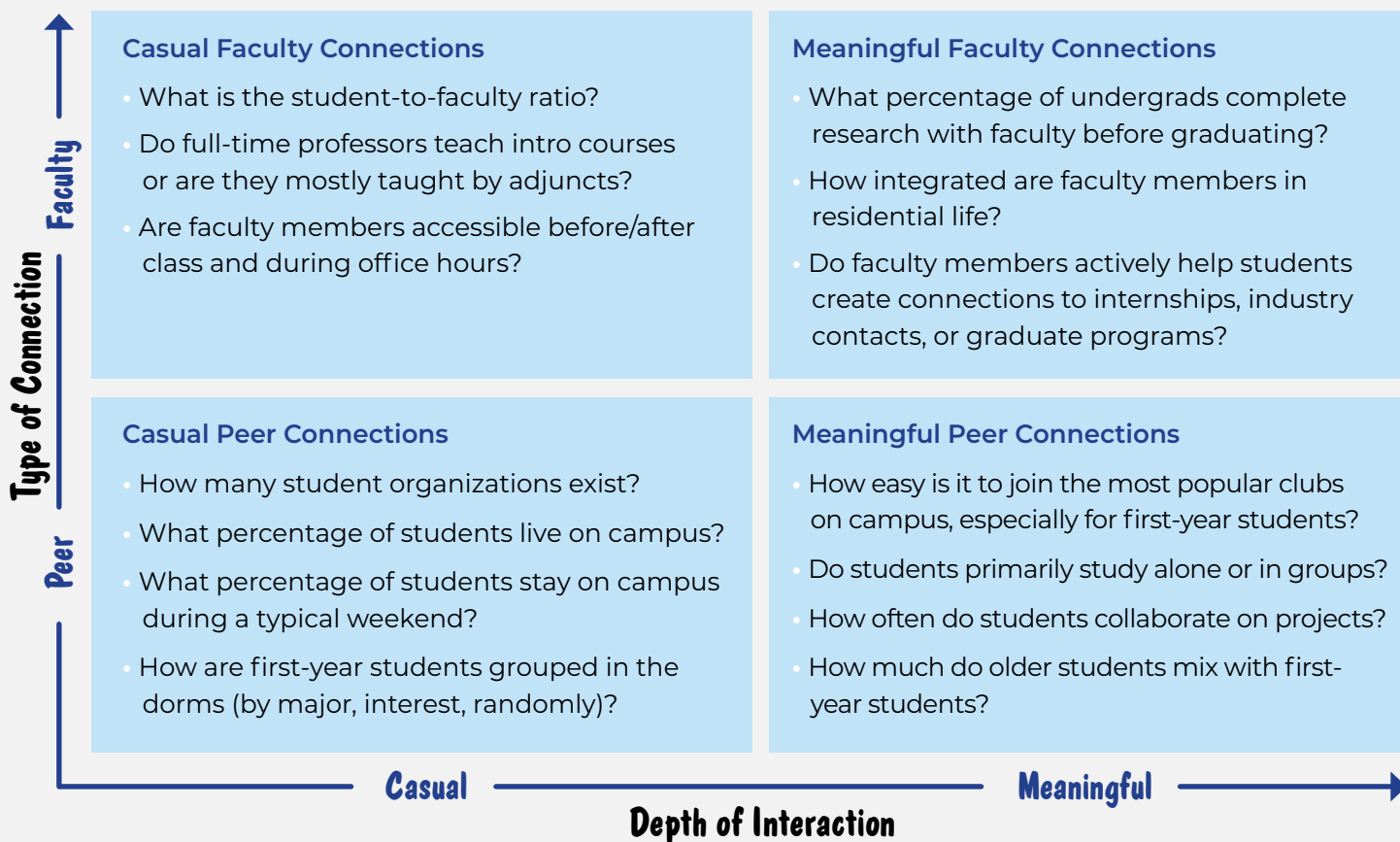
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**STEP 1 :** Collect evidence about the quality of interactions in each quadrant. I helped you out by suggesting questions for each quadrant and then provided a blank 2x2 matrix that you can copy for each campus you're considering.





**STEP 2: Evaluate and discuss.**

**After completing this grid for several colleges, compare them:**

- Which quadrant matters most to you personally?

- ☐ Casual Faculty Connections      ☐ Meaningful Faculty Connections
- ☐ Casual Peer Connections      ☐ Meaningful Peer Connections

- Which colleges offer the most opportunities in that quadrant?

- What specific questions could you ask on a campus tour to verify your findings?

- What steps would you need to take as an undergraduate to move interactions from casual to meaningful?

# #4 Ensure your college investment will pay off.

## The College Admissions Process: 12th Grade

- Create an organizational system for tracking application deadlines, requirements, and scholarship details.
- Finalize your college list and begin applications via Common App or institution-specific portals to finish before deadlines in the fall or winter.
- Submit financial aid forms, including CSS Profile (usually available October 1) and prepare documents for FAFSA (usually available by December 1).
- Follow-up regularly on college portals and emails about application status updates; send mid-year grades as requested.
- Attend accepted students' events to help make final decisions about enrollment.



When you're selecting a college, it's crucial to understand the institution's overall financial health and its ability to invest in your success. A college experiencing financial strain may cut academic programs, reduce student services, or struggle to maintain facilities during your time there.

Meanwhile, your own financial success will depend on acquiring in-demand skills and practical experience before graduation. Increasingly, the skills students leave college with matter as much—even more, sometimes—than the major or institution at the top of the diploma.

**The wage premium from a college degree comes from a mix of *foundational* skills (those that are broadly applicable) and *specialized* skills (which are field-specific). A foundational skill, such as project management, can boost graduate earnings by 22%, for instance. Sometimes one specialized skill can deliver enormous value. Data analytics added to a marketing degree can take the salary of an average marketing manager from \$71,000 annually to more than \$95,000.**

# Exercise:

## Creating Your Skills and Experience Roadmap

**STEP 1:** On LinkedIn, Indeed, or other sites that post jobs (including individual companies), research careers you're interested in. List the top 3-5 skills employers consistently request for entry-level positions in your potential field.

1.
2.
3.
4.
5.



What patterns do you notice in the skills required? Which seem most valuable across multiple job postings?

**STEP 2:** For your top choices among colleges, investigate how you might develop these skills:

- Review descriptions of required courses in your major: Which specific courses teach these skills?

- Examine internship programs: Does the school require internships? How do they help students secure them?

- Look for microcredentials: What certificates or badges can students earn alongside their degree?



**Rate each school on a scale of 1-5 for how well they support skill development in your field.**

### STEP 3: Calculate Your Potential Return on Investment

For each college, estimate:

- Use the net price calculator on a college's website or the U.S. government's College Scorecard [collegescorecard.ed.gov](https://collegescorecard.ed.gov) to estimate your total cost of college multiplied by four years.
- Using the College Scorecard, look up median annual earnings for graduates in your intended major.
- Divide annual earnings by total cost to determine an "earnings-to-net-price ratio." Rank the schools on your list from highest to lowest, and note the outliers on either end.

$$\text{Earnings-to-net-price ratio} = \frac{\text{Median annual earnings}}{\text{Total cost of attendance}}$$



### STEP 4: Reflection

Looking at your college options, evaluate which institutions offer the best opportunities for hands-on learning and skill development.

Which schools provide the most real-world practice through internships, co-ops, or industry partnerships?

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Where will you find the best balance of classroom theory and practical application?

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Which college's curriculum and extracurricular offerings will best allow you to develop and demonstrate the specific skills employers value in your field?

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# A Final Word

Throughout this guide, we've explored four key principles for finding the college that's right for you.

The college search doesn't have to be a stress-inducing race for prestige. Instead, it can be a thoughtful journey of self-discovery that leads to a school where you'll thrive academically, socially, and professionally.

## About Dream School

*Dream School: Finding the College That's Right for You* is not about a single choice in a school, a perfect match. There isn't such a thing. There are more than 3,900 colleges and universities in the U.S. If you exclude two-year colleges and those institutions focusing on a single purpose such as the arts, music, or theology, we're still talking about 1,700 schools. If you take out small colleges—those more like the size of a typical high school, with fewer than 1,000 students—we're left with a universe of around 1,200 campuses.

Your dream school isn't about a single name or a universally understood brand like the Ivy League. It's about finding a place where you can thrive, learn, and become the person you're meant to be.

Based on extensive research—including an eye-opening survey of 3,500 parents—*Dream School* reveals what truly matters in a college: strong job prospects after graduation, hands-on learning experiences, and a sense of belonging. The book also highlights 75 accessible and affordable colleges that satisfy these priorities and explains why elite college degrees often matter less than you might think.

## Spread the Word

If you've found this guide helpful, please tell others about it and how they can get their own copy by pre-ordering *Dream School* now. The more we can shift our collective mindset away from rankings-obsessed admissions and toward finding genuine educational fit, the better for all students.

Visit [jeffselingo.com/dreamschool](http://jeffselingo.com/dreamschool) to learn more about the book, order your copy, or discover additional resources to help with your college journey.

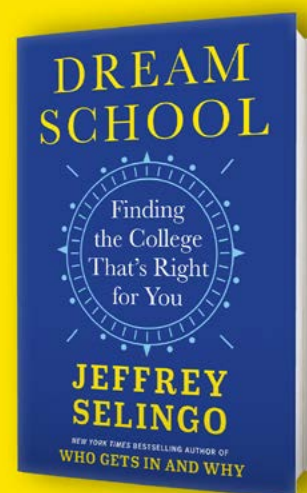
And be sure to follow me on these social media channels:

**Instagram:** [/jselingo](https://www.instagram.com/jselingo)

**LinkedIn:** [/jeffselingo](https://www.linkedin.com/company/jeffselingo)

**YouTube:** [@jselingo](https://www.youtube.com/@jselingo)

## Pre-Order Now



Available September 9

[jeffselingo.com/dreamschool](http://jeffselingo.com/dreamschool)

# Resources

## Books

*The Seven Principles for Raising a Self-Driven Child: A Workbook* by William Stixrud and Ned Johnson (2025)

*The Disengaged Teen: Helping Kids Learn Better, Feel Better, and Live Better* by Jenny Anderson and Rebecca Winthrop (2025)

*Colleges Worth Your Money: A Guide to What America's Top Schools Can Do for You* by Andrew Belasco, Dave Bergman, Michael Trivette (2025)

*The Black Family's Guide to College Admissions: A Conversation about Education, Parenting, and Race* by Timothy L. Fields and Shereem Herndon-Brown (2024)

*Embrace Your Freedom: Winning Strategies to Succeed in College and in Life* by Dr. Philip Glotzbach (2024)

*The Golden Ticket: A Life in College Admissions Essays* by Irena Smith (2023)

*The Emotional Lives of Teenagers: Raising Connected, Capable, and Compassionate Adolescents* by Lisa Damour (2023)

*Never Enough: When Achievement Culture Becomes Toxic and What We Can Do About It* by Jennifer Breheny Wallace (2023)

*Fiske Guide to Colleges 2024* by Edward B. Fiske (2023)

*Growing Up in Public: Coming of Age in a Digital World* by Devorah Heitner (2023)

*The Price You Pay for College: An Entirely New Road Map for the Biggest Financial Decision Your Family Will Ever Make* by Ron Lieber (2020)

*Who Gets In and Why: A Year Inside College Admissions* by Jeffrey Selingo (2020)

*Choosing College: How to Make Better Learning Decisions Throughout Your Life* by Michael B. Horn and Bob Moesta (2019)

*The Naked Roommate: And 107 Other Issues You Might Run into in College* by Harlan Cohen (2017)

*The Gift of Failure: How the Best Parents Learn to Let Go So Their Children Can Succeed* by Jessica Lahey (2016)

*Letting Go: A Parents' Guide to Understanding the College Years* by Karen Levin Coburn (2016)

*There Is Life after College: What Parents and Students Should Know about Navigating School to Prepare for the Jobs of Tomorrow* by Jeffrey Selingo (2016)

*College Essay Essentials: A Step-by-Step Guide to Writing a Successful College Admissions Essay* by Ethan Sawyer (2016)

*David & Goliath: Underdogs, Misfits, and the Art of Battling Giants* by Malcolm Gladwell (2015)

## Podcasts and Websites

Application to Admission Podcast ([understandingthechoices.com/podcast](https://understandingthechoices.com/podcast))

The Truth About College Admission podcast ([truthaboutcollegeadmission.com](https://truthaboutcollegeadmission.com))

College Uncovered ([www.wgbh.org/podcasts/college-uncovered](https://www.wgbh.org/podcasts/college-uncovered))

Notes from Peabody ([uvaapplication.blogspot.com](https://uvaapplication.blogspot.com))

Big Future ([bigfuture.collegeboard.org](https://bigfuture.collegeboard.org))

Your College Bound Kid ([yourcollegeboundkid.com](https://yourcollegeboundkid.com))

College Guidance Network ([collegguidancenetwork.com](https://collegguidancenetwork.com))

Grown & Flown ([grownandflown.com](https://grownandflown.com))

Road2College ([www.road2college.com](https://www.road2college.com))

Financial aid: my Buyers and Sellers list, which helps you find schools that are most generous with merit aid. ([jeffselingo.com/buyersandsellers](https://jeffselingo.com/buyersandsellers))

me3 major and career quiz ([yourfuture.asu.edu/me3](https://yourfuture.asu.edu/me3))

Tuition Fit ([tuitionfit.org](https://tuitionfit.org))

Future U. podcast, which I co-host with Michael B. Horn about the future of higher ed and work ([futureupodcast.com](https://futureupodcast.com))

Next, my twice-monthly newsletter about what's next for higher ed ([jeffselingo.com/next](https://jeffselingo.com/next))