

Finding the Right College for You



Are you on a quest to find the one?

The one college that is perfect for you? If so, think again. There are likely several colleges where you will be happy and successful. The key to finding the right fit is to decide what you want out of a college experience, do your research, and then apply to a reasonable number of schools. Whether you end up at your first choice or your fourth, in the end it's you and not the school you choose that will make the biggest difference.

Finding colleges that match your needs requires some work, but your effort will pay off. High school students will want to start exploring options during their sophomore or junior year. Similarly, adult students should give themselves plenty of time to find the right program and school.

Career goals guide 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. If you are struggling to choose a career direction, activities that allow you to match your interests and skills with specific careers can be helpful. In the *Career Center* section of CFNC.org, you can take a free career assessment and learn more about potential careers.

Your career interests play a role in the type of certificate or degree you will pursue. On the next page, you can read an overview of the variety of educational options. For information on the educational requirements for specific careers, visit the *Career Center* section of CFNC.org or the Occupational Outlook Handbook (<http://stats.bls.gov/oco/home.htm>).

Choosing a major: facts and fiction

A major is the subject or academic area that you specialize in during college. A major prepares you for a career field and usually reflects personal interests and talents. Knowing what you want to major in can make your college search easier, but 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 deciding on a major.



Educational Options After High School

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 are available in subjects like auto mechanics, welding, cosmetology, and practical nursing (LPN).

Associate Degrees

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

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

Bachelor's Degree

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 include 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 Degree

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.

Professional Degree

Professional degrees are advanced degrees in the fields of 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.

Doctoral Degree

A doctoral degree, also known as a doctorate, is the highest educational degree you can earn. A doctoral degree indicates expertise in a specialized field. You must spend 3-5 years after completing a master's degree doing extensive research and a dissertation.



Different schools fit different students

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 decide if you are the type of student who will thrive in a large or small setting.

	Larger Schools	Smaller Schools
Diversity of Academic Offerings	Larger schools have more professors, so they 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 fewer 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, classes are usually smaller. They may vary from five or six to 100 people. This means there may be a greater chance of developing personal relationships with faculty members at smaller colleges.
Diversity of Student Activities	At larger colleges and universities, there may be more cultural events and a greater variety of activities. With a larger student body, it might be easier to find a club or group of people with similar interests.	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.

Student body composition

One of the strengths of college is the opportunity to meet new people and be exposed to new ideas and cultures. The composition 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 that you may want to consider include the ratio of males to females, racial diversity, or average age. While you are likely to meet interesting and different people wherever you go to college, it is important to consider the kind of student body you are interested in joining.

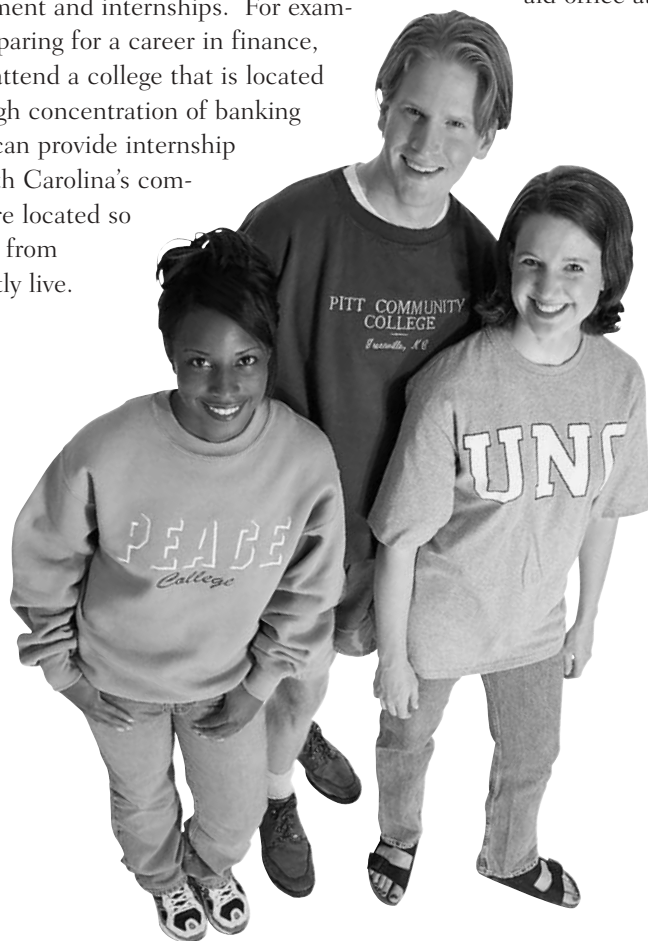
Location

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 at least four years. Things you may want to consider include distance 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 that is located in a city with a high concentration of banking industries which can provide internship placements. North Carolina's community colleges are located so you can commute from where you currently live.

Cost of attendance

The cost of attending college is an important factor to many North Carolina students. 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 college in North Carolina, an independent college, or a public college in another state.

You should not rule out any school based on cost alone prior to finding out what 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 *Paying for College* section of CFNC.org for more information about scholarships, grants, loans, and savings programs for North Carolina students. If you are a senior in high school, be sure to contact the financial aid office at the college(s) you are considering.



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 ink.

Write in or check priorities on this side

Rank (circle) the importance on this side

Not Important		Somewhat Important		Very Important
1	2	3	4	5

Availability of a specific major

I am interested in these majors:

Availability of programs for adult students

I am interested in:

- evening programs
- weekend programs
- childcare availability

Academic reputation

My college should have a good academic reputation:

- locally
- regionally
- nationally

Cost of attendance, including financial aid

- I do not want to take on any debt.
- I am willing to take on some debt for the right school.

Setting

I want to be in a:

- small town
- midsize town
- large city

School size

- Large (Greater than 10,000)
- Medium (5,000-10,000)
- Small (Fewer than 5,000)

Distance from home

- Close to home (within 1 hour)
- Fairly close to home (within 4 hours)
- Not close to home (more than 4 hours)

College Priorities Worksheet *(continued)*

Write in or check priorities on this side

Rank (circle) the importance on this side

	Not Important	2	Somewhat Important	4	Very Important
Class size	1	2	3	4	5
<input type="checkbox"/> Small classes					
<input type="checkbox"/> Medium classes					
<input type="checkbox"/> Large classes					
Availability of faculty	1	2	3	4	5
<input type="checkbox"/> Easily accessible					
<input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat accessible					
Geographic diversity of student body	1	2	3	4	5
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					
Student organizations	1	2	3	4	5
I want to be involved in this activity or join this student group:					

Athletics	1	2	3	4	5
<input type="checkbox"/> I want to play this sport on a college team:					

<input type="checkbox"/> I want to play this sport on an intramural team:					

Placement rate into jobs or graduate school	1	2	3	4	5
Housing	1	2	3	4	5
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					
Other College Attributes	1	2	3	4	5
I am interested in a:					
<input type="checkbox"/> women's college					
<input type="checkbox"/> historically black college					
<input type="checkbox"/> military college					
<input type="checkbox"/> religiously affiliated college					
<input type="checkbox"/> other: _____					

Get Informed: Click, Call, & 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. Visit CFNC.org and **click** on schools to get the basics, **call** admissions offices and then **visit** colleges that interest you!

Click

The CFNC website at www.CFNC.org has information and virtual tours of North Carolina colleges in the College Fair section. Profiles include information on class size, admissions requirements, location, cost of attendance, majors offered, and links to the website of each college and university.

Call

Contact the admissions office at colleges that interest you and ask for publications for prospective students that describe the school and its programs. You can also request information about admission requirements, scholarships, financial aid, and visitation days for prospective students. You may also want to ask an admissions representative questions related to the most important priorities from your College Priorities Worksheet. For general questions, you can speak with a College Resource Specialist at CFNC by calling (866) 866-CFNC and selecting option 1.

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'll 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. Have questions prepared based on your interests and what you have read about the college, to make the most of your time on campus.

During your visit, make sure you:

- 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'll be visiting several campuses.

How do they measure up?

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 at the college and if you can be comfortable there. These steps will help you narrow down your list of colleges so you can start the application process. Remember, however, 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 you know will accept you. 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 seem too expensive. Contact the college financial aid office if you don't think you can afford it. More costly colleges often offer more financial aid.

Once you have narrowed your list of colleges to your top four, you can use CFNC.org to apply online. The information you've put in your Student Planner about academics, awards, and activities is automatically transferred into your online applications, saving you the effort of typing the same information over and over.

There is no doubt that making a college choice can be challenging. Hopefully, this publication has given you some helpful things to consider and some good strategies for gathering information. Research, explore and plan, and you'll be on your way to a great college experience!



Additional free publications available from CFNC:

AD1: High School Planner

AD2: UNC Minimum Course Requirements

AD6: Transfer Students

AD9: Writing Your Admissions Essay

DS1: Transitions – College Guide for Students with Disabilities

FA1: How Do I Pay for College?

TE2: College Entrance Tests

Additional online resources:

Career Information:

Occupational Outlook Handbook, a publication of the U.S. Department of Labor
<http://stats.bls.gov/oco/home.htm>

Search for colleges outside North Carolina:

The College Board: www.collegeboard.com

www.CFNC.org • 866-866-CFNC (Toll-free)

Se Habla Español