

Great Hearts Academies Office of College Counseling

Building a College List

By early fall of senior year, it is our hope that Great Hearts students will be finalizing their college list. In most cases, a final list will range from six to eight colleges and will be distributed evenly with 2-3 “likely” schools, 2-3 “target” schools and 2-3 “reach” schools.

As you begin to investigate and visit schools, remember to include schools in the “likely,” “target” and “reach” categories. Students who begin building their lists with “likelies” and “targets” that appeal to them feel a greater sense of control and peace throughout the college process. Armed with a foundation of schools where they have a good chance of being admitted, these students can explore more selective colleges with confidence and a clear head because they know that they will have good options no matter how the highly selective decisions come back.

Highly selective institutions admit fewer than 10% of their applicants. Most colleges and universities are receiving record numbers of applicants, and many colleges are seeing an increase in the quality of applicants. Therefore, students who fixate on “reach” schools run the risk of making a potentially stressful process even more anxiety producing.

Finding the right fit

Experience tells us that most juniors know very little about the differences among colleges; they know only the schools their relatives and friends attended and the general word on the street about a particular place. During the summer before senior year, we would like you to become familiar with the curriculum, special programs, and other distinctions of each of the places you are considering. Visiting helps in this investigation phase, but it is not the only way to become knowledgeable. Students can visit college websites or write to the college asking for catalogues, DVDs, and other information pertinent to their individual needs. College guidebooks also provide important objective and subjective information. This information-gathering stage is important both in choosing appropriate schools and in setting the stage for writing an application that is informed and persuasive. Many colleges pay attention to the student’s “demonstrated level of interest” at decision-making time; schools may assess this factor by the number of contacts a student has had with the school or by the specificity with which the student explains why he or she is applying.

Types of Colleges

The following short descriptions outline some of the different types of institutions available in your college selection process. We’ve listed just four below.

State Schools

A state school is typically one that enrolls 7,000 or more students, is publicly funded, and offers both undergraduate and graduate work. Often, state schools have big campuses. They can span acres or actually be considered a town within themselves (ex. the University of Arizona or the University of Illinois). Diversity and research are some of the features for which many state schools are known. You need to be an independent, proactive student to make the most of a big school.

Highly Competitive Schools

Highly competitive colleges are typically those that describe their admissions policies and standards as “most difficult,” “very difficult,” or “highly selective.” The large majority of these schools are private. Some, such as the University of Virginia or UCLA, are public. Most often, these schools are small to mid-sized. While many other characteristics may vary from campus to campus, the defining characteristic of these schools is the selectivity of their admissions practices. You need to be an academically strong student to do well here.

Small Liberal Arts Schools

Typically, small schools are characterized by their size, usually under 3,000 students. There is a range in selectivity in admissions policies from “least difficult” to “most difficult.” In addition, there is a range of locales, from rural areas to suburban and city locations. For example, Hillsdale College in Michigan is located in a rural area, while St. Edward’s University is located in the heart of Austin, Texas. Small class size, low student-to-faculty ratios, and emphasis on undergraduate education are hallmarks of small liberal arts colleges. You should want to have close interaction with faculty and students to select a small school. Attending a liberal arts college does not mean the same as studying the Great Books at Great Hearts Academies. These schools offer an array of majors within a liberal arts context. Students who want to study Engineering at a liberal arts school often complete a 3 - 2 program, where three years of humanities are studied at the school and two years of science at a prestigious university such as Columbia University or Washing University in St. Louis.

Religious Schools

Most religious colleges and universities tend to be medium in size (3,000-7,000), and their defining characteristic is that they are affiliated with a religious organization. Jesuit colleges and universities represent one kind of religiously affiliated school (i.e. Loyola Marymount, Marquette University.) Other schools like Baylor, Belmont, and Point Loma Nazarene are considered Christian Independent Colleges. Religious colleges can be found in rural, suburban and urban locations with differing majors, religious philosophies, and selectivity.