

College Readiness Curriculum

Lesson 5

Choosing a College

Lesson Overview:

Students will continue the College Readiness Curriculum
by completing the following steps:

- 1) identifying needs and priorities in choosing a college
- 2) comparing colleges they are considering

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College Readiness

Lesson 5: Choosing a College

Lesson Overview:

During this lesson, you will guide students through the process of deciding where to apply to post-secondary school, as well choosing a school from among those to which students have applied and been accepted.

NOTE: If your students are in their junior/penultimate year of school or below and are not yet ready to begin applying to schools, you may wish to skip this lesson. If your students are at varying grade levels and stages of the college application process, you might want to separate them into groups and present only Lesson 4 or only Lesson 5, depending on what is appropriate for the group. If you choose to present both lessons to the same group of students, you will want to edit/delete slides from the slideshow in order to avoid repetition.

Core Concepts:

- To choose the right school or program for you, you must identify your needs, preferences, and priorities.
- Critically comparing schools can help you choose the one that best meets your needs.

Lesson Objectives:

In this lesson students will:

- Identify and prioritize factors that will be important in their final college decision-making process.
- Critically compare the post-secondary schools that they are considering.

Materials Needed:

- [Choosing a College Slideshow](#)
- Worksheet 1: Post-Secondary School Priorities Worksheet
- Worksheet 2: Post-Secondary School Chart

Step 1: Activate Prior Knowledge and Ideas

Explain that whether students are determining which universities or programs to apply to or deciding among schools that have already admitted them, they will want to weigh the options against their personal priorities. Students' priorities may make the decision for them, and will at least narrow the options.

Begin the lesson by asking students to take a moment to imagine their perfect post-secondary school or program. It might be a real school they've researched or visited, or perhaps it's just an ideal. Ask students to jot down a few words that describe the school/program.

Invite a few volunteers to share and discuss what they wrote. Ask students to keep their descriptions in mind, and revise or expand them as necessary as they view a slideshow about factors to consider when choosing a college.

Step 2: Present the Slideshow

Present the slideshow, pausing occasionally to respond to questions and solicit comments from students. (See suggestions following each slide.)

[Slide 1]

Factors to Consider

As you begin to apply to schools or choose a school to attend, here are few factors you might want or need to consider:

Location: Do you want to be in a specific city, region, or country? Do you want to be near or far from home? Do you prefer an urban or rural setting? How important is location to you?

Academic Interests: What do you want to study? Do you want to focus on an area of study or more actively prepare for a specific job or career? Do your future goals (a career or graduate school) require a very specific undergraduate field of study (biomedical engineering or astrophysics), or will a broad field (biology or physics) prepare you equally well? Do you want the option to try out different areas of study? Do you want a degree that has a narrow focus, or would you prefer a program or school that allows or encourages a "well-rounded" education and the ability to attend classes outside of your primary field of study? For each school you may want to consider the individual professors in your field. Are they well-known and -respected? What are their accomplishments? What have they published? How do other students rate them in reviews?

Career Goals: What career do you aspire to? Is there just one specific program or major that would prepare you, or several options that would put you on the right track? Does a school have famous alumni in your area of interest who speak well of the program and/or might serve as connections

later on? How successful are graduates from the university or program? How long does it take graduates to obtain a job after graduation? How many go on to master's or PhD programs?

Pause to ask: Which of these factors is most important to you? Did you consider these factors when imagining your perfect school?

[Slide 2]

More Factors to Consider

Cost: How much will each option cost? Consider tuition, room and board, books, supplies, etc. Will you be tempted to spend more on recreational activities depending upon the location? Is that cost realistic for your budget? Is financial aid available? Is cost a concern at all? If your family will be responsible for all or part of the costs, you will want to confer with them.

Prestige: How important is it that your post-secondary school or program be regarded highly? Will the prestige of your college play a role in your career success or not? For some thought-provoking reading on the value of attending a prestigious university, check out [Your Elite School is Not Worth the Cost, Studies Say](#) or [Do Elite Colleges Lead to Higher Salaries? Only for Some Professions](#).

Selectivity: How selective is the school; i.e., what percentage of applicants does it admit each year? What, if any, are the minimum requirements for grade-point average and exam scores? Given your own academic record, exam results, or experience, how likely are you to be accepted? You may want a broad range of selectivity on your final application list. Be realistic, but don't underestimate yourself, either.

Size: Small schools tend to have smaller class sizes, facilitate closer relationships with professors, and can feel more manageable to some students. Small schools may have fewer resources, but you may have more access to the resources that do exist, such as lab equipment or professors' time. Larger schools often offer more variety and options in academics as well as extracurricular activities. On the other hand, some special resources may be available only to graduate students or a select few undergraduate students.

Pause to ask: Does anyone have questions or concerns about this slide? Clarify anything students don't understand about selectivity, for example, or what it means for a school to have prestige. Share the links about elite schools with students who are interested in reading the articles. Assure students with concerns about cost that the topic will be covered in much greater depth in Lesson 8, Financing Your College Education.

[Slide 3]

Even More Factors to Consider

Extracurricular interests: Are there clubs, sports, activities, volunteer opportunities or job/internship opportunities in or near the school that appeal to you? Consider other recreational activities you enjoy, too. You probably won't spend every second in class or studying, so make sure that you are happy with your options for filling the rest of your time, too!

Special Interests: Some schools are set up to serve students from specific backgrounds, or with specific requirements or interests. Are you looking for a single-sex environment? Maybe you seek a school—such as a historically black college or university—designed with the needs and interests of a particular community in mind. Do you want your school to have a strong religious affiliation? Perhaps you want the discipline and training a military school offers, or maybe you'd fit in well at a school with a strong focus on one particular subject area, such as technology, health sciences, or fine arts. What other specialties might appeal to you or best meet your needs?

Academic Culture: Many schools have their own “culture” – a set of shared values or an ethic that permeates the way that people behave and interact with each other. Would you excel in a school that is extremely competitive and focused on individual success? Or would you prefer a school that is more relaxed and supportive? Would you like a school that feels more formal? Or would you like a school in which you feel comfortable calling your professors by their first names?

Campus Culture and Social Issues: It is worth looking at current social issues and the stances that a university has recently taken on issues that are important to you. How have students, faculty and leadership responded to different social issues as they have come up on campus? Are women and others protected against harassment and even assault? Do student feel that they can openly speak their mind? What political stances have students, faculty, and or leadership taken? Do you agree or disagree?

Pause to Ask: How do these factors figure in to your perfect school? Invite volunteers to share their thoughts. Allow time for students to revise or expand their descriptions as necessary.

Discuss: Issues related to campus culture –protests and incidents of harassment or assault, for example—often make the news. As appropriate, you may wish discuss a current example with students, encouraging them to consider how similar events and incidents would influence their feelings about attending the school in question.

[Slide 4]

And Still More Factors to Consider

Safety: Look at the safety track record and safety resources for each school that you seriously consider. Much like social issues, safety issues can play a huge role in your college experience. Will you feel comfortable walking across campus after dark? What about if you leave campus? What level of safety and security would make you feel comfortable? You may also want to talk with your parents or guardians about their comfort level and safety concerns, as well.

Campus Resources: Consider what resources you might need or appreciate. Support that you might ask about or review could include: career center, medical center, counseling (academic and/or emotional), health/balance resources, writing center, etc.

Your Own Preferences: You are likely to spend the next three to five years pursuing an undergraduate degree. What other aspects of your life or studies will be important to you during that time? Talk with your family, friends, guidance counselor and/or mentor to help you pinpoint your personal priorities.

Gut feeling: Sometimes you just get a feeling that one option is better than another. Are you the kind of person who tends to follow your own hunches? Or do you prefer to make your choices using logic?

Pause to Ask: Invite volunteers to recap the information from the slideshow. Respond to any additional questions and concerns students have about the information.

Step 3: Present and Analyze “Case Studies”

To solidify learning from the slideshow, ask partners to complete a “case study” activity:

- One partner describes an imaginary student who is in the process of choosing a college, stating for example, what the student plans to study, how s/he enjoys spending free time, and what his/her future career plans are.
- The other partner then identifies three top factors from the slideshow that the student should prioritize when making a final decision.
- Finally, ask the partners to switch roles and repeat the activity.

Step 4: Complete the Post-Secondary School Priorities Worksheet.

(~60 minutes)

Distribute the Post-Secondary School Priorities Worksheet and ask students to complete it in class or as homework. Encourage them to try not to think about specific schools as they complete the activity. Ask students to think only about their own values, personalities, and preferences, and draw upon their notes on the perfect school and the factors they explored during the slideshow presentation.

When students have submitted their completed worksheets, set aside a few minutes to meet with each student and provide feedback. In addition to responding to any questions and concerns students may have, use the following points to guide discussion:

- Do the student's priorities match what you know about the student?
- Have students omitted priorities you think they should consider?
- Have students shared their worksheets with members of their College Readiness Teams? If not, they may want to do so, and to solicit team members' feedback.

Assure students that they have no obligation to do as you suggest. The purpose of your feedback is not to force students to change their priorities, but simply to help students assess their priorities in light of what you know about each student and about the process of choosing a college. Ultimately, students may decide to revise their priorities, or they may decide that they are comfortable with the priorities and preferences they originally identified.

Step 5: Compare Schools (~45 minutes)

Distribute the Schools Comparison Chart and ask students to complete it in order to compare the specific schools to which they have applied or are planning to apply. (Some students will first need to continue and complete their research into schools, either during or outside of class.)

As students submit their completed charts, schedule a few minutes to meet with each student and provide feedback. Respond to students' questions and concerns, as well as using the following points to guide discussion.

- Does the student's assessment of each school seem complete? What else should the student consider?
- Does one school seem to stand out above the rest? Why?
- Do you know anyone who has attended a school the student is considering and might be willing to provide further information and guidance?
- Have students discussed their charts with their College Readiness Teams? Encourage them to do so. For most students, it will be particularly important and useful to consult their parents/guardians.

RESOURCES

Share the following suggestions and links to guide students who are still conducting research into schools.

In-Person Resources

- Current Students – Do you know someone who is already a student at the school? Ask them about their experience and impressions. Admissions offices often have programs to put you in contact with a current student who is willing to talk to you and answer your questions.
- Alumni – Do you know someone who attended the university in the past? Ask them about their experience and impressions. Don't forget to attend the Alumni Week sessions during this module!
- Admissions Office Staff – If you cannot find the information you are looking for on the internet, call the school Admissions Office.
- Guidance Counselor – Guidance counselors at your secondary school may have helped other students who were interested in the same school. They may also have a relationship with some admissions offices.
- School visits – If it is practical, planning a visit to your top choice schools can help you to learn more about the people (students and professors) and the culture of the school community. School visits can be planned for before applying, or before selecting a school. If possible, ask to meet with current students and professors in your program of interest.

Online Resources

General:

- Internet search – Use a search engine to search for a specific school. School websites and other comparative websites can provide general overview information as well as specific details, so you may find yourself going back to the same website several times during your search and decision-making process.

Specific:

- [TopUniversities \(global\)](#)
- [The African Economist – Africa's Top 100 Universities](#)
- [Universities Australia](#)
- [University Grants Commission \(India\)](#)
- [Malaysia University Portal](#)
- [Universidades de Mexico](#)
- [Los Mejores Universidades de México – El Economista](#)

- [Unistats \(UK\)](#)
- [UCAS \(UK\)](#)
- [Your Europe Education & Youth \(European Union\)](#)
- [College Scorecard \(US\)](#)
- [Campus Explorer \(US\)](#)
- [US News and World Report Rankings \(focus is on US, but also includes global information\)](#)