SELECTING THE RIGHT SCHOOL

Note: The term “college” includes all postsecondary institutions—community colleges, technical schools, and career schools, as well as four-year colleges and universities.

In the United States, high school graduates have many opportunities and options for postsecondary education. This makes the possibilities nearly limitless, but a final decision can be very difficult. There are no magic formulas for selecting the “perfect” postsecondary school. Thoughtful planning and research, however, can help students and their families focus their efforts and successfully manage the process.

A majority of high schools students will answer the question, “What are you going to do after high school?” with, “Go to college.” But we know that not all of these students actually go to college, and fewer still complete their degrees.

Some interesting statistics:

- Between 1987 and 1997, the percentage of those completing high school going directly to college increased from 57 to 67 percent.1
- Between 1971 and 1997, the percentage of those completing high school with four or more years of college rose from 22 to 32 percent.1

When beginning the college search, the first question students and their families need to answer is, “Why college?” What is it that the student hopes to achieve in college?

WHY GO TO SCHOOL?

There are many reasons for going to college. Benefits include

- Greater knowledge. College level study enhances critical thinking and communication skills. It results in more knowledge about our complex world. This knowledge produces a more skilled family member, community member, employee, consumer, and lifelong learner.
- Greater potential. Education opens the doors to achievement and self-actualization. It provides greater awareness of options and reduces barriers to accomplishment.
- More job opportunities. The world of work continues to require education beyond high school for more and more jobs. Those with more education have greater flexibility in the changing labor market.
- More money. Earning power is directly linked to level of education completed.

Students may have other reasons for continuing their educations after high school. Whatever their reasons, they will want to be clear about their needs and expectations before they actually begin searching for the “right” college.

IS PROGRAM OF STUDY OR COLLEGE MAJOR THE KEY?

The cost of a four year college degree in Oregon, including living expenses, begins at $40,000 – $50,000, so a four-year college degree is a sizeable investment. If a student wishes to achieve a particular career goal, it is essential to be sure that the program of study or major desired is offered at the schools being considered.

Some areas of study do not require four years of college. Many programs are offered that culminate in an Associate Degree or a certificate. In fact, a number of students in our state’s community colleges have already earned four-year college degrees; they have decided to return for a certificate or Associate Degree in order to advance their careers. A four-year liberal arts education is valued in many enterprises, but it is not the only or the best educational choice for all students. Once again, the vital question is “Why?” If achieving a specific occupational goal is in the answer, availability of an applicable program of study is a key factor to consider.

WHAT ARE SOME OTHER FACTORS?

CIS School Sort allows students to specify preferences in 10 or 12 school characteristic areas. These items are important to many students, and consistent school-specific data for these characteristics are available, making sorting possible.

Advise students that the sorting database is developed from data reported by the schools themselves.

continued
If a characteristic is omitted or inaccurately reported by a school, that school may not appear in a student’s School Sort results where the student anticipated it would be.

The first School Sort characteristic is “Programs of Study Offered” which has been discussed above.

The other characteristics are:
- Type of degree (length of program)
- Location
- Type of school (public, independent, religious affiliation)
- Community setting (where school is located)
- School size
- Admissions requirements
- Cost
- Availability of financial aid (including availability of sports scholarships)
- Special programs and services available (ROTC, study abroad, services for learning disabled)

Other characteristics that prospective students are encouraged to consider include:
- Breadth of academic offerings
- Diversity of student body
- Class size, especially for Freshman classes
- Faculty reputation
- Student activities
- School calendar
- Student living situations

Most of these characteristics are covered in the topics in both U.S. Schools and Oregon Schools information. More than one topic may help students and their families evaluate a school regarding these characteristics.

Various organizations also rate schools nationally and regionally. The most well known of these ratings is an annual review done by *U.S. News and World Report*. Prospective students should remember that all school rating systems are based on a set of assumptions and values which they may or may not share. Students should first look carefully at how the schools are evaluated and then decide how to use the information.

**OTHER HELPFUL HINTS**

**Start early.** Don’t wait until senior year. For very competitive colleges, students will need to know entrance requirements in **eighth grade** in order to plan a four-year high school program that will meet those requirements. If possible, visit schools during late sophomore and junior years to get a “feel” for the different types of colleges. Many applications are due late fall of the senior year, so some decisions need to be made before then!

**Don’t be biased.** Keep an open mind about all the options. Parents and students may underestimate the value of a small career school or a community college and overestimate the value and relevance of a school that offers four-year degrees.

**Be an informed consumer.** Read about the school in publications. Explore the school’s website. Talk to people who have attended the school. Talk to faculty at the school. There are as many points of view about what constitutes a great college experience as there are people who have experienced college. The more perspectives students explore, the better able they will be to evaluate schools for their individual needs.

**WHAT ARE THE STEPS FOR SELECTING A SCHOOL?**

Students should be encouraged to take the following steps:

1. Set some goals for postsecondary education.*
2. Set some criteria for schools to be considered.*
3. Research schools in CIS and on school websites. Request school catalogs.*
4. Compare schools.*
5. Review and reset your priorities.
6. Attend college fairs, talk with school recruiters, visit schools.
7. Review and reset your priorities.
8. Apply to schools.
9. Be accepted, and if undecided, visit.

* The CIS learning activity, Know What You Want ...or You May Get What You Don’t, helps with these steps.
INTERNET SITES FOR ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Data:
1 National Center for Education Statistics publishes a number of reports and studies that look at national education trends.
   http://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/
2 Oregon’s Employment Department publishes articles and data supporting the connection between education and work.
   http://www.qualityinfo.org/olmisj/OlmisZine?zineid=00000005
Oregon University System’s Office of Institutional Research prepares regular studies on the postsecondary educational paths for high school graduates in Oregon.
   http://www.ous.edu/irs/01WHOGG/
Oregon Student Assistance Commission, Office of Degree Authorization, publishes an annual report on “College Choices, by County and High School.”
   http://www.osac.state.or.us/oda/college_choices.html

Advice:
The U.S. Department of Education web site provides resources for education beyond high school for students and parents.
   http://www.students.gov/
The Coalition of America’s Colleges and Universitie web site guides you to books, web sites, and other resources that admissions and financial aid professionals consider most helpful.
   http://www.collegeispossible.org
For some suggestions to share with parents,
   http://www.petersons.com/ugrad/parentview.html
Presented as a web class, College Prep 101 has been developed by Oklahoma State University’s College of Education to help students prepare for college. Teachers and counselors may excerpt and use all or portions of this site, as long as they don’t “make any money” on its use.
   http://collegeprep.okstate.edu
For a complete guidebook, Preparing Your Child for College, A Resource Book for Parents, by the US Department of Education
   http://www.ed.gov/pubs/Prepare
Also from the US Department of Education, Getting Ready for College Early, A Handbook for Parents of Students in the Middle and Junior High School Years
   http://www.ed.gov/pubs/GettingReadyCollegeEarly/
For answers to common questions for potential community college students, see the American Association of Community College website
   http://www.aacc.nche.edu/Content/NavigationMenu/AboutCommunityColleges/WhoAreYou/PotentialStudent/Potential_Student.htm
Selecting a private career schools introduces several additional challenges. See the Oregon Department of Education’s tips on selecting and enrolling
   http://www.ode.state.or.us/pcs/tips.htm
## Unemployment by Education

**U.S. Unemployment Rate, 2002, by Highest Level of Educational Attainment**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Education Level</th>
<th>Unemployment Rate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Doctorate</td>
<td>1.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Master’s degree</td>
<td>2.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor’s degree</td>
<td>3.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Associate degree</td>
<td>4.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some college</td>
<td>4.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High school diploma</td>
<td>5.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High school dropout</td>
<td>8.4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Unemployment Rate (All persons 4.6%)
Earnings by Education

U.S. Median Weekly Earnings, 2002, by Highest Level of Educational Attainment

- Doctorate: $1,345
- Master's degree: $1,026
- Bachelor's degree: $876
- Associate degree: $657
- Some college: $617
- High school diploma: $536
- High school dropout: $388

Median Weekly Earnings (All Persons $647)