

25 Common Myths About College

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The college selection process is tough enough. Don't let the myths about college scare you away from a college or university that might be just right for you.

It's true, and it could end up being true about you. Year after year students settle for a second- and third-choice college because they listened to half-truths or downright false statements concerning the college selection process. We want to explode these myths so you can...Choose the college or university that is best for you.

Myth #1 - It's better to get good grades than take challenging courses.

When you have even modest success in advanced or accelerated courses it indicates to a college that you can handle challenging courses - like those you will find in college. A challenging college preparatory program or some advanced placement courses will help you get into more selective colleges.

Myth #2 - The standardized tests (ACT, PSAT, & SAT) are more important than your high school grades.

Colleges know that your performance in high school is a better predictor of college success than the standardized tests. That does not mean that most colleges will ignore your SAT or ACT scores. Some state institutions with far more applicants than they can assess fairly may use scores to determine if you are eligible.

Myth #3 - I need to decide on my career before I can choose a college.

College is your time to explore. Except in a few specific situations, you can choose a major in your sophomore year and still complete the degree in four years. A surprising number of students discover their ideal field while taking a course they didn't expect to like. If you're not ready, don't let well-meaning friends pressure you into deciding on a major field or a career before you choose a college. Take your time.

Myth #4 - You can't get into a selective college if you did poorly in 9th or 10th grade.

Colleges look for improvement in performance as a sign that you can and will do the work. In fact, a vast improvement as a junior and senior indicates to a college that you have settled down. However, do not expect to catch up for three poor years in one good semester as a senior.

Myth #5 - If I haven't heard of a college or university, it can't be very good.

You may not hear about many of the nation's finest colleges until you are well into your adult life. Athletics on television is how most colleges get to be known, but many great colleges do not get that kind of exposure. Some of the nation's finest colleges don't play big-time athletics. Judge a college on its own merits. Don't let name recognition determine a good or bad college.

Myth #6 - A lot of out-of-class activities will compensate for poor grades.

Admittedly, colleges consider out-of-class activities such as athletics, student government, and music when they review an application. But colleges look at your academic performance first. Lots of out-of-class activities help only if the college already believes you can do the work. "The thicker the file, the thicker the child" is an expression admissions counselors use when a prospective student submits materials on all that he or she has done, but the student still has poor high-school grades.

Myth #7 - Colleges need students so it's easier to be admitted.

Selective private colleges and most state-supported colleges and universities get more qualified applicants than they can possibly accept. While some colleges are having difficulty attracting students, many of these have chosen to get smaller rather than admit unqualified students. Some colleges have lowered their standards, but this also can be a problem for you. The admissions standards might have been lowered, but what a college and its faculty expect of students might not have changed. If you are a border-line student at a college that has lowered standards, you have a good chance of getting in over your head.

Myth #8 - You should go to the most prestigious college to which you are admitted.

You should go to the college that "fits" you best. If it happens to be prestigious, that's fine. However, fit has to do with how you feel when you are on campus, that matches with how you learn and how the professors teach, along with the academic pressure you can handle. If the college isn't a good match, you will be unhappy regardless of the prestige.

Myth #9 - Big colleges are best if you haven't decided on a major field.

Many students think that because there are more courses to choose from, a large college offers greater options for undecided students. However, choices alone should not be the deciding factor. If you are undecided, the best college is one that has core requirements or distribution requirements that ensure you will explore new areas and fields. Also, look for colleges with the strongest academic advising and career counseling programs regardless of their size. Good advising can help you choose an academic and career path you will enjoy rather than one you think you might like right now.

Myth #10 - The quality of the academic program in which I am interested is the most important characteristic of a college.

About two of five students change their major fields of interest before they actually enroll in college, and about one of two changes the major field once enrolled. Look for a college that has your current field of interest but is also strong in all its areas. It's worth noting that the research on success in graduate school and in employment after college suggests that the best way to master a major field is a combination of learning theory and active, hands-on-learning by doing. What's more valuable is having the opportunity to do research on your own or to work side by side with a professor on a project rather than simply taking more courses in the field.

Myth #11 - The best time to visit colleges is after you have been admitted.

Many students have fallen for this myth only to find that none of the colleges to which they were admitted "felt" right when they visited. If possible, visit before you apply and again after you have been admitted. If you can visit only once, make it before you apply.

Myth #12 - College is for only four years.

This is wrong on two fronts: 1) You can't trade in your degree for another one if you didn't go to the best college for you the first time. Your college is with you for life. 2) Only about one of five students completes college in four years. In fact, only two of five students complete college in six years. If you plan to be out of college in four years, learn what each college's four-year graduation rate is.

Myth #13 - Your life will be ruined if you don't get admitted to your first choice college.

Thousands of students each year do not get admitted to their first choice college and most are happy, healthy individuals today. Yes, rejection is hard on your ego, but you will not be alone. Additionally, the vast majority of students who settle for their second choice end up happy at

that institution anyway. Remember, college admission, especially at the more selective colleges, has to be subjective. With thousands of applications and only a small staff, it is impossible to assess each applicant objectively. Some applications stand out. Some don't.

Myth #14 - You have to take only the minimum college prep courses to get into college.

Technically, this is true. In reality, it is not. The more mathematics, science, and languages you take, the better your chances are for getting into a good four-year college.

Myth #15 - You will have a better chance of getting into professional or graduate school if you go to a university that offers these graduate programs.

Many students and parents mistakenly think that attending a university with a law school, medical school, or graduate school guarantees admission into that program at graduation. Very few universities give their students special preference for graduate study, and those that do reserve it for only the very best students. Many small colleges and universities have excellent records in placing students in professional schools and graduate programs. The key to admission is succeeding in a strong major program at a challenging college, not where you go. Regardless of where you attend, there are no guarantees.

Myth #16 - Liberal arts colleges do not have good science programs.

The "liberal" in liberal arts means "broadening" and "freeing" - as in freeing one's mind from narrow thinking. The term "liberal arts" is a shortened version of the full title: liberal arts and sciences. Most liberal arts colleges have been emphasizing science for all students for a century or more. Since the best way to learn science is by doing science, small colleges with small classes and fewer students in the laboratories often have an advantage. Proportionally, far more physicians and Ph.D.s have earned their undergraduate degrees from small liberal arts colleges than from large universities.

Myth #17 - Residence Halls are simply places in which to sleep.

This is true at many large institutions, but it is not at smaller colleges. At "residential colleges" the staff takes advantage of the 24-hour learning experience. Many small colleges have regular activities in the residence halls ranging from those focusing on wellness and personal growth to film festivals and Super Bowl parties. A residential college offers a unique time in your life to blend your academic, social, personal, and recreational life. The famous college tradition, the late night "bull session", often deals in subject matter from academic courses, personal beliefs, and arguments over the views of famous philosophers. Residential life can add a great deal to your college experience.

Myth #18 - Large universities have greater diversity.

This is true if "diversity" simply means having greater numbers of African Americans, Hispanic Americans, Asian Americans, Native Americans, and international students. Unfortunately, the size and nature of a large university often mean that there is little interaction among those of various ethnic and racial backgrounds. At large universities, groups of students can often choose to live and learn together and separately from other students. At small schools, however, the student population is small enough that you will get to know well, or in passing, virtually all students. If the value of diversity is to learn to understand and appreciate other cultures and groups, then small colleges often offer greater diversity.

Myth #19 - Your college experience will be pretty much like everyone else's.

This can be true at large universities where the number of students makes "personalizing" the experience difficult. It is generally not true at smaller colleges and universities. At these

institutions, students can and are encouraged to study overseas, do an internship, pursue an independent study project, conduct research with a professor, major in two fields, cluster courses on a single topic, and so forth. In fact, at most smaller institutions you can even design your own major.

Myth #20 - Colleges are concerned only with my intellectual and academic development.

Many colleges and smaller universities pride themselves on their ability to "develop the whole person". Some of this personal development comes from requiring a broad-based general education that contributes to your understanding of the world and society. Some of the personal growth takes place in the residence halls where you learn things like tolerance and how to get along with different kinds of people. In some cases, personal and professional development is intentional. At these colleges, there are workshops open to students on time management, developing relationships, handling yourself at a job interview, and your responsibilities as a citizen.

Myth #21 - Only the very best students receive financial aid from colleges.

If you are admitted and have financial need, colleges generally want to make it possible for you to attend. In fact, the greatest proportion of financial assistance at private colleges tends to go to students in the middle of the class. High-ability students or students with special talents may receive "merit-based scholarships".

Myth #22 - State-supported institutions offer more financial aid than private colleges do.

State-supported colleges and universities offer very little of their own resources for financial assistance. As the name suggests, state-supported institutions are subsidized by their respective states and that allows them to charge less. However, state institutions are also more likely to offer only loans to students who do not have a high need.

Myth #23 - The federal government provides most of the financial aid.

Government funds comprise only a very small proportion of the financial aid available. In fact, the government continually reduces the amount of grant money - money that does not need to be paid back. Private colleges, especially, supply the largest portion of financial aid.

Myth #24 - Even if I get financial aid, I will end up with large loans to repay when I graduate.

To see that you don't have too much debt at graduation, most colleges allow you to borrow only a reasonable amount. Nationally, on average, students will usually have only \$2,500-\$3,500 per year in loans. At most private colleges this represents less than 20% of the annual charges. Depending on the loan, you will usually have 10 years to repay, and you don't start the repayment until after you graduate.

Myth #25 - You can't trust the college about financial aid.

Financial aid is not a "you vs. me" business. The job of a college's financial aid officer is to make it possible for all admitted students to attend their college while staying within the federal guidelines.