

# The Search Is On: How to Pick the Right College

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The summer of 2010 marked a milestone for Tim Koenig, a then rising junior at Saint Joseph's Preparatory School in Philadelphia, Pa. Koenig began the all-important college search, exploring nearby Pennsylvania-based campuses like Penn State and Drexel University and more distant destinations like Georgetown University in Washington, D.C., and Boston College. "I dove deeply into the college search last summer and over spring break of my junior year," says Koenig, who is leaning toward a career in actuarial science, which applies mathematical and statistical methods to assess risk in the insurance and finance industries. He has narrowed his college search in terms of academics, "But I still have questions about finding the best college for me," notes Koenig. "Do I look for certain clubs in college or different types of people? How do I know I'm going to enjoy myself there?"

Koenig is correct to consider all aspects of the college experience before making a final decision. Statistics show that some 40% of students who start college don't graduate – primarily because they made the wrong school choice.

## Narrowing It Down

How do you go about picking the right college? In July, Shaun Harper, a professor at the University of Pennsylvania Graduate School of Education, spoke to a group of high school students, including Koenig, during the Knowledge@Wharton High School Business, Entrepreneurship & Leadership program, a forum for Philadelphia-area high school students to expand their knowledge of such business subjects as career development, finance and entrepreneurship. Guest speaker Harper, who has done extensive research on the college experience, said, "Part of being successful is picking the right school for you."

The good news, noted Harper, is that the U.S. has some 5,000 colleges and universities from which to choose. "You wouldn't want to apply to all of them because of the application fees. But you do want to apply to, say, 10 schools," he said. Your target schools should meet more than your academic needs. Narrowing your choices requires some critical analysis of the different types of campuses, economic criteria and demographics. Start with the question: How do you envision your college experience?

Campus location is an important consideration. "I'm looking for a small college in the city or a large college in a

suburban area,” said Ramon Guzman-Segura, a senior at Central High School in Philadelphia. “I want an arboretum,” added Central High School senior Lindsay Taylor, referring to the park-like setting found on some campuses.

It’s important to think about whether you prefer a campus that is rural (in the country) or urban (in the city), said Harper. Penn State, for instance, is in rural central Pennsylvania. “Sometimes going to college at a place like Penn State is exactly what someone needs. It provides them some shelter from the urban madness and all of the distractions.”

Students should also consider whether they plan to commute each day to campus or live on campus in dorms. While commuting to campus saves money, it also takes away from the total college experience. What’s more, traffic can make commuting stressful. “[Several of us who have] written about college success have found that students who live on campus tend to be more successful in college than students who commute,” noted Harper. “If you have to commute, make sure you find the resources that are intended for commuter students – like carpooling.”

### **Sticker Shock**

For many students, college cost is the No. 1 consideration – and with good reason. A degree from a private, elite university like the University of Pennsylvania, Harvard University or the University of Southern California costs about \$200,000. Understand the various types of colleges – and their related costs — before you apply, said Harper. “Community colleges [that typically offer two-year associate degrees] are significantly less expensive than four-year institutions. Public institutions are considerably less expensive than private universities,” he noted. “I will say that private universities tend to give a lot of scholarship money. There are many private colleges or universities where if your parents make less than \$50,000 a year, you can go at no cost. It can actually be less expensive to go to a school like Harvard than to go to [a public university] like Temple.”

Two years at a more affordable community college before transferring to a four-year institution to complete your degree can be a valuable option, suggested Harper. “If you are able to get good grades at community college, you can get academic scholarships once you transfer,” he added.

College is an extended commitment, and students need to make sure their choice is the right fit both academically as well as socially. “Diversity is very important to me,” said Darnae Johnson, a senior at Central High School. “I’m in a diverse high school, and I don’t want to be around just one type of person in college.”

“You should think seriously about the racial demographics of the place before you go,” noted Harper, who praised his own undergraduate experience at Albany State University in Albany, Ga., a historically black college. “Private, elite institutions are some of the most diverse in the country. For instance, 43% of the students on the University of Pennsylvania campus are white.”

Can you find a school that is perfect on every level? Maybe not, said Harper. But with 5,000 schools from which to choose, you can – and should — “cast a wide net.”

### **Related Links**

- [Dr. Shaun Harper](#)
- [KWHS Business, Entrepreneurship & Leadership Program](#)
- [The College Board College Search](#)
- [College Navigator](#)