

# Make the Right College Choice for the Right Reasons

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## Weighing the Options: Which university is right for me?

Generally speaking, students have a pretty clear idea about what they are looking for in a school. I know I did—and I didn't find it at the first school that I attended, or the second. What I did discover, however, was a series of fatal misunderstandings that repeatedly landed me in a college that I was less than satisfied with. My story is not uncommon: thousands first year college students find each year that they wound up attending a school that just wasn't right for them.

Higher education comes in many forms. It can be obtained at a small liberal arts college, an enormous state university, or even at a publicly funded community college. During my four years of college I tried all three flavors of education and learned a good deal about the differences between each—both positive and negative. If you are dissatisfied with the university you have ended up in, or are a high school student trying to prevent paying tuition at the wrong university, explore the differences between these three categories before narrowing your selection.

### Examining the Options

**Private College.** Private colleges have a number of benefits that cannot be found elsewhere. They are academically challenging and student focused. Most private colleges have a common thread (critical thinking, technological advancement) that is woven through their entire curriculum. When looking at a private university, determine what their common thread is so that you can ensure their goals are as important to you as they are central to their curriculum.

Private colleges tend to be smaller; such a school will pose incredible challenges for wall flowers as there are fewer social networks to choose from. Because of their size and the cost of tuition, their class size also tends to be smaller. For students who occasionally ditch out on a class—this is not the type of college for you. Professors are intensely involved in the academic lives of their students and their help is easy to access but they expect you to attend their class regularly. In regards to cost, private colleges are the highest, however, the excellent scholarships they offer offset the price of tuition. If you are short in financial assistance but have a knockout G.P.A. and stand up test scores, you should still consider applying to a private college.

**Community College.** They have a bad rep, I know. The slogan for CLC, the junior college that I attended, was College of Last Chance. Cute, and I must say incredibly motivating. Ignore the snickers from your friends attending a real university; there is nothing wrong with a community college. In fact, community colleges give you the opportunity to attend college, get class credit, and determine a major, and find the college that is right for you all for a small tuition fee. Typically, community schools only offer 2-year degrees, so you will get the opportunity to attend a 4-year university.

A common myth about community schools is that they employ less than first-rate staff. Not true. Most of the professors that I encountered were incredibly accomplished academics. Many of these individuals choose to work at a community school because the employment is usually part-time and very flexible. Junior college is a great option for students who haven't chosen a major or those who aren't sure that college is right for them. Most students with a part-time job can afford to pay for a junior college themselves—great news if finances are a major concern.

**Public University.** State schools are a good option for most students as their tuition is reasonable and their classes are challenging. Keep in mind that they are very large and this can be a difficult environment for some students to adapt to. It doesn't take long before the feeling of anonymity sets in at a state school: you rarely recognize the faces on the sidewalk, know your classmates, or are familiar with your professors.

Public universities cost less than private schools, but their student to professor ratio is much higher. Many of the classes take place in lecture halls, at least for the first two or three years. The instructors are accomplished though sometimes disengaged. Typically, the success of one student was less important to them than to the profs at a private school. The atmosphere is much more independent and the class schedules and work load cater to this. For students who plan on working throughout school, the public university is fairly accommodating.