SELECTING A COLLEGE:
MAKING AN INFORMED DECISION

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ACCORDING TO U.S. NEWS and World Report, the average price of tuition at a public college in 2023-2024 was $10,662. At private colleges, that average tuition increases to $42,162 (and some schools actually exceeded $90,000). This means choosing a college often comes down to the bottom-line - one's ability (or to their parent's ability) to financially afford the college(s) under consideration. After costs, other factors can heavily influence the selection. Academic reputation, athletic program(s), distance from home or work, family college preferences, and any number of other factors can and should be taken into consideration to make the best personal decision possible.
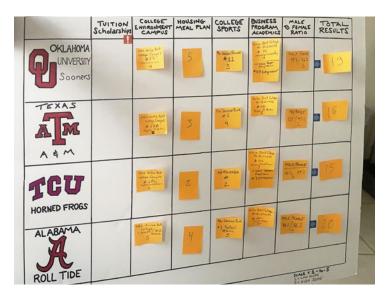

Beyond obvious "sticker-price" considerations, this article offers a decision-making approach to assist you on making the difficult decision on a college selection. This approach combines traditional college selection processes with a decision matrix (information support-tool). More importantly, this approach tailors the college selection process to specific criteria and factors that are most important to you, the student – or to the student's parents paying the tuition bill.

Most first-time college students are flooded with information as they approach selecting a college. This is an exciting time! Friends are likely making similar college decisions. Parents, grandparents, other relatives, mentors, and friends are undoubtedly sharing their personal recommendations on the "best college" you should attend. These are important considerations no doubt, however, many other factors besides costs and friendly recommendations should help you select a college. I recommend you continue to apply the traditional college selection process and then add a decision matrix to help make the best personal choice (among many close-call college options).

TRADITIONAL COLLEGE SELECTION APPROACH

The traditional "tried-and-true" approach of selecting a college remains applicable and important. Start early; identify interests/goals/and priorities. Research each school. Decide on a top list of your favorite colleges, and then try to visit each school. If you are fortunate enough to visit a college under consideration, it is always best to go in with a plan. Plan to learn, experience, and get a feel for the college and campus. Campus visits provide valuable insights into the campus environment, facilities, and community. Attend campus tours, information sessions, and talk to current students and faculty members. Perhaps even try to plan your trip in conjunction with a college sporting event or a campus activity.

DECISION SUPPORT TOOL

==A decision matrix is a decision support tool that can help you in a variety of situations, from making decisions to solving problems==. This tool works well if you have several options that you can compare them easily (such as colleges) using the same criteria. Because a decision matrix focuses on ranking and rating options, it's helpful for quantifiable decisions that rely on logic rather than emotions or personal preference.

A decision matrix helps you evaluate different options. This tool can simplify your process because you only need a list of options and significant criteria to judge them. You then score each option, and the highest-scoring option typically represents the best decision as it most fulfills your criteria. Using a decision matrix also enables you to compare and contrast your options in a simple-to-read format.

HOW TO USE A DECISION MATRIX

You can use the following steps to create and use a simple decision matrix:

I. LIST YOUR OPTIONS.

When you make decisions, determine which options you want to evaluate and compare against one another. You create your decision matrix by listing those options as rows of the table. For example, choosing between several colleges, the left side of your matrix table may be like this:

OPTIONS						
College A						
College B						
College C						
College D						
College E						

2. DETERMINE YOUR CRITERIA.

==You determine the criteria to help you make your decision==.

While you can brainstorm a long list of criteria, try to reduce your criteria to eight or less factors. Narrowing down your criteria to those issues or factors most important to your decision. You then list those items as the columns of your matrix table. Using the example of colleges under consideration, you may create the following criteria columns:

OPTIONS	Price	Academic Program(s)	U.S. News College Rankings	Sports & Extra-curricula	Campus Life	School Size	SCORE
College A							
College B							
College C							
College D							
College E							

3. SCORE YOUR OPTIONS.

Create a rating scale to score how well each option meets the criteria. A common scale to use is from one to five, where one represents a poor rating while five represents an excellent rating. You can use a larger or smaller scale but try to define each number represents to YOU. Once you've defined your scoring, move through the table, and assign ratings to each option. Using the example, a college that scores a five under any of the listed criteria would represents the best college for that criterion. It is okay to give duplicate ratings in the same criteria, but best to try to pick an overall winner and loser for each factor. A college that scores a five under the price criteria means it is the most affordable college under consideration. Meanwhile, the college that scores a one in this price criteria, is your least affordable (this does not take into consideration the scholarships or financial aid available to help off-set costs). Rate each item from one to five as follows:

OPTIONS	Price	Academic Program(s)	U.S. News College Rankings	Sports & Extra-curricula	Campus Life	School Size	SCORE
College A	3	1	3	5	3	4	**19**
College B	1	2	2	4	3	5	**17**
College C	4	5	4	3	4	2	**22**
College D	2	4	1	1	2	3	**13**
College E	5	3	5	2	3	1	**19**

4. MAKE THE DECISION.

Place the sum of each option's totals in a "Score" column at the end of your table. Now that you have your totals, you can determine which option scored the highest across all criteria. In this example, "College C" has the highest score (and at least on paper), representing the best choice based on your wants or needs. FYI: Many people use this matrix tool and are really shocked by the results. That is the whole point. Adding this matrix into your traditional college search activities will help differentiate your college options. The scores and results may be very different than expected. [NOTE: This example uses score totals for simplicity. If any single criteria is more important, you can multiply a weighted score to it.]

At the end of the day, you want to know that you made a final and well-informed decision about where to attend college. Good luck and best wishes on your academic and personal journey! ■

I don't hate you. I'd unplug your life support to recharge my phone, but I don't hate you.

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