

Finding The Right Fit: Types Of Colleges And Universities

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When I begin working with a high school student to start the college search and application process, I ask a lot of questions. This helps me learn more about my students- their strengths and areas where they may be less confident, their hopes and dreams and aspirations. This also gets the students thinking about things they may not have thought much about before, including the different types of colleges and universities available to them.

Students are fortunate to have over 2000 four-year colleges and universities in the US from which to apply. However, some types of colleges may be more suitable for some individual personalities and learning styles. To find your fit, it helps if you know a little about what your choices may include.

Colleges and universities can be categorized in many ways. There are public and private, large and small, city and rural, religious affiliated or not, not-for-profit colleges and for-profit colleges. For the sake of this article, I will *only* be discussing not-for-profit colleges.

Public Or Private

A public college or university is one that is affiliated with a state and receives a significant amount of their funding from the state government. Or in the case of the academies—West Point, The Naval Academy, The Air Force Academy, US Coast Guard and The Merchant Marine Academy—the federal government. Public colleges and universities need to answer to their state legislatures. Some set rules for the percentage of students who may be admitted from outside the state. In general, public colleges will have a majority of state residents making up their student body. For the academies, there are different rules and these are set by the US Government.

Many state “flagship” universities, such as the University of Michigan and the University of California at Berkeley enjoy a national reputation. Others are smaller and may be less well known but fill a specific purpose, like the Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts, “the Commonwealth’s public liberal arts college”.

Private institutions can be large universities or small colleges and they may or may not have a religious affiliation. They also range in size—large, medium and small. From Boston University with an undergraduate population of about 18,000 to Emory University’s approximately 8000 undergrads to Goucher College with both undergraduate and graduate students totaling 2000.



College Or University

In case you ever wondered what designates a “university” it is this: A university is “An institution of learning of the highest level comprising a college of liberal arts, a program of graduate studies and several professional schools and authorized to confer both undergraduate and graduate degrees”. Universities will award degrees beyond a Bachelor’s and Master’s and include PhD and professional degrees. In my state we have the flagship public University of Connecticut that is comprised of the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences as well as other undergraduate schools including Nursing, Engineering, Fine Arts, Education and Business, and a Graduate School, Medical School, Dental School and Law School.

Universities offer the widest array of majors students can choose from. Some of the large institutions will also have a focus on research. A very large university may not be the best choice for a student who will feel overwhelmed on a vast and busy campus. For others, a big campus with a lot of students is just what they were looking for!

Liberal Arts Colleges

These are colleges that tend to have either all undergraduate students or include a number of graduate students pursuing their master’s degrees. The focus at a LAC is on teaching undergraduates. A liberal arts curriculum will cover Arts, Literature, Languages, Math, Science, Philosophy, Social Sciences and Religious Studies. Some LACs will also include majors in Business or in Engineering. There are many variations in scope and size of LACs in the US. Stonehill College and Franklin & Marshall College are examples of Liberal Arts colleges.

Colleges With A Religious Affiliation

Some colleges have a direct affiliation with a religion and some have a more loose affiliation. The vast majority of colleges with a religious affiliation accept students of any religion or no religion. Many will require that a student take one or two religion or philosophy based courses as part of their liberal arts curriculum.

There are many Catholic colleges and universities in the US. They will often have a religious leader as the president of the college, although some have lay presidents. Many well known ones are Jesuit institutions such as Georgetown University, Boston College and Marquette. Some are Catholic of another order—Villanova is Augustinian and St. Anselm is Benedictine. These colleges have religious symbols throughout campus and some may have a majority of students who identify as Catholic. Attending mass is not required of anyone, but it may be a part of the social scene. These are things that students will need to weigh when determining the type of college or university that best matches what they are looking for.

Other colleges have an affiliation with one of the Protestant faiths. For some of these colleges religion may play a big part and others will have an affiliation in name only. Some of these campuses may include a chapel—either of a particular denomination or one that is non-denominational. Again, this is a matter of individual choice and what feels right and meets the needs of each student.

There are also colleges with a Christian affiliation where your faith, education and way of life are inextricable; colleges where students sign a statement of faith to that end. They may have rules about dating or mandatory bible study. These are colleges for a very specific kind of student who tends to self-select these institutions. For them, this is a great fit.

Find Out Where You Fit Best

Each of these types of colleges and universities will have pros and cons and some things that appeal to some students and not to others. Finding your fit and comfort level is part of your learning experience and journey going forward.



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