

# SCHOOL DAYS

COMMENTARY // Higher education

## So much to think about when applying to college—here's a primer

By Linda Dennis and  
Lisa-Marie Richardson

Creating a college list is one of the most stressful parts of the high school experience. With so much riding on the choice of schools, the way students make these decisions plays a critical role in their long-term academic and career success.

So, what is the most effective way to research a college before deciding whether to add it to your college list?

With the many academic and extracurricular demands high school students engage in, finding time for meaningful college research is challenging and often overlooked.

Most students rely on campus visits, college websites, school-based tools such as Naviance and Scoir, and advice from counselors, family members, and friends. But is that truly enough?

We believe college research should go beyond admission chances and sticker price. Students and families often focus on whether a school is affordable and attainable, but we also look ahead to what happens after enrollment—and well beyond graduation.

Will students have access to their intended major? How many students graduate? What kind of return on investment can they expect? What percentage of graduates are still seeking employment six months after earning their degree? What are the median earnings of graduates ten years after graduation?

These are critical questions to consider when building a college list.

Core factors to consider:

1. **Affordability:** (What can your family realistically pay?) Look at the total cost of attendance and available financial aid options, including: scholarships and grants; loans and work-study; net price calculator results (your estimated cost after grants and scholarships). Families should ask: What is too much? Are you willing to graduate with significant debt?

2. **Attainability:** (Can you realistically get in?) Consider looking at profiles from admitted students in previous years; GPA and test score ranges; strength of your high school curriculum; your extracurricular activities; your awards and honors; opportunities in case your academic profile fails.



3. **Availability of academic majors and minors:** Does the college offer what you want to study? How and when do you declare your major? Are you admitted directly into the major as a first-year student? If not, what GPA and prerequisites are required? Is admission to the major guaranteed after your first or second year?

4. **Student preferences and campus fit:** Campus setting (urban, suburban, rural); location and size; campus culture and vibe; Greek life; housing, clubs, sports, and study abroad; special programs or interests that are important to the student.

5. **Return on investment:** Graduation rates; employment outcomes; salary potential after graduation; career placement support; what are you getting back for what you are paying?

6. **Employment outcomes:** How many students graduate on time? How many are employed or in graduate school after graduation? Strength of career services and employer connections.

A strong college list is not based on reputation alone. It is built on financial reality, academic fit, career outcomes, and personal preferences.

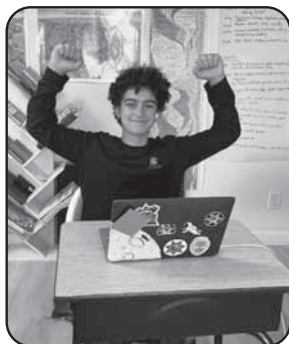
Researching colleges carefully helps students avoid excessive debt, majors that they cannot access, and campuses where they won't thrive. Instead, choose colleges where they can afford to go, get in, succeed academically, and graduate with strong outcomes.

*Linda Dennis and Lisa-Marie Richardson are college counselors and co-founders of College Admissions Team.*

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#### EVENT DETAILS

**Date:** Thursday, March 26, 2026

**Time:** 1:00 PM - 3:00 PM

**Where:** 28990 Pacific Coast Hwy, Ste. 116  
Malibu, CA 90265 (bottom of Kanan Rd.)

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## COLLEGE STANDOUTS

- Noah Bergerman of Oak Park earned dean's list honors at the University of Tampa in Florida for the fall 2025 semester.
- Mia Spiegel and Eliot Monick of Calabasas earned fall 2025 dean's list honors at Tufts University in Boston.
- Sophia Lippel, a graduate of Oak Park High School, made the recent dean's list at the University of Missouri in Columbia. She is a senior at Mizzou's School of Journalism.
- Casey Hirsh of Oak Park was elected into Phi Kappa Phi, the nation's oldest and most selective, all-discipline collegiate honor society, at the University of California-Davis.
- Darius Baharloo of Calabasas was chosen for Phi Kappa Phi membership at Syracuse University in New York.