



The College Search Process

Identifying Your Wants and Needs in Post-secondary Education

This handout was designed by a team of current college students (Rural Peer Ambassadors) at UW-Madison to aid high school students at the start of their college¹ exploration journey. In this handout, you will find a series of exercises made to be completed in order by a current high school student with support from a parent or guardian as needed.

Step #1: Collecting Your Data

Start by filling out the table below. You will reference this table again in later steps. Please refer to your unofficial transcript for help on where to find your GPA, class ranking, and a list of the advanced placement courses you have taken or are currently enrolled in. This can often be found on your school district's website or the platform your school uses to access students' grades.

Student's Current Data	
GPA	
Class ranking	
Number of advanced placement (AP) courses taken	
List of AP course(s) completed, and score received on the exam	

Step #2: The Three Buckets Model

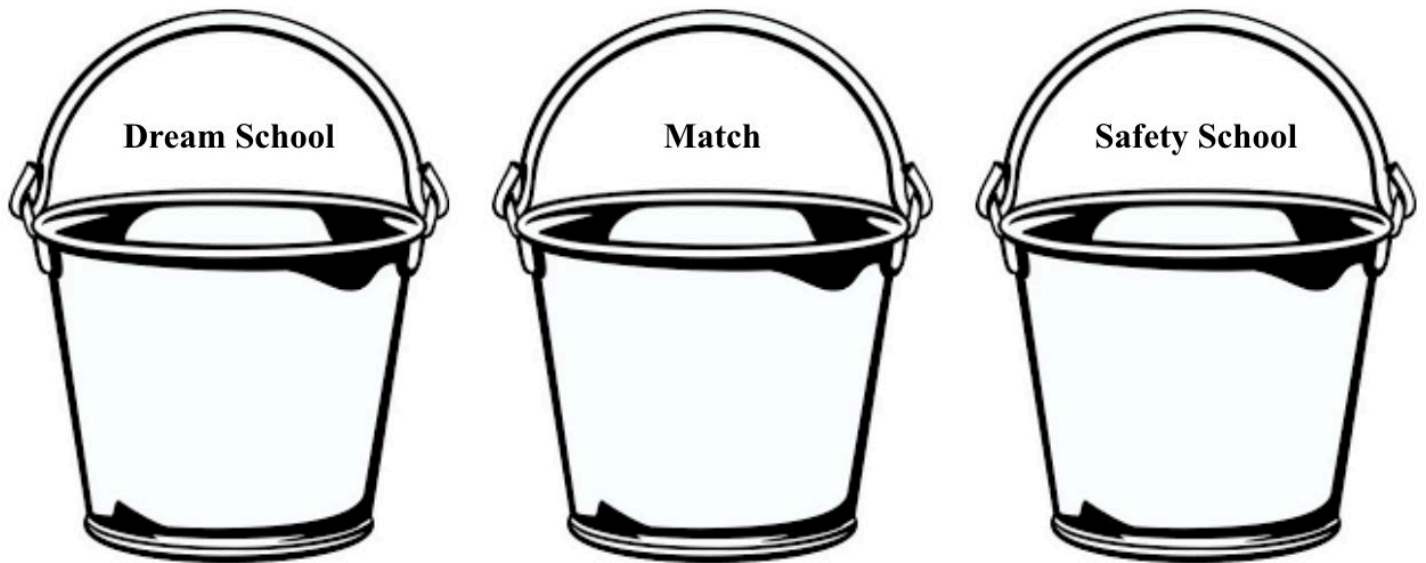
The three buckets model is a tool used to help students sort prospective colleges and universities into three different categories based on a set of criteria.

Firstly, create a list of all the colleges/universities that you are considering on a separate sheet of paper. The longer the list, the more you will have to work with during the upcoming steps, so please feel free to add any schools that you are interested in to your list. Everything is on the table at this stage, so don't limit yourself!

¹ We use the term college to generally refer to all post-secondary educational options. This includes 2-year, 4-year, public and private colleges and universities.

Next, go through and place the schools on your list into one of the following three buckets, “Dream School”, “Match”, or “Safety School”, based on the criteria listed in their descriptions below.

Use the college/university’s website (or any of the website tools we provided for you as a resource at the end of this handout) to find out what academic criteria they have for incoming students (e.g. do they require a minimum GPA?)



1. Dream School

- a. The student’s academic data (refer back to the table on the first page) may fall below in more than one area, but their application would still be considered.
- b. This category represents an aspiration – the college/university you hope you attend.

2. Match

- a. This is the “right fit” for a student.
- b. A school that will be both academically challenging, while also being both socially and emotionally fulfilling.
- c. The student falls somewhere in the middle of admission requirements (compare your data from the first page with standard admissions metrics for that school).

3. Safety School

- a. It’s guaranteed that they will be admitted based on academic qualifications and school admission requirements.



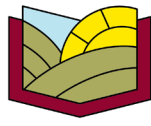
- b. Student falls above or average on all or most admission requirements and academic qualifications.
- c. This should still be a school that the student could envision themselves at. If the student does not feel like they could be happy at the school, don't consider it as an option.

Step #3: Assessment Rating of Key Characteristics

For this step, you will rank the characteristics of a school listed in the table below from “of little importance” to “very important” depending on your personal preference. Put a check mark in the column of your ranking of each characteristic. Feel free to add other characteristics that aren't included at the end of the table. Characteristics are arranged in no particular order.

By ranking key characteristics of different colleges/universities, students can better understand what characteristics they value in a college/university.

Characteristic	Of Little Importance	Somewhat Important	Very Important
Location			
Size			
Academic programs available			
Extracurriculars			
Cost			
Diversity			
Internship opportunities			
Research opportunities			
Career support			



Step #4: Ranking Your Top Choices

You're at the last step! Now, using the characteristics that you have identified as "Very Important" in Step 3, compare the schools listed in each bucket against one another to determine which school in each of the three categories is your top choice.

Below is an example of how you might choose to organize your comparison of a single school against the characteristics you have identified as being very important. Fill in the school's name at the top of the table and place a "✓" or an "X" in the rows underneath to indicate whether or not that particular institution meets your wants for that characteristic. For example, if you identified "location" as being very important to you because you want to attend a school in state, you would place a checkmark to the right of "location" for a school such as UW-Madison, which is in-state. To compare more than one college/university at a time, you can add multiple columns to the right of the table.

Very Important Characteristics	School Name:	School Name:

The colleges/universities which have the most check marks can be placed towards the top of their respective buckets, and the schools with the fewest check marks can be placed near the bottom of their respective buckets. Lots goes into college search and exploration, so feel free to play around with the exact order until you feel that your top choices are right.



College Terminology for Students

- FAFSA
 - **FAFSA** stands for Free Application for Federal Student Aid. The FAFSA is a form completed by current and prospective college students at the start of each year to help colleges determine each student's federal aid eligibility.
- Scholarships, Grants, & Loans
 - **Scholarships** are payments made to support a student's education, awarded based on academic or another achievement. These do not need to be paid back.
 - **Grants** are a sum of money given by a government or other organization for a particular purpose. These do not need to be paid back.
 - **Loans** are money borrowed by a student or the student's parents. Loan money has to be paid back once a student graduates or leaves college. Loans can be used to build credit. There are both public and private loans available.
- Different types of degrees
 - **Bachelor's degree:** Academic degree awarded to someone after completion of their undergraduate studies. Bachelor's degrees are typically attained in three to six years, with the average being four years.
 - **Master's degree:** A postgraduate degree awarded to someone who has successfully undergone study demonstrating a high level of understanding in a specific field of study. Obtained after the completion of a bachelor's degree. Typically takes two years to attain a master's degree.
 - **Professional degree:** An academic degree that prepares someone to work in a specific profession, practice, or industry. Often includes meeting the requirements for licensure or accreditation. M.D., or Doctor of Medicine, is one of the most well-known examples of a professional degree.
- Different post-secondary options
 - **College:** Smaller institutions of post-secondary learning. Includes community colleges, liberal arts colleges, and technical schools. The term is also used generally to apply to all post-secondary education.
 - **University:** Larger institutions of post-secondary learning, offering both undergraduate and graduate programs.
 - **Trade-school:** Refers to any post-secondary educational institution that offers training for a specific career path.



- **Vocational school:** Much like trade schools, a vocational school offered education in a specific career field but differs in that vocational schools offer broader programs that cover various aspects of a career path instead of specific programs.
- **Apprenticeship:** Refers to the arrangement in which someone studies under a professional in their field of choice to learn an art, trade, or job.
- B.S. & B.A.
 - **Bachelor of Sciences:** A subset of a bachelor's degree. Emphasis on topics such as business, technology, sciences, and healthcare. Depending on the institution, a major may be offered with two separate paths for obtaining either a bachelor's of arts or sciences.
 - **Bachelor of Arts:** A subset of a bachelor's degree. Emphasis on general studies, along with subjects like the arts, social sciences, languages, communication, and sociology.
- Majors, Minors, Certificates, and Credits
 - **Major:** Your main focus of study. This is what your degree is in. For example, if you pursue a major in biology during your undergraduate time, you will obtain a bachelor's degree in biology.
 - **Minor:** A secondary specialization added on top of a degree. Not every institution will have minors or certificates.
 - **Certificate:** Like a minor, a certificate delineates a focus in a particular topic on top of a major. However, certificates are typically fewer credits than a major. Not every institution will have minors or certificates.
 - **Credit:** Credits can be thought of like points that go towards your degree. You will need a certain number in order to graduate. Each institution determines how many credits students need to successfully earn in each to graduate. The number of credits that a course is worth is dependent on the difficulty and frequency (i.e. how often class sessions meet and for how long) of the course.



Further Resources for College Exploration

- College Search & Comparison
 - College Search - College Board
 - <https://bigfuture.collegeboard.org/college-search/filters>
 - NCES College Navigator
 - <https://nces.ed.gov/collegenavigator/>
- Scholarship Search
 - Career One Stop Scholarship Finder
 - <https://www.careeronestop.org/toolkit/training/find-scholarships.aspx>
 - US Department Of Education - State Scholarship Contacts
 - <https://www2.ed.gov/about/contacts/state/index.html>
- City Comparison
 - Best College Towns - A College Advisor Guide
 - <https://www.collegeadvisor.com/resources/best-college-towns/>
- Tips for Writing College Application Essays
 - The Princeton Review - Crafting an Unforgettable College Essay
 - <https://www.princetonreview.com/college-advice/college-essay>
- Degree Program Comparison
 - College Scorecard
 - <https://collegescorecard.ed.gov/>
- UW System Comparison
 - UW Explore UW Campuses
 - <https://uwhelp.wisconsin.edu/find-your-uws/explore-uw-campuses/>