



The top myths about college

Myth #1 — It's better to get good grades than take challenging courses.

When you have even some success in advanced or accelerated courses, it indicates to a college that you can handle challenging courses like those you'll find in college. A challenging college preparatory program or some advanced placement courses will help you succeed in college.

Myth #2 — The standardized tests (ACT, PSAT & SAT) are more important than your high school grades.

Colleges know that your performance in high school is a better predictor of college success than the standardized tests are. That doesn't mean that most colleges will ignore your test scores. Some state institutions with large numbers of applicants may use scores to determine whether you're eligible.

Myth #3 — I need to decide on my career before I can choose a college.

College is your time to explore. Except in a few specific situations, you can choose a major at the end of your sophomore year and still complete your degree in four years. A surprising number of students discover their ideal field while taking a course they didn't expect to like. If you're not ready, choose a college that allows you to keep your options open. Take your time.

Myth #4 — You can't get into a selective college if you did poorly in 9th or 10th grade.

Colleges look for improvement in performance as a sign that you can and will do the work. In fact, a vast improvement as a junior and senior indicates to a college that you've settled down. However, don't expect to catch up for three poor years in one good semester as a senior.

Myth #5 — If I haven't heard of a college or university, it can't be very good.

You may not hear about many of the nation's finest colleges until you're well into your adult life. Athletics on television is how most colleges get to be known, but many great colleges don't get that kind of exposure. Some of the nation's finest colleges don't play big-time athletics. Judge a college on its own merits, not on name recognition.

Myth #6 — A lot of out-of-class activities will make up for poor grades.

Yes, colleges consider out-of-class activities such as athletics, student government, and music when they review an application. But colleges look at your academic performance first. Lots of out-of-class activities help only if the college already believes you can do the work.

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Myth #7 — You should go to the most prestigious college that admits you.

Actually, you should go to the college that fits you best. If it happens to be prestigious, that's fine. However, fit has to do with how you feel when you're on campus, it matches with how you learn and how the professors teach and the academic pressure you can handle. And it fits with your family's financial situation. If the college isn't a good match, you'll be unhappy regardless of the prestige.

Myth #8 — Big colleges are best if you haven't decided on a major field.

Many students think that because there are more courses to choose from, a large college offers greater options for undecided students. If you're undecided, the best college is one that has core requirements or distribution requirements that ensure you'll be able to explore new areas and fields.

Also, look for colleges with the strongest academic advising and career counseling programs, regardless of their size. Good advising can help you choose an academic and career path you'll enjoy rather than one you think you might like right now.

Myth #9 — The quality of the academic program in which I'm interested is the most important characteristic of a college.

About two out of every five students change their major fields of interest before they actually enroll in college, and about one out of two changes the major field once enrolled. Look for a college that has your current field of interest but is also strong in all its areas. It's worth noting that the research on success in graduate school and in employment after college suggests that the best way to master a major field is a combination of learning theory and active, hands-on-learning by doing. What's more valuable is having the opportunity to do research on your own or to work side by side with a professor on a project rather than simply taking more courses in the field.

Myth #10 — The best time to visit colleges is after you've been admitted.

Many students have fallen for this myth only to find that none of the colleges to which they were admitted felt right when they visited. If possible, visit before you apply and again after you've been admitted. If you can visit only once, make it before you apply.

Myth #11 — College is for only four years.

This is wrong on two fronts: First, you can't trade in your degree for another one if you didn't go to the best college for you the first time. Your college is with you for life. Second, only about one out of five students completes college in four years. Only two out of five students complete college in six years. If you plan to be out of college in four years, learn what each college's four-year graduation rate is.

Myth #12 — Your life will be ruined if you don't get admitted to your first-choice college.

Thousands of students each year don't get admitted to their first-choice college and most are happy, healthy individuals today. Yes, rejection is hard on your ego, but you won't be alone. The vast majority of students who settle for their second choice end up happy at that institution.

Myth #13 — You have to take only the minimum college prep courses to get into college.

Technically, this is true. In reality, it is not. The more mathematics, science, and languages you take, the better your chances are for getting into a good four-year college, and the better your chances of success once you get there.

Myth #14 — You'll have a better chance of getting into graduate school if you go to a university that offers these graduate programs.

Many students and parents mistakenly think that attending a university with a law school, medical school, or graduate school guarantees admissions into that program at graduation. Very few universities give their students special preference for graduate study, and those that do reserve it for only the very best students. Many small colleges and universities have excellent records in placing students in professional schools and graduate programs. The key to admission is succeeding in a strong major program at a challenging college, not where you go. Regardless of where you attend, there are no guarantees.

Myth #15 — Liberal arts colleges don't have good science programs.

The "liberal" in liberal arts means "broadening" and "freeing" – as in freeing one's mind from narrow thinking. The term "liberal arts" is a shortened version of the full title: liberal arts and sciences. Most liberal arts colleges have been emphasizing science for all students for a century or more. Since the best way to learn science is by doing science, small colleges with small classes and fewer students in the laboratories often have an advantage. Far more physicians and PhDs have earned their undergraduate degrees from small liberal arts colleges than from large universities.

Myth #16 — Residence halls are simply places where you sleep.

Living at home while attending college is a good option for many students, but residential life can add a great deal to your college experience. At residential colleges, the staff takes advantage of the 24-hour learning experience. Many colleges and universities have regular activities in the residence halls, ranging from film festivals to Super Bowl parties. The famous college tradition, the late-night "bull session," can cover academic courses to personal beliefs. Attending college is a unique time in your life, and living on campus may help you blend your academic, social, personal, and recreational activities.

Myth #17 — Large universities have greater diversity.

This is true if diversity simply means having greater numbers of African Americans, Hispanic Americans, Asian Americans, Native Americans, and international students. Unfortunately, the size and nature of a large university often mean that there is little interaction among those various ethnic and racial groups. At large universities, groups of students can often choose to live and learn together and separately from other students. At small schools, however, the student population is small enough that you'll get to know nearly everyone. If the value of diversity is to learn to understand and appreciate other cultures and groups, then small colleges often offer greater diversity.

Myth #18 — Colleges are concerned only with my intellectual and academic development.

Many colleges and smaller universities pride themselves on their ability to “develop the whole person.” Some of this personal development comes from requiring a broad-based general education that contributes to your understanding of the world and our society. Plus, personal growth takes place in the residence halls, where you learn things like tolerance and ways to get along with different kinds of people.

Myth #19 — Only the very best students receive financial aid from colleges.

If you’re admitted and have financial need, colleges generally want to make it possible for you to attend. In fact, the greatest proportion of financial assistance at private colleges tends to go to students in the middle of the class. High-ability students, or students with special talents, may receive “merit-based” scholarships.

Myth #20 — The federal government provides most of the financial aid.

Government grants comprise only a moderate proportion of the financial aid available. In fact, the government continually reduces the amount of grant money (money that does not need to be paid back). Private colleges supply the largest portion of financial aid.

Myth #21 — Even if I get financial aid, I’ll end up with large loans to repay when I graduate.

To see that you don’t have too much debt at graduation, most colleges allow you to borrow only a reasonable amount. The maximum amounts that dependent, undergraduate students may borrow in combined subsidized and unsubsidized Direct loans are:

- \$5,500 per year for first-year
- \$6,500 per year for second-year
- \$7,500 third, fourth, and fifth years

Depending on the loan, you’ll usually have 10 years to repay and won’t start the repayment until after you graduate.

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