How to: Go to College

Applying to college for the first time? Started college, took a break, and now going back? Either way, deciding to go to college is a big decision and requires lots of planning may also yield a lot of questions as you go through the process. This guide is designed to help you find resources as you navigate this exciting next step.



Step 1: What are your goals?

The first question to ask yourself when considering college is - What are you hoping to get out of college? While college is a great option for furthering your education and career, depending on your personal goals, alternative options such as trade school or certification programs might be a better fit. Once you assess your goals, then you should start thinking about what type of college degree are you looking to earn. Initially, you can pursue an Associate's degree or a Bachelor's degree. Once a bachelor's degree is earner, more advanced degrees can be pursued.

Types of College Degrees

Undergraduate Degrees

Associate's Degree
- Typically earned in 2 years
- 60 semester college credits

Bachelor's Degree
- Typically earned in 4 years
- 120 semester college credits

Graduate Degrees

Doctoral Degree
- Usually 5-6 years to complete
- Credit requirements vary

Professional Degree
- E.g. Juris Doctor (J.D.)
- Requirements vary

Master's Degree
- Completion time varies
- Semester credit requirements vary from 30-60 hours

Depending on what your end career goal is, your total education requirements may vary. For example, if your goal is to be a lawyer, you will first need to complete a bachelor's degree. Once that is completed, you will need to earn a Juris Doctor degree.

Step 2: Where will you go?

Once you have narrowed down your focus of degree programs, it is time to begin researching institutions. Many factors can influence your decision to apply to and attend a particular school. A couple of questions you may ask yourself to help narrow your choices:

- Are you planning on staying local or are you willing to relocate for school?
- What type of college/university would you like to attend? (Public, private, community, etc.)
- Is your degree program offered at the schools you are interested in?
- What is the acceptance rate of the university?
- What requirements does the school have? GPA, SAT, ACT, etc.

Depending on your specific circumstances, there may be other factors that will influence your decision on where to attend. Some schools have a religious focus, whereas others are single-sex colleges. HBCUs or Historically Black Universities and Colleges were founded specifically to create a educational environment specifically for black-identifying students. Some schools are online only. Be sure to thoroughly research every school you are interested in attending.

Types of Colleges and Universities

Two-Year Colleges

- Also referred to as Junior or Community College
- Cost to Attend: $
- Ex: San Antonio Collge

Public 4-Year University or College

- Sometimes called “state schools”
- Funded by local and state government
- Cost to Attend: $$
- Ex: University of Texas

Private 4-Year University or College

- Funded privately
- More financial aid may be available
- Cost to attend: $$$
- EX: St. Mary’s University

Step 3: What is your budget?

This step may actually come first, or second, depending on your personal circumstances, but figuring out the financial challenges and barriers when attending college is a critical part of planning your college experience. Once you figure out what you are able and willing to spend on your college career, you may decide to reconsider what schools you are going to apply for. There are multiple costs associated with college that you should keep in mind as you work on your budget.

College Costs

- Tuition and Fees
- Room and Board
- Books and Supplies
- Transportation Costs
- Technology
- Club Fees

Step 4: Completing your Applications

After you have narrowed down your focus and know what schools align best with your budget and educational needs, you can begin the application process. The Common App is a website which allows you to apply to multiple schools through one application. Browse the Common App website to ensure the schools you are interested in are included on their website. If you are only applying to schools in Texas, you can fill out the ApplyTexas application, which allows you to apply to any public or community college in Texas, as well as many private universities. Some schools, however, have a separate application process so be sure to review their application requirements. Generally speaking, most college applications will ask for the same information, however the requirements may vary from school to school. You should be prepared to share the following information in your application.

- Personal information
- High school information
- Extracurricular information
- Test Information (such as ACT, SAT, etc.)
- Previous college credit earned

Step 5: Applying for Financial Aid

Another application you will need to complete is your Free Application for Federal Student Aid, or the FAFSA®. Completing this application will allow you to see what types of financial aid you are eligible for based on your situation. Be sure to review the FAFSA 101® guide on the Alumni resource page for more guidance as you complete your application.

Step 6: Making Your Decision

Once the school you have applied to make their admission decision, you will be notified and if accepted, there will be a deadline to make your decision. Oftentimes, when the admission decision is made, the financial aid that is available to you will be offered as well. If not, contact the school's financial aid office to ensure you have the correct information.

Making the decision to continue your education and invest financially in pursuing a degree can be challenging. If you are having trouble making a decision, schedule a tour to visit the campus if possible to help you make your decision. You could also meet with the admissions office to ask additional questions if needed. Lastly, the CAST Alumni Network is here to support you through this exciting time. You can always email alumni@castschools.com if you need additional support.