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In This Issue

19 The Final College Decision:
got acceptance letters? now what?

How to Make the Final College Decision

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By the time April rolls around, you will have received a few important emails from colleges that you've applied to. Maybe you are excited that you got into Stanford. Or you are wondering why you were wait-listed to the University of Washington. In the next few weeks, you'll be making one of the most important decisions: where should I spend the next four years of my life?

How do you make this important decision? Your teachers, counselors and family members have been advising you to find a school that fits your needs. Now, you have to make the final decision. This is easier said than done: you have only the few weeks in April to finalize this decision. Should you go online and ask for help? Do you go to every open house that you are invited to? Or, do you just sleep on it, hoping one morning, you will wake up knowing what school is best for you.

This is a big decision, but from my years of experience, you will be happy with your final choice after thoughtful consideration and weighing your options. Here are some tips to help you make the right decision before the May 1st deadline:

- **Read the fine print.** Skip the glossy brochures, stickers and posters. The University of Oregon looks very similar to Oregon State when you look at these glossy marketing materials. Instead, focus on the details of each campus and ask yourself questions in the following areas:

1. Academics: Do they have the courses of study that I want? If I change my mind, are there other majors or academic departments that are of interest to me? You can get answers to these questions by browsing course information online. Also, go directly to the department that you are interested in for detailed information about research opportunities, specific course offerings and unique academic programs.

2 Social/Extra-Curricular: Do they have the social life I want? How far do I want to be from home? Will I have fun on the weekends? Reading the campus paper, asking recent alumni about their experiences or talking to students when you are on campus. Tour guides are trained to give you generic answers, so try to find friendly students who can give you the nitty-gritty.

3. Finances: Can my parents and I make the investment? Will my financial aid/scholarship award change in the four years that I'm there? Make an appointment with a financial aid officer to ask these detailed questions. Remember, college is a four year investment.

- **Visit your top three campuses if you can.** You only have a short period of time, so you can't visit all your campuses. Trying to visit the University of Colorado and Columbia University in New York City in one week is not only expensive, but tiring! So prioritize your campus visits, focusing on the Spring Open houses for accepted students. If you can't visit on that day, try to visit during the week.

On the other hand, try not to miss any classes! Your admission is contingent that you pass all your senior classes. Visit a campus when classes are in session, but there are colleges that will have special tours on the weekend. If you can, bring an adult that you trust to campus. This person can help you pay attention to aspects of



campus life that you might miss. When you are on campus, ask the following questions to get a true flavor of the campus community.

1. What is the academic culture like? Where will I study? Can I handle the work? Do students like their teachers? Are professors happy to teach you?

2. Will I enjoy campus life? What student groups will I join? Where will I find friends? Where will I live?

3. If I need advice, who will help me? How accessible are professors, advisors, health professionals and financial aid officers?

- **If you can't visit, get in touch with faculty, current students and alumni.**

This won't replace the feeling you get when you visit campus, but it will help you get more information that college guidebooks and websites can't provide. Usually they will be able to answer your questions via e-mail or on the phone.

- **Get valuable feedback from people you trust.** One day you may prefer Reed College. The next day, Whitman College is on the top of your list. This can be common, so get an outside point of view to gain perspective. Ask your confidants why they think a certain college is the best choice for you. Remember to listen to their advice, but try not to be persuaded by it. You are the one in the driver's seat.

Remember intuition is often our best guide, so pay attention to that gut feeling. Trust yourself. In the end there is no such thing as the wrong choice. Like any experience, college is what you make of it. Take advantage of opportunities, choose challenging courses, become involved in your interests, and your decision will have been the right one. The next four years are going to be a very exciting time- where you'll make lifelong connections and friends. Make the most of it!

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