

RETURNING TO SCHOOL:

A Quick Guide to Comparing Colleges

Once you're sure about taking the next step and returning to school to complete your bachelor's degree or enter graduate school, selecting the right school takes some time and effort. It's such a big investment of money, time and energy that you want to make sure that you choose the college that's right for you. There's a lot to consider when choosing a school, and it can be an overwhelming task if you don't know what you're looking for.

You should begin by making a list of the criteria that are most important to you. Here are some factors and questions to consider in your research:

Cost to Attend and Time to Complete the Degree:

When comparing the cost of tuition between colleges, it is more useful to compare the total cost to complete the degree than the individual per credit cost. The total cost takes into consideration the total number of credits needed to complete the degree. Be sure to take into account any fees or other charges such as books, technology fees, or parking that might be assessed over and above the cost of tuition, and don't forget to factor in future annual tuition increases. Also investigate whether the college offers financial aid and if your company or organization has a tuition reimbursement program.

Flexibility of Class Schedules and Times:

Consider how you will best balance going to school with your other obligations. Are classes offered during evenings or weekends to accommodate your work schedule? Is it possible to temporarily "stop out" of your degree program if you need to take a semester off for personal or professional reasons, or does the program follow a more rigid cohort model and schedule?

Convenience of Location:

How easy is it for you to get to campus? Are classes offered close to your work location or home? Does the college offer complimentary public transportation to students?

Availability of Online Learning Options:

Consider what kind of learning fits you best and research your options. Are courses offered in an online format? Can you choose to take classes online or in a traditional classroom depending on your schedule and learning style? If you're interested in an online program, be sure to investigate the quality of the online learning experience offered by the college to ensure it mirrors the quality of their traditional classroom programs.

Credit Transfer or Credit for Prior Work Experience:

Policies regarding transfer credits and the availability of credit for prior work experience vary widely between colleges. You'll need to meet with admissions counselors and/or academic advisors to see if you qualify.

Accreditation of the Degree Program:

Verify the program's accreditation. The most recognized and accepted type of accreditation in the United States is regional accreditation, such as the Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools. It is important, however, to determine the type of accreditation needed for your chosen field of study.

Reputation of the College and Program:

Another way to measure the quality of a program or college is to talk to other people. Don't rely only on what you see on a college's website or in their marketing materials. Meet and talk with graduates and current students. If you don't know any, an admissions counselor should be able to provide you with names of people who you might contact. Talk with your professional colleagues and your organization's HR department.

Quality of the Faculty and Classroom Experience:

Review the qualifications and experience of the faculty members who teach in your desired field. Pay attention to the faculty to student ratio. Better yet, arrange to visit a classroom or meet in person with a lead faculty member or department chair.

Availability of Specializations or Concentrations:

Does the curriculum offer the flexibility to pursue subjects and research topics that interest you? Can you customize your degree to meet your professional goals? Will you be able to immediately apply what you're learning in the classroom to your job?

Job Placements and Achievements of Graduates:

If possible, look for the placement rates of graduates of the program in which you're interested. In the absence of statistical results, review testimonials and other anecdotal evidence that might demonstrate the success of graduates.

Admission Requirements:

Most colleges have similar admission requirements as far as the paperwork required, but be sure you know exactly what each school requires in terms of which tests you may need to take, GPA requirements, required prerequisite courses, admission and financial aid deadlines, essay and/or resume requirements, and the number of letters of recommendation you need.

What now?

Begin your research by visiting college websites. Narrow your choice to just a few schools and then make contact with the admissions counselors responsible for your academic program. If possible, visit the campus and meet with the counselor in person. Ask a lot of questions. Choosing the right school takes time and energy, but the effort you make before making your final decision will increase your chances of finding the right match for your personal and professional requirements.



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