



College Planning Essentials

**12 Insights for Finding the
Right Academic, Financial and Social Fit**

Peachtree College Planning.com

Intro

The college search process is, itself, a learning experience. By the time it's finally completed, though, the biggest lessons may have come from the flawed assumptions, missed opportunities, and wheel-spinning along the way.

Of course, students and families who are armed with some of those insights up front can zero in on the right choices a lot more efficiently. Which is why the team at Peachtree College Planning have prepared this e-book for you.

Also keep in mind that college costs will be one of your largest expenses on your way to retirement. Carefully planning for college and retirement together can be the smart path to long-term financial health.

The new insights you gain here may stir up a new set of questions. That's okay. Bring them to one of our **public information sessions**, or a **private initial consultation**. There's no cost, and no obligation, for attending either, of course.

Curious about how professional college planners can help you find the right schools without going broke? Call **404-477-1770** or go to **PeachtreeCollegePlanning.com** to find out.

COLLEGE PLANNING ESSENTIALS

PART ONE



Finding the Right **Academic** Fit

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In the long run, career choice is more important than college choice. **Maybe** you should let the first one guide the second one.



Students commonly pick a school because it offers their major. Yet often that major turns out to be a passing interest. But with assessment tests like the *Strength Finder Profile*, a high schooler can get an insightful look into their own natural strengths. Those in turn will point to a handful of possible career pathways.

Continue the process to understand the skills, preparation, salaries and opportunities associated with those career directions.

You may need help interpreting profile results and applying them to a college search. But shouldn't you know where you're headed before you start your journey?

Every school has preferences for certain types of students. **Those** who fit the bill get fast-tracked for admittance and a great offer.



It happens all the time.

A student doesn't think they have the grades to get into their top-pick college. But they get accepted anyway, with a sweet financial aid package to boot.

To achieve student-body balance, a college might look for kids from certain geographic areas, or those with certain talents. They could be aiming for more ethnic diversity, or to beef up certain academic majors. Maybe they have too many girls and not enough guys.

Examining a school's recent admittance trends can be revealing and helpful, if you know where to look for them.

After you apply, colleges carefully assess you. **Before** you apply, you should dig deeper to assess them.



Thinking of graduating in four years? Check out your target school's four-year graduation rate. A 95% rate says something about a school. A 45% rate says something else.

Look into online resources like the *National Center for Educational Statistics* and the *College Navigator* to learn all kinds of things about any school. For example, what percentage of students get financial aid, or graduate with debt?

Wouldn't that helpful info take your college search to a whole new level? You just might reject some schools before they decide whether to reject you.

Wouldn't it be great to get into that 'reach' school, even though it's a long shot? **Be** careful what you wish for.



Sure, it would be an achievement to get accepted. But it might be tougher to achieve academic success there. You're smart, but if most of the other kids are smarter, the struggle to keep up might be more stress than you need.

Plus if you're in the bottom 25% grade-wise, you can say goodbye to those merit scholarships you were counting on.

Of course if you're pumped to take on the challenge and pay full price, go for it! First, though, get some direction on where you have the best chance of succeeding.



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PART TWO

Finding the Right **Financial** Fit

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Some families think they make too much money to qualify for financial aid. **So** they don't even apply. **Big** mistake.



Income is just one of many factors schools use to determine aid. There are other buckets of money available, and a professional college planner can help you find them.

The right income planning and tax strategies could recapture some or all college costs. In many cases, the higher the income, the higher the benefit.

Repositioning your assets, or tapping them in the right sequence, can make a big difference. Start by finding out how your current financial position might be helping or hindering your chance of taking advantage of these opportunities.

Does a school's 'sticker price' make your eyes bulge? **Don't** cross it off your list just yet. It may end up being within reach.



▶ **Don't get hung up on** published tuition costs. But understand how schools will view your financial profile from your EFC. EFC stands for *Expected Financial Contribution*, and it should be your starting point for the entire college process.

The formula is, total Cost of Attendance (COA), minus your EFC, equals the amount of financial aid you need. True, the aid that a school offers might not be enough. But then again, you might be delightfully surprised.

Be careful, though: mistakes on your EFC form could lead to a bigger financial burden than you deserve.

So you think their grades are too low to get any financial or merit aid? **First**, cast a wider net. Second, fill out a form.



With over 4,000 colleges in the U.S., there's a fit for every student. Dig around, and at least a few will pay your child something to attend. Lots of lesser-known schools still offer a solid education. And unless you're heading for the ivy leagues, the college name on the diploma isn't going to matter much once the student is in the workforce.

The silliest mistake we see are families not bothering to fill out a *Free Application for Federal Student Aid*. FAFSA opens up all kinds of opportunities for college financial help, none of which are linked to academic performance.



At some of the country's top schools, the smartest kids enjoy the most financial aid, right?
You would think.



▶ **At almost 100 'need only' colleges**, it's not merit but rather family financial need that attracts aid. If the student is just sharp enough to get into a top school, they just might cover everything the family can't afford.

For example, at Emory, the *only* people who get a break on tuition are those who can't afford Duke.

Which naturally gives hope to students whose dream school costs too much. Look into the financial aid policies of some of your top college picks, including how much of their aid is in loans vs. free money.

Disappointed at the financial aid package that a school is offering? **Surprisingly**, they may be willing to negotiate.



Your appeal may or may not be successful, but heck, it's sure worth a try.

Negotiation factors may include special circumstances, like a disability or high medical expenses. But more commonly, families simply claim that their financial 'need' isn't being met, or their student's academic worth isn't being rewarded.

You could also mention the juicier aid package that's being offered elsewhere; if the school really wants that student, they might juice up their own offer.

An advisor can help you think like admission officers think, for a more successful negotiation.



COLLEGE PLANNING ESSENTIALS

PART THREE



Finding the Right Social Fit

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The right social fit is just as much of a factor in college success as the right academic fit. 33% of all students transfer and take longer than 4 years to graduate.



▶ **For a balanced approach** to college selection, take wider view of what each school has to offer.

Every college features a wealth of info on its website. Look closer. Make lists. Compare. What resonates with you, when schools talk about their athletics, Greek life, worship services, cultural activities, diversity, organizations, and social events?

Campus life offers all kinds of opportunities to explore new directions and connect with like-minded people. In fact, years from now, you're more likely to reflect fondly on the extracurriculars than on the term papers.

Anyone who enrolls at a school without visiting it at least once may be in for some unexpected surprises.



▶ **Are the dorm rooms** cramped and shabby? Does the school have a modern cafeteria and gym? Is there a comfortable, friendly vibe on campus? You won't know unless you go. And go when school is in session.

Students transfer, or lose momentum completely, when their chosen school wasn't quite what they expected. The pace might be too fast, or the college too small. Or it may be a feeling of just not fitting in. Hmm.

Every college looks good on their website. But you're planning to spend four years of your life on their campus, not on their website. So go play student for a day.

So you've made plans to visit a school? Good. **Be** sure to step off campus and explore the local environment too.



▶ **Are your target schools** in cities, suburbs, or rural communities? Each will offer a vastly different life experience. Think: do you want an environment that's similar, or different, than where you live now?

A rural campus can seem safe, remote and self-enclosed. Busy urban campuses can be overwhelming and exciting at the same time. Also, think hard about how you'll be affected by the weather, and the distance from home.

Do you know the *20 Points of Social Fit*? A good college planner can help you drill down to what's truly important, so you'll make a choice you won't regret.

So what do you think? Hopefully the insights here have broadened your approach to what's possible, and what's needed to get there. But such a brief introduction of course can only be a starting point.

Close

If you decide to go it alone with college planning, you might find some genuinely helpful tips on the **[Peachtree College Planning blog](#)**.

Or, if you're wondering how a professional Atlanta-based team can help with college planning, including how it ties in with retirement planning, schedule **[a free initial consult call](#)**. Get your questions answered. Get some helpful ideas. Learn about various consulting packages and their costs.

You can also stop by for our informative presentations on college planning at local high schools. We'd love to see you there. **[Find out more](#)**.

However you get there, every student deserves to find the perfect academic, financial and social college fit. After all, it's the springboard to their future.



404-477-1770

3500 Piedmont Road, Suite 225, Atlanta, Ga 30305

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