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Learning

from the December 15, 2005 edition

College choices: a deeper look

By **Stacy A. Teicher** | *Staff writer of The Christian Science Monitor*

The search for college should be about "the right fit," experts say. For some, that might simply be a matter of where the price is right, or which campus environment feels comfortable. But there's always that central question: How much are the students learning?

For families in the throes of college applications or planning ahead for next year's campus visits, here are four tips from experts for looking beyond popular college rankings in the search for a good education.

Tip No. 1: Build your own college ranking system.

Debra Stuart has 30-plus years of experience at universities, and she has a long title to prove it: vice chancellor for

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administration with the Oklahoma State Regents for Higher Education. So she was a well-informed parent when it came time for her and her husband to help their daughter look at colleges a few years ago.

First they thought about the size of school their daughter wanted, the majors that most interested her, and the places she'd like to live.

Then they mined various guidebooks for basic information - like whether a school or a particular program was accredited. They also took a look at the ubiquitous US News & World Report's annual college issue. But because rankings are subjective, the family picked them apart and decided which factors they wanted to weight more heavily.

" 'Good,' in our mind, was that they had good graduation rates [and] a good student-faculty ratio," Ms. Stuart says, "because these were things that we knew [would help] our daughter and her learning style."

They visited campuses - armed with their own rankings and a quiver of questions.

Tip No. 2: Focus on the first year.

Find out how a college determines what classes freshmen should take.



OK CAMPUS: A student passes the Seed Sower statue at the University of Oklahoma. Selecting a school comes down to 'a feeling,' some say.

JEFFREY HADERTHAUER/
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"Students come with all sorts of abilities, and part of what makes or breaks a student is their experience in their first year," Stuart says. "Do they have a placement test for math ... and how successful is that?"

Some colleges have semester- or year-long seminars that group freshmen together to help them adjust to campus life. Others work to make sure students have enough contact with faculty so that they don't feel like a number. The Policy Center on the First Year of College offers information about the most effective initiatives ([see below](#)).

Tip No. 3: Gauge the engagement.

"Research shows that if students engage in certain activities, they're likely to learn more than if they don't," says Trudy Banta, vice chancellor for planning and institutional improvement at Indiana University-Purdue University in Indianapolis. The long list includes: "things like participating in faculty research; study abroad;... service learning; contact with faculty outside the classroom - [especially] talking about intellectual matters; group work with peers; and how much they study."


It's easier to find this data if the school participates in the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE). More than 900 colleges have done so over the past six years, but it's up to the schools to decide if they want to release their results. Ms. Banta believes most schools would make results available if prospective students requested it. You can then compare their data with benchmarks on the NSSE website.

Even without NSSE results to pore over, you can ask similar

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questions: How much help is there for people with weak skills in certain subjects? What kind of living- learning centers are on campus - a language-immersion house? A dorm centered on women in the sciences? What are the results of student- and alumni-satisfaction surveys?

The admissions office is a good first stop for such questions. But for more details on quality issues, one underutilized resource is a school's institutional research office.

Tip No. 4: Probe preferred majors.

Some majors are reviewed by outside accrediting boards, so that's a good place to look for ratings, Stuart suggests. And you can ask for pass rates on external exams - whether it's LSATs for potential law students or licensing tests for accountants.

Prospective students and their parents should also ask about other forms of "outcomes assessment," Banta says. More schools are starting to help professors and departments define learning goals and measure students' achievements in classes over time. This scrutiny may reveal that students aren't getting enough chances to practice a key skill, such as public speaking, and then the curriculum can be adjusted accordingly.

Another good question to ask is whether students will have a "capstone" experience in the major, and whether they've published student papers, written either on their own or with faculty.

After Stuart's daughter looked far and wide for a school with a good film and video major, she ended up choosing the University of Oklahoma in her own backyard - to everyone's surprise. When she put aside her preconceptions and went on campus, she liked the diversity of students and activities, her mother says. Now she's a junior, and film and video have taken a back seat to her interest in advertising.

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Do as much research as you can, Stuart says, but when it's time to make a choice, "it comes down to a feeling."

Resources to help you select

Policy Center on the First Year of College

Go to www.brevard.edu/fyc or call the center on the campus of Brevard College in North Carolina at (828) 966-5401.

The center publishes research and a list of institutions of various types and sizes that exemplify effective initiatives focused on first-year students.

National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE)

Go to www.nsse.iub.edu or call the Center for Postsecondary Research at Indiana University in Bloomington at (812) 856-5824.

On the website, you can click on a list of institutions that participate in this measure of factors that influence college students' learning and personal development.

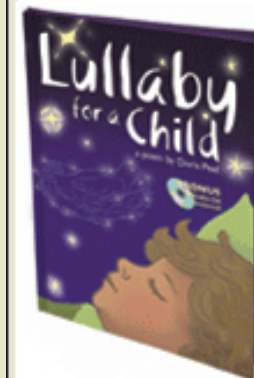
You can also click on a link to NSSE's pocket guide, "College: What you need to know before you go." (www.nsse.iub.edu/html/pocket_guide_intro.htm).

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