

OVER **600** TIPS, TECHNIQUES,
AND STRATEGIES REVEALED

The Secrets of **PICKING A COLLEGE** (and Getting In!)

Lynn F. Jacobs · Jeremy S. Hyman
Jeffrey Durso-Finley · Jonah T. Hyman



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ADVANCE PRAISE FOR *THE SECRETS OF PICKING A COLLEGE (AND GETTING IN!)*

“The college application process can seem daunting, but this book breaks the process down into logical, manageable steps. Everyone loves a secret. These are secrets you can use, share with your best friends, and pass along to your younger brother or sister. There are over 600 tips in this book. Here’s one more: Read the book. It should be your first step on the path to college.”

—**Marjorie Savage, Parent Program Director, University of Minnesota and author, *You’re on Your Own (But I’m Here If You Need Me): Mentoring Your Child During the College Years***

“College advice books tend to come in several forms: some are light and breezy to read, but ultimately shallow and conventional in their thinking. Others have great insight, but it is often encased in leaden, academic prose. The authors of this book have skillfully combined the best of both worlds. This book is easy to read, clearly organized, and very specific in its advice. It is also extremely thoughtful in how it treats each step of the admission process. I plan to use it with my own students.”

—**Jon Reider, Director of College Counseling, San Francisco University High School; former Senior Admission Officer, Stanford University; and co-author of *Admission Matters: What Students and Parents Need to Know about Getting Into College***

“*The Secrets of Picking a College* takes the clutter away from the college process, breaking down the stages into bite sized chunks. The questions posed to the students throughout the book really drill down to the nuanced questions students should ask themselves as they think about where they want to spend the next four years as a student and a lifetime as an alum. Sharing with students and families an actual reader rating card that admissions officers use to evaluate each component of the

application is worth its weight in gold! A valuable resource for students, parents and counselors!"

—**Beth Ann Burkmar, Associate Director of College Counseling, The Hun School of Princeton, Princeton, NJ; former Regional Director of Admissions, University of Pennsylvania; and former Admissions Counselor, Drexel University**

"Informative, current and logical, *The Secrets of Picking a College* is full of important information on a wide variety of topics, yet is concise and easy to understand. Individual topics are covered in a detailed and helpful manner. It will make you think about the college search process in a more thorough and wide-ranging way. I wish every family I work with would get a copy."

—**Alyssa O'Brien, Director of College Guidance, Lawrence Woodmere Academy, Woodmere, NY and former Admissions Reader, Northeastern University**

"If you read one book on the college process—this is the one you want. Straightforward, spot-on advice to streamline the college exploration and admission process, improve outcomes, and reduce stress for students and families. Professional insights on what really happens in the college admission world presented in a readable format students can put into practice immediately."

—**Barbara T. Conner, Director of College Counseling, Foxcroft School, Middleburg, VA, and Creator of #FiveFirstChoiceColleges**

"*The Secrets of Picking a College* captures the essence of the process and provides excellent tips and suggestions to students (and parents!) who are just beginning this journey. Having two sons who went through this process a few years ago, I can say that it would have been helpful to them to have a similar "Guide" handy since they were eager to try to figure it all out themselves."

—**Diane Freytag, Director of Counseling and Advising, The Overlake School, Redmond, WA**

"It would take hours, even weeks, to gain the knowledge on one's own that is so accessibly offered in this guide. The authors of this book did

their audience a huge favor by doing a lot of the hardcore research and web searching that has taken me over a decade to acquire as a full-time college counselor. The websites offered here are particularly impressive, and the advice is sound, easy to grasp, and invaluable for any student and family searching for the right fit.”

—**Kelly B. Richards, Director of College Counseling, St. George’s School, Providence, RI**

“A guide for *all* college-bound students packed with practical pointers and compiled specifically for students. *The Secrets of Picking a College* is like having a college coach by your side. Filled with advice from college professionals – including admissions officers – this book is easily accessible and is a must-read.”

—**Alicia J. Linsey, Counselor, Lexington High School
Lexington, MA, and founder and independent counselor, The Academic Advancement Group**

“*The Secrets of Picking a College (and Getting In!)* does a fantastic job of capturing the ‘moving target’ of college admissions. Its easy-to-follow format, complete with web links for digging deeper and finding the latest updates, make it a *must-have* for high school students. It not only answers standard college related questions, but also answers important questions that students may not otherwise know that they should ask.”

—**Sandy Aprahamian, Independent Educational Consultant,
EDNavigators LLC**

“*The Secrets of Picking a College* will not be a secret for long. This virtual encyclopedia of the college admissions journey will become the ‘go to’ resource for parents and students alike. While this book describes every aspect and nuance of the college search (including mastering a calculator!), it presents the treasure trove of material in easy-to-read, delineated sections. *The Secrets of Picking a College* delivers the most up-to-date, practical compendium available today of the ever-evolving landscape of college admissions.”

—**Franca Rawitz, Independent College Counselor & Founder,
ReadySetCollegeNYC**

“The strategies, tips and techniques suggested in this exemplary book include information which I have gleaned through years of experience, seminars and conferences. Families who read every word, or even flip through pages and skim chapters at different times throughout the college application and transition process will find illumination on this complex, holistic process.”

—**Laura O’Brien Gatzionis, Educational Advisory Services,
Athens, Greece**

“These 600+ tips and strategies are clear, easy-to-understand and will give students insights into the often complicated college admissions process. Choosing a college list, if done correctly, can be a fun journey of self-exploration and growth. Students and their families can use this book as a resource to maximize positive outcomes and increase college acceptances.”

—**Jill P. Madenberg, Independent Educational Consultant and
Certified High School Guidance Counselor**

“Hundreds of tips with catchy headings (“Best-Kept Secret,” “Reality Check,” “Epic Fail!”) jump off the pages, making it simple for even the busiest (or *laziest!*) teenagers to find them. Parents, too, will appreciate the ease of honing in on concise explanations, suggestions ... and warnings.”

—**Sally Rubenstone, Senior Advisor, College Confidential**

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 **Professors' Guide™** 
Series Book

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Jonah T. Hyman is a beginning senior at Haas Hall Academy, a math and science charter school in Fayetteville, Arkansas. His interests include transportation engineering, maps, number theory, game shows, as well as all things patterned. Jonah scored triple-800s on the SAT (he shares his secrets in this book) and is currently in the throes of the college-picking—and, hopefully, getting-in—process.

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TO YOU—THE FUTURE COLLEGE STUDENT

College.

For some students it's something to look forward to: a chance to get away from home, to study something new, to make new friends, and, in the end, get that much-treasured college degree. For other students it's a source of worry: What will it be like? How will I fit in? Will I be able to do the work?

And then there's the college-application process. For virtually everybody starting the (in many cases) two-year process it seems like a lot. So many choices, so many things to do, so hard to get in, so little information about what colleges are looking for, so many ways to mess up. And, if that weren't enough, it all seems so much out of your control. How can you really know what any of the schools are like and whether you'd fit in? How can you really improve any of your standardized test scores or write an application that'll distinguish you from the thousands of other students wanting to go to that school? How will you know what to say about yourself on the personal statement or to some nameless interviewer trying to size you up? Finally, how will you ever round up enough money to pay for college at all? The thoughts swirl and pretty soon you're feeling confused and in many cases even overwhelmed by it all.

It doesn't have to be this way. Imagine there were a book that cast light on the process: that showed you all the different stages of the college-application process and told you what to do at each stage to maximize your chances of getting in to the very best colleges—the ones right for you.

This is that book—a book that covers all the major “moments” of the college-application process in a series of over 600 tips, techniques, and strategies that show you just what to do at each stage of the process. You'll first learn about the different kinds of

colleges and how to locate the type that best fits your intellectual and social personality. Then, you'll learn how to use various resources to compose your initial list: general-purpose and college-specific websites, your college counselor, college nights, and visits by college reps, financial aid and scholarship tools—you'll learn how all of these can be used to your best advantage. Next, you'll find out all you need to know (and then some) about the all-important college tour: when to visit and what to do on your visit; what questions to ask on your visit and whom to ask them of; whether to attend a class, visit a dorm, or have an interview; and finally, how to evaluate and compare the colleges you've visited.

From there, it's on to the standardized tests: you know, the dreaded ACT and SAT tests—including the newly revised 2016 SAT. There'll be specific and detailed tips for each section of each of the tests—concrete things you can do before, during, and after the test to maximize your scores. Following that, we give you our best tips and strategies for putting together your applications: how best to do the personal essay on the Common App (including the newly revised 2015–2016 essay prompts); how many extracurriculars to list (and which ones colleges consider best); how to get great letters of recommendation from teachers and your counselor; how to answer those supplemental (and sometimes bizarre) questions put forth by particular schools; and, most important, how to present yourself and your achievements to best advantage. And, if that wasn't enough, there's a special piece detailing what admission officers most look for in applications.

And finally, you'll find tips for making your final choice among the (hopefully many) offers you've received for admission and aid. You'll learn things to do—and not do—in evaluating the alternatives; what to do if you've been wait-listed at a school; how to evaluate (and in some cases improve) the financial aid offer you've received; and finally, how to spot those features in the college—and in yourself—that are most likely to guarantee you a productive, and enjoyable, four or five years of college.

We've assembled a team of experts to guide you through the college application process, each of whom brings different knowledge, expertise, and experience to the book. Who better than a pair of

professors to show you •what makes one college better than another •how to evaluate the requirements, curriculum, and majors at the different colleges •what to look for when visiting a class and talking to a professor or undergraduate advisor, and, most important, •how to assess the quality of the education you're going to receive at each of the colleges? And who better than a seasoned high school counselor, previously an admissions officer for ten years at a major university, to tell you •what colleges are looking for in an application •how to construct the personal statement, extracurriculars, and supplemental questions to maximize your chances of getting in •how to approach your teachers and counselor for the best possible recommendations, and •what factors to consider in making your final choice among the (hopefully) many colleges you've gotten in to? Last but not least, who better than a high school student, who's in the very midst of applying to college and who has gotten a perfect score on every standardized test he's taken, to not only •share his tips for acing the SAT and ACTs but also to •offer suggestions on managing the stress that's an inevitable part of every college search?

And if that wasn't enough, we've added tips that we've gathered by interviewing dozens of admissions officers whom we've met as we made our own college tour; and a special appendix in which a major admissions officer reveals to his colleagues (and now, to you) the criteria his university uses in admitting students (an amazing behind-the-scenes document).

We're out to change the college application process in America: to shed light on what for many students is an opaque, unpredictable, and anxiety-provoking process, and, in so doing, to level the playing field for all of those who aspire to join the 22 million students now in college. But, more than that, we hope to offer tips, techniques, and strategies that will work for *you*—that will show you the way to take ownership of the college application process and, hopefully, to get in to all the colleges of your choice.

You can do it. We will show you how.

Lynn, Jeremy, Jill & Joseph

We'd like to hear from you! If you have a question or comment—or if you'd like to contribute a tip or share an experience for the next edition of this book—e-mail us at:

- lynn@professorsguide.com
- jeremy@professorsguide.com
- jeffrey@professorsguide.com or
- jonah@professorsguide.com.

Or, if you'd like to share a tip in real-time with the over three-million students applying to college this year, post a comment at WWW.TSOPAC.COM/TIPS or tweet it @professorsguide. Maybe someone else could benefit from your insight!

Top 10 Reasons to Read This Book

- 10. The tips are really good.** Written wholly by experts, the book provides high-value tips, techniques, and strategies for picking—and getting into—the colleges of your choice.
- 9. The book covers all the major topics.** From first thinking about college to visiting the colleges, from taking the ACT or SAT to composing your application, from figuring out the finances to making your final choice—it's all here, with insider tips for every stage of the process.
- 8. The information is quick.** Top 10 lists, Do's and Don'ts, Most-Asked FAQs, 7 Biggest Secrets, 21 Must-Ask Questions, 10-Step Plans—all the advice is bite-sized and easy-to-digest. And our *Professors' Guide* icons help you navigate your way through the book and might even provide a little entertainment along the way.
- 7. The information is up-to-date.** All the new realities of the college-application procedure are covered, including the 2016 revised SAT and the revised, 2015–2016 Common App essay prompts. And we offer hundreds of URLs—many of them little-known—that will guarantee that you'll be fully informed in real time of any changes that are occurring.
- 6. The tips are practical and specific.** No abstract theories here or general descriptions of the various stages of the process, just concrete, easy-to-follow tips that tell you exactly what to do—and not do—at every step along the way.

5. **The advice makes sense of the process.** The tips, techniques and strategies take what for most students is an inscrutable, perplexing, and in some cases, painful process and make it transparent, easy-to-understand, and (as much as is possible) rational.
4. **The book addresses the psychological dimensions.** We know that applying to college can be a roller coaster of emotions, so we offer you tips for minimizing anxiety, overcoming self-doubt, and, most of all, putting yourself forward in the best possible light.
3. **Each section of the book stands on its own.** Unlike some guides, you don't have to read this book cover to cover; you can pick it up and read at whatever stage of the process you're at.
2. **The information is not available elsewhere.** Trust us, we've read virtually every other book about picking a college, surfed every website we could get our hands on, and talked to dozens of admissions officers and professional counselors, and no one tells you the insider secrets we reveal in this book.

And the number one reason you should read this book:

1. **The tips will really maximize your chances of getting in.** The advice in this book has worked for thousands and thousands of students—and it will work for you!

The Professors' Guide™ Icons



EXTRA POINTER. An additional tip that applies to a special situation.



5-STAR TIP. A really high-value suggestion that you should be sure to use.



BEST-KEPT SECRET. One of the things no one wants you to know but will be really helpful.



REALITY CHECK. An invitation to step back and assess what's really going on.



RULE OF THUMB. A general principle that will work in most (but perhaps not all) situations.



EPIC FAIL! A giant blunder that should be avoided at all costs.



IOHO. (IN OUR HUMBLE OPINION). Our perspective on some controversial issue. Not everyone will agree.



ON THE WEB. A useful link for getting additional tips or more information on a specific subject.



BONUS TIP. For those who can't get enough, one more tip.



FLASH! Late-breaking information that you'll want to know.



1 STARTING YOUR SEARCH

Starting any big project is always intimidating. And starting the college search is particularly so, since there's so much pressure associated with the process that everyone going through it—even those with the calmest possible temperaments—is going to have periods of feeling totally stressed out. The worries are many: How do I know where to apply? Will I have good enough scores on the SAT or ACT? Are my high school grades or class rank up to snuff? Do I actually have to be interviewed? What should I write on the personal essay? Will I get in where I want to go? Will I be able to afford where I want to go? Could I be making a decision that will ruin my career possibilities after college—or even ruin my life? Do I even know what career I want to have? And how does anyone actually manage to survive applying to college, anyway?

We know that, for many, this can be a tough process. But it doesn't have to be as hard as a lot of people make it. It's a lot easier if you take it step by step. And, more important, it is a lot easier if you have clear, straightforward, and simple advice about what to do at each stage of the process—not to mention if you know some of the insider secrets. That's what we're here to give you. To get you started off on the right foot—and to help you get acquainted both with the colleges and with yourself—we start off with some basics and explain:

- ▶ The 10 questions you should ask yourself as you begin your college search
- ▶ Learning the landscape: the 6 major kinds of colleges
- ▶ The 8 things that make better schools better

10

Questions to Ask Yourself as You Begin Your College Search

Most people start their college search by looking outward: they look at websites, talk to parents, teachers, counselors—maybe even read books! But really the best way to start is by looking inward. That's because with so many colleges, which differ in so many ways, it's really important to get in touch with *your* priorities and values before you start on the path to applying to—and picking—a college.

Going to college is a huge life change and you want the college you choose to be in line with who you are and what you want out of college. So take the time to read over, and think carefully about, these questions:

1. What reasons do you have for wanting to go to college?

Although this might seem like such a no-brainer that there's no point in answering it, take some time to generate and write down all the reasons you might have for wanting to go to college. Do you want to get a world-class education? Do you want to prepare for some lucrative career? Are you looking to expand your social life and, in the best case, meet that special someone? Are you hoping to break free of your parents and develop a greater sense of independence? Do you just have no other idea of what to do with the next four or five years of your life? Whatever your reason or reasons, having a list and referring to it from time to time can help you determine more clearly what you want to get out of college and help you judge if particular colleges will really provide you with what you are looking for.

2. Do you have a single passion, or lots of broad interests? Some high school students have a particular area of study or an activity that they know is their true love and that they are absolutely certain that they want to pursue for the years to come. Been interested in climate change since you were 10? Always wanted to

study bats? Been intrigued by international relations for as long as you can remember? Then you might want to think about colleges that are specifically devoted to that pursuit or have special programs in the area. However, if you like lots of subjects or just learning for the sake of learning, then a more general college, with strengths in lots of fields, might be just what you're looking for.



REALITY CHECK. Be careful not to confuse a passion with a passing interest: there are many tales of a “passion” that faded after the first semester of college. And don’t feel bad if you don’t yet have a passion—most people in high school (and even beyond) don’t.

3. Have you had any experiences at a college (perhaps in summer programs or concurrent enrollment programs), and what did you learn from them about what you like or don’t like in a college?

Some high school students have already had some experiences in a college setting, which can provide you with a leg up in sorting out what you might want to look for when choosing a college. If you’re one of these students, ask yourself whether you liked the kinds of classes you took; whether you liked the living arrangements at that sort of college; whether you liked the kinds of students they had at that college; whether you liked being away from home; and so on. How you felt about a proto-college experience can provide you with important clues about what you might like in a real college experience.

4. Which courses in high school did you like and not like—and, most important, why? Reflecting on your educational experiences in high school can help you figure out what kind of educational experiences you want to have in college and what kinds you want to avoid. Did you like classes that were smaller and had lots of discussion or did you think larger classes where the teacher mainly lectured were more to your liking? Did you like classes that emphasized creative thinking or ones in which memorization was the main mode of study? Did you prefer classes that emphasized group

work or ones with more individual work? Thinking about what learning experiences worked best for you can provide models for what kind of instruction you'll value in a college.

5. Do you enjoy classes that challenge you intellectually, or do you prefer easier classes? Do you like to have classmates that are as smart (or smarter) than you, or do you prefer to be at the top of the class? Naturally, no one wants to attend a school where everything is over their head or everyone is smarter than he or she is, but that shouldn't be a major worry because the college-selection process usually prevents these outcomes. However, you do have some choice about whether you want to be at a place where the students are academically gifted or study really hard—and the professors gear their courses toward smart, hard-working students—or a place where students are less academically inclined and the professors lower their expectations (and their course content and assignments) accordingly. Knowing your level of comfort—or discomfort—in challenging (and, in some cases, competitive) settings can be a help in knowing what sort of college to aim for.

6. Do you prefer to have more freedom in selecting your courses, or do you like having a predetermined curriculum? While high schools tend to have fairly strict requirements and relatively few electives, colleges vary between ones with large numbers of required courses and ones with extremely few courses you have to take (some even have an “open curriculum” in which there are no requirements). Do you like the idea of having control over much of your college program or would you rather the college structure your courses for you? Would you like fixed, set-out majors or would you like the possibility of designing your own? Knowing how you like to structure your education can help you evaluate whether the requirements at the various colleges you might be considering are right for you.

7. Do you like being in a place with lots of extracurricular activities going on—and, if so, what kinds of activities might you like to engage in? If you are a person who is always going out on the town, you're not going to be happy in a town where everyone clears out on the weekends and there's nothing to do. But that same town might

be just fine for the person who just wants to hang out in the library all week long. Everyone has different kinds of interests, so consider how high a priority it is for you to attend a school with lots of social life and parties, many sporting events to watch, sports opportunities for you to participate in, a lively arts scene, an emphasis on community service or political action, a religious community that suits you, or other activities that interest you. Of course, interests can often develop or change, so consider not only what you like doing now but also what you think you might want to explore a little down the road.

8. Are you looking for a place where the student body is diverse, or would you like most of the students to be pretty much like you?

Consider the level of diversity (social, political, gender, ethnic, religious) at your current school and how you experience it: Are you in a high school with mostly the same kinds of students, and would you welcome the opportunity to interact at college with different kinds of students? Or are you in a high school with great diversity and are just fine with that. Or do your high school experiences make you realize that you'd rather be with students more like yourself? Whatever your answer is, you should take it into account when thinking about colleges: with over 4,000 choices you should be able to find one with a student body you feel comfortable in.

9. What kind of town or city do you like to live in, and where would you like it to be? Do you like the idea of life in the big city or is a rural small town more to your liking? Or perhaps life in a smaller town with easy access to the big city? Is there a particular region of the country—or a particular kind of climate—that you feel is where you'd most like to be? Keep in mind you have to live in the place for four or five years—and “living” is more than just taking courses.

10. Do you want to get away from your parents or do you want to keep one foot in the nest? Distance from home is often a major factor in selecting a college, because, many students like the idea of being able to come home for holidays and weekends. On the other hand, some students want to stay as far away from the coop as they can. Know which type you are.