

Ten Tips for the Queer College-Seeker

by Jeffrey D. Cook

College is a time of fantastic opportunity to expand your mind, discover new interests, and of course, have fun and build lifelong friendships. The decisions you make now regarding college are some of the most important ones of your life.

As a lesbian, gay, bi, trans, queer, or questioning student, the search for a college can present even more issues and considerations than those confronting your straight classmates. You may be one of the many queer youth who have experienced tremendous intolerance or even violence during high school, perhaps without the ability to be honest with family and friends about your sexual orientation. This makes choosing the right college of paramount importance, not only for academic reasons, but to use college as an additional tool in turning around your personal life.

As you make your choice, you want to keep in mind issues of safety, comfort, ability to academically succeed, and ability to continue the process of coming-out. Indeed, there is no reason that college can't be a positive experience, where you can find success and happiness!

So what are the things to look out for? Check out these ten tips, many of which also apply to your straight friends, too:

1. Look at the big picture.

There are literally thousands of colleges and universities in the United States alone. No doubt there are a number of colleges that at some point you've thought of attending. These may include both big schools and small schools, schools your friends are thinking of applying to, schools your parents attended, schools that sound interesting from something you've read or heard, and schools that have always "just been there" in your head. But there are also schools that you've never heard of that might be right for you. Keep the big picture in mind, and explore the universe of options available to you.

2. Identify your passion.

It is not unfair to suggest that the biggest factor in choosing a college is whether or not your particular academic interest is offered by a particular institution. Regardless of what the college or university is like, if you can't follow your core interests and your real passion, or at least find what your passion is once in school, the whole foundation for a successful college experience will be shaky.

3. Visualize "college."

What does the word "college" mean to you? Do you visualize a big school or small school, one close to home or farther away, one in a city or one in a small town? How do you feel about Greek life (fraternities and sororities) and athletics? How strongly do you feel about any of these characteristics? Identifying your expectations and what you think would be your preferred college environment will help you narrow the field of prospective institutions.

4. Do your homework.

Read college literature, including the course catalog. Every college will boast about caring and dedicated faculty, so go deeper and learn, for example, if there are any English, history, psychology, and/or sociology classes about gay issues, people, history, and/or influence. You may not necessarily take these courses, but their availability comments on the academic and sociopolitical environment of the school.

5. Road trip!

Visit the campuses of the 5 to 7 colleges on your short list. Only by visiting can you begin to soak in all of the intangibles so critical in making your decision. Make these visits happen! You can't rely solely on college viewbooks and/or advice from counselors, family, and friends. While the quality of instruction and of the faculty is important, those things are not necessarily what you should use your visits for. Here are some ideas:

- Get current and past issues of the campus newspaper. Remember that student newspapers often have negative articles in them about the school, so take everything with a grain of salt. The purpose here is to find out the culture of the college, identify what the social and political interests on campus are, and to pick up hints about what the institution is like. What are the special events listed/advertised? Is there a huge sports section but few opinion columns? Do you gain a sense of diversity, excitement, and/or acceptance? Does the college appear to be socially progressive?
- The student newspaper is not, of course, the only resource for uncovering campus culture. An example of another resource is the list of clubs and organizations.. Call club presidents like the president of the gay student association, if one exists. And make a mental note if one doesn't exist.
- Read the college's nondiscrimination statement. Is "sexual orientation" included? If so, has it been included for a long time or did the college just get around to putting it in? If it is not included, why? Did the college's board of directors defeat such a proposal, or was a proposal never made? Either way, if not included, it may be a red flag.
- Walk through both student and faculty parking lots and read the bumper stickers. Yes, read the bumper stickers! What do they say? Or aren't there very many? Are there political statements? Rainbow stickers? And what kind of cars are there? This may sound strange, but subliminally you'll gain more information about the school. Really!
- Dine in the dining hall -- and no, not to just test the food. (At few colleges will you gush over the culinary talents of campus chefs.) Instead, use your time to observe people. If you're bold, you can sit with someone (a current student). Otherwise, just sit and eat and watch. How are people entering the cafeteria greeted when they enter? Do friends call them over? Do different social/political/racial/economic groups mix well? Are people generally happy? What are the topics of conversation? Are people planning to attend a campus or community event? Is it obviously a liberal student body or conservative student body? Is it hard to tell? What does your "gut" tell you? Would you be comfortable there?

6. Check out the larger community.

Walk the streets of the community, sensing its character. Ask around, and read local newspapers. What off-campus events, activities, and opportunities are there? The larger community affects the campus and vice versa. This city will be your home for four years, so choose wisely.

7. Manage the parents.

Don't let your parents run your search. On the other hand, they may actually have some words of wisdom. The key, however, is whether or not you're out to them. If they don't understand all of your considerations in selecting a college, their advice will not factor in all the things you are. In any event, you should be the one communicating with the college, and you should be in the driver's seat. You need to be the critical decision-maker, and colleges want to interact with you, not your parents. This also places a lot of responsibility on you for managing the search and admissions process.

8. Hey, you're still in school!

It's important not to flake on your current academic commitments during your senior year. You have a lot on your mind, but you must continue to build a solid academic record, being mindful of things like fall test dates. You have to balance these commitments with remembering application deadlines, filing for financial aid, getting recommendations, and writing those personal essays.

9. Don't get nutty! Be thoughtful.

Pick no more than five colleges to which you will apply for admission. Among the five should be your "dream" school -- the one you really would like to attend and which may be an academic reach. Also included should be a "safety" school -- one to which your admission is assured. Finally, there should be two or three realistic, solid choices. It is from these middle choices or your dream school that your final college choice will ultimately emerge. It is from your offers of admission that you will choose **the best college match**, which is the key goal for any student.

10. It's time to be yourself.

Coming out is a journey -- we all know that. No one should be forced to take that journey any more quickly than they're comfortable with. If done well, done constructively, and after serious consideration, some students even choose to come out in their college essay. The important thing is this: Going away to college is a great opportunity to finally come to terms with who you are if it wasn't possible in high school. Coming out certainly isn't mandatory, but your ultimate happiness will depend on it, no matter when it happens. Just think: All the nasty baggage you may feel you've had to carry around from your past can be jettisoned, and you can start anew. College will certainly bring challenges, but you should welcome those challenges, including that most wonderful one -- the challenge of daring to be yourself.

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