

FIELD GUIDE TO OHIO'S BEST COLLEGES

YOUR FAMILY'S TRAIL MAP FROM HIGH SCHOOL
TO A BEST-FIT COLLEGE

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Field Guide to Ohio's Best Colleges

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Field Guide to Ohio’s Best Colleges:

Your Family’s Trail Map from High School
to a Best-Fit College

Acknowledgements	xi
Introduction	1
Section I - The College Landscape	9
Chapter 1 - The Bachelor’s Degree and the Major	11
<i>INTRODUCTION.....</i>	<i>11</i>
<i>THE ANATOMY OF A BACHELOR’S DEGREE.....</i>	<i>11</i>
THE CORE CURRICULUM	12
FREE ELECTIVES.....	13
THE MAJOR.....	14
THE MOST IMPORTANT THING TO KNOW ABOUT MAJORS	16
APPLIED VERSUS THEORETICAL MAJORS.....	19
GET EXCITED ABOUT AN ACADEMIC MAJOR EARLY....	20
ACADEMIC MAJOR AND CAREER RESOURCES.....	21
Chapter 2 - Cocurricular Activities	25
<i>INTRODUCTION.....</i>	<i>25</i>
<i>THE IMPORTANCE OF GETTING INVOLVED</i>	<i>25</i>
<i>COCURRICULAR ACTIVITIES THAT HAVE THE MAGIC.....</i>	<i>28</i>
Chapter 3 - The Cost of College.....	33
<i>INTRODUCTION.....</i>	<i>33</i>
<i>A PRIMER ON THE COST OF COLLEGE.....</i>	<i>34</i>
TUITION AND DISCOUNTS	34
OTHER COSTS	36
<i>A COMPREHENSIVE EXAMPLE.....</i>	<i>36</i>
<i>HOW MUCH DEBT IS REASONABLE?.....</i>	<i>39</i>
<i>HOW TO KEEP COLLEGE COSTS LOW</i>	<i>39</i>

Section II - The College Fit Process.....	45
Chapter 4 - Everything you want in a college	47
<i>INTRODUCTION.....</i>	47
<i>WHAT IS COLLEGE FIT?.....</i>	47
<i>THE FAMILY COLLEGE MEETING.....</i>	48
<i>COLLEGE FIT QUESTIONS.....</i>	49
<i>AFTER THE MEETING.....</i>	56
Chapter 5 - Ohio's Sturdy 30 and Their Strengths.....	57
<i>INTRODUCTION.....</i>	57
<i>PUBLIC UNIVERSITIES.....</i>	61
BOWLING GREEN STATE UNIVERSITY	62
KENT STATE UNIVERSITY	70
MIAMI UNIVERSITY	79
Ohio University.....	88
THE OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY	96
UNIVERSITY OF CINCINNATI.....	105
<i>OHIO'S BIG 5 LIBERAL ARTS COLLEGES</i>	115
THE COLLEGE OF WOOSTER	117
DENISON UNIVERSITY.....	122
KENYON COLLEGE.....	128
OBERLIN COLLEGE & CONSERVATORY	133
OHIO WESLEYAN UNIVERSITY.....	140
<i>COLLEGES EMPHASIZING PROFESSIONAL PROGRAMS.....</i>	148
CASE WESTERN RESERVE UNIVERSITY.....	150
OHIO NORTHERN UNIVERSITY	157
UNIVERSITY OF FINDLAY.....	164
<i>COLLEGES WITH UNIQUE STRENGTHS.....</i>	173
ASHLAND UNIVERSITY.....	175
BALDWIN WALLACE UNIVERSITY	183
CAPITAL UNIVERSITY.....	190
MARIETTA COLLEGE	197
OTTERBEIN UNIVERSITY	202
UNIVERSITY OF MOUNT UNION.....	209
WALSH UNIVERSITY.....	215
WITTENBERG UNIVERSITY.....	222

<i>COLLEGES OF ART AND DESIGN</i>	227
COLUMBUS COLLEGE OF ART & DESIGN.....	229
CLEVELAND INSTITUTE OF ART.....	235
<i>PASSIONATELY CHRISTIAN COLLEGES</i>	242
CEDARVILLE UNIVERSITY.....	244
MOUNT VERNON NAZARENE UNIVERSITY.....	250
FRANCISCAN UNIVERSITY OF STEUBENVILLE.....	256
<i>CATHOLIC COLLEGES</i>	263
UNIVERSITY OF DAYTON.....	264
JOHN CARROLL UNIVERSITY.....	271
XAVIER UNIVERSITY.....	277
Chapter 6 - Conducting a Strategic Campus Visit.....	285
<i>INTRODUCTION</i>	285
<i>THE OFFICE OF ADMISSIONS</i>	285
<i>PREPARING FOR A CAMPUS TOUR</i>	286
SCHEDULING YOUR VISIT.....	286
PREPARING FOR YOUR VISIT.....	287
CONDUCTING YOUR VISIT.....	288
<i>MAKING A FINAL COLLEGE DECISION</i>	291
References	297

Introduction

In an ideal world, students planning to attend a four-year residential college would step off the stage following high school graduation with a general understanding of their interests and capabilities as well as how those might translate into future educational needs and ultimately a career. They would have already identified a set of possible college major options as well as cocurricular involvements to explore, selected colleges to visit that specialize in those programs, and designed visits to help them discern a best-fit choice. Additionally, and while in high school, they would have identified pre-requisite knowledge needed to enter those programs and have completed the coursework and earned the grades necessary to properly prepare themselves. Finally, they would possess the emotional stability and maturity to maintain an even keel in the face of one of life's most challenging transitions – college.

After many years of working with college students as an academic advisor, faculty member, student affairs administrator, and academic administrator, I believe that only a small percentage of students graduate from high school in this enviable position. For most, they are unclear as to the nature of their interests and capabilities, and have very little understanding of the meaning or trajectory of various college majors or paths to the workplace. Similarly, they have little understanding of college curriculum or how to navigate themselves academically, and are unaware that colleges, like people, are good at some things but not so good at others. Some may struggle with learning challenges, depression, or anxiety, making the transition to college more challenging than it might be otherwise.

The result is that they often end up at a college that doesn't quite fit for one reason or another. Indeed, according to a 2017 Strada Education Network study of more than 89,000 post-college U.S.

adults, 36 percent of the survey respondents would have chosen a different major and 28 percent would have chosen a different college.

You may be surprised to learn that, in my experience, many of these high school seniors will remain in a state of academic and career confusion even as they approach their college graduation. Of course this varies by major and college, but it has been a consistent observation of mine for several decades.

For many years, I taught the business school capstone course at my university. The class was composed of graduating seniors. In our first meeting, I would ask students to introduce themselves. We would discuss a bit about their career plans for the future and how they had prepared themselves to pursue those plans. In most cases, about half of the class had no clear direction in terms of what they wanted to do upon graduation and, therefore, had done little in terms of preparation save completing their college curriculum. They had not joined professional organizations, networked with professionals, completed relevant internships or co-ops, explored graduate programs, studied abroad in their area of study, worked with their college career center, or even clarified a career target. Instead they waited tables, played video games, hung out with friends, made ends meet, and worked on their courses. After college, they would initially drift as they had in college while hoping they might find something interesting and rewarding to them. In the end, most have done fine, ultimately finding their way. Today, most of my academic nomads are raising families and involved in their professional careers. However, I can't help but wonder if it could have been easier for them.

How about the other half of my students? Well, the other half had either entered college with a clear major and career target or developed one, typically in their first year or two. They had navigated the stresses that accompany the transition to college,

sought out support when needed, and learned to manage their emotions. They had joined the relevant student organizations on campus, sought relevant internships or co-ops, networked with professionals in their chosen field, chosen study abroad opportunities aligned with their goals, selected minor areas of study or electives that were similarly aligned and, more often than not, had jobs or acceptance into graduate schools in their area of interest before graduation.

Traditional wisdom encourages students to enter college “undecided” and wander around for a while until they determine what they want to major in. I am not a fan of that strategy. Quite to the contrary, I believe that high school students benefit from a process that helps them clarify their interests and strengths, and connect those to possibilities for the future. Once they get excited about a goal for the future they become more motivated and willing to work. With a clear goal, they are also able to pick aligned involvements, courses, internships, programs, majors, minors, and activities that either strengthen their commitment or help them learn enough to make changes as needed. Students, who have engaged in this process once, learn that they can do it over and over until they connect with something that will really work for them. In my experience, most of these more proactive students will never settle for an unsatisfying major or career – at least not for long.

As habitual as this process of optimizing one’s academic and career path can become, so can wandering aimlessly on some sort of academic pilgrimage hoping for insight without a plan for how to get it.

This book is written for parents of aspiring college students interested in one of Ohio’s best residential college campus experiences. It is intended to help you better understand what is meant by “college fit” and give you ideas on how to help your

student optimize his or her selection of a college to attend. If you pick well, it is more likely that your student will be more motivated, happier, likely to graduate, and more successful as a result.

The book begins by laying some groundwork that will help you better understand how colleges work. Throughout the book, I aim to help you understand the options colleges offer and how to achieve a more optimal college fit for your student than you might otherwise attain. If you follow our process, your student will land in a good-fit college. While I won't guarantee a graduation date, my process will ensure that your family works together to explore what you really want, identify colleges that are good at all those things, and then thoughtfully explore your options through strategic campus visits. These steps will help you make a final decision based on the best information possible. It doesn't get better than that.

What this book will not do is spend time on the admission process. Don't expect discussion on how to maximize ACT scores, improve college admission essays, complete forms, file for financial aid, or determine if your student should submit their application early. Your high school counselors and a myriad of web sources and other books are eager to help you with that. Instead, this book will solely focus on issues related to the "college fit process."

I once heard an analogy comparing the college admission process to filing your tax return and the college fit process to financial planning. Filing your tax return and filing your college application both require that you tend to deadlines, forms, and processes under an overwhelming cloud of urgency. In contrast, financial planning and determining college fit are strategic processes more focused on longer term goals, exploration, and planning for the future. This book argues that students and parents should

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rebalance the admission process vs. college fit process and allocate more time and energy to the latter.

So, thank you for joining me. Let's get on down the trail.