Common College Criteria: Glossary and Questions to Consider

Here are some common terms you’ll encounter as you begin to research colleges, and some related questions to get you thinking about what type of collegiate environment will be best for you.

**SIZE**
“Small” colleges are usually around 1500–3000 students. These small colleges are still quite large compared to what you’re used to at Loomis. Mid-size colleges and universities are around 4k-10k students. Large universities will have even larger enrollment, including (potentially) thousands of grad students. The largest universities have upwards of 30k students.

*Questions to Consider:* Would you rather be a big fish in a small pond or vice versa? How important is it for you to know your professors and have them know you? How important is it for you to be recognized for your work? How much of a self-starter are you?

**LOCATION**
“Location” refers to where the school exists geographically. This may pertain to specific metropolitan areas (“I want to go to school near Boston”) or areas of the country (“I’m interested in West Coast schools”) or even locations abroad (“I’m interested in studying in the UK”).

*Questions to Consider:* How far is a long way from home to you? Are you looking to experience a new location or one already known to you? Is it important to be within driving distance from home or is a plane ride acceptable? Do you want to be able to come home for a long weekend, or is it okay to be away until major school breaks?

**SETTING**
Setting is different from “Location” in that it refers to the surrounding environment rather than the geographical location. A school’s setting can play a role in what opportunities it offers but it’s not necessarily the defining feature of those opportunities. A school in a more rural setting, for example, may have plenty (if not more) on-campus social and cultural opportunities and connections to internships in large cities, despite being further away from an urban area.

*Questions to Consider:* Do you want immediate access to the culture of a city? Why? How do you envision taking advantage of that access? Do you prefer the suburbs where there is more green space and less action, but still access to a city? Do you want a college where most of the social life takes place on campus? How important is for you to have access to outdoor recreation?

**COLLEGE MAJOR**
Your major is your specific area of study that you are focusing on throughout your undergraduate years. It is what your degree will be in (e.g. “A Bachelor of Arts (B.A.) in Sociology” or “A Bachelor of Science (B.S.) in Biochemistry”). Students do not typically declare a major until the middle or
end of their sophomore year in college, so it’s not something you need to decide on in order to apply to schools (with the exception of some preprofessional programs – see below).

**Questions to Consider:** Which subjects have you enjoyed most at Loomis? Is there a particular subject you haven’t studied yet but that interests you? What do you like to work on or learn about – e.g. abstract ideas, real people and real social problems, the remote past, the next 100 years, foreign cultures, scientific discoveries, how things work?

**CURRICULAR REQUIREMENTS**
At Loomis you need to fulfill certain requirements in order to graduate (e.g. 4 years of English, 2 years of science, 2 PPRs, etc.). Most colleges also have requirements that you must fulfill in order to graduate. The types of requirements generally fall into three categories:

- **Core Curriculum** – Schools with a core curriculum require all students to take specific coursework, most often in their first and second years. The purpose of a core curriculum is to expose students to a wide breadth of disciplines, including the humanities and the sciences. The Core serves as a unifying academic experience for all students, regardless of what they later decide to major in.

- **Distribution Requirements** – Distribution requirements provide structure to an undergraduate education in the same way that a core curriculum does, but with more flexibility. You won’t necessarily be required to take specific classes, but you’ll be required to take certain types of classes (e.g. three quantitative-reasoning courses, three writing-intensive courses, etc.)

- **Open Curriculum** – Other institutions offer open curricula. An open curriculum has no course requirements at all. Students are usually free to take whatever classes are of interest to them, occasionally with some exceptions. Because of the lack of structure, an open curriculum requires students to be independent and comfortable pushing themselves outside of their comfort zone.

**Questions to Consider:** Do you like open-ended assignments or ones with more structure? How comfortable are you going outside your comfort zone? Have you enjoyed courses here at Loomis that you initially didn’t think you would enjoy?

**ACADEMIC CULTURE**
A school’s academic culture may be defined by not only how rigorous the coursework is, but also the typical student’s approach to his or her studies. The academics at some schools will be more challenging than at others, and selectivity is not always a barometer for this. An academic culture may be competitive or collaborative; a competitive environment may mean that students feel a lot of pressure to succeed, to different degrees. A collaborative culture may still emphasize excellence but will encourage students to work together instead of against each other.

**Questions to Consider:** How well do I respond to academic competition? How important is to me that I be at the top of my class? To what degree do I want to be academically
challenged? How important is it for me to perform near the top of my college class? How important is it to me that I am recognized for my academic talents? Is it more important for me to be surrounded by very capable and inquiring students even if they receive better grades than I do? Does an academic Honor Code appeal to me? What about an alternative grading system?

CAMPUS CULTURE
“Campus culture” encompasses everything from the social opportunities on campus (including athletics, fraternities and sororities, cultural offerings, clubs and organizations, weekend activities, etc.) to the types of people who attend that school.

Questions to Consider: To what extent do I want to attend a college where there are many people like me, or vice versa? To what extent do I want my fellow students to be politically active? Am I interested in Greek life (joining a fraternity or sorority)? How important is it to me that my school be racially and ethnically diverse? How important is it to me that I attend a school with people from other parts of the country/world? Do I want a school with a particular religious affiliation and/or with a strong religious community? What hobbies, interests and talents do I hope to develop in college?

LIBERAL ARTS
The goal of a liberal arts education is to get students to think and learn across disciplines. The emphasis is not just on WHAT you study (e.g. Spanish, physics, women’s studies) but the RESULT of your studies: namely, gaining the ability to think critically and independently and to write and communicate effectively. These skills are central to any career or profession. You will encounter the liberal arts at a liberal arts college, but not only there: you will also encounter them within the College of Arts & Sciences at any university.

Questions to Consider: Does the idea of exploring new academic disciplines interest you? Have you enjoyed making connections between the material you’re covering in different classes? Do you want to be able to explore different subjects before declaring a major? Do you hope your college experience will help you determine your career, or do you already have a career in mind?

LIBERAL ARTS COLLEGES AND RESEARCH UNIVERSITIES
As mentioned above, you can find the liberal arts at a research university. You can also find research at any liberal arts college. The “research” at a research university refers to the research conducted by faculty at that school. Professors at liberal arts colleges conduct research too, with an equal emphasis on teaching undergraduates. Because graduate students are a significant population at research universities, it may actually be easier to do research as an undergraduate at a liberal arts college, depending on the school. At some universities, graduate students (as opposed to professors) may teach some of your classes.

Questions to Consider: How important are undergraduate research opportunities to me? Do I want to conduct research directly with a professor or am I comfortable working with
graduate students? How important is it for me to be taught by professors as opposed to grad students?

HONORS COLLEGES
Most public universities (and some private ones) offer special programs known as Honors Colleges or Honors Programs. Admission to a university’s Honors College may include a separate application and is usually significantly more selective than admission to other university programs. Honors Colleges often include additional curricular programs, enrichment opportunities, housing, early course registration, privileges, scholarships and recognition for their students. At large universities, these programs may offer a smaller community within the larger student body.

PREPROFESSIONAL PROGRAMS
In addition to traditional majors like Chemistry or English, many schools also offer preprofessional programs like business and engineering. These programs prepare you for a specific career. They are good fits for students who already are committed to a career path; they are not good fits for students who hope to discover that path in college. Some schools require you to apply directly to that program when you apply to the university; others have you apply once you’re a student there.

Questions to Consider: What are the reasons for my interest in a preprofessional program? Are they tied to professional outcomes or academic inquiry? What experiences have I already had that have led me to this interest?

Business
A business program typically teaches topics like (and offers majors in) accounting, finance, management, entrepreneurship, and marketing. Business is the main focus of the curriculum and business-related courses will make up most of the course offerings. Many universities have an undergraduate college of business, but there are also entire colleges that are specifically for the study of business too. Business schools or programs are great fits for students who would like to pursue it as an academic discipline, not just as a career. Students whose interest in business relates more closely to wanting a business-related career should also consider liberal arts offerings.

Engineering
Like business, engineering covers a wide range of disciplines, and engineering programs usually offer a host of majors pertaining to specific areas of study (e.g. electrical engineering, biomedical engineering, civil engineering, mechanical engineering). At the heart of engineering is understanding how and why things work, and using knowledge to provide solutions to complex quantitative problems. There is much variation among engineering programs: there are engineering/polytechnical colleges, engineering programs at universities, engineering programs at liberal arts colleges, and dual-programs between liberal arts colleges and university engineering programs for students who want both types of experiences.