

Advisor offers step-by-step tips for picking a college

High school students don't have to be overwhelmed when picking a college as long as they put college planning on their agenda each year leading up to graduation, according to Monica Moody Moore, vice president for enrollment management at the College of Notre Dame of Maryland, Baltimore.

"You don't want to use a singular source for information," said Mrs. Moore. "Look for common patterns. Use all the resources that are out there."

Students should visit college Web sites and study commercial college guides, she said. It's easy to request information from universities, she said, noting that colleges will often mail packets of information.

High school counselors, advisors and teachers can also provide a broad perspective on the kinds of schools that may fit a particular student, she said.

"I wouldn't recommend friends as the ultimate guide for a college search," said Mrs. Moore. "Use the experts. That's why they're there."

In the junior year of high school, students should take the PSAT and test preparation courses to help them do well on the SAT, she said. The junior year is also a good time to begin visiting colleges. Many universities offer guided tours and allow potential students to sit in on classes, she said. Some provide overnight accommodations, which can help students get a feel for the campus culture.

"Talk to current students, professors and alumni," she said. "Don't be afraid to visit a campus more than once. Visiting doesn't hurt anyone."

Students should ask about faculty-to-student ratios and what kinds of outcomes are expected, she said. One of the best questions to ask current college students is what they wish they would have known about their college before they applied, Mrs. Moore said.

"I do caution students against committing too early to one school," she said. "You shouldn't lock in and get your hopes up too high. A lot of things can happen."

A common mistake students sometimes make on their college search is overlooking their high school academics, Mrs. Moore said. From the very first moment of freshman year, high-schoolers should be focused on performing at their best and getting involved in clubs and extra-curricular activities, she said.

“You can’t sidestep the high school years,” she said.

Mrs. Moore encourages students to participate in the life of a potential college as much as possible. Most universities offer public lectures, film presentations, art shows and other events that can help students determine whether that school fits their needs.

One of the best online resources for selecting a college is www.petersons.com, Mrs. Moore said, which offers profiles and links to colleges and universities.