You, Too, Can Use Big Data to Help you Decide What College Will be Best for You

**March is an exciting and scary time for people who applied to college this year. Most are receiving admissions decisions—or will soon. Fortunately, there is a tool that can help you compare campuses even if you can’t visit, or don’t have a lot of time there before you have to decide.**

This, of course, is “Big Data” which is becoming an important watch word in all phases of society. It shapes research in [healthcare](http://www.mckinsey.com/industries/healthcare-systems-and-services/our-insights/the-big-data-revolution-in-us-health-care), [politics](http://www.oxfordjournals.org/our_journals/polana/virtualissue4.html), and [economics](https://www.aeaweb.org/articles?id=10.1257/jep.28.2.3), for example. it can also help you decide what campus will fit you best.

As an [educational search consultant](http://www.drmatthewweed.com/educational-search) who has studied and worked on several leading [campuses](http://www.drmatthewweed.com/book), I have a few key metrics that are worth paying attention to.

Obviously, the cost of a future degree or program is very important. That said, many campuses that seem “out of reach” have incredibly [generous](https://college.harvard.edu/financial-aid/how-aid-works) [financial aid](https://admissions.yale.edu/financial-aid-prospective-students) [that can](http://money.cnn.com/2015/04/01/pf/college/stanford-financial-aid/) [mitigate](https://www.princeton.edu/pr/aid/pdf/1314/PU-Making-It-Possible.pdf) that problem—or make them the best choice for the price-conscious consumer.

You may be waiting with baited breath for admissions news, and will soon hear about financial aid offers. Once these come in, you may feel the support you’re being offered to attend certain campuses is too low. If this has happened somewhere you really want to go, you can always write a letter expressing your great desire to attend that school and notifying them of special circumstances that your [FAFSA](https://fafsa.ed.gov/) may not fully have caught or that you think they didn’t account for fully in making your award. **Letters can sometimes give financial aid officers the information they need to increase the offer they made you—thereby helping you go to college there.**

Some colleges also offer net price [calculators](https://www.usnews.com/education/best-colleges/features/net-price-calculator) that will give you a solid sense for how much it will cost you to attend there. Most, unfortunately, require you to reenter your data for each college but a new resource is now helping [make estimates](https://myintuition.org/quick-college-cost-estimator/) for many of the leading colleges.

Don’t let the “before” aide price scare you before making your decision. At least [one private liberal arts college](https://college.harvard.edu/admissions/choosing-harvard/affordability) claims that up to ninety percent of families will pay less for someone to go there than they would pay if they studied on a public campus. [Others make](https://www.princeton.edu/news/2016/03/31/affordable-princeton-financial-aid-allows-students-graduate-debt-free) [similar claims](https://news.yale.edu/2015/02/27/faqs-about-financial-aid-and-student-borrowing-yale-college).

That said, what happens if tuition costs aren’t a primary concern, or you have several choices that cost about the same?

Here are some very helpful metrics that can predict how college may go for you. All are easily accessible online.

Most can be summarized by what we might call the “resource-to-student ratio”, i.e. the amount of campus resources relative to the number of students on campus. At least three sub-ratios are worth paying attention to: The faculty-to-student ratio, the staff-to-student ratio and the endowment-to-student ratio.

The **faculty-to-student ratio** isimportant because getting attention from faculty members who can help you with class matters, research opportunities, or your ideas and projects that aren’t directly relevant to academics can be harder at a school with lots of students and relatively few faculty. On campuses with relatively more faculty and fewer students, professors—and the opportunities they offer—may be more practically and psychologically accessible.

Many large universities are proud of giving half of their undergraduates opportunities to do research with faculty members. In my experience, small-to-medium sized schools can often give every student who seeks opportunities of this sort the chance to work with faculty. As research is often considered essential for students wanting to get into advanced training, the value of a high faculty-to-student ratio becomes clear—even for the student who may be a “go-getter.”

Remember, even the most determined first-year student has to compete against others who are equally motivated. In larger schools sheer numbers mean that many older students may have greater experience or better faculty contacts than almost any first-year can because they have been there longer.

The faculty-to-student ratio also impacts class size, much as it probably does in your local school district. Large classes can [reduce student engagement](https://www.merlot.org/merlot/viewMaterial.htm?id=330317&hitlist=hasCollections%3Dfalse%26amp%3BhasEtextReviews%3Dfalse%26amp%3BisContentBuilder%3Dfalse%26amp%3BfilterOtherOpen%3Dfalse%26amp%3BhasAssignments%3Dfalse%26amp%3BhasAwards%3Dfalse%26amp%3Bcategory%3D343424%26amp%3BfilterSubjectsOpen%3Dtrue%26amp%3BhasRatings%3Dfalse%26amp%3BfilterTypesOpen%3Dfalse%26amp%3BfilterMobileOpen%3Dfalse%26amp%3BhasComments%3Dfalse%26amp%3BhasCourses%3Dfalse%26amp%3BisLeadershipLibrary%3Dfalse%26amp%3BfilterPartnerAffiliationsOpen%3Dtrue%26amp%3BhasSercActivitySheets%3Dfalse%26amp%3BhasPeerReviews%3Dfalse%26amp%3BhasEditorReviews%3Dfalse%26amp%3B). Scheduling lectures is also a problem. Some are now [set at 7:30 AM](https://www.purdue.edu/registrar/calendars/2016-17-Academic-Calendar.html), others [end at 10PM](http://www1.udel.edu/registrar/policies-procedures/classtimes.html). Colleges of all sizes now [patch this gap](http://www.forbes.com/sites/noodleeducation/2015/05/28/more-than-half-of-college-faculty-are-adjuncts-should-you-care/#247b6a871d9b) with more and more instructors and part-time faculty who don’t always [have the right](http://www.chronicle.com/article/University-Adjuncts-Are-Often/142917/?cid=at&utm_source=at&utm_medium=en) to set course policy in response to student needs. Discussion sections are integral to learning in these large lecture courses. A potentially significant concern with this is that the people who lead these small student-centered learning opportunities are often first-year graduate students, and sometimes even undergraduates, who know little more about the topic than their students.

Is this sometimes a problem in schools with high faculty-to-student ratios? Absolutely! However, it is usually less of a problem there.

The **endowment-to-student ratio** is another easily determined [factor](https://www.collegeraptor.com/college-rankings/details/EndowmentPerStudent) that can affect your success. This is important because high endowment-to-student ratios mean that these universities can try creative things or start new projects [far more easily](http://www.usnews.com/education/best-colleges/the-short-list-college/articles/2016-10-04/10-universities-with-the-biggest-endowments) than schools with relatively few funds to spread around. They may also have [better resources for financial aid](https://www.collegeraptor.com/college-rankings/details/EndowmentPerStudent).

My own long experience on a variety of campuses suggests to me that if I’d been at a less wealthy school than I was as an undergraduate at Yale, and met someone like my friend Victor with whom I co-created technology that helped turn printed books into electronic text years before others were regularly doing this, getting the funding to make something like the [“Yale Text Scanning System”](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MdhA9KCj_no) happen might not have been possible.

**The staff-to-student ratio** is a third key measure of the [support and opportunities](http://futureofchildren.org/publications/journals/article/index.xml?journalid=72&articleid=523&sectionid=3590) available on any campus. A large staff can imply a bureaucratic and inefficient administration. It can also mean that ways can be found around bureaucratic knots for the creative, hard-working student who refuses to take “no” for an answer. More importantly, it implies there are enough people around to help ensure you that someone will have the time to help before a minor problem becomes a major crisis. That said, wherever you go, it’s important to be sure the staff provide honest, caring, useful, timely help—something you can learn by working with [people like me](http://www.drmatthewweed.com/educational-search), going on campus visits, and using student satisfaction websites.

All of this said, you can definitely get a great education at a school where these ratios are not fully in your favor. Very large schools often have unique departments or majors with incredible faculty and enormous resources. Wealthy but very small schools may not have facilities or experience in providing assistance to students with unconventional needs. Only you can know what you will need to succeed.

Finally, as you make your selections and applications, if distance is a concern, please think about it as objectively as you can. College is a huge investment. Don’t let distance keep you from applying to campuses that are truly best for you if you can. Do whatever it takes to get the best balance of resources and access to them—without undercutting [your role](https://www.caring.com/scholarship) as a [family](http://www.studentscholarshipsearch.com/scholarships/mattie-jt-stepanek-caregiving-scholarship.php) [caregiver](https://www.seniorhomes.com/p/seniorhomes-caregiver-scholarship/), for example—that will help you have a better and more fulfilling educational experience and greater opportunities. In many cases you may find it is better to go further than to stay close, struggle for attention, and spend tens of thousands of your hard-earned dollars on a program that doesn’t have everything you need to become the accomplished, successful, financially independent person in whom you are investing so much money, time and hope.

If you have questions about any of this, please feel free to reach out to [me](https://www.drmatthewweed.com/contact) via my [website](https://www.drmatthewweed.com/) for a free half hour introductory consultation that can, if you like, lead to further conversations that may, literally, save you tens of thousands of dollars in time, energy and effort that you can better put into achieving your long-term happiness and improving your chances to make your world and future the way you want them to be.