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Your Guide to Finding The College That Fits

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It may be harder than ever to get into the Ivy League, but fortunately it's easier than ever to find outstanding alternatives. Counselors say if you look hard enough, you're bound to find a school that you love--and, more important, that loves you back. Here are eight strategies kids (and parents) are using to find happiness beyond the ranks of the traditional elite schools.

- Take the Honors Route** Big state schools trying to attract top students are increasingly establishing honors colleges. These schools within schools often feel like cloistered liberal-arts colleges but still have access to the superior resources of a large research university. The University of Arizona Honors College offers its students special dorms, advisers and courses. Another upside is that while you're getting a more personalized education, you still have the chance to watch your school win a football game every once in a while.
- Rethink How You Learn** Just as not all students learn alike, not all colleges serve the standard fare of a core curriculum and electives. At St. John's College, which has campuses in Annapolis, Md., and Santa Fe, N.M., students study nothing but the great books, retracing the grand arc of Western thought and literature from Plato and Plutarch in freshman year to Marx and Melville in senior year. Graduates from Alverno, a Roman Catholic college for women in Milwaukee, Wis., earn academic credits and acquire proficiency in the school's "eight abilities," which range from being a good communicator to solving problems well to having an appreciation of art.
- Go Global** Nothing helps students understand globalization more than living it. And fortunately, foreign universities are increasing their quality and their outreach to American students. McGill in Montreal has long been a popular destination to the north, and the University of Hong Kong is growing in popularity, with 252 American applicants last year. After Prince William of Britain matriculated in 2001, the University of St. Andrews in Scotland saw a boost in its international applications, and at the University of Edinburgh, American enrollment has almost tripled since 2002. The most dubious perk of going to college in Britain: free enrollment in the national dental-care system.
- Carve Your Own Niche** Some high schoolers are already so sure of their future careers that a meandering liberal-arts education seems a waste of time compared with the chance to specialize early. The Savannah College of Art and Design has gained a national reputation by offering demanding degrees in subjects like fibers and interior design. Students at the Culinary Institute of America can major in such fields as baking and pastry-arts management. The school has two campuses: one in Hyde Park, N.Y., and the other in St. Helena, Calif., the heart of Napa Valley. Alas, there are no wine pairings with the dorm food.
- Find a Microcollege** Tiny schools with a few hundred students or less may be daunting to some; if your idea of college is lots of keggers and skeezy nights you can't tell your parents about, you may want a bit more anonymity. But for those looking for four years of close-knit community, wee colleges come in many flavors. The Thomas More College of Liberal Arts (68 students) in Merrimack, N.H., offers a rigorous Catholic education. The College of the Atlantic (278 students) in Bar Harbor, Maine, has an additional intimacy built into its curriculum, because all students share the same crunchy major, human ecology.

- Give Grades an F** In your adult life, it's likely that nobody, not even your boss, will ever care what grades you got in college. Some schools don't much care either and have taken grades out of the equation. Hampshire College in Amherst, Mass., opts instead for detailed written evaluations of student projects. Sarah Lawrence

College in Bronxville, N.Y., says not distracting students with letter grades is key to making sure they're motivated only by a love of learning. Don't worry, pre-med and pre-law students: more than half of all Hampshire students go on to grad school, even without GPAs.

- Keep the Faith America's campuses are not quite so godless as some believers might think. There are scores of colleges that mix liberal arts and religious values to attract competitive students. Taylor College in Upland, Ind., offers the same courses as secular schools, but students can still minor in youth ministry or biblical languages. Wheaton College in Wheaton, Ill., is known as the evangelical Harvard for its twin traditions of quality academics and deep faith. Not that contemporary values haven't been encroaching. In 2003 Wheaton lifted its 143-year-old ban on dancing.

- Lean Toward Green For die-hard stewards of the earth, there are a handful of institutions that style themselves solely as environmental liberal-arts colleges. Prescott College in Prescott, Ariz., tells prospective students that they will have a chance to do much of their learning in the 1.4 million acres of surrounding national forest. Northland College in Ashland, Wis., encourages hands-on environmentalism. The college's president got into the act herself this summer, spending a month as the sole caretaker and guide at an island lighthouse on Lake Superior.

10 TIPS YOU NEED TO KNOW

1 Hold your horses. There's no need to start the search until the summer before junior year

2 Get organized: the best applicants treat the process as a research project, with clear goals and deadlines and lots of note taking

3 If possible, pay a visit: no amount of Web surfing can replace a real tour of a campus

4 Study the price: with scholarships and financial aid, the college that causes the worst sticker shock may still offer a better deal

5 Contact the coaches: even if you're not a star in your chosen sport, a coach who thinks you could be a walk-on could lobby for you

6 Know the tests: SATs and ACTs have their own logic. Practice!

7 Be first in line: if you can, apply for early action or early decision

8 Don't overapply: stay safe and sane with five to eight schools

9 Click Send: online apps are ultraconvenient. But follow up by phone to be sure it went through

10 Trust the system: admissions are generally fair. Success comes through diligence, not tricks or high-priced consultants