

Types of Colleges: The Basics

Is a college the same thing as a university? What does “liberal arts” mean? Why are some colleges called public and others private? Here are the basic types of colleges.

PUBLIC AND PRIVATE COLLEGES

Public colleges are funded by local and state governments and usually offer lower tuition rates than private colleges, especially for students who are residents of the same state.

Private colleges rely mainly on tuition, fees, and private sources of funding. Private donations can sometimes provide generous financial aid packages for students.

FOR-PROFIT COLLEGES

These are businesses that offer degree programs that typically prepare students for a specific career. They tend to have higher costs, which could mean graduating with more debt. Credits earned may not transfer to other colleges.

FOUR-YEAR AND TWO-YEAR COLLEGES

Four-year colleges offer four-year programs that lead to a bachelor’s degree. These include universities and liberal arts colleges.

Two-year colleges offer two-year programs leading to a certificate or an associate degree. They include community, vocational-technical, and career colleges.

LIBERAL ARTS COLLEGES

These colleges offer a broad base of courses in the liberal arts: literature, history, languages, mathematics, and life sciences. Most are private with four-year bachelor’s degree programs that can prepare you for a variety of careers or for graduate study.

UNIVERSITIES

Universities often are larger and offer more majors and degree options—bachelor’s, master’s, and doctoral degrees—than colleges. Most universities consist of several smaller colleges, such as colleges of liberal arts, engineering, or health sciences. These colleges can prepare you for a variety of careers or for graduate study.

COMMUNITY COLLEGES

Community colleges offer two-year associate degrees that prepare you to transfer to a four-year college to earn a bachelor’s degree. They also offer other associate degrees and certificates that focus on preparing you for a specific career. Community colleges are often an affordable option with relatively low tuition.

VOCATIONAL-TECHNICAL AND CAREER COLLEGES

Vocational-technical and career colleges offer specialized training for a particular industry or career. Possible programs of study include the culinary arts, firefighting, dental hygiene, and medical-records technology. These colleges usually offer certificates or associate degrees.

ARTS COLLEGES

In addition to regular coursework, arts colleges and conservatories provide training in areas such as photography, music, theater, or fashion design. Most of these colleges offer associate or bachelor’s degrees in fine arts or a specialized field.

SINGLE-SEX COLLEGES

All four-year public colleges, and most private colleges, are coed. But there are some private colleges that are specifically for men or for women.

RELIGIOUSLY AFFILIATED COLLEGES

Some private colleges are connected to a religious faith. The connection may be historic only, or it may affect day-to-day student life.

SPECIALIZED-MISSION COLLEGES

Historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) focus on educating African American students. Hispanic-serving institutions (HSIs) are colleges where at least 25% of the full-time undergraduate students are Hispanic. HBCUs and HSIs may offer programs, services, and activities targeted to the underrepresented students they serve.

2 Paths to a Degree and a Career

Liberal Arts Majors and Career-Oriented Majors

Some college majors focus on preparing students for very specific careers. For example, a nursing major gives you the technical skills and knowledge you need to work as a nurse and prepares you to pass the licensing exam for that career. We call majors like these career-oriented majors.

Another road to a career is a liberal arts major. “Liberal arts” is an umbrella term for many subjects of study, including literature, philosophy, history, and languages. Students who major in these subjects don’t build technical skills for a specific profession, but they still learn valuable career skills. An example of a skill acquired in a liberal arts environment would be the ability to communicate effectively and solve problems creatively.

CAREER-ORIENTED MAJORS

Range of subject matter. If you choose a career-oriented major, you’ll probably take the majority of your courses in your major. That’s because you’ll have to take several required courses.

Course requirements. Career-oriented majors have more course requirements than liberal arts majors. For example, an engineering major would probably have to take several math, physics, chemistry, and other lab science courses from freshman year on.

Career planning. Once you choose a career-oriented major, your career path is well mapped out. Note that some careers, like engineering, require so much specific knowledge that students often start preparing in high school.

LIBERAL ARTS MAJORS

Range of subject matter. If you choose a major in the liberal arts, you’ll probably take classes in a wide range of subject areas, which can include English literature, history, sociology, economics, and philosophy.

Course requirements. Your eventual major within the liberal arts curriculum will be the subject area you take the most classes in and eventually earn a degree in. For example, you may major in—and earn a bachelor’s degree in—history or English literature.

Career planning. Some liberal arts majors don’t have a specific career in mind when they choose their major, but some do. Many future lawyers, for example, choose a liberal arts education as undergraduates—majoring in subjects such as political science or English—and then go to law school for advanced study.

Both Types of Majors Prepare Students for Careers

CAREER OPTIONS

Here are a handful of popular liberal arts majors and a few careers they can lead to:

- English: editor, marketing executive, writer
- History: archivist, museum curator
- Foreign languages: foreign service officer, translator, interpreter
- Political science: community organizer or activist, lawyer, policy analyst
- Psychology: market researcher, social worker, therapist

Some career-oriented majors include:

- Radio and television broadcasting
- Culinary arts
- Paralegal studies
- Mechanical engineering

WHERE TO
LEARN MORE

Read more about any college major in our **Major and Career Search** on [cb.org/bigfuture](https://collegeboard.org/bigfuture). You can also search for colleges offering majors of interest in **College Search**.

Sizing Up Colleges: Big vs. Small

ONE SIZE DOES NOT FIT ALL

As you begin your college search, one of the first decisions you need to make—and one that helps narrow your list—is what size college you want to attend. U.S. colleges offer many options, from small colleges with fewer than 1,000 students to large state universities with more than 35,000 students. What's best for you depends a large part on your personality and academic goals.

THE BIG COLLEGE EXPERIENCE

Do you picture yourself at a Big Ten university that offers everything from televised sporting events to countless degree programs? Are you itching to break free of the high school fishbowl and enjoy the anonymity that comes with being one of thousands of students? Then a big college might be a good fit for you. Here are some of the benefits associated with big colleges.

- Wide variety of majors and courses
- Well-stocked libraries
- Variety of housing opportunities
- Well-funded sports programs
- Wide range of academic choices and student activities
- Distinguished or famous faculty
- State-of-the-art research facilities

Things to Consider

- To succeed at a big college, it's best to go in knowing what subjects or general areas you're interested in. Students who do best at large colleges tend to be go-getters who take advantage of the many opportunities available.
- Introductory classes at a large college may contain hundreds of students. Some students find this environment exciting. Others feel overwhelmed.
- Another point: If you're attracted to a college because of its famous faculty, find out how many classes are actually taught by the professors, not by their teaching assistants.

THE SMALL COLLEGE EXPERIENCE

Do you enjoy personal attention from teachers and advisers? Then a small college may be just what you need. Some students find that a smaller setting is a better fit. There may be fewer facilities, but there are also fewer students to compete with. Here are some of the benefits associated with small colleges:

- Small class sizes
- Hands-on learning opportunities
- Individually designed majors
- Strong advising system; advisers know students well
- Strong sense of community
- Professors, not teaching assistants, teach most courses
- Opportunity to get to know professors well

Things to Consider

- Small colleges don't offer as many majors as big colleges; however, some of them let you design your own.
- Courses at small colleges are usually taught by professors, not teaching assistants. The professors may even know your name and areas of interest.
- Be aware that small colleges don't have the research facilities of large universities. If you're hoping to be a research assistant, find out what kind of work and facilities are available before you apply.
- Although you'll find a robust social life at most small colleges, you'll find less in terms of big sporting events and the variety of events.

START YOUR SEARCH

Whether you're considering a big university, a small college, or something in between, look carefully at the options and see what's most important to you. Keep in mind that college size is one of many factors to consider as you build your college list. Visit [cb.org/bigfuture](https://collegeboard.org/bigfuture) to begin a college search.

Campus Setting: Rural, Suburban, Urban

One of the steps in finding the right college for you is deciding what type of campus setting you prefer. Rural, suburban, and urban campuses have different advantages. The key is to find which setting lets you make the most of your college experience.

Which Is Right for You?

RURAL CAMPUSES

Rural campuses are located in the country, often near farms and wilderness areas, and usually near a small town. Here are things to consider about rural campuses:

- Most rural campuses are self-contained, with a majority of the students living on campus. This can increase a college's sense of community.
- Rural campuses can provide access to outdoor learning opportunities, particularly in fields like agriculture or environmental science.
- Many rural colleges bring entertainment to their students and provide free events. Comedians and bands may perform on campus during college tours.
- Most rural colleges provide on-campus transportation options, such as buses, for students.
- The landscape of rural campuses can vary widely. A rural campus in Ohio, for example, will be much different from a rural campus in Alaska.

SUBURBAN CAMPUSES

Suburban campuses are in small cities, large towns, or residential areas near cities. Here are things to consider about suburban campuses:

- Suburbs often combine some of the best features of urban and rural areas.
- Suburban campuses usually offer access to nearby cities and to outdoor activities.

- Suburban colleges are frequently self-contained, which can create a strong sense of community.
- Suburban colleges often have connections to the towns where they're located. This can provide opportunities such as jobs and entertainment.
- Public transportation may be available in addition to a college's transportation options.

URBAN CAMPUSES

Urban campuses are located in cities. Here are things to consider about urban campuses:

- Some urban campuses are spread throughout a city while others are self-contained within a city.
- Many urban colleges offer off-campus learning experiences. This may mean a chance to explore the work world through cooperative classes and internships.
- Urban colleges tend to attract culturally diverse students.
- Students can find entertainment options—such as museums, concerts, and plays—on and off urban campuses.
- Cities usually offer substantial public transportation options.