

SORTING THROUGH COLLEGE MAIL

It starts as a trickle and, by senior year, turns into a flood: college mail. Your mailbox fills with shiny brochures touting colleges from coast to coast. It's exciting at first, but as months go by and more mail arrives, that college mail can become just another big stack of papers in the corner of your room. Before you consign the whole mess to the recycling bin, check out these strategies for sifting some gold out of the college mail flood.

Take a Closer Look: "No matter how hard colleges try, most brochures wind up looking the same—happy students, bright sunlight, manicured lawns, stately buildings," says Robert Massa, vice president of enrollment, student life and college relations at Dickinson College (PA). "What possible value is it to you to spend time reading these publications from cover to cover? Plenty!"

The trick is to read the information carefully, looking for the college characteristics that interest you. If you already know that you want a small-to-medium-sized liberal arts college located in the Midwest, for example, keep that in mind as you look at college mail.

The text can also offer you clues about the college's "personality" or educational philosophy.

"Seek catch phrases (such as 'interdisciplinary learning,' 'emphasis on research,' 'student-run courses,' etc.) which match with your own sensibilities and values," says Cigus Vanni, counselor at Howell High School (NJ).

When you find a college with characteristics that interest you, put the brochure in a separate box or pile—your "possible" box. When you're ready to start some more in-depth research, the "possible" box will be a good place to start. You can take this strategy one step further by dividing your mail into three boxes:

1. Definitely interested
2. Maybe interested/possible
3. Not interested

Don't throw out the "not interested" brochures yet.

Of course, for this tip to be helpful, you do need some idea of what you are looking for in a college. If you are just figuring that out, reading through brochures from a variety of colleges could be helpful. As you read, make a list of what college characteristics appeal to you. You can refine this list later as you get a better idea of your interests and how they might fit into your college experience.

Organize the Information: A loose-leaf notebook can also be helpful in keeping track of the various colleges. Use one page for each college to start. As you look at the brochures from a college that interests you, jot down such characteristics as size, admission requirements, deadlines for admission and aid, programs that interest you (academic and nonacademic), campus diversity, a description of the surrounding community, and anything else of importance.

If you do this for each college, you will soon have a good basis for further research, plus a quick and easy way to compare colleges using only the aspects that are important to you.

Share the Wealth: Remember that “not interested” box? Before you dump it, check with your counselor. You can also do this informally: you and your friends can get together for a college mail exchange. You can bring the mail you don’t need, and spend a few minutes looking through your friends’ mail.

Taking the Next Step: It is important to remember that college brochures and view books are essentially direct marketing pieces. Their job is to get you interested in the college. Making a decision on whether or not to apply to a college based only on a few brochures is like buying a car just because their television ad looks really cool. The ad may get you to the car dealer, but you still need to test-drive the car before you buy.

So it’s up to you to take the next step. All college brochures have reply cards, which you can fill out to request more information about a college. Be as specific as you can about your interests and the kind of information you want. For example, if you are interested in playing a particular sport at college, note that on your reply cards. Chances are, the college has some literature that focuses either specifically on your sport or on athletics in general.

But don’t stop with college literature. Talk to your guidance counselor, visit the college’s web site, and read about the college in guidebooks and other outside resources. If the college still interests you, plan a visit.

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