

# 4

This **Getting Started Guide** is your source for up-to-date information about choosing a school or program. Use these tips to get organized and motivated—and get going on making your dreams a reality.

## = Get Answers

### questions to ask every school (and why)

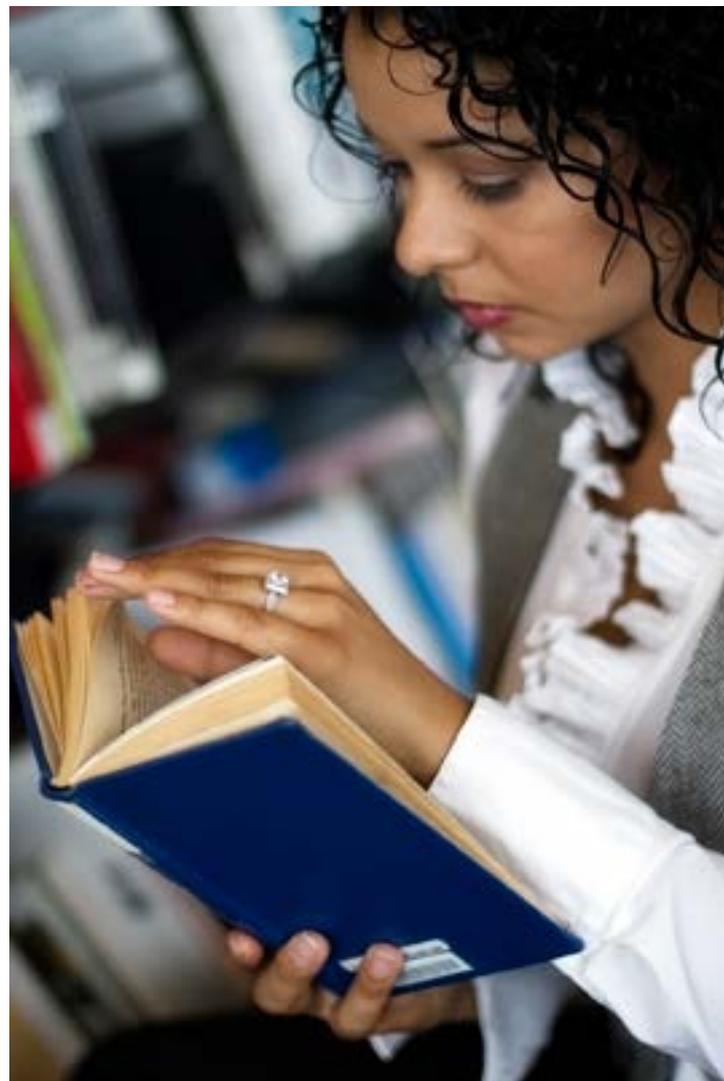


Going back to school for a degree or certificate is a big decision. It forces you to ask deep questions about yourself and your future.

Before you research any schools, turn a lens on yourself. Use these prompts to take a closer look at your motivations, values and goals.

## ☰ Questions to ask yourself.

- What am I good at? What am I not good at?
- Is there a career out there I would love that I haven't thought of yet?
- Where do I want to be in five years? Ten years?
- What matters most: happiness, job security, or financial success?
- What does success mean to me?
- What do I really want to be when I grow up?





## acceptance criteria

- How do you decide who gets accepted?
- What are the prerequisites?
- How important are grades?
- Do I have to take an entrance exam, such as the SAT, GRE or GMAT?
- How do you factor work and life experiences into your decisions about admissions?



## classes offered

- Who can I talk to about the program I want to study?
- What career counseling services do you offer?
- Can I sit in on some classes before I decide whether your school is the right fit for me?
- Is there an alumni network I can reach out to with questions about your graduates' student experiences and careers?

## Questions to ask schools.

### Why ask?

Some schools care a lot about their applicants' grades and test scores. Others have a more flexible admissions policy that welcomes a wider variety of students.

Life and work experience can count for as much as—if not more than—grades and test scores. Be sure to ask. School websites and brochures might not cover this topic in detail.

Sometimes the best way to learn about a field that interests you is to talk to someone who teaches in that department.

Recent graduates and experienced professionals in your field can also be great resources.



## Notes

Use this space to take notes when you speak to a school advisor.



## scheduling

- How much flexibility will I have when it comes to choosing classes?
- Can I take classes at night or on weekends?
- Can I study part-time some semesters and full-time others?
- Can I take some classes online and others on campus?



## expected cost

- How much will it cost me to go to school?
- How much is tuition?
- How much will books cost?
- What about housing?

## Why ask?

Every school is different.

Some offer only on-campus programs, some are all online, and others offer a mix.

Education is a big investment. The first step to mapping out a smart budget is adding up all your costs.

Don't let the numbers discourage you. There are many ways you can make it work out.



## Notes



## financial resources

- What scholarships, grants, work-study programs or loans are available?
- How many of your students rely on financial aid?
- How much of that aid comes in the form of loans?
- How much class time do I need each term to remain eligible for financial aid?
- What's the average amount of debt your students have when they graduate?



## accreditation

- Are your school and the program I'm interested in accredited?
- By what organizations?
- Where can I find more information about your accreditation(s)?
- If you're not accredited, how do you assure students that your programs are of high quality?

### Why ask?

Nationally, about two thirds of undergrads rely on some form of financial aid.

The federal government is the biggest source of financial aid for students, and loans—which have to be repaid—make up the biggest single chunk of federal aid. Grants, scholarships and work-study earnings do *not* require repayment.

Some loans, grants, and scholarships require a minimum number of credit hours for students to receive aid. Ask a financial aid officer for details.

According to U.S. News & World Report, the average amount of

undergrad debt in the U.S. is about \$28,400 as of November, 2014.

Accredited schools and programs have to meet high quality standards.

Federal financial aid is only available to schools accredited by organizations recognized by the U.S. Department of Education.

Certain professional licensing or certification exams are available only to graduates of accredited programs.

Attending an accredited institution may give you a competitive advantage in the job market.



### Notes



## transfers

- Do you accept transfer credits from other schools?
- How do I go about getting my credits transferred?
- What is the appeals process if my credits are not accepted and I want to challenge the decision?
- What is your student retention rate?



## graduation rates

- What's your on-time graduation rate?
- Is increasing your graduation rate a high priority?
- How many of your students get jobs within six months of graduating?
- What job placement services do you offer?
- What are some of the top employers who hire your graduates?\*

\*Be sure to mention the program you're interested in.

## Why ask?

Most schools will accept credits transferred from other schools, but you need to find out if the actual credits you earned will apply to your program.

The transfer process can be complicated. Ask if there's an adviser who specializes in helping transfer students. (in many cases, the answer will be yes).

If most students stick with a school until they graduate, that might suggest that they're happy with the school.

The on-time graduation rate is a tricky topic, especially for schools with lots of post-traditional students who work while going to school.

These students typically take longer to finish their degrees.

Also keep in mind: Most graduation rates do not yet factor in the ebb and flow of transfer students—a very large contingent.

Schools are under pressure to improve how they track their students once they graduate.

A big no-no to listen for: Schools cannot promise that a degree will land you a job. It might increase the odds, but don't believe any claim that a degree is a guaranteed ticket to a certain job.



## Notes

Use this space to take notes when you speak to a school advisor.



## tour

- Can I take an in-person or virtual tour before I make my decision?
- For on-campus programs: Can I sit in on some classes during my tour?
- For online programs: Can I take a trial run to see if online learning is right for me?



## applying

- How do I apply?
- What documents do I need to send?
- Are there any admissions fees?
- How and when will I learn if I get in?

## Why ask?

A school should roll out the red carpet for any student who's interested in getting an up-close look at the campus.

As more programs offer online education as an option, many schools will let you test drive their distance-learning software to help you preview the online learning environment.

Some schools have application deadlines that are set in stone; others offer rolling admissions.



## Notes

Use this space to take notes when you speak to a school advisor.

Sources: U.S. Department of Education; National Center for Education Statistics; The Project on Student Debt  
© 2015 All Star. All rights reserved.