



Picking your path

Government website helps guide you through the complex process of choosing a college

If you have a high school senior with college ambitions in your life, then this is the time of year when the search for the right school starts to heat up.

You probably already have a list of potential schools and may have even done some campus visits. The new year will bring deadlines for school applications and financial aid, which means lots and lots of paperwork. That means you'll need to spend this fall and winter pruning your list, gathering documents and preparing applications.

Plowing through the plethora of resources available to help your senior find the right school can be so overwhelming you might not know where to begin. Not to worry — the U.S. Department of Education is here to help with the recently launched website, **CollegeScorecard.ed.gov**.

The site is the scaled-back solution to President Obama's directive to create an online tool for ranking colleges by value. Institutes of higher learning objected vehemently to the idea of the government ranking them for value. They argued —

probably rightly so — that there are too many factors involved in why someone chooses a school, and what constitutes value (beyond economics) to devise a universal ranking system. So, the site was created as a scorecard with no rankings.

Focus on economics

College Scorecard contains a lot of good information in an attractive, easy-to-use interface. The focus of the site is the cost, graduation rate and earning potential of graduates at each college profiled. It doesn't get into campus culture, amenities, extra curricular activities or any of the other intangibles that define the college experience. This is the biggest criticism of the site. Critics claim that by focusing on economics the site doesn't give viewers the full picture.

That's a valid point, but the site shouldn't be the only source you use when reviewing potential schools. It's a good tool to identify colleges that warrant further investigation. And, while cost and earning potential shouldn't be the only criteria you consider, they are important factors.

The home page features a prominent search tool to find schools. You can search by programs/degrees, location, size and name. There's also an advanced search feature that

lets you filter for public, private, nonprofit, religious affiliation and mission.

There are also some graphics highlighting higher education facts on the home page. Below them are links to lists of featured schools and links to various financial aid resources. At the bottom of the page is a link to the raw data College Scorecard uses to profile schools. This is useful information for researchers or journalists, but most casual users won't have much need for it.

Easy to compare

After you enter your search criteria and click "Find Schools" you're taken to a page that displays the results as a grid with bar charts for each school. The charts, with bars for cost, graduation rates and average salaries of graduates, allow you to quickly scan the results and compare schools. A line through the bars indicates the national average for each category so you can tell if a school is above or below average in the different areas. The schools' locations and enrollments are also displayed.

A link at the bottom of each school takes you to a page with more details. The details include: a map; a link to the school's website; whether it's public or private; city, suburban or rural; small, medium or

large; two-year or four-year; and any religious affiliation.

There are also expandable sections with more information on costs, financial aid, graduation and retention, earnings after school, the racial/ethnic and socio-economic makeup of the student body, SAT/ACT scores and academic programs offered. The cost section has a link to the school's personal cost calculator. The financial aid section has a link to the Free Application for Federal Student Aid.

The graphic representation of each school's cost, graduation rate and earning potential make it easy to quickly compare schools, but it can be misleading, especially the earning potential. Just because a school has a much higher than average salary predicted doesn't necessarily mean your student will earn that. Much depends on the program of study chosen. A school that awards a lot of engineering degrees will have a high average salary. But, if you go there and study for a career in social work you're going to earn less than that average. College Scorecard should consider breaking out earning potential by program instead of an overall average. That would make the site more useful.

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