An Internet Road Map for the College-Bound Student

From building your preliminary college list to completing your applications to getting ready for your first year at college, the Internet can help you in nearly every part of the college search (except for actually making your decisions, that is). But surfing the Web can also eat up time better spent on schoolwork, time with friends, or even sleeping-with no guarantee that you'll find what you're looking for.

To make sure that your time on the information superhighway is fun instead of frustrating, read on for a guide to Internet use for the college-bound.

The On-Ramp
One of the best ways to maximize your time online is the savvy use of search engines (i.e. Google, Yahoo, Dog Pile). You can type in "college admission" and get a list of thousands of sites. So, it's best to have a good idea of what you're looking for: lists of college home pages, financial aid help, applying online, tips on essays?

Beginning Your College Journey
From the very beginning of your college search, the Internet can be a valuable tool. A good place to start is with Web sites that provide databases of colleges. Depending on the site, you can type in the geographical area, size, setting, major(s), and other characteristics that interest you. You'll then see a list of colleges that match your preferences. These "comparative" sites are a great way to generate a long list of colleges to research further. You might find colleges you haven't even thought of.

As with all information online (or elsewhere, for that matter), consider the source before deciding how much to depend on it. Some comparative sites only include the colleges that pay for the privilege of being listed, so you could miss some good options if you rely on only one site. You'll find that some comparative sites have more information than others about individual colleges. Also, a comparative site may not have the most up-to-date information on deadlines and other time-sensitive material. For that, it's best to check the colleges' Web sites directly.

Some sites that offer college search options (as well as other college information) include:

- collegedata.com
- collegeview.com
- eCampusTours.com
- MyCollegeOptions.com
- princetonreview.com

Other Programs

- collegeboard.com
- COOL Web site

There are also many sites about the college admission process in general.

Researching Colleges: Moving on Down the Road

Once you have a preliminary list of colleges that interest you, the Internet can be helpful in researching each college further. The primary ways to research colleges online are through the individual college Web sites and through email contact.

Most comparative sites also provide links to college home pages. There are also simple lists of college home pages, categorized alphabetically or geographically.

Or just type a college's name into a search engine.

The Web sites of individual colleges are often invaluable sources of in-depth information. You can find all the basics-selectivity, size, majors, setting, etc.-in addition to some clues as to what everyday life on campus is like.

Kenneth E. Hartman, author of *Internet Guide for College-Bound Students*, writes that you can find two types of information about colleges, official and unofficial. Official information is what you can learn from the admission office, guidebooks and the college catalog. Unofficial information is the kind you read in the student newspaper, find out from contacting current students and browsing student-made Web pages. And college Web sites are the easiest way to gather unofficial information, short of visiting the college in person.

To make the most of a college's Web site, try these strategies.

- Look at the home pages of individual faculty members in majors that interest you-some post detailed syllabuses of their classes, descriptions of their research interests, and email addresses. If you have a specific question or two about a major, try sending a faculty member a short, polite email introducing yourself and asking your questions (don't ask anything you can find out in the college catalog, though).
- Read the pages for prospective students thoroughly. They will give you basic information about the college, as well as some sense of the mission and priorities of the college.
- Visit the home pages of student organizations-you can check out the schedule for the Drama Club or see what resolutions were passed by the Student Senate.
- Look for the home pages put up by current students at the college. If students list their email addresses, send short email messages to a few of them, asking questions about their college experiences. But don't take a few complaints on one student's home page as gospel; try to look at a good sampling of student pages.
- Find the alumni association pages-what are alumni of the college doing now? What is the college doing for its alumni?

Applying to Colleges: Avoid the Bumps in the Road

The option of applying to colleges online is very common. A few colleges even require online applications (but the vast majority of colleges do not). Computer-minded students will probably feel that applying online is easier and even more enjoyable than the traditional application. (Check out the Web-enabled Common Application, which is accepted by many colleges across the country.)

Whether or not you apply online has no bearing on the college's admission decision. Admission officers are committed to assessing each application on its content, not how it was received.

Two problems can creep up when students apply online, but you can avoid them. First, students who use email and other interactive Internet options for casual correspondence may have a tendency to write their online applications in their usual email language. But online applications should be just as literate and error-free as their traditional counterparts. That means no Internet abbreviations or emoticons, and a well-proofread essay. This advice seems obvious, but some admission officers have noticed that the quality of some online applications has been questionable.

The second problem stems from the relative ease of applying online: submitting too many applications. No matter how easy it may be to push a button and send yet another application, submitting a large number of applications often makes your final decision more difficult. It's better to spend some time researching colleges and narrowing your list rather than applying to a bunch of colleges you don't know much about.

Warning Signs

Not all of the information you find on the Internet is accurate. Anyone can put up a Web site for minimal cost and say anything they want. That means that you need to consider the source of anything you find on the Web. Before depending on information from a Web site, ask yourself the following questions:

- Where is the information coming from? That is, who is sponsoring the site?
- What motives might the person or organization behind the site have for publishing certain information? For example, corporations want to sell their products, and activist organizations want to draw readers to their cause. There is plenty of good information on corporate and activist sites, of course, but be aware that you might be getting only one side of the story.

- Can you find similar information elsewhere, on unrelated sites?
- Are opinions backed up with facts or references to other publications?

Finally, if you have any questions about college admission information you find on the Internet, ask your guidance or college counselor.

Don't Leave the Dirt Roads Behind

The Web can be very useful in the college search, but sometimes the traditional avenues are just as valuable. No matter how detailed a Web site is, it can't take the place of visiting a campus or talking to people who know the college first-hand. And the Internet is not nearly as helpful when you need to make a big decision about where to apply or to attend. For that, you need to consult your own goals, feelings and thoughts-and your best help may be a real-time conversation with your family or your college counselor.

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