

DREAM SCHOOLS, TARGET SCHOOLS, AND SAFETY SCHOOLS

It's impossible to know your child's odds of getting into any specific college. Applying across multiple levels of selectivity lets you dream big while making relatively certain they'll get in somewhere.

THE SHORT LIST OF SCHOOLS

your child intends to apply to defines a specific set of possible futures. There are no guarantees in this exciting, hope-filled, nerve-wracking, highly competitive process, so defining this list is crucial for optimizing your child's chances of getting into a school that's a great fit. An applicant who aims too high across the board runs the risk of being locked out of admissions entirely. But one who plays it too safe might receive a stack of acceptance letters...to schools that can't help them

reach their full potential, leaving them forever wondering about what might have been.

That's why many applicants choose a strategy (recommended by The Princeton Review) of applying to schools across a high to low selectivity range—Dream schools, Target schools, and Safety schools—that's likely to include, somewhere in the range, their best-fit college. By helping

your child develop a personal set of ideal schools at each of these three selectivity levels, you'll help them optimize their chances of getting into schools that are right-sized for their dreams and achievements, no matter how selective this year turns out to be.

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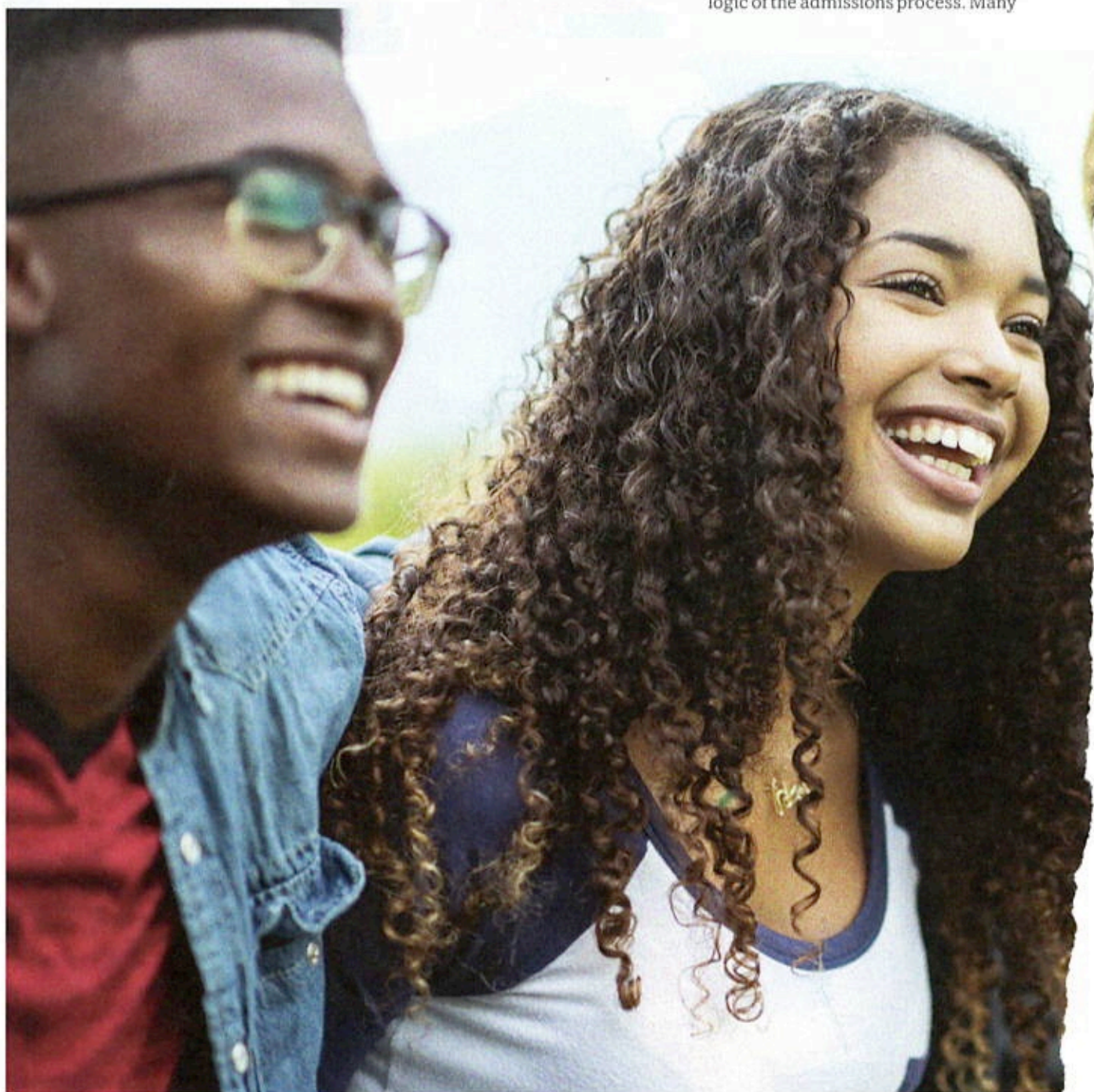
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■ **Dream schools** are the ones your child would very be happy to be accepted to, but which carry higher average standards than they've achieved, or are highly selective, making acceptance less likely but not impossible. For these schools, carefully crafted essays and engaging interviews could score some extra points to throw an on-the-bubble applicant over the top.

■ **Target schools** are those whose applicants' average GPA and standardized test scores match well with your student's credentials, making acceptance likely, though not guaranteed. It's here that teens should feel comfortably competitive against a proven set of standards, but still need to put their best foot forward on their applications.

■ **Safety schools** generally have lower average test scores and requirements than either Dream or Target schools—these are the schools that would be very happy to enroll your child. The importance of including safety schools in the application pool cannot be overstated. Colleges are fiercely competitive today, and unknown factors (such as what a certain college considers their “best fit” or an immense number of competing applications) can disrupt the normal logic of the admissions process. Many



students end up enrolling at what they had considered a Safety school: Sometimes this turns out to be a great four-year fit; sometimes this can be a solid stepping-stone to transfer later. (See "Changing Course," page 86.)

How many colleges should a student apply to? "Five to eight applications are usually enough to ensure that a student is accepted into a suitable institution," advises The College Board. Choosing two or three schools from each of the three tiers would yield between six and nine colleges.

But some students these days apply to as many as ten, or even twenty—making admission somewhere more likely, perhaps, but piling up application fees for their parents.

The cost of education is no small concern for parents, and needs to be taken into account when choosing schools. Paying for tuition can be a bottomless pit of stress for parents, and even student loan options, for credit-less minors, often require family assistance. There are cost-saving secrets your family can take

advantage of, like scholarships and grants; we cover the general strategy for this in our "Paying For It All" section starting on page 54. But in terms of individual schools, most colleges have scholarship information listed on their websites, and you can always call a prospective school's financial aid office to inquire about financial assistance and work-study programs that can significantly reduce the price tag.

Once you've narrowed down your student's prospective Dream, Target, and Safety choices, visiting the city and/or campus can be one of the most exciting parts of the decision-making process. If in-person tours aren't available or feasible, you and your student can usually watch online tours of the facilities and activities, either sanctioned by the university on its website, or by student YouTubers. Student-submitted videos sometimes offer the best sense of campus life across colleges, as watching unscripted activities and interactions among their peers can give your child a unique peek into campus culture.

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All things considered, assembling your child's personal short list for college applications comes down to finding a set of best-fit schools that's within the family budget. With a little planning and research, you may find some hidden gems, like a too-expensive college that offers a financial aid package that brings it within range, or a Safety school that has an honors program that makes it more challenging. Take the time to explore the options, and you can help your child find great schools that can guide them to a bright future without breaking the bank.

