



GUTENBERG  
COLLEGE

PATHWAYS TO COLLEGE  
FIND ALIGNMENT • LOCATE A MENTOR

WORKSHOP

Presented by Eliot J. Grasso, Ph.D.

Provost & Tutor

egrasso@gutenberg.edu

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Overview

Our culture presents us with mixed messages and convoluted thinking about college. When people think of the college application process, the most prominent issues tend to be the financial costs involved, the reputations of various institutions, and the perception that going to college “sets one up” for an easier life by promising employment because of a degree earned.

While all these factors contribute to thinking about pathways to college, I believe that a more helpful way to think about college foregrounds the purpose of higher education: the pursuit of truth and skills in an educational environment created by mentors who are aligned with a student’s needs and values.

There are many kinds of colleges, and each college can offer the opportunities to develop different skills. The purpose of this document is to equip families with the right kinds of questions to research before they invest in a college.

The most important question that a family needs to ask when considering college for a child is this:

What kind of **educational environment** will facilitate the student’s goals and objectives?

An educational environment that offers highly transferrable skills—such as critical thinking, clear communication, and complex problem-solving—is desirable. On average, a person will hold 10 jobs by age 40, and that number is projected to grow. Therefore, a program that

focuses on transferrable skills needed for a variety of jobs is the best option for long-term sustainability.<sup>1</sup> Since lecture-based education is largely passive for students, active discussion-based environments tend to do better in cultivating these critical skills.

In any institution, the faculty (teachers) create the educational environment in which your child will be developing while in college. Since education centers on a dialogue between a teacher and a student, research the faculty at an institution before you invest.<sup>2</sup> You and your child need to understand (1) who the faculty are, (2) why faculty do what they do, (3) how faculty are selected, (4) how faculty are incentivized, and (5) what faculty offer to students. Below, you will find information and suggestions for how to go about researching the faculty at an institution.

## What to Know About Institutions of Higher Education

### **Incentivizing Faculty: Tenure**

Most institutions of higher education offer **tenure** to their faculty. Tenure is a life-time position at the college where the faculty member teaches, and it serves as a major incentive because of the job security it provides. The incentive of tenure governs how faculty will choose to spend their time. When a new faculty member starts, s/he has to perform in three areas: (1) research, (2) teaching, and (3) service. **Research** includes new publications that advance the faculty member's field. **Teaching** is work done in the classroom with students. **Service** is time spent on various committees. Duties in research, teaching, and service are logged in the faculty member's tenure file. After several years, the tenure file is reviewed, and the administration either offers or withholds tenure for the faculty member.

### **Research vs. Teaching Institutions**

There are two basic types of institutions: (1) **research institutions** and (2) **teaching institutions**.

**Research institutions** require faculty members to publish work that advances their field while also asking them to teach. At research institutions, publications weigh heavily in the decision to offer a faculty member tenure or not.

**Teaching institutions** require faculty members to do significant amounts of teaching, and the teaching requirement is more significant than the research requirement. Teaching institutions incentivize their faculty to interact with students, and they weigh student

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<sup>1</sup> In a study conducted by the Association of American Colleges and Universities, seventy-four percent of business and nonprofit leaders say they would recommend a liberal education to college and university students for long-term professional success. Ninety-three percent of employers surveyed say "a demonstrated capacity to think critically, communicate clearly, and solve complex problems is more important than [a candidate's] undergraduate major." "It Takes More than a Major: Employer Priorities for College Learning and Student Success." 2013. Washington, DC: Association of American Colleges and Universities and Hart Research Associates. [https://www.aacu.org/sites/default/files/files/LEAP/2013\\_EmployerSurvey.pdf](https://www.aacu.org/sites/default/files/files/LEAP/2013_EmployerSurvey.pdf).

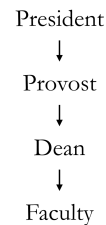
<sup>2</sup> A college may have a great reputation for a variety of things (facilities, food, extracurricular activities, sports, etc.), but this reputation may have nothing to do with what takes place between the teacher and the students.

evaluations and observations more heavily than publications when deciding to offer a faculty member tenure or not.

In research institutions, faculty may have less time and less incentive to interact with students outside the classroom due to heavy research requirements. Renown faculty at well-known institutions may or may not be assigned to undergraduate courses where your child will be studying. Instead, research institutions may hire teaching assistants for such classes to protect the research time of renown faculty. Your institution of choice may have renown faculty members, but those faculty members may or may not be available to interact with your child.

## The Structure of Institutions

It is ultimately the dean's responsibility to assign courses to faculty members. Thus, the dean is directly responsible for building the faculty who will create the educational environment at a college. The chain of hiring looks like this:



## Adjunct Faculty

A faculty member can be **TTF** (tenure-track faculty) or **NTTF** (non-tenure-track faculty). The most common type of NTTF faculty member is the **adjunct**. An adjunct is a faculty member who is hired as a contractor on a per-year or per-class basis rather than receiving a lifetime appoint through tenure. Adjuncts are not compensated as well as tenured faculty and, consequently, may need to teach at a variety of institutions to make a living. An adjunct may or may not have time to interact with students outside of class and may or may not have a serious investment in the bigger philosophical/educational picture of the institution that your child attends.

## Adjunct Faculty, Budgets, and Fragmentation in an Educational Environment

It is cheaper for institutions to hire adjuncts seasonally than it is for them to hire tenured faculty. Thus, institutions may employ many adjuncts to teach in lieu of one tenured faculty member. The more adjuncts there are at an institution, the more fragmented an educational environment can become. Fragmentation is caused not by the quality of teaching, since adjuncts are no less skilled than tenured faculty, but by the level of adjunct-faculty investment in the institution caused by fewer incentives. Faculty who are hired “for life” (tenured) are more likely to be invested in the long-term health of an institution and its educational environment than those who are hired on a seasonal basis.

## What to Do: Research the Faculty & Find a Mentor

Education is fundamentally relational. Your child will be well-served if s/he can build good relationships with teachers. You need to learn whether or not a college aligns with your student's needs and values.

Your research objective is to locate a mentor for your child. **Faculty profiles** on college websites tend to be geared toward professional accomplishments and awards. You will need more than a list of accomplishments to determine whether a faculty member will be a good mentor to your child. When children leave homes to attend college, they will have to survive. They will have to make decisions about what kinds of compromises they will make socially and financially to survive. They will benefit from having someone at their college who can serve as a mentor, someone with whom they can dialogue about serious life issues who will listen well and give sound counsel when asked. The mentor *might* be a faculty member, but your research might reveal that your child will need to go in a different direction.

**DO THIS #1:** Email/call the dean with the questions below. (Note: larger universities may have multiple deans—locate the dean in the department/school of your child's area of interest).

### Questions to ask the dean about hiring protocol for faculty members:

- a. Does your institution offer its faculty tenure? Why or why not?
- b. Does tenure hinge more on research or teaching?
- c. What personal qualities do you look for in faculty before you hire them or give them tenure?
- d. Do you employ adjuncts?
- e. How are adjuncts selected?
- f. What percentage of classes are taught by adjuncts? Why?
- g. Do students have advisors? What makes a faculty member a good candidate to be an advisor? What role does an advisor play in the life of a student while the student is enrolled?

**DO THIS #2:** Email faculty members in your child's area of interest and see if they will answer questions about how they teach and why.

### Questions to ask faculty members:

- a. Why do you teach?
- b. What is your philosophy of teaching?
- c. What drew you to your subject area of interest?
- d. What do you want for your students?
- e. How do you believe that interacting with you (the teacher) achieves these ends?
- f. Are you available to meet with students outside of class time and outside of office hours? Why or why not?

**DO THIS #3:** Research the faculty in your child’s department of interest on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and LinkedIn.

- a. What are the instructors’ worldviews?
- b. What are the instructors’ religious/political beliefs?
- c. How do they handle disagreement?
- d. What kinds of articles/images do they post?

If it looks like a faculty member might not be the best option for a mentor, research campus ministries, churches, and community organizations. Find someone who can connect with your college-bound child.

### **Does the Instructor’s Worldview Matter in the Educational Environment?**

**Audrey**, a junior at Gutenberg College who graduated from Classical Conversations, said this:

“I’ve found that having college instructors who share my basic worldview is helpful in encouraging me towards truth during this great life transition. But further, I think it is important having instructors who acknowledge where a student is in their process (wherever that may be) and are comfortable with dialogue. I feel like it is a combination of these two things that truly helps grow a student.”

**Trisha**, a sophomore at Gutenberg College who was homeschooled, said this:

“Worldviews change what a person values in an education, in writing, in discussion. If your basic worldview doesn’t match with your professor, you end up with a massive gulf, and the people offering you the education often won’t present you with the things you believe are valuable and want to pursue. Opposing ideas are important. They cause growth and can help create both confidence when you find out you are right, and humility when you learn you are wrong. A teacher should differ enough to challenge you and bring you different angles on ideas. But when a person disagrees with you fundamentally, it makes it all the more difficult to communicate with them, and that is not a problem you want between you and an instructor.”