blueprint

FREE GUIDE

The College List Playbook

How to build a list that actually fits you, the way a $5,000 counselor would.

Most college lists are built backwards. A student picks a few famous names, adds a "safety" they would hate, and calls it done. Families who can afford it pay a private counselor five thousand dollars to fix exactly this. Here is the same method, free.

1. What a good list actually is

A good list is not a ranking of the best schools. It is a small set of colleges where three things are all true at once: **you can get in, you can afford it, and you would genuinely be happy there**. Miss any one of those and the school does not belong on your list, no matter how good it looks on a sweatshirt. The whole job is balance: protect yourself from the worst case while keeping a real shot at the best case.

2. The three tiers, defined honestly

Every school is a Safety, a Target, or a Reach. The tier is about your odds at that specific school given your grades and scores, not the school's fame.

- **Safety.** Your numbers are clearly above the school's typical admitted student, and you can afford it. You need at least two, and you have to actually like them.
- **Target.** Your numbers land in the middle of the admitted range. A coin flip, roughly. Most of your list lives here.
- **Reach.** Your numbers are below the typical admit, or the school admits so few people that it is a reach for almost everyone. Every highly selective school is a reach, even for a 4.0.

One rule that saves students every year: a school is only a safety if you would be happy to attend. A place you would resent is not a safety. It is a trap.

3. How many of each

A balanced list is usually eight to twelve schools, shaped like this:

2 to 3	4 to 5	2 to 4
SAFETIES	TARGETS	REACHES

If your list is all reaches, you are gambling. If it is all safeties, you are selling yourself short. The shape matters more than the names.

4. Fit is five things, not one

Selectivity gets all the attention, but the students who end up happy chose on fit. Score every school on these before it makes the list:

- **Academic fit.** Do they actually have your major, and teach it well?
- **Financial fit.** Can your family pay the real price after aid? The one families skip.
- **Size and setting.** Big or small, city or quiet town. This shapes daily life more than prestige.
- **Outcomes.** Do graduates get where you want to go?
- **The gut check.** Can you picture yourself there, and not hate it?

5. Financial fit, the one nobody plans for

The sticker price is almost never what you pay. What matters is the **net price**: cost after grants and scholarships, for a family like yours. Two schools with the same sticker can cost your family fifteen thousand dollars a year apart once aid is in.

Build one **financial safety** into your list on purpose: a school you can afford even if no extra aid comes through. It is the most important safety you will have, and the one most lists are missing.

6. The mistakes that sink a list

- **All reaches, no plan.** It feels ambitious. It ends in April with no good options.
- **A safety you would hate.** A safety you resent is not protection.
- **Prestige over fit.** Choosing a name over a place you would actually thrive.
- **Ignoring cost until spring.** By the time the aid letters come, the list is already set.
- **Copying someone else's list.** Their grades, budget, and goals are not yours.

7. Your ten-minute action plan

1. Write down your GPA and test scores (or "test optional" if that is your plan).
2. List every school you are curious about. Do not filter yet.
3. For each, look up the middle range of admitted students and honestly mark it Safety, Target, or Reach.
4. Cut anything you could not afford or would not attend.
5. Rebalance to the shape above: a couple of safeties, a core of targets, a few reaches.
6. Confirm one of your safeties is a financial safety.

That is a real list. Not a wish, a plan.

The shortcut

Everything in this guide is what Blueprint's free quiz does automatically. Answer a few questions about your grades, your budget, and what you want, and it builds your reach, target, and safety list from real data on nearly two thousand US colleges, with the net price for a family like yours already worked out. **The guidance families pay $5,000 for, free for every student.**

Take the free quiz at applywithblueprint.com