

## **Understanding Educational Systems**

*What You Need to Know and Look for When Researching School Options*

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## Understanding Educational Systems

There are many different types of schools that offer various types of education and credentials. The best way to view a school is to consider what kind of degrees or credentials it grants to its graduates. Basically, schools can fall into two categories: Private and Public (state-supported).

### ***Private schools***

A private school is a school for which a student must pay the entire cost of her education. Private schools are, therefore, often much more expensive to attend. They also often may have stricter entrance requirements. Because of their higher tuition rates and admissions requirements, some people believe that an education from a private school is more prestigious than one from a state school.

Private schools can vary greatly in size. Some can be very small (just a few hundred students) to extremely large. For example, Scripps College in Claremont usually admits less than 200 students each year; whereas, USC has over 30,000 students.

### ***Liberal Arts Colleges***

A private, Liberal Arts College is a school that is normally going to place an emphasis on general world knowledge, rather than on preparation for a career. There will be more general education courses than job preparation courses. A liberal arts education is particularly suited to someone whose educational intention is to “search for knowledge and truth.” Today’s liberal arts colleges are usually designed with the “traditional” student (enters directly out of high school, and financially supported by parents) in mind.

Often Liberal Arts Colleges are small and may likely place an emphasis on close, personal interaction between the faculty and students. These schools usually offer smaller classes (60 students or less) – sometimes as small as 10 students per class.

### **Religiously Affiliated Schools**

All schools, which have a religious affiliation in the United States, are private because the government cannot support or endorse any specific religion. Many of the larger religions and denominations have schools designed to educate people about their religion, value systems, and possibly to train their future religious leaders. There are a few things to think about when considering a religious school.

**Why are you considering a religious school?** If you want to increase your understanding of your religion and deepen your faith, then you will definitely want to make sure your school’s basic beliefs are in alignment with yours. If not, you may have trouble. To find out what their beliefs are, check for their Statement of Faith, as it will spell out what they believe.

**Are you assuming that attending a religious school means there will be no crime or other behaviors you consider to be inappropriate?** These schools may openly oppose such things, and even actively attempt to stop it. However, it is important to remember that individual people (students, faculty, and staff) have free will, and therefore can choose to disregard rules. We live in an imperfect world; therefore, it is impossible to totally avoid such behaviors.

**Does the school require that you study its religious beliefs?** Most undergraduate programs at religious schools may require that you take a minimum number of classes to learn about its religion. Some graduate level programs will not require the formalized religious training, but some will. It is important that you find this out. Remember, if you do not want to learn about a religion, then you should not attend a religious school.

**Does this school require its students to embrace the faith it teaches?** Some schools will require you to go through great lengths to prove that you embrace their religious beliefs. Yet, other schools do not require that you embrace the faith that it teaches.

A private institution is completely within its right to require its potential students to embrace its faith. If you do embrace their beliefs, this should not be a problem for you. If you do not, then you might want to ask yourself why you would want to attend a school that teaches things you do not want to learn.

**Does this school expect you to engage in particular religious activities or hold to some character ideals?** Some will expect you to attend particular religious activities (i.e. be an attending member of a church community; attend chapel three times a week; and/or engage in volunteer activities, etc.) Some will expect new students to hold to particular lifestyle choices (i.e. no one who is divorced, etc.) Some religious schools will require that you abstain from certain behaviors (i.e. drinking, pre-marital sex, dancing, etc.). You should find out what kind of lifestyle expectations the school will hold of their future and current students. If so, ask yourself if these expectations are acceptable to you.

### ***Vocational schools***

Vocational schools can be either private (for-profit or not-for-profit) or public (state supported). Vocational schools are designed with one purpose in mind – to develop the skills needed to gain immediate employment. This kind of training also includes police and fire science academies. Vocational schools do not require general education courses, or other classes, which do not directly relate to the job for which the student is being prepared. Vocational schools may offer a few different programs of study. **Vocational school classes usually will not transfer to, nor be applied towards, a bachelor's degree at a traditional university.** However some private, vocational schools do offer their own bachelor's degrees (ITT, DeVry, University of Phoenix, etc.). If you are considering one of these schools, you should find out how many, if at all, the units acquired will transfer to a traditional university.

### ***Public (State-supported) schools***

Public schools are often referred to as “state schools”. State-supported schools are institutions, which get most of their financial support from the state government. Because they are state supported, the tuition rates are usually substantially lower than the tuition rates at private schools. The primary purpose of state-supported school system is to make education a truly equal opportunity by giving everyone an opportunity to obtain a college education. Generally their entrance requirements may not be as strict as those of private schools. Generally, unless the program or school is impacted (more applicants than they have openings), a student who meets the minimum entrance requirements will be admitted. If a school or program is impacted, then the entrance requirements will be stricter.

State supported schools cannot, because of “separation of church and state,” offer specific religious training programs. Therefore, if by chance, you are interested in receiving any kind of religious education, then a state school would NOT be an appropriate choice. Keep in mind that most programs of theological study are offered at the graduate level, meaning that a masters or doctorate degree is required, and a degree in theology cannot be obtained from a state school. However, the undergraduate education needed to prepare to enter school of theology can be obtained from a state school should the individual decide this is appropriate.

### **California System of Higher Education:**

In California, the system of public higher education has a three-tiered system: 112 Community Colleges, 23 California State Universities (CSU), and 10 Universities of California (UC). Each system serves a different purpose, and has different entrance requirements.

#### **Community Colleges**

California’s 112 Community Colleges are designed to provide equal and open access to education. This means they are state funded, therefore they are supposed to be affordable. It also means that they have an “open access” admissions philosophy – **all adults can be admitted regardless of academic preparedness**. In California, they offer vocational training programs, the first two years of general education leading towards a bachelor’s degree, and basic or remedial skills development (less than college-level math, reading, writing, study skills, etc.) classes.

Because community colleges promote open access, the institutions understand that not everyone who starts school will finish – some lack motivation, purpose, focus or are not prepared for the academic challenges that face them. This is both a blessing and a curse. The blessing is that the person, who for whatever reason, did not do well in school as a child, is given an opportunity to develop those skills which he lacks, complete his general education classes, then transfer to the four-year school of his choice. The curse is that since people will enter with all levels of academic and emotional preparedness, many people may wind up taking classes for which they are not prepared. For example, a person who lacks basic writing skills and does not know how to use the library will have difficulty when taking a class where she is expected to write a research paper. Fortunately, however, most of these schools are actively and continuously working at developing programs to address these issues.

Community colleges are usually much smaller than a CSU or UC, and their classes will seldom reach more than 40 students per class.

### **California State Universities**

**The 23 California State Universities have been charged with one primary purpose – to focus on teaching at the undergraduate (Bachelor’s degree) level.** Most of the educational programs they offer are at the Bachelors level. They offer all levels of classes between first and second year general education through the fourth year courses. The university is designed for people who are academically prepared; therefore they will typically only offer a minimum of pre-college level classes designed to help those people who “slipped through the cracks” – that is, were admitted without the minimum level of skills needed to succeed. These schools will offer several Masters level degree programs, but this is not their emphasis. They were originally not expected to offer doctorate degrees, but a few have recently started to offer limited Ed.D. (Doctor of Education) degrees for public school administrators.

Their admissions requirements are stricter than the community colleges – they are NOT open access. They will generally have specific entrance requirements, which are designed to admit the top 30 percent of high school graduates as first-time freshmen. See note on following pages for how economic downturns affect university entrance requirements.

Generally speaking, CSUs are easier to get accepted by as an Upper Division Transfer student than as a First Time Freshman. An UD-transfer student does not need to provide high school records or test (SAT, ACT, etc.) scores, because his/her admissions requirements are met by completing Lower-Division GE requirements at the community college. Basically, it is understood that a student who can succeed through the first two years of GE study should be able to succeed in a university.

**Another characteristic of the California State University is that it is a “teaching” institution rather than a “research” institution.** In the culture of higher education, full-time faculty is expected to do three primary things: 1) Conduct research and publish, 2) Teach, and 3) Provide service to the school and/or community. When a school claims to be a “teaching” institution, it means that its faculty is expected to place more emphasis on teaching than on research. Therefore, the faculty actually teaches the classes; and they are expected to engage with the students. The advantage is that the students have direct contact, possible mentoring, and potential references from their teachers.

Finally, the last characteristic of the CSU to consider is the size of the campus. Generally, a CSU could be considered a “medium” sized college/university. They are generally bigger than a community college and most small private liberal arts colleges, but smaller than a University of California and other large universities (USC). They may have class sizes that range from 30 – 250 or more students depending on the school.

### **University of California**

The ten Universities of California (UC) are charged with an emphasis on advancing research (i.e. finding a cure for cancer, etc.) and to focus on providing advanced education (including masters

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and doctorate degrees). They offer undergraduate degrees, and many students will pursue their undergraduate degree programs there, **but the emphasis is placed on research and advanced education**. Therefore many undergraduate classes – especially general education – can be very large (up to 500 to 1,000 students or more) and are often taught by graduate student assistants instead of the faculty.

Their admissions requirements are stricter than the CSUs and they are not open access. They will generally have specific entrance requirements, which are designed to admit the top 10 percent of high school graduates as first-time freshmen.

Another characteristic of the University of California is that it is a “research” institution rather than a “teaching” institution. As mentioned earlier, in the culture of higher education, full-time faculty is expected to do three primary things: 1) Conduct research and publish, 2) Teach, and 3) Provide service to the school and/or community. **When a school claims to be a “research” institution, then its faculty is expected to place more emphasis on research than on teaching**. Therefore, the faculty teaches fewer classes so they can focus on their research. Instead, often graduate students wind up teaching many classes.

Finally, the last characteristic of the UC to consider is the size of the campus. Generally, UCs could be considered “large” sized school. Sometimes they can be as large as a city.

### ***Economic influences on higher education:***

The information presented in this document will generally hold true during normal economic activity. However, it is important to realize that when resources are tight, this will impact higher education as much as any other industry. Generally, during tight economic times, you might see some of the following trends:

- One of the first things most schools do when facing budget cuts, is to cut back the number of classes they offer. For example, instead of offering 15 sections of freshman writing classes, they may only offer only 10. This means that there are fewer classes available and fewer opportunities for all students to get the classes they want.
- Another thing most schools are likely to do is to reduce the number of teaching opportunities they can offer to their part-time teaching staff, and instead require those classes to be taught by the full-time teaching staff. Or, they will hold off hiring new full-time faculty and staff and therefore depend even more on their part-time faculty to fill the void left by retirements, deaths, resignations, etc.
- During economic downturns, many more people (especially mature adults who get laid off from jobs) will go back to school. In addition, people who are worried about losing their jobs will also start to go back to school because they want to make sure their skills are up to date. Most of them will wind up in either the community college, or private vocational schools. However, some will go into the universities as well. This means you will see more working adults going to school during difficult times.
- When universities (including public) find they have more students than they can provide classes and resources for, they will engage in stricter “enrollment management” practices. This means they are likely to make their admissions requirements tougher (i.e need a minimum of 3.0 GPA instead of 2.5 GPA, reduce admissions to only once a year instead

of year round, etc.). This means students will likely have a harder time getting into the university of their choice when the economy is bad. Some students will be ready to transfer to the university, but may find that they can't get in due to the stricter requirements, so they stay at the community college until they can get in.

- Many people who would otherwise prefer to be in a private school may choose to leave the private school and attend a state-supported school to save money. Therefore, these schools may see a decrease in student populations. (Or many people may choose to go to the private schools to avoid the crowds at the public schools.)
- All of these combined influences may mean that community college students may find it hard to get the classes they need when they need them. This may cause their education to take longer than it would during normal economic times.

### **What to Consider When Choosing a School**

1. ***Accreditation:*** Accreditation is to schools what licensing is to doctors, lawyers, architects, cosmetologists, and other professional occupations – it gives credibility to its holder as being legitimate. Note that not all institutions are accredited, but if they are not, your education will likely not be considered legitimate or accepted by the rest of the world. For example, I have personally met several people, who received their Bachelor's degree from unaccredited schools, not be able to be accepted into a Master's degree program because the school from which they received their bachelor's degree was not accredited. These people usually wind up having to get a second bachelor's degree from an accredited school before they can get into their desired master's program.

There are two types of accreditation: 1) Regional accreditation by the academic world; 2) Accreditation within the discipline (i.e. business, architecture, engineering, education, medicine, etc.) Regional academic accreditation is the most important of the two. **In the western U.S. the accreditation to have is WASC (Western Association of Schools and Colleges).** A western school that is not WASC accredited will likely not be eligible to receive financial aid for its students. Also, other schools will most likely not honor its coursework. Therefore be sure the school has WASC (or its local equivalent) accreditation.

If you go to the school's "About" page on their website, or look at their catalog, it will tell you what kind of accreditations it possesses. Or, you can check this website for accreditations: <http://ope.ed.gov/accreditation/>

2. ***Type of school:*** Do you have a preference whether or not you go to a state or private school? Is tuition cost important to you? Do you want more personal attention? Your answers to these questions may direct your choice about private/state schools.
3. ***Statistics on 'Student Success':*** It is advisable to look into the schools' success rate with its students: If this is a community college, how many students actually transfer to a higher-level school? How many students persist from one year to the next? How long does it typically take students to finish? (i.e. does that '4-year degree really take 7 to finish?) How many actually finish their degrees? How many students receive financial



aid? How much student loan debt do graduates typically hold? How many are able to get a job in their field upon graduation? How many graduates go on to graduate school? Most schools have departments on campus who are responsible for providing statistical data on the campus and might be titled, “Office of Institutional Research” or some other similar name. They will usually post those statistics on their website.

4. Statistics on student success (percentage of students who persist, transfer, graduate, ‘time to degree’, and/or get jobs after graduation, etc.).

5. ***Does It Offer An Educational Program That Meets Your Goals?*** It is important to remember schools just can’t offer a program in every subject. They must choose to focus their resources in their chosen areas of study. For example, Cal Poly Pomona has an excellent reputation in the sciences, but it does not have a nursing program. The school may be top-notch in every other way a person can imagine, but if it doesn’t offer what you are looking for, then it won’t serve your purposes.

6. ***Residency:***

In higher education, “residency” has two meanings: 1) The students’ normal place of living, and 2) Taking classes at the “home” campus. For students who chose to go to a school local to where they have lived their entire life, this should not be an issue. However, for students who go to a school far away from their hometown; transfer, or take classes from campuses other than a “main” campus, then residency is something they should think about.

### **Non-resident students:**

For students who attend a public school, your residency matters because it will affect how much you pay for tuition and may affect admissions requirements. If you chose to attend a public school from your state of residence, you will pay regular tuition fees because public schools are funded by state tax dollars.

However, if you chose to go to school out of state (or out of your country), you will likely pay additional fees as either a “non-resident” (from another state) or as an “international” student (go to that country only to attend school). Non-residents are charged higher tuition because it is assumed they do not pay state taxes. International students often pay a significantly higher fee to attend state schools. The programs and laws that affect non-resident and international students can be complex and subject to change, so if this is an issue, then check the school’s website or catalog for more information on these programs.

For students planning on attending private schools, residency may not be as much of an issue because private schools are not state funded. Therefore, some students may find that there is not much difference in cost to attend an out-of-state public school vs. an out-of-state private school. However, international students will likely still be expected to pay international student fees at private schools as well.

Since international students pay higher fees, many schools will offer special programs to cater to their needs. In addition to researching other issues, international students should

also find out what kind of support systems the schools offer for them. International student services offices may offer things such as assistance with processing forms and documentation, testing assistance, academic counseling, personal counseling, and social activities to help the students adjust to the cultural changes they face. They should also take the time to find out if their program of study requires internships or other forms of work experience while in school, because international students may be limited in the types of jobs they will be able to acquire while in the country on a student visa.

### **In Residency:**

This term refers to taking classes at the actual campus. This is significant because accreditation rules may require schools to require that all graduates take a minimum number of classes “in residence” (on campus). Sometimes students transfer units in from another school. Some schools allow students to take classes off campus. For example, Fuller Seminary in Pasadena, California, has several satellite campuses in Southern California and other states as well. Therefore, people who take most of their classes at a satellite campus may be required to take at least 12 units at the Pasadena campus. I have met people who had to temporarily relocate to the local campus to take classes so they could meet the “in residence” rule.

### **7. Work Experience Required:**

Some schools and/or programs will require its students to either 1) Have prior work experience in the field of study as an admittance requirement; and/or 2) Require that you gain work experience while in their program. The number of experiences; the amount of experience required (months vs. years) and the level of professionalism (volunteer, internship, residency, full-time job, managerial experience, etc.) will also vary.

#### **Admissions Requirement:**

Sometimes having some hands-on experience in the field of study is required before you will be admitted into the program. Experience will often be required for any combination of the following reasons:

- i. **Curriculum:*** The program curriculum is based on the assumption you have real-world work experience. The program is designed to further ones’ professional development. This is common in many MBA (Master’s of Business Administration) degree programs.
- ii. **Ensure ‘Goodness of Fit’:*** Some schools will want to see that the applicant has already had some hands-on work experience to be sure they are entering the program for the right reasons. Many people will want to go into a profession, but may not last long because they are not cut out for the profession (i.e. choosing nursing because it supposedly offers job security.) Requiring prior work experience will hopefully reveal whether or not some are cut out for the field of work.
- iii. **Make Admissions Standards More Competitive:*** Some programs may require prior experience to set apart those who are highly qualified from those who are not. Programs that demand excellence from their candidates and/or programs that are ‘impacted’ (more candidates than openings) may demand more experience to weed out the inexperienced They may also do

this to require more advanced skills/experience upon entrance to the program.

- b. Part of the Curriculum:** Some courses of study may require that you gain tangible, relevant work experience while you are enrolled in their program through volunteering, internships/residencies, and/or professional-level work experience. If internships are required, you will want to find out how many, the number of hours to be completed, whether or not they will likely to be paid or volunteer, the types of experiences and/or employers required, and any other specified requirements, etc.

The amount of work experience required is an important thing to consider for a few reasons:

1. **No Prior Experience:** If you are going to school to prepare yourself for a specific profession, you will need to gain tangible work experience before many employers will consider you to be a viable candidate. If you graduate, but you have no prior experience in the field, then you will likely have a difficult time getting a job after graduation. However, internships or other mandated experiences are often the gateway into the professional-level jobs.
2. **Prior Work Experience:** If you already have a professional-level position in the field you are studying, internships can sometimes feel like an unnecessary burden because they may not give you added experience and may pay less than the current job you have. If you do not need to gain ‘entry-level experience’ in your field, this may not be as helpful to you as it would be if you were inexperienced. However, these people often find they can create an internship project in their current position. You will want to find out if this is an option.
3. **Need a Survival Job:** If you need to work at a ‘survival job’ while you are in school, then you will likely need to work at least two different jobs at the same time: One for money, and one for experience. If so, then you need to worry about juggling priorities, transportation, and potentially conflicting scheduling issues.
4. **Job Placement Assistance:** If you are required to get a related job while in school, will the program help you get that job, or do you need to find it on your own? When you are ready to move on after graduating, will they place you, or are you responsible for getting your own professional-level job? Some programs limit the number of applicants they receive based on the number of internship openings they have available to make sure everyone who makes it that far can be placed in a position. Many schools may have an ‘internship coordinator’ – someone who coordinates job listings, but is not responsible for actually placing you in a job. So how much support you will receive in finding your first (or professional-level job) can make a difference in whether or not you actually get your foot in the door upon graduation. How much training in job search, resume and interview preparation, and “career and life planning” will you have available? Will it be required as part of your professional preparation?

8. ***School and Program/Department Size:*** The school could be small, but the program you are studying could be very large. (*Fuller Seminary is a small school, but most of its students are in the Theology department, so the department is large*) Or the school could be large and the program is small. (*For example, Cal Poly Pomona is a large school, but its History, Communications and Anthropology departments are small.*) Or both could be small; or both could be large. **Again, the larger the school/program, the more resources and choices available to you, and the more you can benefit from its reputation; yet at the same time, the more likely you will become a “nameless, faceless number.”** *The important question to answer is what is more important to you?*
9. ***Program Distinctives:*** How one school teaches a subject may vary significantly from how another institution teaches it. For example, CSU Long Beach and APU both offer Master’s level programs to prepare people for the profession of College Student Affairs, but CSULB emphasizes counseling (it is a counseling degree); whereas APU emphasizes administration (it is an education degree). Consequently, CSULB automatically prepares its graduates to qualify for community college counselor positions, but APU’s program may not. ***What are you hoping to gain from this education?***

If you are trying to get into a training program to prepare for a specific career, take the time to find out what skills you will need to have for that career. Then take the time to be sure the academic program you are considering will actually teach you the skills you need to learn. For example, someone who is considering “counseling” as a career will find that most bachelor’s degrees in psychology will be similar. However they will have many options once they pursue their graduate education. There are many types of counseling (therapeutic, school, career, rehabilitation, etc.), and consequently various training programs will emphasize different types of skills to be taught. For example, therapeutic and school counseling programs may only have one class relating to career counseling, but a degree in career counseling will have 10 – 30 units devoted specifically to career counseling. If you were to pursue a career counseling job, they will want to know how many units in career counseling you completed.

10. ***Its Mission/Philosophy:*** What each school and/or program values can vary significantly. Whether the school is proud of being “open access” or “highly selective in admissions” is just one example of its focus. Even schools of the same religious beliefs can vary significantly in their philosophies. (For example, Masters, Biola, APU and Fuller are all non-denominational evangelical Christian institutions, but they all vary regarding their degree of conservative vs. progressive theologies – Masters is the most conservative, and Fuller is the most progressive on this spectrum.) You will learn a lot about an institution by reading mission statements, philosophy statements, “areas of distinction”, and statements of faith (*for religious schools*). These things are usually found in the “About” section of the institution’s website.
11. ***Reputation:*** As you conduct your research, find out about the school’s and/or program’s reputation for the program you are considering. You can ask the faculty, its alumni, current students, employers who hire their alumni, people at other schools, and

faculty and/or counselors at your current school. However, it is important to remember there is no guarantee you will receive an objective response. Many people will give you their biased opinions. As you ask around, you should get a feel for how the institution/program is regarded. Reputations are important in that with a good reputation comes potential prestige and opportunities.

Be sure to talk to the admissions personnel of the school you are considering. Their job is to find qualified students and help them with the admissions process. However, it is important to remember that when dealing with admissions representatives (and campus tour guides) of schools, their job is to be a “marketing representative” for their institution. So their job is to reflect their school in the best possible light. So their information will also probably be biased as well. However, I have personally known quite a few student services professionals and professors who personally believe that it is in no one’s best interest to encourage students to enter a program when it is apparent that it will not be a good fit. If and when you encounter such people, you can generally trust their judgment.

Another point to consider about reputation of a school is whether or not you are anticipating pursuing additional education beyond this next step you are considering. For example, if you are currently a community college student who wants to become a psychologist, you will have at least two more schools to choose (Bachelor’s degree, and Master’s/Doctorate). If you know that you will be going on beyond this next degree, then you should focus a concern for reputation on the highest degree you plan to achieve, because once you receive it, the ones before it don’t matter much. Therefore, it doesn’t matter if you start off at a community college, and transfer to a state university if you ultimately receive your doctorate degree from a prestigious school with an excellent reputation for that field.

Note: Degree completion programs are increasingly gaining acceptance in the business world as a viable alternative, but they are still not as well received in traditional institutions of higher education. They may often be perceived as the “junk food” of higher education. If you want to pursue a degree beyond a degree completion program, ask about the program’s reputation as that can become important for admissions to graduate school.

**12. Location:** Needless to say, the more convenient and accessible a school is to you, the less of a burden your educational endeavors will become. While this is important, it is not the only factor to consider. In addition, the higher the level of education you pursue, the fewer schools there will be from which to choose. Often times, people will need to relocate out of state to pursue advanced degrees. Issues such as supporting a family, housing, transportation, transitions, and employment needs should be factored into such a decision.

**13. Teaching Style:** There are many ways of learning (lecture, hands-on, online, etc.). Equally, there are many ways of teaching as well. By far the most common style of teaching in higher education is lecture (instructor talks, and students listen, take notes, write papers, and take tests). However, some schools are founded on the idea of

incorporating multiple learning styles into the way they teach. If they do, they will make that very clear in their recruitment strategies. Look for phrases such as: “hands-on”, “kinesthetic,” “multiple learning styles,” “polytechnic learning,” “learn by doing,” “linking theory to practice,” “focuses on Student Learning Outcomes” as an indication that the institution strives on helping its students to learn. Currently such schools are the exception rather than the norm, but increasingly they are becoming more popular.

- 14. *Average Class Size:*** As mentioned earlier, the school’s average class size can vary significantly from 10 to 500 students per class. If you like the traditional lecture method of teaching, a large classroom should not bother you much. However, if you either prefer a kinesthetic teaching style or having an opportunity to get to know your professors, then you will want to be in a school whose average class size is less than 50 students. Intimacy and creative teaching styles are not possible with mega-sized (over 70 students) classes. In addition, with classes of this size, much of the grading, and possibly teaching, is done by graduate student assistants rather than the faculty themselves.
- 15. *Cost of Tuition:*** Just like location, cost of tuition is important, but it is not everything. By law, schools must publish their projected cost of attendance. The factors published usually include tuition, books, housing and living expenses for the area. Be careful when determining the cost that you are not comparing “apples to oranges.” Different schools may publish per unit/ per semester/quarter, per full-time/part-time status, or per year cost. If you find this to be the case, try to convert everything to a “per full-time, per year cost” to be able to make an accurate comparison.
- 16. *Admission Requirements:*** As mentioned earlier, admission requirements can vary significantly from one school to the next. Some will require minimum GPAs, entrance exams, pre-requisite coursework completed, admissions essays and/or letters of recommendations. Also, note how often the school accepts new applicants. Some schools will only admit new students in the Fall; whereas others admit all year round. With religious schools, and some other schools in general, there may be character or lifestyle expectations that are required of applicants. For example, some religious schools may clearly state that students are supposed to abstain from drinking alcohol and/or other behaviors considered to be inconsistent with the faith. Therefore, if you are considering a religious school, look at its expectations of students.
- 17. *Academic Terms:*** What kind of academic term system does this school operate under? Is it a semester system (usually between 13 – 20 weeks), a quarter system (usually about 10 –12 weeks), monthly (4-6 weeks), or otherwise? Shorter-term systems have both advantages and disadvantages. The advantages are that classes are over quickly and you can learn more in a shorter amount of time. This can be good for the person who has a short attention span, is really disciplined, or wants to get through classes sooner. The disadvantage of the shorter systems is that they require a lot of self-discipline. You need to constantly be on top of things and can’t waste any time. – **There is no room for procrastination or floundering.** Also, for subjects, such as math and science, you don’t have a lot of time to learn – you are cramming the same amount of material in a shorter

amount of time. So for subjects that are hard, these short-term classes may turn out to be a disadvantage.

18. *Level of Support:* Most people who work with students (counselors, professors, administrators, and staff members) are highly skilled and experienced at understanding the students and their needs. Most people genuinely do care about their students and truly do want their students to succeed in school and life. In fact, most people who work in colleges find a benefit of their job is an opportunity to positively impact lives.

As mentioned earlier, in large (especially public schools) students are likely to become a “nameless, faceless number” where no one really knows them and where they need to fight for their needs and wants. Oftentimes students are expected to “follow the rules” regardless of their personal circumstances. Whereas in many small and/or private schools, students are likely to have people who know, support, and look out for their best interests; and may be willing to accommodate the rules to meet certain student needs.

Both of these approaches have advantages and disadvantages for students.

In a school where a student is a “nameless/faceless number”, staff members at these schools are fully qualified to anticipate and address various student needs; but the problem is that they often have a much higher number of students for whom they are responsible. Therefore it is usually harder to get to know all of their students as unique human beings. Students who are normally responsible run the risk of being misjudged as being “lazy” or “irresponsible” when they encounter genuine emergencies where they truly do need one-on-one attention. Consequently it is much harder to identify what is truly going on with an individual who may be struggling because there may not be time to find out. Therefore, students need to read and follow directions, anticipate their own needs, solve their own problems, and to learn to become their own advocate. In other words, students learn how to accept responsibility for themselves and their actions as a simple form of survival. In these institutions, students who don’t learn to take responsibility for themselves usually wind up either dropping out, or somehow wind up getting “kicked out” of the school for either academic or administrative reasons. This kind of environment is particularly suited to those individuals who are responsible and independent; or who need to learn how to become responsible and/or independent.

Whereas, students in schools who do offer a lot of support, they may benefit from being known, observed and/or mentored by their professors, counselors and other school personnel. When these staff members have the benefit of knowing their students personally, they are often in a better position to anticipate future needs and to offer “preventive remedies” when the need arises. This kind of personal attention will be particularly suited to the type of person who values intimate relationships and also individuals who tend to get overwhelmed easily; and consequently need more support than do individuals who value being independent. However, there is a disadvantage to receiving so much support: Students are not as likely to need to learn to how accept responsibility for themselves as a way survive. Instead, they are more likely to learn to

## Understanding Educational Systems

expect the system to accommodate their expectations – regardless of whether or not their expectations are appropriate and realistic.