

Making Jewish College Choices
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The decision-making process for selecting a college is exciting, but also fraught with stress and the potential for conflict. The most important information to take from this discussion is really to take a deep breath and relax. Take whatever steps will work to open the lines of communication with your children (or your parents, if the listener is a student!). The opportunity to learn more about one another through this process should not be taken for granted.

That said, there are five basic categories to consider in selecting a school. They are:

Location
Academics
Population
Size
Jewish Life

This conversation will not address one of the other chief factors about which I know you are concerned, and that is cost. But these five factors needed to be considered in the mix with cost, though in many cases cost will make the final decision.

It's also crucial to remember that there is not only one match. Each campus will have its advantages and disadvantages, a balance among all of the relevant concerns. In today's highly competitive environment, it's worth finding building a list of schools with as many places as possible which score high on your students' list of preferences in the five above categories.

Many of the categories above are being well-addressed by high school college advisors. I include them here, however, to make the point that the Jewish part of the decision-making process should rank as high as everything else does.

Parents: in the end, it is your son or daughter who will be spending four years at this school. Please listen carefully to what they have to say and try to keep the lines of communication open. Students: your parents bring a lifetime of wisdom to this

conversation, even if their college experiences seem like ancient history to you. Please be open to their suggestions and be patient when you don't agree.

Let's begin.

Location

There are three aspects of location to consider. First, how far is the school from home? Is it important to be close enough to bring laundry home? Hop on a bus or a train on a moments' notice? Or is it preferable to make a break from the familiar? Would distance will help to build a sense of independence? Next, are there particular geographic preferences? For a skier, southern California may not be a good choice. For someone who hates the cold, Minnesota becomes less desirable. Finally, consider an urban location vs. a small college town? An urban location has more cultural opportunities, more diversity and more variety. It can also have more traffic and congestion, more noise and less of a campus feel. A college town is often defined by coffee shops and bookstores, a sense of intimacy and charm. For some people that environment can feel stifling and limiting, lacking options and resources.

Academics

Standardized testing and grades do a lot to define what the right academic match is – but it's also important to ensure that the school is an environment which will be an appropriate challenged. Beyond that, you'll want to consider the course offerings. Is a school with a core curriculum or a comprehensive set of requirements preferable? Do you want a school where the academics are more of a 'choose your own adventure'? Are there specific subjects which of interest, whether or not as a major? Some schools are known for strength in engineering, others for writing or history. Try to ensure that non-major courses of interest will be an option.

Population

Who goes to this school? What is it known for socially? Is it a big party school? (no comment as to whether that is an advantage or a disadvantage!) To what extent is the social life defined by fraternities and sororities? (note that the traditionally Jewish fraternities and sororities are AEPi, ZBT and SAM, and AEPi and SDT and that they are no longer exclusively Jewish) Are sports a big deal and is being a fan an important part of the experience? Are most of the students on campus drawn from a particular region of the country and is this appealing?

Size

Here, indeed, size can matter. At a larger school, there are generally a greater variety in course offerings, more co-curricular choices and many more people with whom to build a social network. By the same token, a larger school may have several hundred students in introductory courses, with most of the small group work done with graduate teaching assistants. Some students feel that in a larger school their identities are reduced to their ID number. At a smaller school, there is generally a smaller student/faculty ration, a greater likelihood of getting to know the professors personally and greater ease in rising to positions of leadership. Some students feel that a smaller school is stifling, incestuous almost, and that everyone knows everyone else's business.

Jewish Life

Now, the primary focus of the conversation. Here too, most of the options are a matter of preference. I would suggest, though, that just as students evolve dramatically in developmental and intellectual ways while on campus, the same holds true in terms of Jewish identity and spiritual fulfillment. What is important today may be less so tomorrow; the reverse is equally true. That means that choosing a school with options you may not think you need right now is important because you may need them later.

These are questions to ask of the schools under consideration, but also, to discuss with one another. One of the links below will even offer a page you can print out to review, prioritize and share with one another.

Are there Jewish Studies courses available? Every student should try to take at least one Jewish Studies course, no matter their primary field of interest. It's exciting to discover that Jewish Studies are as challenging and sophisticated as Economics or Philosophy or English Literature.

Are there mandatory classes on Shabbat and holidays? If class on Shabbat is a concern, missing one class a week for the duration of a semester can be a problem. Holidays are a more likely challenge. While most professors, given ample notice, will excuse a student for holiday observance (timely submission of work will be looked upon favorably!), knowing what the school's policies are in this regard – also in terms of exams – is valuable.

What kind of Israel activity is there on campus? Are there cultural events? Advocacy programs? Travel opportunities? What is the atmosphere on campus with regards to Israel? (Note here that how the campus responds to anti-Israel

activity is more important than whether or not there have been any incidents. Is the general student body supportive? Has the administration taken action to ensure safe and respectful exchanges of ideas?)

Is there Kosher food available? What does that mean on this particular campus? In some cases, there are full board programs. In others, 'Kosher food available' means a toaster oven and frozen bagel dogs. It's important to know what the options actually are. This is also the case in terms of Passover and whether the arrangements are simply to provide matzah in the dining halls, or something more extensive.

What does Shabbat look like on campus? How many services are held on Friday night? Of which denominations? With what frequency? Is there a Shabbat dinner? Are there services on Shabbat morning? Do students hang out together during the day? Is there a synagogue nearby which welcomes students?

Is there an active Conservative community on campus? Is there a connection with **KOACH**? How regularly do students come together for services? Are there learning programs or community service programs designed specifically for Conservative students? Is there a rabbi, either on the staff or in the local community, who serves this group? Do students participate in international **KOACH** programming, like the annual **KOACH** Kallah (conference)?

What does Jewish life on campus look like overall? How large is the Hillel or JSU staff? How full is the Hillel calendar? Are there cultural events? Community service programs? Learning opportunities?

These are just some of the questions you might ask, to get you started.

How do you find the answers to these and all the other questions this process raises? Of course, the internet is an excellent resource, both for the sites of the individual schools as well as the comprehensive guides, like Barron's. For preliminary answers to the questions about Jewish life, you can also refer to Hillel's Guide to Jewish Life on Campus, <http://www.hillel.org/HillelApps/JLOC/Search.aspx>. Following the PSAT, you can also be sure that there will be a constant flow of glossy viewbooks in the mail. Remember that these are marketing tools. They are a great start, but serious consideration requires probing further.

Make contact with the high school's current alumni, or USY or Ramah alumni, who are on that campus. They can give an honest, first hand assessment of the experience. Their perspectives are extremely valuable.

The most important thing to do is, though, is visit. This won't necessarily be possible for all the schools on the preliminary list, but it's worth visiting as many as possible. Once the list is narrowed down, it makes sense for students to go for a full weekend. These arrangements can be made through Hillel, or through the admissions office.

These instructions are really for the students among you: plan to arrive on Thursday – the weekend really begins on Thursday night on campus and this can give you a sense of what the party culture is like. On Friday, sit in on classes, of varying sizes and in varying topics. Participate in the full Shabbat experience. Saturday night will tell you more about the social scene.

Being a part of the totality of the campus experience when you visit doesn't commit you to anything – but it does give you a full picture of what you'll have to choose from if you should enroll. Each year we get a few calls from students who find themselves in a place bereft of Jewish experience, for having failed to do all their research. We'll do what we can to help, but some campuses just don't have the raw material from which to build a Jewish life.

Should you have questions beyond what appears here, **KOACH** is happy to help, both now and later. Feel free to be in touch with Rabbi Elyse Winick, Associate Director for **KOACH** at winick@uscj.org.

Learn More....

About Jewish priorities in making college choices: <http://koach.org/choosing.htm>

About what to expect from Jewish life on campus: <http://koach.org/guide.htm>

About **KOACH**: www.koach.org

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