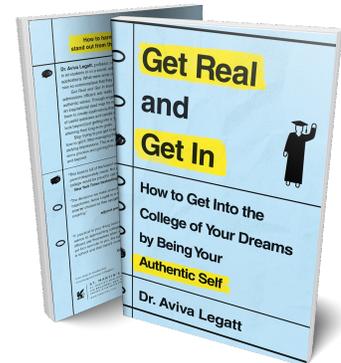


*Get Real and Get In: How to Get  
Into the College of Your Dreams by  
Being Your Authentic Self*

**Reflection Exercise:**

What do you need from college?



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Below is a list of needs your future college *could* meet for you. Beside each item, rank it on a scale of 1 to 4.

1=non-negotiable, 2=important, 3=semi-important, 4=unimportant.

- Long distance from current home
- Friends from high school will be there
- Internship opportunities in my future career
- Politically engaged student body
- Near nature, lots of outdoor activities
- Affordable
- Attractive program in my desired major
- School with high “name brand” recognition, prestigious
- Good sorority/fraternity scene

- Beautiful environment
- Cool college town, lots of off-campus opportunities
- Strong study abroad program
- Strong religious affiliation/spiritual opportunities
- Strong alumni network
- Chance to play collegiate sports
- Diverse student body
- Can drive home easily

This list is by no means comprehensive. You may have a completely different set of priorities than the ones listed here. The point is this: the sooner you get real about what your needs are, the sooner you can cross schools from your list that don't meet them.

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## **School research framework - Example: Carnegie Mellon**

### **(Tepper)**

#### **Question 1: What is the college's culture and character?**

Head over to the university's "about" page on their website and check out "Our Mission and Vision," (or something similar). A school's mission statement is likely to be several paragraphs long, but you might find one sentence that summarizes it.

CMU's Tepper School mission/vision reads like this: "The Tepper School of Business is committed to improving the critical thinking and leadership capabilities of individuals so as to enhance their value to business and society." (That's a bit dry, but hey—it's for a business school!)

The motto is a short phrase or saying that captures a school's history, character, and culture. It provides a sense of the school's values and educational philosophy. Carnegie Mellon University's motto is "My heart is in the work."

For me, this phrase suggests that we can't separate the core of who we are from what we do. Does this sound like you? Perhaps you're more philosophically minded and believe we're a lot more than the work we end up doing in the world. If a school's motto

doesn't align with your own internal compass, it may be best to choose a different school.

## **Question 2: What are the college's strategic goals for the next few years?**

Check for the university's published strategic plan. This document announces an intention to support that plan with resources and, most important for you, with students who can take advantage of those resources. Some college presidents may be looking to enhance community engagement, while others may be looking to advance global opportunities. For Carnegie Mellon and Tepper, key priorities are to "foster innovation and to use data for social good."

This means that Tepper may be interested in students who have launched a nonprofit, have worked with big data, or are highly engaged in volunteer work. Does that align with the work you've been doing throughout high school?

If so, awesome! You can wow an admissions professional by showing them you understand the link between your passions and experiences and the school's stated goals. Conversely, the school can provide you with resources, opportunities, and academic programs to take you to the next level.

### **Question 3: What are the academic choices and how are they structured?**

Does the school use block scheduling (scheduling short but intensive classes), or traditional semesters? Does the school emphasize a core curriculum, or their lack of a core curriculum? What about the subject you're interested in—what kind of research are students and faculty doing within this program?

Think about what you might like to major in and check out those academic programs.

Would going to School XYZ adequately prepare you for a future in that field?

At Carnegie Mellon/Tepper, there are ten concentrations to choose from. The faculty hope students “enhance their skills in quantitative and analytic reasoning,” and the school aims to “provide the social, economic and political context for understanding business decisions in a global environment.” If numbers, data, and the influence of external forces on business decisions fascinate you, Tepper might just be the place for you.

### **Question 4: What college-based initiatives are being funded through donations?**

A more to-the-point way to ask this: where's the money?

Knowing where the money is flowing indicates where school priorities are today or where they may go tomorrow. You can check this out for yourself via press releases on college and university websites. You can also investigate The Chronicle of Philanthropy, at [philanthropy.com](http://philanthropy.com). Check out the academic areas of interest to you. Has your potential program just received a big fat wad of cash? More money means more opportunities—maybe for scholarships, cool new study abroad programs, improved facilities, etc.

Let's look at Tepper again. The Tepper family gave two BIG donations in the last twenty years: they donated \$55 million in 2004 and \$67 million in 2013. Since these donations were received, the school has expanded its facilities and strengthened its global reputation.

You want to know if the school that “puts its money where its mouth is,” i.e. funds the initiatives they claim to care about. Conversely, if your potential college is donating to causes and programs that go against your core values, you don't want to find out about it midway through your first semester.

**Question 5: What connections and relationships can you build with alumni, current students, administrators and professors of the college?**

Establishing contact with people associated with the college can give you a personalized look at life inside. You can get a “sneak peek” to help you determine if said college is really right for you.

Don't know where to find alumni? A quick online search can yield tons of potential contacts. Check out regional alumni groups listed on the college's website; see if there are any alumni you're connected to through your high school, or through social media. Find someone who seems nice and ask if you can give them a call. Or better still, meet for coffee. Going on informational interviews with alumni will give you a sense of what college life is like and how your interests might fit with the opportunities said college offers. But don't stop with alumni! Go on campus visits or attend summer programs. Talk with administrators, current college students, and professors.

Establishing relationships like this will help you identify what elements of the college might fit with your interests. And it doesn't hurt your chances of getting in. The more relationships you build with people associated with the college, the more people you have invested in the fate of your application. AKA, you'll have more people pulling for you—always a good thing!