

From club to College

COLLEGE

PROCESS

DISCOVER YOUR CHOICES, BEST
FITS, ACADEMIC, AND HOW TO
SELECT.

20+ COLLEGES TO CHOOSE! HOW

**2026
JANUARY**



TIMEFRAMES
WHICH CITY

SCHOLARSHIPS & FITS

- SCHOLARSHIP PROGRAM
- FINANCIAL AID
- GRADUATION RATES
- ENROLLMENT SIZE



HOW TO GET ORGANIZED

How to Build Your College List

- Don't start with, "Where can I play?"
- Start with, "Where will I be happy and supported for 4 years?"

Use these categories to build and refine a list of schools.

1. Academics

- Majors offered
- Do they offer what you think you might want? (e.g., nursing, business, engineering, education, etc.)
- If you're unsure, look for schools with lots of options and strong advising.
- Academic level
- Is this school a reach, match, or safety for your grades/test scores?
- Do they have academic support for athletes (tutoring, study hall, advisors)?

Player task:

1. Write down 3–5 majors you might be interested in.
2. When you look at a school, check: "Does this school have at least one of these?"

2. Coaching Staff & Volleyball Program 🏐

- Coaching style
- Watch match videos on YouTube/ESPN+/school site: how do they coach? Energy? Communication?
- Ask current or former players (if you know any) what the culture is like.
- Program fit
- Level of play (D1, D2, D3, NAIA, JUCO) and conference strength.
- Are you likely to compete for playing time there by year 2–3?
- Stability
- How long has the head coach been there?
- Is the staff turning over constantly?

Player task:

1. When you add a school, write 1–2 notes:
 - "High-energy coach, fast tempo offense"
 - "Defensive-minded, lots of ball control focus"
2. Ask yourself: "Would I want to be coached this way every day?"
3. Graduation & Outcomes

Graduation & Outcomes

- Graduation rates
 - Look for 4-year and 6-year graduation rates on the school's website.
 - Athlete success
- Do student-athletes graduate at similar or higher rates than regular students?
 - After college
- Do they have internships, career services, alumni networks?

Player task:

1. Search: "School Name" graduation rate student athletes."
2. If you can't find numbers, write down:
 - "Ask coach about graduation and career support on next call/email."

3. Location & Environment

- Distance from home
- Be honest: Do you want to be a short drive away or are you okay with a flight?
 - Setting
 - Big city, small town, suburban, rural?
 - Weather: snow and cold, hot and humid, mild?
 - Campus feel
- Would you be comfortable living there 9–10 months a year?

Player task:

1. Circle your preference:
 - Distance: In-state only / Driving distance / Anywhere in the country
 - Environment: City / Suburban / College town / Rural
2. Only add schools that match at least one of your top preferences.

3. Size of School

- Big universities (15,000+ students)
 - More majors, more activities, bigger feel.
- Can feel less personal and more "on your own."
- Medium schools (5,000–15,000 students)
 - Mix of options and community feel.
 - Small colleges (<5,000 students)
- Smaller classes, more personal support.
- May have fewer majors and activities.

Player task:

1. Decide your comfort zone: Small / Medium / Large.
2. When you add a school, note its approximate size.

In-State vs. Out-of-State

- In-state
 - Usually cheaper tuition.
- Easier for family to come to matches and visit.
 - Out-of-state
 - More options.
- Sometimes still affordable with scholarships or special tuition agreements.

Player task:

1. Make two columns on your list: In-State and Out-of-State.
2. Try to have a mix unless you're sure you want only one.

7. Scholarships & Cost of Attendance

- Types of aid
- Athletic scholarships (more common in D1/D2/NAIA, limited or none in D3).
 - Academic scholarships (GPA/test-based).
- Need-based aid (based on family financial info).
 - Talk early about budget
 - Have an honest family conversation:
 - "What can we realistically afford per year?"
 - "Are we okay with loans? How much?"
 - Value over label
- A "smaller" school with good aid may be better than a "name" school you can't afford.

Player task:

1. Ask your family: "What's a realistic yearly cost for us?"
2. When you research a school, write:
 - "Estimated cost after aid: ___ (look it up on their net price calculator)."

8. Putting It All Together – Simple College List Template

Please fill out

School Name:

Division/Level:

Location (city/state):

Distance from home:

Size (small/med/large):

Environment (city/suburban/rural):

Majors I like:

Coaching style/notes:

Graduation rate notes:

In-state or out-of-state:

Estimated cost after aid:

My interest level (1–5):

Encourage them to keep (pertaining to age):

15s–16s:

- 20–30 schools (very loose list, wide range of levels and locations).

16s–17s:

- 15–20 schools (more realistic based on feedback from coaches and their own preferences).

- 17s–18s:

- 8–12 serious options they're actively communicating with.

How to Build Your College List (Age-Based Timeline)

- > The goal isn't "biggest name possible."
- > The goal is: right fit for you as a student, person, and athlete.

8th Grade – Early 9th Grade: Just Getting Curious

Goal: Start noticing what you like in a school, not making a list yet.

Focus on:

- Environment
 - Big vs. small school
 - City, suburban, or rural
 - Close to home or far away
 - Basic academics
- Schools that have a lot of different majors (because it's normal not to know yet).
- Notice terms like "liberal arts," "polytechnic," "research university."

Simple player tasks (low pressure):

1. Make a short list:
 - "Do I think I'd like:
 - Big campus or small?
 - City, suburbs, or small town?"
2. When you watch a college game on TV, look up the school after and note:
 - Where is it?
 - How big is it?
 - Do I like that vibe?

No "official list" yet—just preferences.

9th Grade – Early 10th Grade: Learning What "Fit" Means

Goal: Connect school fit with who you are and who you're becoming.

Focus on:

- Academics
- Start noticing majors that sound interesting: business, nursing, engineering, education, sports management, psychology, etc.
- Understand that your grades now affect your options later.
- Campus life
- Do you care about:
 - School spirit and big games?
 - Smaller, tighter-knit community?
 - Religious affiliation or not?
 - Athletics (lightly)
- Learn the difference between D1, D2, D3, NAIA, and JUCO.
- Understand that all levels have great athletes and real commitments.

Player tasks:

1. Write down 3–5 majors or fields that seem interesting (they can change later).
2. Look up 3 schools (any level) and answer:
 - Where is it?
 - Undergrad size?
 - Does it have any of the majors I listed?

Still no pressure to have a “final list”—this is exploration mode.

Late 10th Grade – 11th Grade: Building a Realistic College List

Goal: Start building an actual list with different types of schools.

Now we use these categories more intentionally:

Now we use these categories more intentionally:

1. Academics

- Majors offered
 - Does this school offer at least one major you might want?
 - If you're undecided, does it offer lots of options and good advising?
- Academic level
- Compare your current GPA/test scores (or projected) with their average admitted student.
 - Think in terms of:
 - Reach: Hard to get into, but possible.
 - Match: You're right in their typical range.
 - Safety: Very likely to be admitted.

Player task (academics):

1. List 3–5 majors/areas of interest.
2. For each school you consider, ask:
 - Does it have at least one of these?
- Is it probably a reach, match, or safety for me?

2. Campus & Social Fit

- Size & setting
 - Do you want:
 - Under 3,000 students (small)
 - 3,000–10,000 (medium)
 - 10,000+ (large)
 - Urban, suburban, or rural.
 - Community
 - Do you want:
 - A big sports culture?
 - Greek life, or not important?
 - Religious affiliation or not?
 - Support
 - First-gen support?
- Diversity and inclusion efforts?
 - Mental health resources?

Player task (fit):

1. Rank these from most to least important:
 - Class size
 - Location
 - Campus feel (quiet vs. energetic)
 - Diversity/support
2. When you research a school, note:
 - “What about this campus would make it feel like home for me?”

3. Athletics

- Level & role
- Where do you realistically project: D1, D2, D3, NAIA, JUCO?
- Do you want to play right away at a smaller program or fight for time at a bigger one?
 - Program fit
 - Coaching style and culture
 - Roster size and competition at your position
 - How the team treats freshmen

Player task (athletics):

1. Ask your club/HS coach:
“What levels do you think fit me if I keep improving?”
2. Watch a game from a level you’re interested in and ask:
- “Can I see myself at this pace/physicality/skill level within 2–3 years?”

4. Cost & Scholarship

- Total cost
- Tuition + housing + food + travel.
- Scholarships
- Athletic money is not the only money.
- Academic and need-based aid often matter more.
- Honest family talk
- You and your family should talk about a realistic yearly budget.

Player task (cost):

1. Have a short money talk at home:
 - “What cost range per year makes sense for us?”
2. When you list a school, mark it:
 - Likely affordable
 - Might need scholarships
 - Probably too expensive

5. Building the Actual List (End of 11th Grade)

Aim for something like:

- 3–5 reach schools
- 5–8 match schools
- 3–5 safety schools

All should be:

- A place you'd be happy as a student even if sports disappeared.
- A place with at least one academic path that interests you.
- A place your family can probably make work financially.

12th Grade: Refining, Visiting, and Trusting Your Fit

Goal: Narrow down and commit to a school that fits you, not someone else's dream.

What changes now:

- You're not just building a list; you're prioritizing it.
 - Visits (virtual or in-person) matter a lot more.
- Communication with coaches and admissions gets more specific.

Focus on:

- Deep fit check
 - Can you picture your day to day life there?
- Do you like how the team interacts and how the coaches talk to players?
 - Backup realities
- If you get injured, would you still want to be at this school?
 - If the coach leaves, is this still a place you could thrive?

Player tasks:

1. Take your list and highlight:
 - Top 3 "I could commit here and be happy" schools.
2. For each top school, answer honestly:
 - Do I like the school even without sports?
- Do I feel seen and wanted here as a person, not just an athlete?
 - Is the cost realistic with/without athletic money?

How to choose which school and deciding major

Let's break it into two parts:

1. Choosing which school to attend
2. Deciding what to major in

1. **Helping Them Decide Which School to Attend**

A. Start with the big picture questions

Ask them things like:

- Do you want to play right away, or are you okay waiting and developing for a year or two?
 - How far from home do you realistically want to be?
- Do you like big universities, medium, or small schools?
 - Do you want volleyball to be:
 - Your main focus (D1, high-level D2/NAIA)?
- A big part of your life but more balanced (D2/D3/NAIA/JC)?
 - Just for fun/club/intramural?

Have them write down their answers. It helps them see what actually matters to them.

B. Teach them how to evaluate a volleyball program

Help them look beyond just "they're good" or "they win a lot."

Key questions:

- Role & fit
 - Where does the coach see you playing?
- Are there many players in your position ahead of you (especially your grad year + 1-2 years above)?
 - Do they truly want you, or just "another body" on the roster?

Coaching style

- Is the coach more intense or more laid-back?
 - How do they handle mistakes?
 - Ask current players:
 - “What’s it really like to play here?”
 - “What’s the hardest part about this program?”
- “If you had to choose again, would you pick this school?”

- Program culture

- Do the players genuinely like each other?
 - Is there drama or cliques?
- How do they talk about their coaches when coaches aren’t around?
 - How do they support each other after a loss?

- Time commitment

- How many hours per week in-season and off-season?
- What’s a typical day like during season (classes, lift, practice, travel)?

Encourage them to visit practices if possible, not just games. Practice shows the real environment.

C. Academics and support (not just volleyball)

Remind them: the ball stops bouncing someday.

Have them check:

- Academic fit

- Do they offer majors they’re interested in (or at least several options they’re curious about)?
 - Class sizes: would they do better in small classes or are they okay in big lectures?
 - Graduation rates for student-athletes.

- Support systems

- Is there a student-athlete academic center?
 - Tutoring, study hall, mentoring programs?
- How does the team handle missed class for travel?

- Schedule reality

- Can labs, clinicals, or certain majors work with their practice/travel schedule?
 - Some programs are flexible; some are not. They should ask directly:
 - “Do athletes in [major] succeed here?”
 - “Do any players here major in [X] now?”

D. Location & lifestyle

Help them picture their actual daily life there:

- Location
 - Big city, small town, rural?
- Weather: can they handle snow, heat, or gloom?
- Travel distance and cost to get home.
- Campus vibe
 - Do they feel safe there?
- Do they like the dorms, dining hall, and common spaces?
- Could they see themselves there if volleyball disappeared tomorrow?

This question is huge:

“If you had a season ending injury and couldn’t play again, would you still stay at this school?”

If the answer is “no,” that’s a red flag.

E. Financial reality

Help them understand money clearly:

- Athletic & academic scholarships, need-based aid.
- Hidden costs: travel home, food off-campus, housing after year 1.
 - Length of scholarship:
 - Is it year-to-year or guaranteed for 4 years?
- What happens if they get injured or their role changes?

Encourage them and their family to actually write out a comparison:

- School A: \$’s per year
- School B: \$’s per year
- Debt after 4 years?
- Is taking on that much debt worth it for what they’re getting?

F. Decision framework you can walk through with them

You can sit down with them and make a simple table:

Columns:

- Volleyball fit (role, coaching, culture)
- Academics (majors, support, flexibility)
 - Cost (scholarships, long-term debt)
- Life fit (distance, campus feel, city)

Rate each school 1–5 in each category and talk about:

- “Where do your eyes light up when we talk about it?”
 - “Where do you feel most at peace?”
- “If you had to pick today, what would your gut say?”

Sometimes just talking out loud with a trusted adult clears it up.

#2. Helping Them Decide What to Major In

They don't need their entire life plan at 17–18. But you can guide them toward a good starting point.

A. Start with strengths, not just “likes”

Ask them:

- What school subjects feel the most natural? (Not just easiest, but most interesting.)
- What do coaches/teachers/parents always compliment them on?
 - Leadership?
 - Communication?
 - Problem-solving?
 - Working with kids?
 - Tech skills?
- What do they enjoy outside of volleyball?
 - Helping younger players?
 - Designing graphics or editing videos?
 - Math, science, writing, debate, art?

Help them see patterns. For example:

- Loves biology + caring for others → look into nursing, PT, OT, pre-med, exercise science.
- Loves math + business side of sports → finance, accounting, sports management, data analytics.
- Loves working with kids + teaching skills → education, child development, psychology.
- Creative + social media savvy → marketing, communications, graphic design, media production.

B. Match majors to lifestyle & athlete schedule

Some majors are very time-heavy (labs, clinicals, studio time). That doesn't mean they can't do them, but they need to know reality.

You can help them ask:

- “Do any athletes here major in [X]?”
- “Is [X] compatible with our practice and travel schedule?”
- “How does your staff support athletes in demanding majors?”

Good “exploration” majors if they’re unsure:

- Business or business administration
 - Psychology
 - Communications
- Undeclared/Exploratory Studies (if the school has a structured program for that)
 - Liberal studies/general studies (with a plan, not as a default forever)

C. Remind them: a major ≠ locked-in career

Important points to reassure them:

- Many people don’t work in a field that perfectly matches their major.
- Skills they build as athletes—discipline, time management, teamwork, resilience—matter a ton to employers.
 - They can:
 - Change majors.
 - Add a minor.
 - Pivot in grad school.

So instead of “What do you want to do for the rest of your life?” try:

“What are 2–3 areas you’d be okay learning more about for the next 4 years?”

D. Combining volleyball experience with career ideas

Help them think how volleyball could connect to future paths:

- Coaching, club director, or athletic administration
 - Sports psychology, athletic counseling
 - Strength & conditioning, athletic training, PT
- Sports marketing, social media for teams, media production
 - Event management (tournaments, leagues)

Then connect those to majors:

- Coaching/admin → sports management, education, business
- Sports psych → psychology, kinesiology, then grad school
- AT/PT → exercise science, kinesiology, biology, then certifications/grad school
- Media/marketing → marketing, communications, digital media

E. A simple activity you can do with them

You can guide a short exercise (20–30 minutes):

1. Have them list:

- Top 5 classes they've enjoyed most.
- Top 5 things they like doing outside of class/volleyball.
- 3 things people say they're "really good at."

2. Circle what shows up more than once (patterns).

3. Look up 3–5 majors that connect to those patterns at each school they're considering.

4. For each major, answer:

- "Could I see myself excited to learn this for 4 years?"
- "Could this lead to more than one possible career path?"

This shifts their mindset from panic to curiosity.

How You Can Practically Help as a Coach/Parent/Mentor

Here are a few concrete ways you can support them:

- Host a "college talk" night
- Invite former players who are now in college to share honest experiences.
- Include players from D1, D2, D3, NAIA, and JUCO so they see different paths.

- Teach them to ask good questions on visits

Help them prepare a written list for coaches and current players.

- Talk about identity
- Ask: "Who are you besides a volleyball player?"
- Help them see they're more than their sport.

- Normalize all levels

- D1 isn't "better" than D2/D3/NAIA/JC.
- The best choice is where they'll grow, play, be supported, and graduate.