

**TELL  
YOUR  
STORY**



**REACH HIGHER**  
Complete your education. Own your future.

# PATHFINDER

**CHEAT SHEET**

# Pathfinder

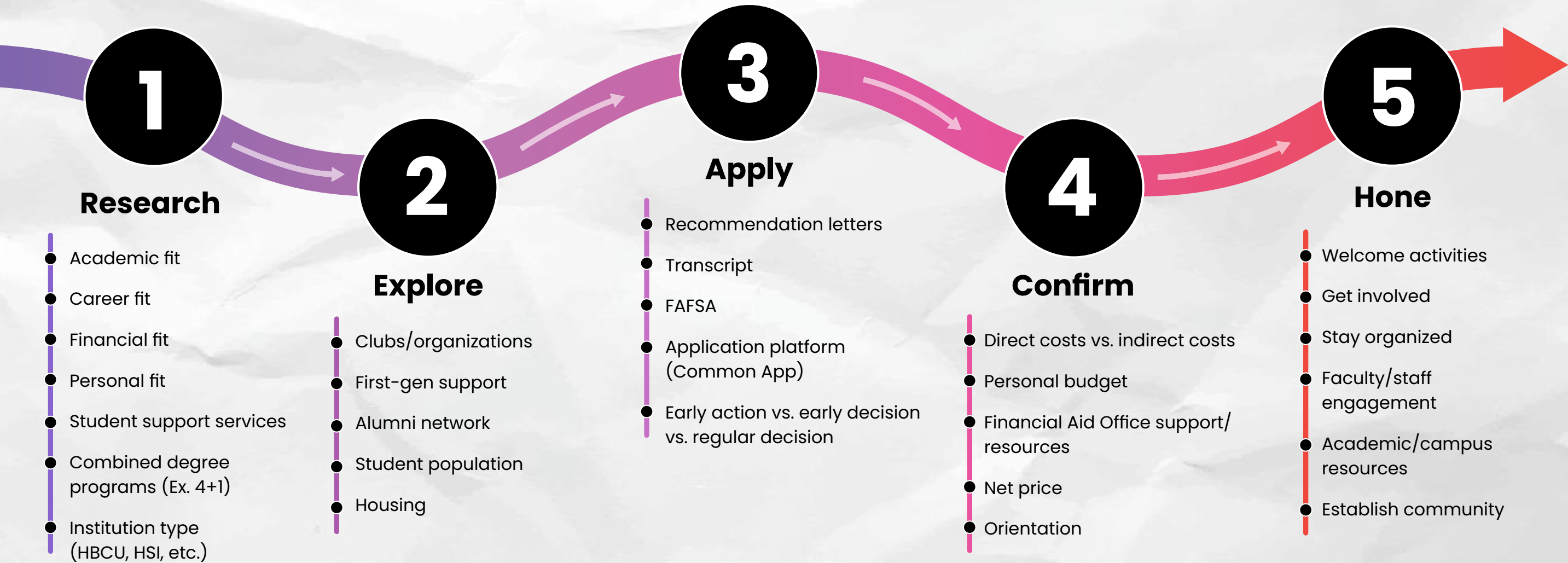
We created the REACH Pathfinder because we know choosing a college/university (and getting there) is hard. Really hard. We wished there was a map that could tell us what factors to consider and where to look. Then we thought, “Why don’t we make one?”

The Pathfinder is a map that you can follow to help you find a college that is the perfect fit for you — and all of the electric, messy, crucial parts of you. As you’re getting started and moving through your college application journey, refer to the Pathfinder for help to stay aligned with what matters most to you. And if you find yourself a little lost on what any of the words on the Pathfinder mean, no sweat. We’ve got a huge college cheat sheet in this document to help clear things up.

Now you’re ready to scroll down and start your journey on the Pathfinder!



# PATHFINDER



# R.E.A.C.H.

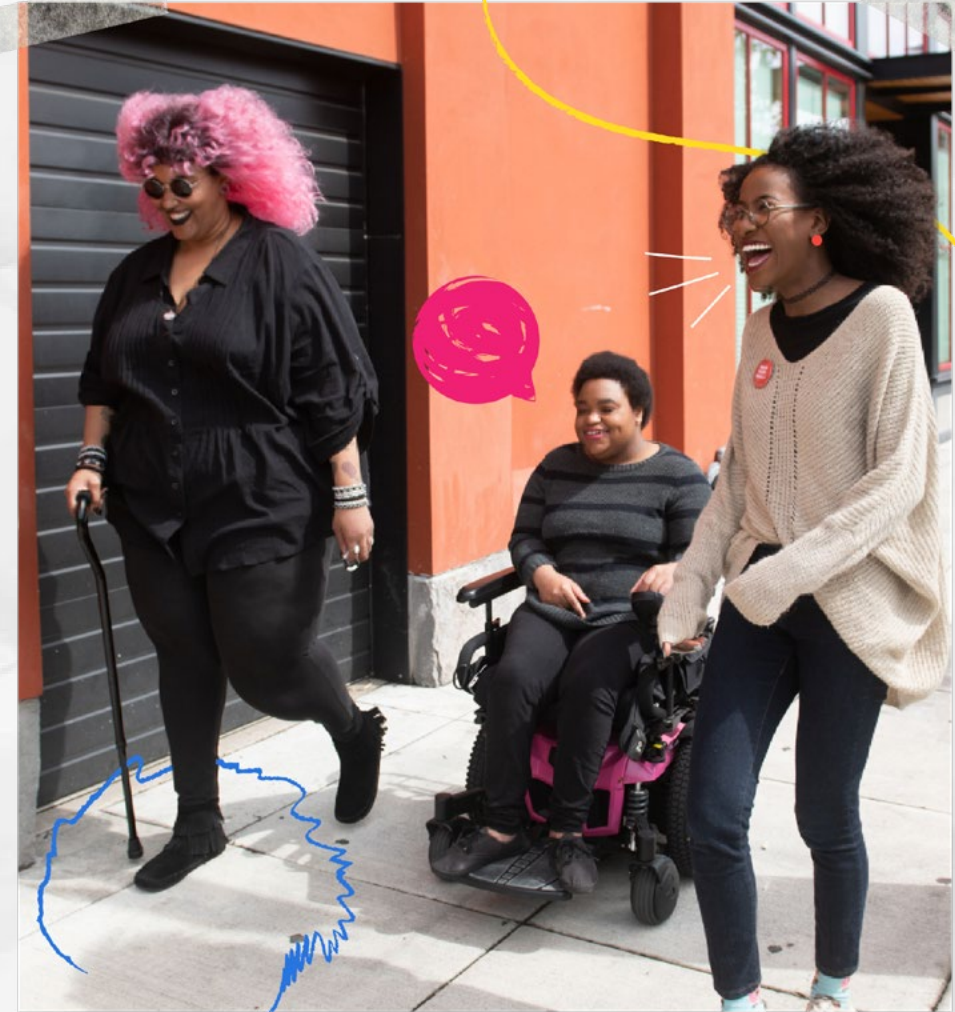
The REACH approach takes you through some of the thoughts and discussions you should be having with yourself and/or family through the college decision process. Now let's get into it – here's what we mean by REACH:

## 1. Research

We're gonna be really real with you: Finding the right college fit for yourself is tough. There's a lot of information to read through. When researching, you should focus on what kind of match and program you're interested in. Ask yourself this: does it match who you are and who you want to be? How long do you want to be in college for? How do you want to grow while you're there? How much should you even spend on a degree? Have you thought about a 4+1 degree program? The Pathfinder is designed to help you through the stages of applying and to think about what you want!

## 2. Explore

Now that you did your research, how do you want to spend your time outside of the classroom? Let's be real, you'll be spending more time outside of the classroom than inside the classroom, so it's important that you look at what's offered. How do you want to spend that time? This is where you take your narrowed down college list and start exploring the student population and activities those schools offer. Your college experience and story is more than your academics.



Original image by [Disabled and Here](#), adapted by Reach Higher

# R.E.A.C.H.

## 3. Apply

Be prepared when you're ready to apply to college, especially if you're waiting until 11:59pm to do so (been there, done that, don't recommend it)! Applying takes time, but **Common App** has resources to make it easier for you. Just try to be aware of essays and application fees.

## 4. Confirm

It's time to secure the bag!! After researching, exploring and applying, it's time to make your decision. You probably feel a little nervous or like this decision will make or break your future, but it's just one step to keep moving towards your goals. Feeling nervous means you care, and it's a part of the process! You should have found your fit and what interests you inside and outside of the classroom. Now it's time to focus on your budget and what's best for you. Remember, no matter your choice, there are people to help you every step of the way during your college experience!



## 5. Hone

Congrats on making a decision! Your story evolves now. Get involved and make the most out of your experience. Through the ups, downs, and late nights, you will be able to build your story and work towards your goal of being a college graduate.



**Real talk:** You're going to change so much over your college experience, so take it easy on yourself and embrace opportunity as it comes. As John Lewis said, "My philosophy is very simple, when you see something that is not right, not fair, not just, say something! Do something! Get in trouble! Good trouble! Necessary trouble!"



## What's that?

That's a Real Talk. Real Talks are additional thoughts we want to share with you on a specific topic or definition. Most of the real talks are things we wish we knew from the beginning of the college application process and throughout our college careers. Real Talk is an attempt to encapsulate a moment and plant it in its proper context so that you all can form an even better understanding of the college going process. The Pathfinder, the cheat sheet, and Real Talks serve as transparent resources for your college journey.

# Cheat sheet

## 1. Research phase

**Academic fit:** Academic fit refers to how the faculty teaches, the academic priorities of the college/university, and what the learning environment is like. It also refers to the distinct curriculum types a college/university may offer.

**Career fit:** Career fit refers to how the college and academic program you are interested in will prepare you for your future goals and/or job. Will the academics and school support your journey to life after college?

**Financial fit:** A good financial fit is one that's within your personal budget and will create minimal to no financial hardship in the event you need to take out a loan. You want to make sure the cost per semester is feasible and that the debt you may accrue can be paid back in a timely manner.

**Personal fit:** A good college fit is when a college meets your needs and wants academically, socially, and financially. Good college fits will meet most, if not all, of your preferences in a college. Finding the right personal match for you can help you thrive academically, personally, and career wise.



**Real talk:** Personal match tends to get left out of those “Which college should I go to?” conversations. But it is so, so important. A school that is a good personal match means that you can step on campus, take a look at the student body, the professors, the classes and extracurricular options, and feel like you belong there. That sense of belonging can be life-saving, so it should be weighed just as heavily as a school's reputation and career match.

**Student support services:** Student affairs, student support, or student services is the department or division of services and support for student success at institutions of higher education to enhance student growth and development.

**Combined degree programs (ex. 4+1):** A combined degree program is a formal plan of study for completing two degrees simultaneously. The courses you take aren't different from those in regular degree programs. But the pace is different! You are likely to carry a larger course load and put in longer hours than your classmates in other degree programs. This could be a program to earn two undergraduate degrees simultaneously, or a 4 +1 program where in 5 years you can earn an undergraduate and graduate degree.

# Cheat sheet

**Real talk:** When you're thinking about your degree program, make sure that you are honest with yourself. It's essential to enroll in a college program that matches your personal capacity! It needs to align with where you are at this moment in time and what you plan to achieve.

**Institution type (HBCU, HSI, etc.):** A college, university, or similar institution, including community college, offering you a post-high school education where you can obtain a certificate and/or degree. Types of Institutions: Public, Private, Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU), Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSI), Minority Serving Institutions (MSI), and Predominantly White Institutions (PWI), Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander-Serving Institutions (AANAPISI) and Tribal College or University (TCU).

**Real talk:** Community colleges are two-year schools that provide affordable postsecondary education for a workforce credential or certification, associate degree, or as a pathway to a four-year degree. All of these institution types can provide you with the necessary education needed to achieve your future goals.



# Cheat sheet

## 2. Explore phase

**Clubs and organizations:** Clubs and organizations are composed of students who wish to organize and meet for common goals, objectives, or purposes, and which are directly under the sponsorship, direction, and control of the school.

**Real Talk:** Clubs are a great way to fill your time outside of class wisely, find your people, explore your passions, tell your story, and learn about the environment around you. They're good spaces for self-care and they break up the everyday stress of college. In these spaces, you will probably learn something new about yourself, the real world, and your interests that a book won't teach you.

**First-generation support:** First-generation students are categorized simply as those who are the first in their family to attend college. First-generation support relates to campus resources and departments that work with first-generation students to help them transition to college.

**Alumni network:** An alumni network connects you, as a graduate, with a number of professional contacts and other graduates from your university. This network helps with finding potential internships, mentorships, and industry connections after graduation.

**Student population:** All the students that belong to a university or college. Student population can also be described by a student's race, ethnicity, income level, and personal identity. Usually this includes information about age, gender, income, race, and other data relevant to a specific field or purpose.

**Housing:** Housing means residence areas, apartment buildings, living communities, dormitories, and other buildings students live in. It varies from campus to campus. There's a variety of housing options like singles, double/triple rooms, suite living, gender specific, etc.

**Real talk:** Choosing where you live matters. Every type of housing includes a different kind of living environment, engagement and opportunity. Have you thought about what kind of environment you want to live in, especially if this is the first time you will be sharing a room? Are you looking to be on a quiet floor, themed floor (identity-based) or living learning community (major-based)? Your comfort and safety are crucial, so it's important to know what your school offers.



# Cheat sheet

## 3. Apply phase

**Recommendation letters:** A recommendation letter describes some of your qualities and abilities. Sometimes it's written by a school counselor, teacher, or academic advisor. The letter addresses things like your academic, extracurricular, and personal characteristics. Official recommendation letters often include a transcript.

**Transcript:** A transcript is any documentation that proves which courses you've taken and the grades you received for those courses. Your counselor will be required to provide an official transcript on your behalf.

**Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA):** Commonly referred to as FAFSA. It is the official form to apply for federal financial aid to pay for college. It is also used by many states, individual colleges, and universities in making their financial aid decisions. Applications open in October of the year prior to enrollment. Funding is often granted on a first-come, first-serve basis, and it's recommended to apply as early as possible.

**Application platform (like Common App):** An application platform is an online service that allows you to research, explore, and apply to a variety of colleges/universities.



**Real talk:** The FAFSA can be hard and stressful, as conversations about money often can be. But it really is best to get it done early, because the earlier you do it, the more money/financial aid/loans you might receive. Carve out intentional time to get it done, ask for help when you need it, and maybe schedule some time afterward to relax and/or celebrate that you finished this big step!

**Early Action vs. Early Decision:** Early action means you receive an early response to your application but do not have to commit to the college until the traditional decision date of May 1. Early action is a non-binding decision. Early decision (ED) plans are binding: If you are accepted as an early decision applicant, then you must attend that college/university.

# Cheat sheet

## 4. Confirm phase

**Direct Costs vs. Indirect Costs:** Direct costs are items that will appear on your university bills, such as tuition, fees, and room and board (if you live on campus). Indirect costs will not appear on your bill but are estimated costs associated with going to college and should be included in your budget. These include items like books, transportation, and personal expenses.

**Personal Budget:** A personal budget, or household budget, simply tracks a household's money in versus money out. Though a budget can be used to help an individual or family spend less and save more, it is, at its most basic, a planning and tracking tool.

**Real Talk:** Budgeting is all about being intentional with the ways you spend money. Try to plan ahead to help ensure you don't run into any inconvenient – or, potentially, financially ruinous – surprises before you receive your next paycheck. A budget also helps you be more confident in spending money on the things you want, but don't necessarily need.



# Cheat sheet

**Financial Aid Office Support/Resources:** A school's financial aid office assists you and your family by providing information on ways to pay for education. When you need help paying for college, you can reach out to the financial aid office at the same time as the admissions office. Many schools will try and provide you with an estimated financial aid award so you can make an informed enrollment decision. Additionally, you can go to the financial aid office to: Learn about both federal and private student aid options, including aid programs for a specific school, find out about deadlines for student aid applications, get forms and money management guidance, award and process your financial aid and any loan applications you submit. There are a lot of different **types of financial aid**, so try to read up on them and get familiar.

**Net Price:** Net price is the amount that you pay to attend an institution in a single academic year AFTER subtracting scholarships and grants you receive. Scholarships and grants are forms of financial aid that you do not have to pay back.

**Orientation:** Student orientation is the time before the start of the academic year at a college or university where a variety of events are held to welcome and acclimate new students. It's generally thought of as a week, but the length of this period can vary widely between institutions, ranging from two days to over a month. During this period, students also take part in social events. Often, incoming freshmen are encouraged to take part in activities such as playing icebreaker games and participating in group activities.



**Real talk:** Orientation can be awkward. It's a ton of strangers getting together in a place they've never been. Our advice? Embrace the discomfort, introduce yourself, and ask someone to lunch, because you never know who will end up being in your college friend group.



# Cheat sheet

## 5. Hone phase

**Welcome activities:** Welcome activities take place during the first few days on campus, and they help you create a foundation for a successful academic year with your peers and staff. This is your time to learn about your new home away from home, make new friends, build your community, and explore exciting ways to engage in and outside of the classroom.

**Get involved:** Getting involved on campus refers to meeting your peers, joining a new club, and familiarizing yourself with campus. Discover the different clubs, organizations, student government and variety of departments on campus. There are so many ways to involve yourself in your new community. Getting involved on campus provides a break from schoolwork, can help alleviate stress. It'll help you create a sense of belonging, and makes college more enjoyable and balanced.

**Stay organized:** The transition to college can be a struggle. Staying organized will help you stay focused and succeed. It can refer to anything from keeping your room tidy to having a calendar to help you schedule all of your involvements, homework, and class schedules. Honestly, it can get easy to fall behind in college. Be gentle with yourself and take time to figure out what organization tools work best for you and your workload.

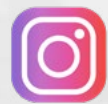
**Faculty/staff engagement:** Getting to know the faculty and staff at your college is important. You're more likely to perform well in classes when you share a connection with the instructor. Building relationships with staff can lead to mentorship, networking, and opportunities during and after college.

**Academic/Campus resources:** Campuses have resources available to help students with their academics and personal growth/success. Check out what the college's career, advising, financial aid, tutoring, writing, health, adult learner, LGBTQIA+ centers, multicultural centers, and library services/centers have to offer.

**Establish community:** Establishing community inside and outside of the classroom can help you feel like you belong. Students who build a community tend to feel safer in their college environments. Students also feel more free to open up to others and ask for help when needed, which results in a more enjoyable college experience. You can grow a community with your peers, faculty/staff, and/or create your own that better suits you (like a club based on a passion/hobby you have). Whether you are in your residence hall/area, in a classroom, or participating in extracurricular activities, many existing communities will be present. You're an important part of the school community.

# Contact us

**You have a long, exciting, confusing, hard, fun, and totally worth-it journey ahead of you. But you don't have to take it on alone. Stay connected with us for support every step of the way.**



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