

WHERE SHOULD THEY GO?

Eight real-life college counselors advise six hypothetical students

It's not easy for students and families to draw up lists of potential colleges. There are the students' qualifications to consider, plus their preferences—and, above all, that elusive thing known as “fit.” *U.S. News* asked two experienced high school counselors, Bonnie Fitzpatrick of Winston Churchill High School in Potomac, Md., and Susan Rexford of West Springfield High School in Springfield, Va., to help us draw up six student scenarios. They and six other counselors then told us what advice they'd give these hypothetical applicants. The results offer food for thought, but bear in mind these caveats: Alice Kleeman of Menlo-Atherton High School in California says it's more important to teach students to do their own research than to give them lists. And Joyce Mitchell of New York City's Nightingale-Bamford School says she never takes what students say about things like size and location at face value, because they often end up at schools that don't match their expressed inclinations. “When it comes time to choose,” she says, “it's the campus culture that counts.”

AMANDA

School: Private
Grades: A-minus/B-plus average
Class rank: Top 20 percent
Test scores: SAT I—Verbal: 650; Math: 550



BACKGROUND: A strong student with a deep artsy streak, Amanda attends a challenging prep school. She works on costumes and set design for school plays and belongs to community service clubs like her school's stop-hunger group. She's thinking of studying religion or philosophy and seeks a place where students want to change the world. She loves Brown University because of its flexible curriculum and its activism. But without any stellar talents or alumni connections, she knows she'll have a difficult time getting in.

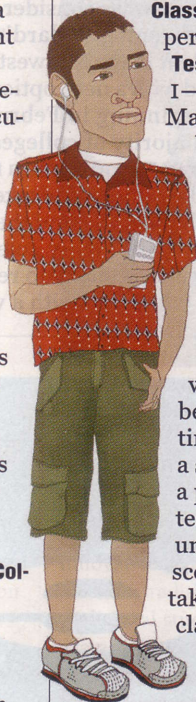
RECOMMENDATIONS:

There was near consensus that Amanda should consider **Oberlin College** in Ohio, known for its intellectual atmosphere and as a school where, says Fitzpatrick, “students care about social issues and causes”; **Hampshire College** in Massachusetts, which has a self-initiated curriculum and close faculty contact; Indiana's **Earlham College** and North Carolina's **Guilford College**, both of which, says Missy Sanchez of Woodward Academy in College Park, Ga., “adhere to the Quaker principles of cooperation and community”; and **Lawrence University** in Appleton, Wis., an undergraduate liberal arts school known for a liberal atmosphere. Shirley Bloomquist, an independ-

ent counselor in Great Falls, Va., says Amanda should give **Brown** a shot, too: “Don't give up on your dreams.”

ROBERT

School: Urban public
Grades: B-plus average
Class rank: Top 30 percent
Test scores: SAT I—Verbal: 480; Math: 520. APs—U.S. History: 2; Chemistry: 3



BACKGROUND: Robert speaks Spanish at home and would like to find a college where he won't be the only Latino. His mother, a single parent, is a preschool teacher. Despite unspectacular test scores, he has taken challenging classes and pulled his grades up from B's and C's. He is captain of the school baseball team but won't be recruited. He wants to study forensic science.

RECOMMENDATIONS: Several counselors noted that Robert is an especially desirable candidate: “Being on an upward trend academically, along with being a member of an underrepresented minority . . . works to his advantage,” says Shirley Raby of the Houston Independent School District. Four recommended the **University of Miami** for its large Hispanic population and its forensic science pro-

gram. **Guilford College** and **West Virginia University** also have well-regarded forensics specialties. But several counselors said Robert would miss out on some great schools if he focused on a narrow, hard-to-find major rather than a broad field: “Everyone has chemistry,” says Mitchell. “He can learn forensic science in a summer program, internship, or on the job.” Other picks included **Loyola University New Orleans**, **Baylor University** in Texas, and the **University of Central Florida**.

ASHLEY

School: Suburban public
Grades: B average
Class rank: Top 50 percent
Test scores: SAT I—Verbal: 540; Math: 560. APs—Psychology: 3; Environmental Science: 2



BACKGROUND: Ashley is a classic middle-of-the-road student. She's very busy and well liked by teachers and classmates: She's on the lacrosse team and the yearbook and treasurer of her school's small Black Students Association. But she hasn't really found her niche. She'd like to be in or near a large city like Chicago, New York, or Boston, at a college that's neither too big nor too small. She's unsure of potential majors; communications is a possibility. Her fa-

ther attended a large state school; her mother has a B.A. from Boston College.

RECOMMENDATIONS: Perhaps because of her own uncertainty, there was little consensus about Ashley (apart from New York's **Pace University**, which several counselors suggested). Some focused on historically black schools like **Clark Atlanta University** or **Howard University**. Others zeroed in on her interest in communications, pointing, for instance, to **Ithaca College** in upstate New York or to **Northeastern University** in one of her favored cities, Boston. Her mother's alma mater, **Boston College**, could also be a good fit because of its location and size, along with the legacy advantage she'd get in admissions. Counselors also noted that Ashley should consider more-selective schools than her decent but not great stats might suggest because of her strong appeal to colleges actively seeking more black students.

JOSHUA

School: Small-town public
Grades: C-plus average
Class rank: 140th out of 200
Test score: ACT: 21

BACKGROUND:

Joshua is in the bottom half of his class. He's a hands-on kid who plays football and baseball at high school (not well enough to play in college, however) and holds down a part-time job at FedEx Kinko's. He has great social skills and many friends, and because of his



small-town background he is especially interested in broadening his horizons at a large university. He'd like a school with an active Greek scene, and he's thinking of majoring in something sports-related like athletic training, sports business management, or sports nutrition.

RECOMMENDATIONS: If Joshua wants to make it into a flagship state school like the **University of Kansas**, the **University of Missouri-Columbia**, or **Indiana University**, he'll need to boost his middling ACT score to at least a 24 to make up for his poor grades, says Annalee Nissenholtz of Ladue Horton Watkins High School in St. Louis. Otherwise, she says, he can still get the big-state feel he seeks at less competitive schools like **Northern Illinois University** or Indiana's **Ball State University**. But Rexford urges Joshua to visit colleges to get a better sense of how much size matters: "It is possible that a midsize school will appear quite large to him if he has always attended school in a small town." Counselors' picks for schools with sports-related programs included **Ohio University** and **Georgia Southern University**.

JESSICA

School: Elite suburban public
Grades: A-plus average (4.5 weighted GPA)
Class rank: Top 3 percent
Test scores: SAT I—Verbal: 760; Math: 690. APs—U.S. History: 5; Spanish: 4; English: 5; European History: 5

BACKGROUND: Jessica is a top student at a demanding public high school in an affluent suburb. In addition to her academic strengths (and the glowing recommendations she'll get from teachers), she worked on a Senate campaign over the summer



and represented France in her school's Model U.N. program.

Jessica's parents—a lawyer and a home-maker—won't qualify for financial aid. She doesn't want to attend her state university, but she's worried that if she isn't admitted to any of the Ivies, her parents won't be willing to pay full freight at another private college.

RECOMMENDATIONS: Given Jessica's stellar credentials, several counselors suggested she'd be a promising applicant at elite places like **Columbia University**, **Stanford University**, **Amherst College**, or—if she doesn't balk at an all-female school—**Wellesley College**. Also, says Rexford, "Jessica should definitely be exploring schools where she can be a strong candidate for merit money," including ever hotter **Washington University in St. Louis** and highly regarded liberal arts colleges like Minnesota's **Carleton College**. Jessica could explore her interest in politics at many places; two schools singled out for strong programs in international relations and public policy were **Georgetown University** and **Duke University**.

MATTHEW

School: Suburban public
Grades: A average (4.2 weighted GPA)
Class rank: Top 10 percent
Test scores: SAT I—Verbal: 610; Math: 760; ACT: 31. APs—Calculus: 5; Biology: 5; Chemistry: 5;

Physics: 5. SAT II—Writing: 590; Math IIC: 790; Chemistry: 700

BACKGROUND: Matthew has excelled in math and science but hasn't participated in activities, apart from debating and Science Club. The son of college-educated Asian immigrants who own a small business, he wants to be an engineer or a doctor and seeks a school with good undergrad research opportunities. He's under pressure to attend an Ivy or another highly ranked school and will apply to Harvard, Yale, and Princeton. Matthew's parents aren't rich, but they'll pay—for the right school.

RECOMMENDATIONS: Several counselors talked about the need to "educate" Matthew and his parents about looking beyond the Ivies and finding a good fit. But they also took the realistic tack of suggesting highly ranked specialty programs that may satisfy his parents. "Matthew has many reaches," notes Bloomquist, but he may have good chances at **Cornell University's** engineering program—an Ivy—or

highly rated engineering-oriented schools like Pittsburgh's **Carnegie Mellon University** and **Harvey Mudd College** in California.

Counselors' other picks—schools with strong premed and undergraduate research programs—included the **University of Chicago**, the **University of Rochester**, Ohio's **Case Western Reserve University**, and **Johns Hopkins University** in Baltimore. ●

