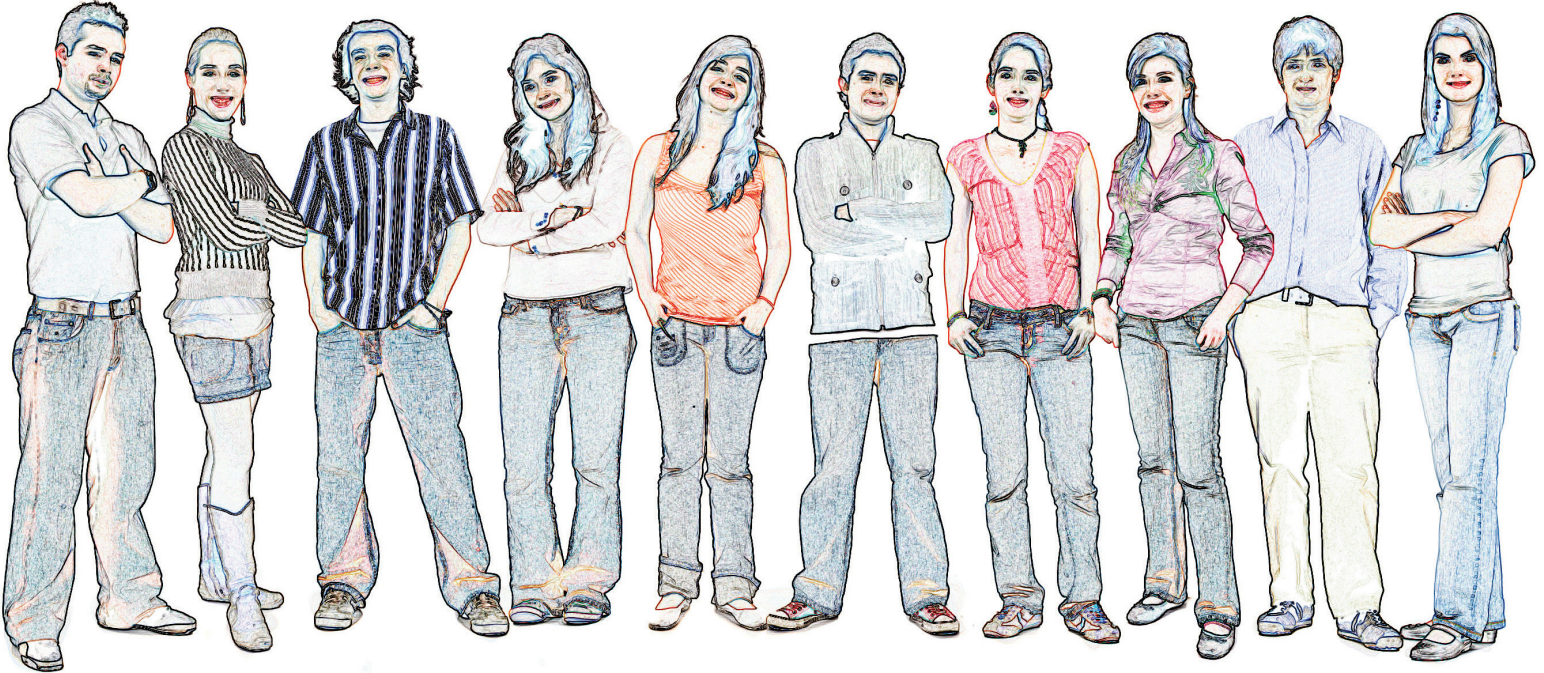


Winner: Elizabeth Jean Martin, Senior at Forsyth Country Day School (NC)



ELIZABETH MARTIN is a senior at Forsyth Country Day School (NC), where she edits the school newspaper and literary magazine. She plays volleyball and the French horn, and she is looking forward to spending the next four years at a college that fits as well as her favorite pair of jeans.

The Right College: As Comfortable As Your Favorite Pair of Jeans

Tax-free weekends, clipping coupons and sales in all your favorite stores: the excitement of back-to-school shopping means crowds and chaos, and it can be difficult to find everything necessary for beginning a new school year without making a few irrational purchases. There is, however, one thing on every shopping list that any student will be sure to choose accurately: the perfect pair of jeans. Indeed, this ubiquitous wardrobe staple is an important purchase requiring a variety of considerations, many of which correspond to another even more significant decision most students will make in the coming weeks, months or years: selecting the perfect college. Interestingly, almost everything a wise shopper thinks about when seeking new denim trousers must also be pondered when searching for a college; style, fit and cost are essential in each case, but one must not forget the ever-important test that comes in front of the proverbial dressing room mirror.

The first thing that meets the eye when scanning the racks is a vast array of options—from straight leg to boot cut or black to classic blue. Any shopper will attest to the fact that if you do not have an idea of what you are looking for in a pair of jeans, the mall can become a mystifying labyrinth of the myriad choices. The same is true for the high school student entering the college search; with the thousands of opportunities available for those pursuing higher education, some idea of what style college is desired is necessary to prevent getting lost in the many options. There are countless things that set colleges apart from one another, and the first step for any student trying to make sense of it all is deciding which variables matter most to him or her.

Perhaps he has always lived in a small town and wants to try the city life; location will be a key factor in his decision. Maybe he has dreamt of lab coats and test tubes since he first cracked open a chemistry book, and in that case, he will want

to look first for schools with strong science programs. This applies to any number of facets of college life—from class size to available extracurricular activities—and determining what is at the top of a student's list of requirements for a college should be at the top of his to-do list for wading through his college search. A student who is a wise shopper will decide what matters most about a school, find the schools that have those features and then consider how he feels about other aspects of each place. Does the student-faculty ratio matter if they offer a strong Russian studies major? Do stellar professors outweigh a less-than-ideal location? How important is an athletic presence on campus—more or less than a good theater group? These are the detail-oriented questions all students will have to answer after deciding which big factors matter most.

As with choosing jeans—deciding on minutiae like the pockets or the stitching after picking the basic cut—choosing colleges to which to apply requires prioritizing. Ultimately, the

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college search requires all students to ask themselves how they want their colleges to look, what matters the most and what shortcomings they will tolerate in areas outside their primary requirements.

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There are two aspects to contemplate when pondering the idea of a college that “fits:” First, the college should feel like an appropriate match for the prospective student in terms of academic rigor, social opportunities and intellectual philosophy, and second, the student should be a suitable candidate for admission. It may seem counterintuitive in a society that stresses the importance of prestige over comfort and success above all to consider a letter of rejection as a blessing, but if a student is not what a college is looking for, then perhaps he would not have been happy at that school anyway. This is not to say that students should not aim as high as possible in their goals for higher education; dreaming big certainly lies at the heart of a desire to attend college.

Nonetheless, a student should be realistic in his expectations and understand that if his application is wrong for a school then perhaps the school is wrong for him. For example, a stellar art student may not be accepted at an institute with a focus on technology, but why would he be interested in a place that did not value or cater to his passions? If one gets to this point on the college shopping trip and realizes that his dream school just will not fit properly, then he can be encouraged by the dizzying options he encountered when selecting a style; certainly there is a school among the plethora of colleges that would be more suitable. He must simply take heart and search again—the time spent will be worth the satisfaction, comfort and opportunities for success presented by a good fit.

Once a pair of jeans or a university has been found that matches the desired style and fit, a shopper must consider the cost of this purchase. In regards to pants, cost usually refers simply to the amount of money one will have to fork over at the cash register. Where college is concerned, however, cost is a far more complex factor. Higher education costs time, energy and money, and a prospective student must consider both the tangible and intangible costs of an education at any institution before mailing his application.

In his speech “The American Scholar,” Ralph Waldo Emerson said that educators should “set the hearts of their youth on fire.” It is becoming both more difficult and more important to remember the importance of cultivating a passion for the pursuit of knowledge, and it is essential for a student to strive to find a college that nurtures and furthers knowledge of whatever his passions may be.

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The question of cost raises many other pertinent inquiries for our contemplative student: How long is he willing to spend on furthering his education, what will he have to give up to make it possible, and what can he afford to spend on tuition, books, room, and board? Ultimately, the college search forces prospective students to balance their checkbooks both literally and figuratively; they must consider how much is too much to pay in many respects. How is a college education really compensated for—in time, money, distance from loved ones, freedom, or dissatisfaction? These considerations are one of the final hurdles in finding a college that will be a good purchase for a conscientious student, who will take into account what is gained, what is lost, and whether or not it is worth it when making a decision. College is about far more than homework, parties or simply getting a diploma, and students who understand and accept the sacrifices that must be made in exchange for a quality education and all the good that comes with it will be better able to find colleges that might be as flawless as that elusive, perfect pair of jeans.

Before one can truly be sure that it is time to head to the cash register, however, it is essential to take a trip to the dressing room. Even jeans that seem to be the right style, fit and price can be all wrong when one looks at how they appear in the mirror, and colleges are not altogether different. The college search gives high school students an opportunity to really look in the mirror, do a little soul-searching, and decide what is important to them in an education, in an environment and in their lives.

Visits to colleges can provide opportunities for this deeper evaluation, allowing students to ask themselves whether or not a school feels like the right place for them. It is important to find a place where the type of people present and the philosophy of the institution align with the prospective student’s personal interests, goals and values. In his speech “The American Scholar,” Ralph Waldo Emerson said that educators should “set the hearts of their youth on fire.” It is becoming both more difficult and more important to remember the importance of cultivating a passion for the pursuit of knowledge, and it is essential for a student to strive to find a college that nurtures and furthers knowledge of whatever his passions may be. After finding a college in the right style, size and cost range, a prospective student who is a wise shopper will take a look in that dressing room mirror to ensure that the institution will be one to set his heart on fire; only when he can say this is true should he begin filling out his application.