

# Comparing higher education choices

Students explore higher education options by comparing similarities and differences between two colleges near where they live.

## Learning goals

### Big idea

Learning about the higher education options in your community can help prepare you to continue your education after high school.

### Essential questions

- What education choices are open to me after high school?
- How can I compare different higher education options?

### Objectives

- Identify higher education options in your community
- Compare and contrast higher education options

### NOTE

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Please remember to consider your students' accommodations and special needs to ensure that all students are able to participate in a meaningful way.

### KEY INFORMATION

**Building block:**

 Financial knowledge and decision-making skills

**Grade level:** Middle school (6–8), High school (9–12)

**Age range:** 11–19

**Topic:** Earn (Learning about careers, Making money), Spend (Paying for college)

**School subject:** CTE (Career and technical education), Math, Social studies or history

**Teaching strategy:** Competency-based learning, Cooperative learning, Personalized instruction

**Bloom's Taxonomy level:** Understand, Evaluate

**Activity duration:** 45–60 minutes

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### National Standards for Personal Financial Education, 2021

Spending: 4-1, 4-2, 4-5, 8-1, 8-2, 8-3, 12-1, 12-2

Saving: 4-2, 8-1, 8-2

Managing credit: 4-2, 8-6, 12-4, 12-5

These standards are cumulative, and topics are not repeated in each grade level. This activity may include information students need to understand before exploring this topic in more detail.

## What students will do

- Review a College Board resource to learn about different types of colleges.
- Use the College Scorecard website (<https://collegescorecard.ed.gov/>) to find schools to explore.
- Choose two colleges to compare and contrast.

## Preparing for this activity

- While it's not necessary, completing the "Meeting your future self" activity first may make this one more meaningful.
- Print copies of all student materials for each student, or prepare for students to access them electronically.
- Review the College Board's "Types of Colleges: The Basics" webpage at <https://bigfuture.collegeboard.org/find-colleges/college-101/types-of-colleges-the-basics>.
- Become familiar with the search function on the U.S. Department of Education's College Scorecard website at <https://collegescorecard.ed.gov/>.
- Obtain a computer with Internet access and a projector or a large monitor.
- Secure computers or tablets with Internet access so students can conduct research.

## What you'll need

### THIS TEACHER GUIDE

- Comparing higher education choices (guide)  
[cfpb\\_building\\_block\\_activities\\_comparing-higher-education-choices\\_guide.pdf](#)
- A computer with Internet access and a projector or a large monitor
- The College Board's "Types of Colleges: The Basics" webpage at <https://bigfuture.collegeboard.org/find-colleges/college-101/types-of-colleges-the-basics>

### STUDENT MATERIALS

- Comparing higher education choices (worksheet)  
[cfpb\\_building\\_block\\_activities\\_comparing-higher-education-choices\\_worksheet.pdf](#)
- Computers or tablets with Internet access
- The U.S. Department of Education's College Scorecard website at <https://collegescorecard.ed.gov/>

## Exploring key financial concepts

There are a lot of options for continuing your education after you graduate from high school. One option is to attend a two-year or four-year college or university. These can be either public or private institutions. Public colleges and universities get money from a city or a state to help run the school. Private colleges and universities don't get public funds and can include not-for-profit schools and schools associated with religious organizations.

When you begin to plan your education after high school, it's important to determine if a school is the right fit for you based on what career you'd like to pursue, how affordable the school is for you and your family, the number of students, the value of your degree, and more.

Choosing what type of institution to attend can have a lasting impact on your life and your future. The U.S. Department of Education's College Scorecard (<https://collegescorecard.ed.gov/>) can help you get the information you need to compare your choices and make an informed choice.

### TIP

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Because higher education costs and other details change, students should be encouraged to always look for the most up-to-date information.

## Teaching this activity

### Whole-class introduction

- Ask students to share their ideas about higher education and education beyond high school.
- Ask them to list examples of higher education options they're aware of in their community.
- To give them a basic introduction to the options available, review the "Types of Colleges: The Basics" webpage (<https://bigfuture.collegeboard.org/find-colleges/college-101/types-of-colleges-the-basics>) with students.
- Be sure students understand key vocabulary:
  - **Public college or university:** A higher education institution whose programs and activities are operated by publicly elected or appointed school officials and which is supported by public funds.
  - **Private college or university (non-profit):** A higher education institution that is primarily supported by private funds. Includes not-for-profit schools and schools associated with a religious organization.

### TIP

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Visit CFPB's financial education glossary at [consumerfinance.gov/financial-education-glossary/](https://consumerfinance.gov/financial-education-glossary/).

- Explain that students will use the U.S. Department of Education’s College Scorecard (<https://collegescorecard.ed.gov/>) to compare nearby schools they can consider after high school.
- Show them the website and conduct a sample search.
  - Be sure students understand how to use the search filters.
  - Start by filtering by your state to show what results you’ll see.
- Be sure students understand how the College Scorecard defines the following terms before they use this online tool:
  - **Average annual cost:** The average price for students to attend the school (after financial aid is given). For public schools, this is the average cost for in-state students.
    - This is an average cost. Because students get different amounts of financial aid, the cost shown may differ from what students would actually pay.
  - **Graduation rate:** The percentage of students who graduated within 8 years of entering this school for the first time.
    - This is typically six years for a four-year institution and three years for a two-year institution (for full-time students enrolled for the first time).
  - **Median earnings:** How much people will typically earn at their jobs.
    - This is determined by taking the midpoint of the annual earnings of people who started at the school 10 years earlier.
    - This information only includes students who received federal financial aid.
- Distribute the “Comparing higher education choices” worksheet and review the directions with the class.

## Individual or group work

- Students can work individually or in small groups to complete their worksheet.
- Students will use the College Scorecard (<https://collegescorecard.ed.gov/>) to find colleges and universities near them.
  - They should create a custom search and search for their location using their zip code.
    - Have students search for schools within a 100-mile radius of where they live.
- Students will select two schools from the search results to compare.
  - If possible, encourage students to select one public and one private school.

- To determine if a school is private or public, they'll need to click on the school and look at the icons that appear below the school name.
- Students will fill in information about the two schools in the table on the worksheet.
- Students then will answer the reflection questions.

## Wrap-up

- Bring the class back together to discuss what they learned about the different costs, sizes, and other features of the colleges they explored.
- Ask for volunteers to share their responses to the reflection questions.
- You also might consider encouraging students to research additional schools on the College Scorecard site during their free time.

## Suggested next steps

Consider searching for other [CFPB activities](#) that address the topics of earning, including making money, and spending, including paying for college. Suggested activities include "[Understanding ways to pay for education after high school](#)" and "[Preparing to pay for education after high school.](#)"

## Measuring student learning

Students' answers on their worksheets and during discussion can give you a sense of their understanding.

**Keep in mind that students' answers may vary, as there may not be only one right answer.** The important thing is for students to have reasonable justification for their answers.