



How to Choose a College With a Discerning Mind and Heart

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Choosing the right college or university is a daunting task. From navigating the application and financial aid process to discerning one's future career, many Catholic families also struggle to find a college that wholly embraces the practice of faith and virtue in daily life.

The search for a college comes at a pivotal point in a young person's life. **Father Thomas Esposito**, assistant professor of theology at the University of Dallas (UDallas) and subprior (and former vocations director) of the Cistercian Abbey of Our Lady of Dallas, draws parallels between discernment of religious life and discerning the right college or university to attend. Here is his advice for students and families discerning a college decision, adapted from an [article](#) originally published in the National Catholic Register.

UNDERSTAND THE TRUE PURPOSE OF A COLLEGE EDUCATION.

At its etymological root, “educē” means to *lead out* — any education is intended to lead you out of a state of ignorance into a state of knowledge. There are different forms of knowledge. I think most people today would regard a college education as a job certification or practical equipment, or part of pursuing a career.

But I don’t think that’s a true understanding of the purpose of a college education. A college education should lead one to be a lifelong learner, to develop the virtues you need to live a joyful and fruitful life in the search for truth. This type of education is more about formation — intellectually, morally, and spiritually — and will serve a person well in whatever career or vocation they choose.

CHOOSING A COLLEGE GREATLY INFLUENCES ONE’S ABILITY TO DISCOVER HIS OR HER VOCATION.

Where one decides to go to college can significantly help or harm one’s search for a lifelong vocation. What is crucial about choosing a college is understanding the type of formation the institution provides. The 18- to 22-year-old range is a very impressionable age. The influences that

govern or inspire young men and women of that age can have lifelong consequences. You shouldn’t think of that in a drastic, fear-mongering way, but it’s a sobering fact that the ideas that you come across in college can influence you throughout your life, perhaps more strongly in the short term, but may become roots that plunge deep into the ground of your soul.

From my experience, no syllogism or deductive logic could lead you to the mathematical certainty that you should go here or there. I wanted to go to another big-name Catholic school, but they wait-listed me. So I had to figure out something else. God often opens doors by shutting the one we want to walk through! No thunderbolt from heaven illuminated the dark sky, but I had a strange sense that I was supposed to be at UDallas. Begrudgingly, I gave in. But from Day One, I met friends who are still my buddies, and the first seeds of a fascination with theology and philosophy that were planted in high school exploded.

KNOW YOUR GIFTS AND LISTEN CLOSELY FOR GOD’S WILL IN DISCERNING WHERE YOU CAN USE THEM WISELY.

When a young man inquires about life in our monastery and wants to know how

to discern, I'll often begin by saying that God draws us towards particular examples or instances of community life that are tailor-made for us. Regarding marriage, a young man does not marry the form of a woman; there is someone who comes into his life and sweeps him off his feet. Something similar happens in religious life. You have to be drawn to a particular community's charism to sense that you want to be part of it. You will be drawn to a community that appeals to your most noble desires and talents and employ them for the greater glory of God.

A similar process is at work in the discernment of the college choice. There are many things that colleges can be known for — whether it's a law program, outstanding campus ministry or a Rome program — but there has to be something that tugs at you and makes you want to investigate it further. Then a personal encounter comes in the form of a visit or chat with a student or alumnus who

communicates with the same enthusiasm or energy about the place. And then that love of a place can be a seed that germinates in your heart through prayer.

GIVE GRACE A CHANCE TO WORK.

An intuitive grace is available to you if you genuinely try to harmonize your interests and desires with what the Lord has in store for you. There is always going to be an element of uncertainty, and that's good — but I think that there's a great connection you can make to a particular college that you can sense in visiting the place or speaking to students and alumni to know the place. These interactions can give you confidence that it is a good fit for you.

In discerning my own vocation to join the abbey, during an Easter Triduum retreat as a senior, I walked out of one of the conferences that one of the monks gave, and I had the sense that God wanted me to be



there. I wasn't thrilled about that. My initial answer to God was "Fine." But once I had that in sight, the selfish cords which I had wrapped around my will were gradually undone.

FINALLY, LOOK TO ST. PAUL FOR ADVICE, not so much the account of his conversion in Acts, as his own account in Galatians 1. Here, he gives a sense of what he's made of this dramatic change in his life, and he notes that God has prepared him for that shift from the zealous preservation of his ancestral traditions to the revelation of God's Son, Jesus Christ.

Paul saw his Judaism as absolutely essential to his vocation as a Christian apostle to the Gentiles — so Paul, not as the guy on the horse, but in his reflection on how God has led him throughout his life. And I don't think it's ever too early to introduce people, at least in high school, to Ignatius' Spiritual Exercises. They are a most welcome and necessary part of discerning a vocation like marriage or the priesthood — or college!





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