



**BETTER FENCER**

**GUIDE TO  
NCAA FENCING**

# The Better Fencer Guide to NCAA Fencing

By Jason Rogers & Will Spear

In this article we dive into the high-octane world of NCAA Fencing, which at first glance for many young fencers, parents and coaches can feel overwhelming. We will give you an overview of the important aspects of college fencing such as school selection, recruitment and what it's actually like to be a college fencer.

To unpack all the complexities of the end-to-end process, Better Fencer has gone to and received some advice from the best. To give us the full NCAA college landscape, we spoke to Brendan Baby, husband to [Sada Jacobson](#) (three-time Olympic Medalist), and himself a three-time NCAA team champion from Penn State. Brendan was a high-school teacher and coach for five years, helping numerous athletes through the school evaluation and selection process. To understand the recruiting process we consulted [Michael Aufrichtig](#), head fencing coach of the Columbia Lions, the two-time NCAA Champions from 2015 & 2016. Also, co-writing this article with me is [Will Spear](#), who is a Columbia Grad and NCAA Team Champion from 2015. Additionally, we interviewed [Jeff Spear](#), member of the 2012 London Olympic Team and NCAA individual champion in 2008, and Andrew Fischl, recent US National Travel Team member and NCAA All-American Finalist to get insight into the daily life of a student-athlete.

While we can't get into all of the intricacies of the NCAA rules, we aim to provide some clarity for rising talent and their parents about how they can best prepare themselves for success before and during college.

## Why Is Participating in College Fencing Good for You?

There are numerous advantages to participating in college athletics, and not all of them are obvious. Along with the health benefits that go along with regular exercise, students who are part of a sports team during college have several post-graduation advantages over their non-athletic peers.

Student athletes tend to have an easier time staying healthy, which can enhance their college experience. Regular exercise has been shown to [improve brain function](#), [relieve stress](#), and help [promote regular sleep](#), all of which are invaluable in an academic setting. Many colleges with athletic programs also offer various assistance programs to student athletes in the form of scholarships, grants, free tutoring, and preferred class selection.

In addition to the benefits of participating in college athletics during college, student athletes also have an advantage once they graduate. Student athletes hone valuable life skills as they work to balance school work with athletic obligations. It helps increase discipline and teaches student athletes how to make smart choices, time management and how to correctly prioritize responsibilities. These skills are often recognized and rewarded by potential employers in the workplace after graduation. An employer will often understand that participating in sports during college helps develop leadership and teamwork skills, as well as that athletics in college shows great drive, the ability to focus under pressure and follow through with commitments. Being a student athlete also opens up the network of athletic alumni who understand what it takes to be a student athlete better than anyone else. They are often more interested in helping fellow student athlete alumni navigate post-graduation decisions and opportunities.

This is not to say that participating in college athletics is strictly better than not. Students who participate competitively in a sport during college will have to make sacrifices on a regular basis in their sleep, hobbies, school work, and/or social life. The massive time commitment that being a student athlete requires is difficult, and at times downright impossible. On the whole, however, most student athletes would say the benefits outweigh the downsides; student athletes get to learn valuable life skills while participating in a sport they love. About NCAA Fencing With precision that is typical of his consulting background, Brendan gives us a great overview of how college fencing works.

45 colleges and universities with varsity fencing programs



Women Only



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## NCAA Fencing Landscape

While there are vast choices of colleges in the United States, there are only 45 schools that have “varsity” fencing programs. The term “varsity” in this context means that they have official, school-sponsored programs, where athletes are potentially able (if they qualify) to compete at the NCAA Championships. In some cases those schools are eligible to award athletic scholarships, but more on that later. It’s important to note, too, that some of those colleges only have varsity women’s programs, and thus only send athletes to compete in women’s sabre, foil and epee at NCAA-sanctioned events.

As with most sports, there are some schools that are consistently competitive, each year sending the maximum number of fencers to compete (12 fencers, 2 per weapon – i.e. both men’s and women’s). Without sending a full “roster” of athletes, it’s very difficult for the college

to vie for the overall NCAA team title, as this award is determined by the cumulative number of victories of all participating athletes at the National Championships event. For example, sending only 6 athletes puts you at a big disadvantage against a team with 12 athletes, even if your 6 competitors are very strong. However, for those schools who don't vie for the overall title, each of their athletes can hope to win individual titles which are awarded for each respective event.

Unlike many NCAA sports, fencing not only sees great success at schools with powerful sports histories, but also at those who are widely considered to be among the best academic institutions in the world. Brendan, very helpfully, suggests that most competitive programs can be divided roughly into 4 groups:

### NCAA Fencing Colleges / Universities by Category

Big Athletics	Ivy League	Niche Athletics
          (New York)	       BROWN   (New York)	         <u>HAVERFORD</u>   Etc...  (New York)

## 1. Big Athletics

Big Athletics schools are those who have long traditions of NCAA athletic success and championships across multiple sports. For example, my alma mater, The Ohio State University, is far better known in the NCAA world for its consistent success in NCAA Football (8 national titles won) and Basketball (two Final Four appearances in the last 10 years).

The programs:

[Duke University](#)

[Northwestern University](#)

[Pennsylvania State University](#)

[St. John's University \(New York\)](#)

[Stanford University](#)

[The Ohio State University](#)

[University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill](#)

[University of Notre Dame](#)

## 2. Ivy League

Ivy League schools are best known for their academic prestige. And although they can not grant athletic scholarships, their fencers are fierce competitors at the NCAA championships and typically have multiple winners at both team and individual levels. For example, the Columbia University Lions are the current two-time defending champions (2015 & 2016).

The Programs:

[Brown University](#)

[Columbia University-Barnard College \(New York\)](#)

[Cornell University](#)

[Harvard University](#)

[Princeton University](#)

[University of Pennsylvania](#)

[Yale University](#)

### 3. Niche Athletics

Niche Athletics schools are those who, while not generally known for their athletic programs, support smaller sports like fencing. Not all of these programs actively grant scholarships, but they, too, can attract star fencing talent from the U.S. and abroad.

The programs:

[Boston College](#)

[Brandeis University](#)

[California Institute of Technology](#)

[Cleveland State University](#)

[Drew University](#)

[Fairleigh Dickinson University, Metropolitan Campus](#)

[Haverford College](#)

[Hunter College](#)

[Johns Hopkins University](#)

[Lafayette College](#)

[Lawrence University](#)

[Long Island University/LIU Post](#)

[Massachusetts Institute of Technology](#)

[New Jersey Institute of Technology](#)

[New York University \(New York\)](#)

[Queens College \(New York\)](#)

[Sacred Heart University](#)  
[Stevens Institute of Technology](#)  
[Temple University](#)  
[The City College of New York](#)  
[Tufts University](#)  
[U.S. Air Force Academy](#)  
[University of California, San Diego](#)  
[University of Detroit Mercy](#)  
[University of the Incarnate Word](#)  
[Vassar College](#)  
[Wagner College](#)  
[Wayne State University \(Michigan\)](#)  
[Wellesley College](#)  
[Yeshiva University](#)

## 4. New York

Last, it's important to note the importance of our sport in New York. While the top fencers come from all over the country, New York City, is undeniably the epicenter of US Fencing. There are several New York Schools that are listed in their appropriate categories above, however, we feel that they merit a subcategory of their own because of the distinct advantages of attending a school that is geographically located close to the city with highest concentration of strong private fencing programs. I, myself, spent the last 3 years of my career training in NYC at [Manhattan Fencing Center](#) so that I could access a consistently competitive pool of training partners, such as Keeth Smart, Daryl Homer and Tim Morehouse.

### **Consistently High-Performing Fencing Schools in New York City**

[Columbia University-Barnard College](#)  
[New York University](#)  
[St. John's University](#)

### **Other Fencing Schools located in Manhattan, New York City**

[Hunter College](#)

[The City College of New York](#)

[Yeshiva University](#)

### **Schools within Reasonable Commute to Manhattan, New York City**

[Stevens Institute of Technology](#) (New Jersey)

[Long Island University/LIU Post](#) (Brooklyn & Brookville, New York)

[Queens College](#) (Flushing, New York)

[Fairleigh Dickinson University, Metropolitan Campus](#) (New Jersey)

[Wagner College](#) (Staten Island, New York)

## **Colleges with Fencing Scholarships**

Varsity programs are divided into three divisions: Division I, Division II and Division III. Although all schools in the three divisions can compete against each other at NCAA events, the primary difference between them is the number and average dollar value of athletic scholarships.

Division I schools are limited to providing a maximum of five total scholarships for women's programs and four and a half (4.5) scholarships for men's programs. Division II schools can provide a maximum of four and a half (4.5) scholarships each for their men's and women's programs. Ivy league and Div III programs can not offer athletic scholarships, but may offer financial aid. If you are more curious about the specifics of each program, you can visit [this online resource](#), which breaks down each college fencing program's level of athletic aid and typical admission standards.

### **How can schools provide half scholarships?**

Full athletic scholarships are not as prevalent as you might think. They are more common at Division I programs; very few student athletes receive them at Division II programs. But even at Division I programs, scholarships are often divided up amongst the athletes on the team. For example, in my case at The Ohio State University, my athletic scholarship was only 50%,

however, I was also awarded a 50% academic scholarship, meaning the university fully funded my tuition, room and board.

## Other Types of Financial Aid

It's no secret that attending college in the United States can be extremely expensive, and there are a number of additional costs outside of tuition that students and their families must cover. Therefore, it's very important to understand the total cost of each of the schools you are considering. This [online resource](#) helps break down in more detail the approximate costs of all schools nationwide. It's a helpful tool, especially if you have non-fencing schools on your list. The good news is that athletic & academic scholarships are not your only option to help defray some of the costs.

All schools offer some kind of **need-based financial aid** to those who qualify based on total household income. There are also a number of **fencing-specific grants** that some universities offer to help you with tuition, room, board or even the costs of traveling to fencing competitions. We have provided a short list containing some of these types of scholarships below, however, you should take the time to do few simple internet searches of your own. Depending on the schools you are considering, you may find several additional options:

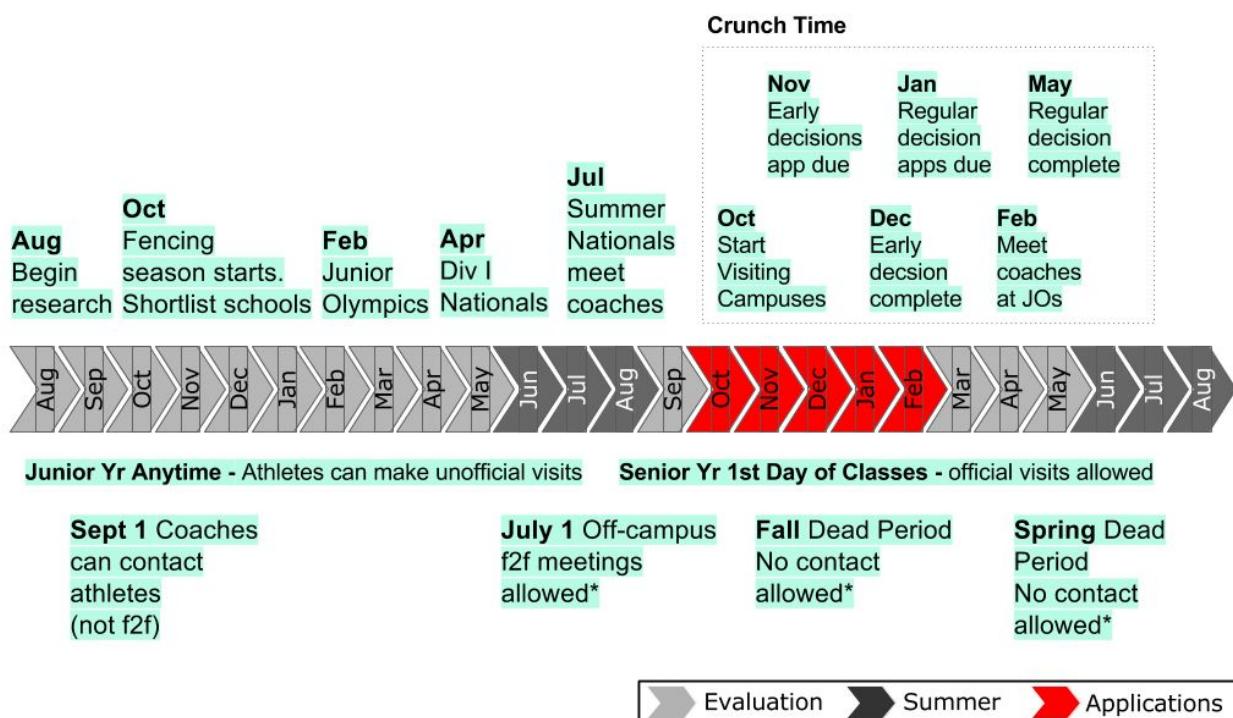
- [Eric Wang fencing scholarship \(FIT\)](#)
- [Herbert C. Spiselman Memorial Endowment for Fencing \(Columbia\)](#)
- [Williams Scholarship Fencing Tournament \(Reed College\)](#)
- Women's Fencing Scholarship (Penn State)
- [NCAA Postgraduate Scholarship Award](#)

## College Selection Process - When To Start Thinking about This

Traditionally, the concrete steps that make up the process of college admission, such as completing SATs (spring of junior year in high school), visiting college campuses (fall of senior year in high school) and submitting college applications (fall senior year in high school) happen

in the one year prior to the deadline when seniors must make their final selection (spring senior year in high school). However, Brendan cautions us that, for athletes, choosing the right college can be a full two year process. This process begins with first narrowing down the schools that you want to focus on and then organizing a game plan for the upcoming two years. This exercise, itself, can be difficult because there are many variables you will be considering to determine your ideal school(s). We're going to spend the next few sections discussing the college selection, recruiting process and their caveats, as well as provide a sample timeline of a typical student-athletes' college search. Another important thing to consider is if the athlete will opt to apply for early admission which will accelerate these milestones on the timeline. We will address this topic more later in our conversation with Columbia head coach, [Michael Aufrichtig](#).

## Milestones – Choosing Your NCAA Fencing College



## Schedule

There are very specific NCAA rules along the timeline that allow, limit or prohibit NCAA coaches or personnel from actively recruiting athletes. You will want to keep this in mind as you think through your own timeline.

**Anytime:** Students athletes are welcome to visit a coach on campus (it must be initiated by student athlete and funded by student athlete). Even a high school freshman, for example, could visit campus and talk to a coach.

**Beginning September 1st of junior year:** Coaches can contact potential student athletes (email, text, phone).

**Beginning July 1st after junior year:** Coaches can meet student athletes off-campus (this is typically at Summer Nationals and coaches can meet with a student athlete before July 1st if they have concluded all of their events at the tournament).

**After first day of classes of senior year:** Student athletes can make official visits to campus (funded by university).

**Dead Period:** A period during which a college coach may not have face-to-face contact with potential recruits – Monday through Thursday of the initial week for the fall signing of the National Letter of Intent (these dates vary, but in 2016 these days occurred between November 7-10)

**Dead Period:** Monday through Thursday of the initial week for the spring signing of the National Letter of Intent. (these dates vary, but in 2017 these days occurred between April 10-13)

**Exception:** When a dead period for recruiting occurs during a North American Cup Fencing Championship, it is permissible for authorized coaching staff members to observe and talk to

prospective student-athletes participating in that event. The NCAA makes this exception so that coaches and student athletes can easily meet while in the same place for competition.

You can read more about this on the [NCAA Website](#).

## Getting in Touch with College Coaches

Being a student-athlete can definitely be an advantage when applying to colleges, but only if the coach of that college knows who you are and that you're interested in their school. That's why communicating with college coaches is an essential aspect of your application process. You need to approach coaches as early as possible (at the latest, during your Junior year in high school) to make sure that you don't miss out on being a prospect because they have already made decisions about whom to recruit.

No matter how good you are at fencing, it's always a good idea to let coaches know where and when you will be competing so they have a chance to evaluate you themselves. Many coaches look not only at results and skill, but will also consider an athlete's personality, how they conduct themselves on the strip, and how they deal with difficult or high pressure situations.

You should also schedule a time to talk with coaches about their school and fencing program. At competitions, a coach will usually be very busy attending to their athletes and evaluating prospects, so it's better to schedule a specific time to meet than to assume that they will be free whenever you happen to walk up to them.

You should ideally schedule to talk with a coach at least a week in advance and come prepared with specific questions to ask. It is often helpful to send your more detailed questions in advance to allow them time to prepare a thorough response. Don't be afraid to ask any questions you're genuinely interested in and don't waste your or the coach's time with questions that won't influence your decision. Genuine interest in aspects of a school and their fencing program will show and will help your prospects when conversing with coaches.

Try to speak to all of the coaches at your target colleges over the course of a season, not just the head coach (especially if your head coach has a speciality in one weapon). Most schools have assistant coaches who oversee each weapon program. You will be spending a lot of time with these people over the next four years, and it's imperative that you're comfortable with all aspects of the fencing program and the style of team leadership. Here are some good times to speak with college coaches:

### **Junior Olympics**

This is your best opportunity to talk with coaches. Most college coaches make it a point to attend with their athletes, and the timing of the event (mid-February) means that many coaches are looking for potential recruits. If you are a junior in high school, coaches won't technically be allowed to speak to you face to face, however, this is a good time for them to evaluate you and you to evaluate them. Also, take time to observe the fencers from your shortlist of schools. Do they seem like people you are excited to have as teammates?

### **Div I National Championships**

Being the premier national event for US Fencing, many college coaches attend, given that a number of top NCAA fencers are also on the national circuit and thus will be competing in this event. This competition often occurs in April, however, sometimes this event is included with Summer Nationals in July. The same rule as above applies for juniors in highschool – it's an important period of observation only – no face to face meetings with coaches.

### **Summer Nationals**

This event is always held over the Fourth of July holiday and, although not quite as strong as the Junior Olympics, is often a good opportunity to speak with some coaches. Because there aren't as many college athletes competing, it's important to contact each individual coach of interest ahead of time to confirm that he is attending (and schedule a meeting, if appropriate).

### **North American Cups (NACs)**

Fewer college coaches will attend NACs than Div I National Championships or Junior Olympics. The timing of these events vary but NACs are often a good opportunity to meet with coaches.

### **Regional or local events**

Usually only one or two coaches attend these smaller events but if you are considering a college in the local area, it could provide an excellent opportunity to have a quality conversation with the coach.

### **Official Visits**

In addition to scheduling a time to speak to coaches at tournaments, for schools you're more serious about, you can arrange an official visit to the campus and speak with coaches at their respective schools. The rules for these official visits will vary from college to college, but they generally consist of spending a night at the college (often in a dorm), meeting the coaches and athletes, attending a practice and sitting in on a few classes. Official visits are allowed starting the first day of a prospective student's Senior year in high school.

Junior Olympics	•	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Most college coaches will attend with their athletes<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>-Coaches are coaching their athletes and looking for potential recruits</li></ul></li></ul>
Summer Nationals	•	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Good opportunity, but not all coaches will attend</li><li>Long time frame provides chance for more in-depth conversations</li></ul>
NACs	•	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Good opportunity, but not all coaches will attend<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>-Typically limited to top programs with high-level athletes and programs in the region</li></ul></li></ul>
Div I National Championships	•	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Good opportunity, but not all coaches will attend</li><li>Similar to NACs in terms of length</li></ul>
Regional or local events	•	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Likely to only be one or two coaches present, if any</li><li>Local or regional schools only</li></ul>
Official Visits	•	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Need to set up relationship ahead of time</li><li>Best time to learn about the program</li></ul>

## Top Mistakes

Before we fully dive into what goes into selecting a college and how to find the one that is the best fit for you, Brendan helps us highlight a few key mistakes that athletes often make while applying to school, how those mistakes manifest, and what steps to take to avoid these common pitfalls. Keep these uppermost in your mind while you are looking at and applying to schools to ensure that you don't fall into these traps.

Common Mistake	Explained	Recommended
<b>Fixating on one school</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Devote most energy and time to one "dream school"</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <b>Identify alternative schools</b> and approach them at the same time as your "dream school"</li><li>• Be open minded to other options</li></ul>
<b>Assume school is academically out of reach</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Don't research or approach "stretch" schools</li><li>• Rely solely on advice of college counselor</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <b>Inform coaches</b> of your interest<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Most coaches have (limited) influence with admissions</li></ul></li></ul>
<b>Assume there is no possibility of financial assistance</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• View athletic scholarships as the only financial support available</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <b>Research</b> non athletic financial support<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Financial aid</li><li>- Academic scholarships</li><li>- Other scholarships</li></ul></li></ul>
<b>Wait until the last minute</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Don't approach schools/coaches until application process is underway</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <b>Begin evaluation process early</b><ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Identify potential schools during Junior year if possible</li></ul></li></ul>

## Fixating on one school

The danger here is when there is a single “dream school” that you just have to go to. This limited approach often causes you to become close minded to other schools that may also fit your needs or even surpass the “dream school” when you consider multiple categories. Being overly focused on one school can close doors to alternative schools earlier than you think if you fail to follow the proper application paths throughout the year, and leave you without other good options if applying to your “dream school” doesn’t go as planned.

It’s best to identify several schools in addition to your “dream school” and approach them simultaneously (and enthusiastically) to ensure that you have more than one good option. Be open minded to other schools and don’t close any doors that you don’t have to.

## Assuming a school is academically out of reach

It’s a mistake to avoid researching and approaching your so-called “stretch” schools (the schools that you believe to be outside of your academic reach). This often occurs at the advice of a college counselor (whose job it is to give students what they see as realistic academic advice). The problem with this approach is that it doesn’t take your fencing skills into account and can close the door to getting into a great school because you didn’t even try.

The best way to avoid this pitfall is to inform coaches at these schools of your interest. Coaches often have (limited) influence with the admissions department and may be able to help get you into their school even if your grades and test scores fall slightly below the school’s average. This is because student athletes can often benefit from a number of resources made available to help them excel academically if they find the coursework out of their comfort zone.

## Assuming there is no possibility of financial assistance

This mistake occurs when student-athletes mistakenly think of athletic scholarships as their only opportunity for financial support. This is simply NOT the case in the majority of schools. As we detailed above, most colleges have numerous non-athletic academic and financial programs and/or scholarships that are available to students and student-athletes alike.

Look closely into all of your financial options and don't assume that your grades preclude you from receiving academic scholarships, that your income is too high for financial aid, or you're ineligible for other types of scholarships. Many high schools also offer additional counseling in this area.

## Waiting until the last minute

Don't wait until the process is in full swing to approach schools and coaches. The application process is starting earlier than ever, and delaying until your applications are already underway gives you a needless disadvantage in the whole process. Keep in mind that each fencing program can only focus on a limited number of incoming athletes and you want to make sure that you are being considered.

Begin the evaluation process early, identify potential schools, and speak with coaches. Ideally, this should all be done during your Junior year in high school so you can focus on applications during your Senior year.

## What If I'm Not Ready to Go to College Right After High School?

It's becoming more common, especially in Europe, to take some time off after high school before heading to college. For many, this is an important time for personal development, and helps them to prepare mentally and emotionally for the big commitment ahead. Others may choose to take a break during college to work or attend to personal matters. There is no problem with this from an academic standpoint, however the NCAA has certain rules that you will want to know if you plan to compete in a varsity program that regulate both the timeframe in which student athletes can compete as well as an age limit for older students.

You are only allowed to compete in NCAA competitions for four full seasons, however, each division has slightly different rules about how long you're able to wait before you start using these years of eligibility. You can see the full rules [here](#), but below we will provide a clear outline of the ruleset for each division.

1. In Division I schools, your eligibility 'clock' begins when you enroll as a full-time student in any school. This clock runs continuously for five full years, and does not stop if you transfer, decide to redshirt (take time off athletics but remain in school), drop out of school for a semester or more, or switch to part time. You will lose eligibility five full calendar years from the day you enroll in a full-time college. Additionally, your Division I 'clock' will start automatically when you turn 21, effectively making 25 the oldest you can be and still compete in Division I sports.
2. In Division II and III schools, you have the first 10 semesters or 15 quarters (a standard academic year for schools on a quarter system contain 3 quarters, as the summer is considered the fourth quarter) in which you are enrolled as a full time student to finish your four years of competition. A semester or quarter will count against your 'clock' when you are enrolled full time, or enrolled part time while competing for the school. Your clock stops if you are enrolled part time without competing or if you are no longer enrolled in a

school. Unlike Division I schools, Division II and III school eligibility ‘clocks’ do not advance with the calendar year and they do not start or end at any specific age.

3. The Ivy League has a few of its own rules regarding eligibility. In the Ivy League, you normally cannot “redshirt”, or take a year off from competitions for any reason. However, exceptions are sometimes granted for injuries or leave of absences. These exceptions can extend your eligibility to the full five years of eligibility granted for Division I schools.

Grad school students can compete as long as they haven’t used up their entire eligibility. This is usually only possible in the first year of grad school because the eligibility clock starts running from the time you enter college. However, Ivy League graduate students cannot compete in the NCAA.

There are a few exceptions to these rules, such as if you belong to the peace corp or the military. However, these rules tend to get extremely complicated and we suggest that you check with a NCAA eligibility officer if you think an exception might apply to you.

I personally took advantage of the ability to take a break from college after my sophomore year at The Ohio State University to train and qualify for the 2004 Athens Olympics. Starting in the spring quarter of 2003, I took a leave of absence from school, but remained in Columbus, Ohio and committed to focus and prepare myself for a difficult season of training and competition ahead. I didn’t resume school again until fall of 2004, after the Games (1.3 years) which was the maximum time I could take off without jeopardizing my scholarship due to NCAA eligibility issues. For many serious student-athletes, this can be a good option, however it comes loaded with a number of caveats and drawbacks, which I’ll mention briefly. The first is that school, while time consuming, is a constructive distraction. When you only have fencing to focus on, it can be difficult not to be distressed by a bad practice or competition result. The other caveat is the academic workload when you return can be daunting. I was lucky in that when I entered OSU as a freshman, I already had nearly a full year of college credits (meaning I was technically a sophomore academically). This gave me a lot of flexibility, allowing me to more easily take the year off to train as well as take a lighter course load each quarter to offset my rigorous training and travel schedule.

## How To Evaluate If a School Is Right for You?

Finding a school that fits you is paramount. For most, it is not only a 4-year commitment (minimum), but also a time when you will truly learn about yourself and develop lifelong relationships with teammates and friends. Let's take a look at the key elements you should be considering when evaluating a college that is right for you.

### An Important Question to Start with: Why Do You Fence?

We've written about this important topic [in a previous article](#), but it's essential to understand your motivations when you are picking your school.

If you can articulate the single most important reason why fencing is in your life, it will help guide both how you make your decision about which colleges to consider and where you ultimately will go. I strongly encourage you to think deeply about this because you might be surprised by what you discover. Michael Aufrechtig, head coach of Columbia University fencing, summarizes this nicely:

"I found that the most successful college athletes are the ones that just love the sport. If someone doesn't love the sport and know why they are doing it, it can be very difficult for them when they're in college. Two years ago, one of the things that we stressed within our team was, 'What's your why?' Everybody fences for different reasons. Some people love winning, and although it can hurt them if they're losing, at least that's why they get up in the morning. For others, their 'why' is that they enjoy the game or the physicality of it. If it's because your parents are pushing you, you're not going to last. You'll quit."

My own college decision revealed a lot more to me than I expected. After freshman year in high school, when people would ask me where I wanted to go to college, my goal was Columbia University in New York.

This goal was born out of a several key factors. The first was that education was very important to my family, and I can not remember a time when I was not focused on going to the best

college that I could get into. Where I went, however, was especially important to my father, Chuck Rogers. He is originally from western New York, and his goal was to attend Cornell University in Ithaca. Despite his high marks, this was a big stretch for him and my grandparents because they couldn't afford the tuition. Nevertheless, in his senior year, he applied for a scholarship, but was devastated to find out that he finished second place to a friend and classmate. He went on to attend a small regional college, Alfred University, for his undergraduate degree, and later did a Master's Degree at St. Mary's University. When I was younger, I would listen to him talk about his college experiences and feel compelled to have the experience that he was not able to. And so the "Ivy League" was my conception of what would be right for me. The second factor was the geographic significance of New York City. At 15-16 years old, I was just starting to perform well at a senior national level, and many of the athletes I competed against directly and admired ([Keeth Smart](#), [Ivan Lee](#), [Akhi Spencer-El](#), Herby Raynaud, to name a few) were training with the Peter Westbrook Foundation (at the Fencer's Club) in NYC. I could see even then the importance of training with the best, and so Columbia seemed like the perfect combination of "Ivy League" academics and elite fencing training.

With that criteria deeply embedded in my mind, my college decision didn't seem that complicated. I would apply to Columbia as my first choice, but also apply to other schools like Stanford and University of Pennsylvania so that I could keep my options open in the event that I wasn't accepted. I also applied to The Ohio State University (OSU) out of respect to Vladimir Nazlymov, whom I had trained with at summer fencing camps in Kansas City since I was a very young fencer, even though I had no real intention of going there.

When spring rolled around, I was delighted to find out that I had been accepted to Columbia and all of the other fencing schools that I had applied to. It should have been a no brainer, right? Well, something in me made me hesitate before I signed on the dotted line. Instead of immediately returning my Letter of Intent, I took the maximum amount of time to reflect deeply on 'why' I wanted to fence in college and what I hoped to achieve.

It was about this time that the Olympics began orbiting in my mind. It's hard to explain, but before that, it had never seriously considered that maybe I could fence in the Olympics. I began to ask, in earnest, important questions like "Am I good enough?" and "What and who would I need to make that happen?" After many discussions with my coach, Daniel Costin, my parents,

and careful consideration, my goals expanded and the criteria of my college decision began to change. You might think “Columbia is a perfect place to train because, as you already pointed out, you have New York fencing on your doorstep.” And you would be right, but something just didn’t feel right. I had this gnawing feeling that New York City wasn’t the right environment for me personally. I was pretty sure that the clash and tumble of the city might swallow me whole, or at least serve as an unavoidable distraction.

At around the same time, I paid a courtesy visit to Vladimir in Columbus to try to, at least, understand what OSU had to offer. After a 4-hour lunch, and a comically long speech from Vladimir (of which my mother, to this day, claims she understood no more than 50%), I knew in my gut that he truly believed in me and could help me achieve my Olympic dream. I also began to understand that the focused training environment and athletic resources that Ohio State could offer me would be my best option to accomplish my newly identified and single most important goal: Becoming an Olympian. And so, in the 11th hour, I made my final decision to leave my childhood dream of attending Columbia behind, take ownership of my “why” and prepare myself to for 4-5 years in Columbus, Ohio.

## Creating Your Evaluation Criteria

Decision making is an inherently complex exercise that everyone approaches differently. It’s very easy to get overwhelmed by all the information that is out there which can result in unnecessary confusion and stress. We have suggested the variables that we believe are most important and can help give you a starting point. Your ideal school may not have everything, but what is important is that you understand clearly any compromises that you choose to consider. I’ve also tried to give you a sense of how these factors may play out by using my own college decision as an example.

### Fencing Factors

There are three extremely important questions you must examine closely with respect to a college’s fencing program.

### **1. What are the coaches' credentials?**

Ultimately, you have to believe that the team leaders can help you achieve your fencing goals. A coach's experience says a lot about how they will try to mold and shape their athletes. In my case, Vladimir's credentials were impossible to ignore. He's a five-time Olympic medalist so he had personally been in that "lion's den" that I wanted to enter. This brings me to an important exception, which is that not all great coaches were great fencers themselves. The fundamental skill of a good coach is the ability to deconstruct the elements of a craft in such a way that they can be taught to young talent. Curiously, this is not a trait that all great athletes possess. Some athletes are blessed with an innate talent and therefore don't think deeply about how they mastered a certain skill. It can be difficult for them, however, to teach people that don't have the same gifts. A great example of this is the now legendary sabre coach, Christian Bauer. He has coached Olympic Champions from France, Italy, China and Russia, yet never achieved such heights as an athlete himself.

### **2. Will I be receptive to the environment they create and their style of coaching?**

What is equally important is the coach's ability to teach you in the way you learn best. When I was making my final evaluation of schools, I realized that I personally needed a coach that was going to be very "hands on," something that I instinctively felt Vladimir could provide at OSU. I also knew how I felt at New York City fencing clubs which tend to be more chaotic and aggressive than the environment I was used to. I recognized that I would do better in a more nurturing fencing environment and OSU provided that feeling of safety and confidence that I felt that I needed.

### **3. How strong will my immediate training partners be?**

It's important to think of yourself as the average of the small group of people you spend the most time with. The strength of your training partners significantly influences your ability to improve. Think of the process of making steel. Hot metal must be hammered over and over to end up with a final product. In this example, your training partners are the hammers and you need them to pound on you day after day if you expect to become as tough as steel. While New York offered the opportunity of fencing with some of the best in men's sabre at that time,

Vladimir was rapidly recruiting a strong group of men's sabre fencers, like Colin Parker, Mike Momtzelidze and Adam Crompton, that could push me every day.

## Academic Factors

There are three extremely important questions you must examine closely with respect to their fencing program.

### **1. What is the overall quality of their academic program or my area of interest?**

This question will not be a surprise, but how you go about evaluating it is very tricky. Talking to a college advisor can be helpful, and there are a number of online resources such as the [U.S. News and World Report College Rankings](#) which can help you rank the options. Also, if you have an inkling of what you want to study, that can help narrow down your options by looking at schools with strong academic programs in those areas. Many non-Ivy league schools attract all-star professors who prefer to teach at bigger schools (e.g. OSU), which sometimes give them better conditions to conduct their research, and they, in turn, raise the profile of the program of their expertise.

### **2. What resources are available to me to help me excel as a student?**

In the end, the final measure of your education ultimately comes down to your ability to take advantage of learning opportunities. So, that means it's not just the name of the school or how brilliant the professors are that you take classes from, but also that the full spectrum of opportunities that you need to be challenged and learn are there for you. I suggest you look closely at how each school helps position their student-athletes to succeed through special conditions and programs such as, smaller class sizes, counseling and tutoring as well as honors classes and extracurricular projects.

### **3. Is the school's brand and reputation widely recognized and respected?**

This question is a bit more delicate. There is no doubt that you can get an excellent education at nearly every college, and there are myriad examples of extremely successful people attending small, lesser known schools (or none at all). However, the question of where you went to school is one that will follow you for many years in job interviews, social events and your online professional profile. The harsh reality is that many people will use your college choice as a snapshot of how smart and talented they expect you to be. For example, especially in certain

professions, having attended an Ivy League school is typically considered an imprimatur of intelligence and likelihood to succeed because of the tough admission standards and challenging scholastic environment. Does that mean that every person that attends an Ivy League school is brilliant and destined for success? Absolutely not, however, most people are more willing to place a wager that they will, rather than not. The school you attend becomes a part of your own personal brand and the way people think about you. Does this mean that a small, lesser known school should be off the table? Definitely not. That school may be perfect for you and the career that you seek, but it is a factor to consider when making your decision.

### Livability Factors

Lastly, you need to feel confident that your new home for the next four years is going to be a place where you can be happy. These are the three key questions which can help you assess potential schools:

#### **1. Am I excited about exploring what this new place has to offer?**

This may seem obvious but it's one that is often overlooked because you are so busy considering other details. Often this is a factor you can't analyze, so it's more about your immediate gut feel for a place. Learning is ultimately about following your curiosity, and so you should be excited about exploring everything your new school has to offer and the surrounding city that a college is in plays a big role in your overall college experience. Your life is primarily on campus, but campus life also gets stagnant and at some point, you will want to get away and take in new experiences and/or live off campus. Are you in a city that interests you? Can you imagine yourself there for the years to come? If the answer to these questions are "Yes!" you are much more likely to drink in the full experience while in college.

#### **2. Will I feel so stressed financially that I can't enjoy my experience?**

As we discussed before, college is a huge financial burden which can place a lot of stress on student athletes and their families. We've also detailed the various forms of financial assistance available to student-athletes (athletic scholarships, academic scholarships, etc.). The bottom line is that if you feel excessively stressed financially because you are not able to secure the funding you need, you will not be able to get the most out of the experience. In other words, a

place at your dream school that will leave you in debt for many years may not be the best option for you if you are offered a full scholarship to another fantastic institution.

### **3. How much access do I have to the emotional support that I need to be successful?**

Lastly, most students will be leaving behind a life they know for a new place, new friends and new experiences. You will want to consider how being away from the emotional support system that you have relied on in your teenage years might affect you. Luckily, today video calling allows us to connect to our loved ones no matter where in the world they are, but physical presence is not something that should be underestimated. We develop very intense bonds with our family, friends and coaches and often there is no substitute for a good old fashioned hug. So the question to ask is: how much access will I need to these people and how am I going to get it?

### **Make a Deal with Yourself**

I want to just pause here and talk about my own choice to attend The Ohio State University over Columbia. I mentioned before that it's unlikely that any school will be a top scorer on all of these questions and your final choice is often one of compromise. In selecting OSU, I knew that I was making a compromise on academic reputation and rigor. No doubt, Columbia would have been a better choice for me academically. I made this choice, however, knowing that I was getting an athletic environment that I believed was better for me in return. This aligned with my number one goal of becoming an Olympian, and so I was willing to make that trade off. It was an extremely difficult calculation to make, but in doing so, I also made a personal agreement with myself that I think made all the difference. I vowed to myself that I would participate in OSU's Honors Program and work as hard as I possibly could to ensure that when I finished college, I would put myself in the best possible position to attend grad school at an Ivy League school, perhaps even Columbia. As challenged as I was with my fencing commitments, I NEVER let them overtake my academic commitments. I'm proud to say that I graduated from OSU Summa Cum Laude with nearly a 4.0 GPA and attending graduate school is still in my long term plans. The point I want you to take away from my college decision is that taking a big risk to achieve

something that you love is totally acceptable, as long as you think, plan and have a backup strategy that allows you to pivot if things go differently.

## Other Questions

It's important to simplify your evaluation and decision so you don't get overwhelmed, which is why we've provided you with the focus areas above. However, there are other, more specific, questions that you can ask if you prefer to have more detail. We've provided some additional questions below that can help you when contacting coaches and college administrators:

Resources for athletes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• What additional resources are available specifically for athletes? - E.g. Athletic trainers, weight training, medical insurance, etc...</li><li>• What <b>training and competition costs</b> are covered by the school and what is the athlete expected to pay for?</li></ul>
Competition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• How many <b>NCAA competitions</b> does the school participate in?</li><li>• How many <b>non-NCAA competitions</b>?</li><li>• Is there financial support for national or international tournaments?</li></ul>
Facilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• What do the fencing facilities <b>look</b> like?</li><li>• How many <b>strips</b> are there?</li><li>• Do fencers practice <b>dry or electric</b>?</li></ul>
Time commitment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• How many <b>practices per week</b> and when?</li><li>• How much time is required per week for <b>non-practice activities</b>?</li><li>• How frequently and how far does the <b>team travel</b>?</li></ul>
Practice environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Where are practices held – <b>on campus or off</b>?</li><li>• Are practices <b>mandatory</b>?</li></ul>
Equipment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• What <b>amount and quality</b> level of equipment is provided to each athlete?</li><li>• How often is it <b>replaced</b>?</li></ul>
Training Partners	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Are they as committed as I am to improving?</li><li>• Are they people that I am excited to spend hundreds, if not thousands, of hours with during my 4 years?</li></ul>

## How to Evaluate Your College Decision

Because you are evaluating the school on so many different levels, it can be hard to keep all of the information straight. We think it's helpful to have a structure for externalizing what is going on in your head.

We suggest going through a very simple exercise with your top schools which requires no more than a piece of paper, a pencil and some simple math. It's called a "[Decision Matrix Analysis](#)," however don't let the fancy name fool you, it's very simple.

The gist of this methodology is that you are going to comparatively judge your schools based on the criteria that are important to you (e.g. coaching credentials, etc.) as well as account for how important each of those criteria is to you.

To give you a very basic example. Let's say I'm trying to decide what to have for lunch today. The two choices I am considering are sushi and pasta. There are two criteria that I am using to decide which I should choose. The first is "will it fill me up?" (light vs heavy meal). The second is "will it warm me up?" (cold food vs. hot food).

The first thing that I am going to do is decide how important each of those criterion is to me. Let's say that, today, I need to go to fencing practice later and I want to make sure that I feel full and won't have to eat again before practice. The "will it fill me up?" criterion would be really important to me, right? I am going to give it a weighting score from one to five, with one being least important and five being the most important. So in this case, I'll give it a weight score of four, because it's pretty important at this moment. Then I give my other criterion "will it warm me up?" a weight score from one to five. Let's say that the weather is a bit cool today, but I don't really have a strong preference whether the food is hot or cold. So I give it a weight score of two.

Then I evaluate each of my choices on those two variables, also giving them a score of one to five. So on the first criterion “will it fill me up?” I give sushi a score of two (because it’s quite light) and pasta a score of five (because I expect to be quite full afterwards). Then I look at the “will it warm me up?” criterion and decide that sushi is a one and pasta is a four.

Now that I have all the numbers I need, I can do simple math to see which option won. I will multiply the weighting score I gave the criterion by the score I gave each option on that criterion. After doing this with each criterion, I add them all up to achieve a total comparative score.

For example the sushi choice now looks like this:

Sushi = 4 (weighting score – filling) X 2 (sushi score on filling) + 2 (weight score – warm up) X 1 (sushi score on warm up)

$$\text{Sushi} = 8 + 2 = 10$$

Then we do pasta, which looks like:

Pasta = 4 (weighting score – filling) X 5 (pasta score on filling) + 2 (weight score – warm up) X 4 (pasta score on warm up)

$$\text{Pasta} = 20 + 8 = 28$$

So pasta is the clear winner when I compare the the two options: 28 (pasta) to 10 (sushi).

You might be thinking, “I just make decisions like that based on what I feel like having on that day.” And I would agree with you. This is totally impractical for simple decisions like a meal choice. However, when you look at decisions that both are more complex (have more criteria) and are more important (will impact your next four years and your future), it’s essential that you investigate your options with a bit more rigour. Even if you ultimately make your final decision based on a gut feeling about a school or coach, this exercise can help reassure you if your final choice scored highly on the things that you consider important.

So let’s apply this to my personal college decision. By the time I got to March of my senior year, I had to make my final decision but still felt unsure. I had three schools left in the running: The

Ohio State University (OSU), Columbia University, and Stanford University. I had been accepted to all three, and was struggling to figure out how to compare all the elements that were important to me. As I mentioned above, it wasn't until this time period that I really cemented my objective to attempt a run at the Olympics and so some of my weighting scores for each criterion actually changed as a prioritized this new goal – all the more reason to write things down and see where each school ranked.

Here is a sheet that I've recreated to best simulate the exercise I went through when I was a high school senior making this decision. I've used the nine key criteria that we mention above, however, you may have more criteria, fewer criteria or even different criteria. There's no wrong way to pick them; the only important thing is that they reflect the top things you value about your college decision.

	FENCING ACADEMIC LIVEABILITY									BETTERFENCER.COM
WEIGHTING	COACH CREDITS	ENVIRONMENT/STYLE	TRAINING PARTNERS	GENERAL ACADEMICS	RESOURCES	SCHOOL REPUTATION	EXCITED ABOUT CITY	FINANCIALLY STRESSED	EMOTIONAL SUPPORT	TOTAL
WEIGHTING	5	5	5	4	4	4	3	3	3	N/A
OSU	5	5	4	3	5	3	3	5	3	147
COLUMBIA	5**	3	5	5	4	5	3	3	2	145
STANFORD	3	2	2	5	4	5	4	3	4	124

(\*) REVERSE SCALE → 1 = VERY FINANCIALLY STRESSED 5 = NOT FINANCIALLY STRESSED.  
(\*) JUDGING COACHING AVAILABLE IN NEW YORK CITY, NOT JUST COLUMBIA.

So you can see that I have given each of the fencing factors a weighting score of five because I knew that it was this aspect of the decision that was the most important to me. I then gave academic factors a weighting score of four because they remained extremely important, but were a close second in terms of my overall priorities over the next four years. Then I looked at the livability factors and gave them a weight score of three because I knew that if a school was aligned with my top two priorities (fencing & academic) that I would be willing to make a compromise on the location. By the way, you can also give each criterion within each category different weighting scores. I chose not to do this in this example, however you could give coaching credentials a five and training partners a three, if that's how you feel.

Then I went through and scored each school on each of the criteria from one to five. You will see that OSU got fives on coaching credentials and coaching style/environment but received a four on training partners. I knew that New York City would provide a better group of training partners because the entire US national team trained there, but I was confident that I still had a great group of people that would challenge me every day to raise my level. Academically, OSU didn't fair as well compared to the other two choices. It received a three on general academics and school reputation, however I gave it five on resources. After visiting OSU, it was clear to me that while the school didn't have the same reputational "Wow" factor as the others, their student athletes had a wealth of resources at their fingertips, like academic advisors, study centers and tutoring (that normal students do not have) to help them excel as well as a strong academically challenging Honors Program. I also understood that because OSU had a culture of supporting their athletes, my professors would be more cooperative in helping me to juggle a tricky training and travel schedule. On livability factors, OSU scored fairly well, receiving a three on how I felt about the city and on emotional support and a five on financial stress factors (note: this is a reverse scale where one means very stressed and five means not stressed at all). I wasn't all that excited about Columbus after growing up in Los Angeles, and I knew I would miss the beautiful weather. However, I also knew that I would have people around me that could provide emotional support if things got tough. Vladimir lived in Kansas City before moving to Columbus and many of the fencing families that had welcomed me with open arms during summer camps, like the Sieberts (Cathy, Neil, Kitz, Syvenna, and Lily) had also relocated to Columbus shortly after Vladimir took over the program at OSU. Lastly, because I was offered a full scholarship (fifty percent athletic, fifty percent academic), I felt no stress about finances at all.

Then I computed the scoring using the Decision Matrix Formula:

**first weighting score X first criterion score + second weighting score X second criterion score + (and so on).**

As you can see, OSU (147) won by a narrow two points over Columbia (145). Stanford came in a distant third primarily because it didn't meet my personal fencing criteria.

Again, if I would have had a strong gut feeling that Columbia was actually the right place, I would have said to myself, "I know what the numbers say, but I'm going to choose to override that with my gut feeling." When this happens it usually means either your weighting is a bit off, or you are considering factors that you haven't included in your criteria. But again, that's ok. We are not computers and emotions play a very important factor in not only how we make decisions, but also how we feel afterwards about the decisions we make.

Even if you make a different decision in the end, I promise you that completing this exercise will not be wasted time because the goal is really about working out and understanding what you find important.

## A College Coach's Perspective

Before approaching a college coach to sell yourself as an athletic recruit, it is important to understand what a coach is looking for. For this insight, we spoke to Michael Aufrichtig, head coach of Columbia University fencing, the 2015 and 2016 NCAA championship-winning team.

### What Is a College Coach's Mindset?

Along with well prepared questions and going in with a positive attitude, it can be helpful to know a typical college coach's mindset before you speak with them to help you form a meaningful connection and get the information that you are seeking. It's OK to be a little nervous, they understand that this is an important decision.

"Our whole thing is, we're going to help you become the best fencer you can be, and then the best teammate you can be, and the best person you can be. It's that combination, that can help

us win the team championships. We always say the individual championships is the bonus round." - Michael Aufrichtig, head coach of Columbia University fencing

For Aufrichtig, the team comes first. He cares most about winning team championships and therefore what each prospective athlete can bring to the table to strengthen that team effort. However, being part of any team isn't only about competing, training, and winning. There are also the important aspects of camaraderie, commitment, and respect that come along with being a member of a college fencing team.

"We really are a family here. Once you arrive on campus, you will have a support group of forty-four fencers. We aim to have fun, not just grind it out. Winning is extremely important, but when we have fun, that's when we do win." - Michael Aufrichtig, head coach of Columbia University fencing

Michael wants to make sure that everyone meshes well together, and he wants to speak with you to ensure that you're going to be a good addition to that family. And it's important to know that even coaches who are trying to recruit you are going to be fairly honest about the strengths and weaknesses of their school. The last thing a coach wants is an incoming prospect to come on false pretenses, hate the school, and quit.

"I'm going to tell them everything what we have, because I want them coming here for the right reasons and not thinking 'Gosh, coach sold me on this, and now I'm miserable.' You want someone that understands that, 'It's going to be hard, but here are all the great things about it,' and then, once they're here, thinking 'Wow, it's even better than I thought it would be.'" - Michael Aufrichtig, head coach of Columbia University fencing

Now that you have an idea about the attitude and motivations of a college coach, you'll be able to better represent yourself, make a good impression and evaluate if this is the right coach/school for you. The next step is to determine what schools you actually want to go to and which coaches to approach.

## What does a college coach look for in a fencer?

Here's what Aufrichtig had to say about his relationship with his students and what kind of people he's looking to recruit onto the team.

"I'm not sure how you achieve this, but I found that the most successful college athletes are the ones that just love the sport. If someone doesn't love the sport, it can be very difficult for them when they're in college." - Michael Aufrichtig, head coach of Columbia University fencing

Aufrichtig talks about how he tries to evaluate potential recruits, not only in terms of their everyday persona, but their tournament personality as well. Michael recounts how he spends time at tournaments observing how potential recruits approach a difficult bout or situation as well as how skilled they are at fencing.

"Fifty percent [of what I'm looking for] is after the touch has finished. For example, their facial expressions, how they're looking at the referee, how they're reacting, and then what they're doing after the bout. How did they handle the adversity of a loss? Did they sit there and start crying? Maybe that's what someone does and that helps them out, and that's fine. But are they able to overcome that and move on?" - Michael Aufrichtig, head coach of Columbia University fencing

For Aufrichtig, the personality of the potential recruit – how they handle loss, whether they enjoy fencing, how they approach a tournament in general – plays a big role in whether he wants that person on the team. Of course, personality will only get you so far. Even if you're the most collected person on the strip, a coach still wants to know you can back that up with solid results and athletic prowess.

"When someone contacts me, I always ask them for a bio: discuss your fencing goals, tell me who your coach is and your training plan." - Michael Aufrichtig, head coach of Columbia University fencing

Aufrichtig was kind enough to share the outline of the bio he requests from potential recruits. In addition to academics and standard tournament results, he pays special attention to an individual's ability to fence 5 touch bouts. Unlike USFA fencing, success in NCAA fencing relies entirely on your ability to fence 5 touch bouts. If a recruit continuously does really well in the qualifying rounds of big tournaments, they may look stronger to a college coach than a fencer who finishes a little higher but often messes up the qualifying rounds.

He also emphasizes the importance of what he calls 'one touch bouts', the bouts that are decided by a single point, usually 5-4 or 15-14 situations. This is because these one touch bout situations are so common in collegiate fencing that even a slight increase in the number of individual touches in a tournament can turn a loss into a close team victory. Below is Michael's full request for information to new recruits:

**Create a Fencing Bio:**

- Compile your academic test scores (SAT, SAT II, ACT, High School Transcript)
- Compile your fencing results (Local, NAC, International)
- Discuss your fencing goals, current coach and training plan
- Record of 5 touch bouts, one point wins/losses, who did you lose to in the DE's? Did they win or lose the next bout?

**Create a Fencing Video:**

- Lesson, Practice, Competition
- BONUS if you can - include written analysis of your fencing video or voice over

In general, when dealing with coaches, it's important to be as prepared as possible. It looks much better to a coach if you respond to their requests in a detailed manner than if you put something together quickly or try to "wing" it. Try to give a thoughtful response to whatever a college coach asks you. You should also respond promptly if the coach has asked you submit specific material so he or she doesn't lose interest. Here's Aufrichtig's thoughts on the responses he gets from potential recruits:

"The differences in the types of things that I get from fencers are really interesting. Some fencer says, "Tuesday, I fenced two hours," and then the other fencer will be like, "I did footwork for

thirty minutes. Then, I did bladework practice for twenty minutes. I always try to get in twelve, five-touch bouts and five, fifteen-touch bouts." Some are much more detailed in their fencing plans, which I find impressive." - Michael Aufrichtig, head coach of Columbia University fencing

Aufrichtig, in particular, is looking for very detail-oriented practice schedules. This level of attention to detail shows the coach that you're very invested in your training, that you have initiative and that you have goals and aspirations. By contrast, an abbreviated, more free-form training schedule (say, "I practice three to five times a week. Mon, Wed, Fri, and sometimes Tuesday and Saturday") raises a red flag. The very first question a coach will ask themselves is what happens those weeks when you go to fewer practices, and what makes an athlete decide to work harder sometimes. That is not to say life cannot get in the way; a bi-weekly visit to your elderly grandmother on Saturdays and belonging to a math club that meets every other Tuesday can be a great reason for that kind of schedule. However, not all coaches assume the best (in fact, in my experience, the scale tends to lean to the other side), and by not being detailed in interactions, you're leaving your dedication and commitment open to doubt.

Your personal interactions with the coach aren't the only hurdles you have to cross. Coach Aufrichtig also talks to the fencers on the current team to determine whether a potential recruit will be a good fit:

"With the Columbia team, I even send out a survey and I say, 'Here's everybody I'm looking at who's academically viable. From one to ten, would this person be a good teammate? Is this person a strong training partner? Are they going to be showing up for practice? Are they going to be first ones in, last ones out? One to ten. Then, will they help us win the NCAAs and help us win the Ivys?" - Michael Aufrichtig, head coach of Columbia University fencing

Coach Aufrichtig says these kinds of surveys play a big roll in his decision-making. A good review from current fencers will catch the eye of the coach, and look at someone they might not otherwise consider, or lock in a pick they were not sure about.

"I've found some individuals that I was like, 'Wow, really?' There are some people on our team now that everyone rated very high, so it's like, 'Alright, well, I better bring this person in or try to

recruit this person, because everybody respects him or her and this person is going to be a great teammate." - Michael Aufrichtig, head coach of Columbia University fencing

The best way to use this information is actively. Don't sit around and wish you were better friends with people on the team. Reach out to them, introduce yourself, and try to schedule an unofficial visit so you can be on campus while it is session, sit in on a class, experience a practice and meet the team. Remember that opportunities like that are also your chance to see if you work well with the team. Four years on a team full of people you don't get along with is going to be a painful experience for you. So, interacting with some of the team members is just as important as meeting with the coach and evaluating the school's academics.

### The Golden Combo

Some top fencing schools have very high academic standards which need to be met to even be considered for a spot on the team.

"We're looking at the grades from about the end of the sophomore year. It's very important, because in the Ivy League they need mostly A's and a high SAT score just to consider them today. The academic standards are getting so high that, even if they're a top ten fencer, it's hard to recruit them if they don't have the grades." - Michael Aufrichtig, head coach of Columbia University fencing

Even though fencing can help in the application process, it's important to remember that it's not an all-purpose ticket into any school you want to go to. You still need the grades and SAT scores to get in. You still need a proper and well thought out application. And you still need to be able to impress the coach that you will be the right fit for the team:

"I think one of the main things student athletes are struggling with is the recruiting process and how important is fencing to them? Better have some really darn good grades, and you'd better have the right attitude to fit on the team. If not, fencing really doesn't matter that much with the top schools." - Michael Aufrichtig, head coach of Columbia University fencing

Fencing can be an important asset, but a slightly weaker fencer with better grades and test scores might appear in a more favorable light to recruiters than someone whom they fear might struggle with the school's course load. On the other hand, a very strong fencer with lower scores than the average candidate might also be considered. Remember, a true 'golden combo' of good grades, good scores, and good athletics can be incredibly difficult to attain, but the triangle doesn't have to be perfectly symmetrical to cover the same area; strengths in one area can compensate for weaknesses in others. Overall, a good attitude and strong desire will always help, no matter which school you apply to.

"I can feel when somebody really wants to be at Columbia, whether it's for the very high profile fencing community (meaning New York City) or the interest in just being in New York City itself with the core curriculum at Columbia *and* the fencing." - Michael Aufrichtig, head coach of Columbia University fencing

### It's Not All about Now, It's about the Future

Just because someone looks strong during the recruiting process does not guarantee that a potential recruit will be the best fit for the team. This is why a lot of coaches ask high school students where they see themselves in a few years, what their plans are, and what fencing means to them. Coach Aufrichtig talks about how formative the late teen years can be:

"In two years, as someone's maturing from fourteen, fifteen to seventeen, eighteen, a lot can happen. When we're looking for the ultimate recruit, it's more of, 'Where are they going to be in two, three, four, even five years from now,' because you're both committing by the end of your junior year for college recruiting." - Michael Aufrichtig, head coach of Columbia University fencing

Coach Aufrichtig describes a nightmare scenario for a coach: recruiting a student to come and strengthen his future team. But because he also has a strong senior class, the new fencer might sit out most of their freshman year, become disillusioned and consider leaving the team halfway through their second year. This, then, leaves the coach in a bad position with either a frustrated

fencer or a potentially weak team. This is a good example of why college coaches want to be very sure of an athlete's commitment to the sport over the course of their entire college career.

## How Is College Fencing Different than Fencing in High School?

Everything we've covered thus far is more or less the same for every NCAA sport. Coaches are all looking for, in Aufrichtig's words, a "self-starter, go-getter, determined, great work ethic individual that can fence like a champion." However, fencing is one of the few sports where the rules and structure of a competition are different for NCAA meets. Indeed, in our interview, Michael mentioned how important 5-touch bouts are in collegiate tournaments:

"Unlike most fencing tournaments, all of our results are based off of 5-touch bouts, because that's how we get points. The preliminary rounds for most other fencers are really used for nothing more than just advancing to the next round." - Michael Aufrichtig, head coach of Columbia University fencing

This can mean a major adjustment for many fencers who aren't used to the importance of five-touch bouts, especially when the pressure is high. In the USFA circuit, losing a five-touch bout often means that you will be seeded lower in the next round, putting you at a disadvantage. However, you still have a chance to progress, by simply winning your next match. In NCAA meets, losing a five-touch bout can mean defeat for your whole team. Other than that, Michael says that he thinks fencing in college is not all that different than that of a competitive high school fencer.

"This is probably the life of any high school fencer that's taken fencing very seriously. They go to class, they go to practice, they eat, sleep, study, and that's their Utopia. They love it. They thrive on it. A lot of high school fencers are doing it now, and I don't think there's much difference between high school and college. The course loads are a little bit more rigorous. If your parents do your laundry now, then you're doing your own laundry. You have more responsibility, but it's not all that different." - Michael Aufrichtig, head coach of Columbia University fencing

College fencing is just the next step in a typical competitive fencer's life. Someone who is well-adjusted to life in high school fencing has every opportunity to thrive in college fencing.

## No Matter What: It's Hard

Just because it's not fundamentally different, doesn't mean it's not more difficult. Adjusting to and navigating college can be difficult enough without the extra commitment of belonging to a team which requires that you show up to every practice (within reason). And then if you add a tournament every few weeks (taking up a lot of your weekend and keeping you from doing schoolwork), you've got a recipe for academic problems. The life of a student athlete is difficult, but luckily, many people have faced the same challenges before you and, for the most part, schools are happy to help, and teachers are understanding. Most athletic programs have resources set up specifically for this reason to help athletes find that perfect school-athletics-social balance.

"There's a lot of resources: the universities offer them in many different ways when it comes to tutoring, when it comes to setting up plans with academic advisors and academic deans. We have a system where the upperclassmen help the 'first years' in setting their schedule. We even have our own database of different teachers, what to take, and who are the best professors out there, things like that. We try to do everything possible to give everybody the best possible chance to do the best that they can, but it's still hard." - Michael Aufrichtig, head coach of Columbia University fencing

The most important takeaway from this is that you will not be alone if you struggle. As part of a team, you're surrounded by people who want to help you succeed. Don't be afraid to reach out and ask for help in any aspect of college life, including school, teachers, scheduling, or training. There are many people that will be happy to give it.

## The Recruiting Process – How It Differs Between Schools

The college admission process on its own is very convoluted, to say the least. This then is further complicated for athletes because not every school has the same recruiting process. An Ivy League school has a different process than a Big Athletics school, which has a different process than Niche Athletics school. Michael says this is one of the biggest areas of confusion for potential recruits and their parents, and below he outlines, from beginning to end, the admissions process as he sees it:

"Most don't understand the difference between a National Letter of Intent from a scholarship school like Ohio State and a Likely Letter from a school like Columbia, Yale, Harvard or other Ivy School. Most also don't understand the difference between early decision and regular decision. Within the recruiting process, there's a lot of misinformation and gossip out there. At Ohio State or Penn State a coach might say, 'We want to recruit you, and can offer you scholarship money, approximately X% of which will be athletic and Y% will be academic.' Then in November, an athlete would sign a National Letter of Intent that indicates they plan to attend and the deal is sealed. We don't have this in the Ivy League.



I am happy to hear of your interest in an Ivy League athletics program, and I am writing to clarify the Ivy League policies related to admissions that will be important to keep in mind throughout the recruiting process.

I understand that you have had conversations with an Ivy League coach about opportunities at an Ivy League institution. These discussions, while significant, represent only a preliminary step in the application and admissions process. Ivy League coaches are very knowledgeable about the League and their institution's admissions policies, and they will be a valuable resource and guide for you. However, please note that only the admissions office at each Ivy League school has the authority to admit applicants and notify them of admission, and only formal correspondence from the admissions office should be considered an admissions decision. It is very important that you continue to demonstrate outstanding academic and personal achievement throughout your high school career in order to best prepare for college.

As you know, coaches have the opportunity to communicate support for prospective student-athletes to their admissions office. In deciding whether to support your application, coaches may ask whether or not their school is your top choice, but a coach may not require you to refrain from visiting or applying to other schools, or to withdraw applications to other schools, as a condition for support during the admissions process. You should fully explore your options prior to deciding on your top choice. Coaches may indicate the extent to which your interest will affect their willingness to support your application, so that you can make informed decisions about potential opportunities, but coaches should not ask you to make a choice before you are ready. You should expect Ivy League coaches to be honest and forthcoming during the recruiting process, and we ask candidates to be honest with coaches as well.

Attached is a document that further describes Ivy League admissions and athletics recruiting policies and provides general information about the admissions process. Should you have any questions, please direct them to [redacted].

Wishing you continued success in your high school career,

Sincerely,



BROWN • COLUMBIA • CORNELL • DARTMOUTH • HARVARD • PENN • PRINCETON • YALE

#### Example of an Ivy League Likely Letter

In the Ivy League, coaches technically cannot tell an athlete that they are officially accepted, only the admissions department can do this. However a verbal commitment is made which is

something like, ‘Jason, you’re our number one saber prospect. I really feel you’d be great for this program. Are we your number one choice?’ You would then say, ‘Yes, Michael. Columbia’s my number one choice.’ My response would be, ‘Great. You have my commitment, one hundred percent, that I’m recruiting you for the class of 2021.’ All it is is a verbal commitment.

Before I give you that commitment, I bring your transcript, your test grades, and other information to admissions. They give me a verbal green light to recruit you. They could say to me, ‘Hey, Mike, everything’s really good with Jason. His transcript looks good, but his SAT score is a little low, so you can tell him that you have permission to recruit him but he has to retake his SATs and aim a little higher.’

There are different caveats of how we can move forward, but after July 1st, when you have your junior transcript, I can get an official pre-reading, and that official pre-reading is looked at by admissions, where they give me a green light again, in other words, a likely acceptance. Before, that was all I had to do, but now, since everything’s happening earlier, I can get a ‘verbal pre’ so there’s a lot of verbal trust things happening.

Right now I have five athletes that I’m verbally committed to. They verbally committed to me. Nothing’s written down, there’s no contract, they can turn around on July 2nd and say ‘You know Mike, I’ve had second thoughts, and I now plan to go with Harvard.’ I can’t do anything about that. The same is true in reverse. However, most people don’t do this because their reputation is also on the line...That’s where the trust comes into play.

Every two or three months our athletic department takes whoever we committed to verbally and communicates that to the Ivy League. The Ivy League sends out a letter that basically says, ‘Don’t assume you’re in. The admissions department is the one that can grant you acceptance.’ It’s a funny thing because many fencers are spooked by this and say ‘I thought Coach Mike committed to me.’ However, it’s a form letter that they send out to everyone.

Then once all the people that we commit to verbally turn in their application by November 1st (the early decision deadline), they then receive something called a ‘Likely Letter.’ That Likely Letter says, ‘Dear Jason Rogers: Congratulations on everything you’ve done. You are likely to get into Columbia.’ You wait until December 15th when admissions can officially say,

'Congratulations Jason, you're accepted to Columbia.' It's only after that that you can go public and say 'Yeah, I'm going to Columbia. Woohoo!'

That is the process for our official recruiting slots. However, the other way to get into an Ivy League school is just to apply and get in on your own merit. As a coach, I can recommend some athletes. I call it my 'wish list,' but that carries no weight compared to the Likely Letter. The Likely Letter is an official recruiting spot. My recommendation is just one more great thing in your application, as if you had a recommendation from someone on the board of governors of Columbia. It is helpful, but it's not the same as a recruiting spot.

In the case of Columbia, and it might be different at other schools, but if you get in on your own merit, and I have recommended you, it means that I feel you're a good fencer and addition to the team. In this case you would have the same privileges as any recruited athlete." - Michael Aufrichtig, head coach of Columbia University fencing

We hope that with this knowledge of how the recruiting process works, you will be better equipped to ask coaches the right questions and have better insight into the role that the coach plays in the recruiting process; both their powers and their limitations.

## Common Questions Asked By Fencers and Parents

We asked Coach Aufrichtig what questions potential recruits and their parents most commonly ask during the recruitment process. We list them below in hopes that they will give you more aspects of college and fencing life to consider as well as the wide range of questions that are okay to ask when meeting and talking to coaches:

From Students:

- What's your philosophy on playing time?
- Does it matter if you're a senior or a freshman?
- What type of support is there in terms of resources?
- What type of financial support?
- Do you support Olympic and Junior World and Senior World dreams?

- What's the team like?
- What's school like?
- What kind of fun am I going to be having?

From Parents:

- What kind of support do you have?
- How are you going to help my son or daughter do well in school?
- How are you going to help them become the best fencer they can be?

The most important thing to remember is that every coach and every school will have different policies and philosophies that will influence how they answer these questions. Use this time with the coach to ask anything and everything you want to know about the school. There are no 'right' questions. Asking questions shows interest in addition to providing valuable information. Before you commit to a school, it's important to have answers to these and any questions you may have to help determine whether the program and the team are a good fit for you.

## Day in the Life - a College Fencer

To give you a taste of what life is like for a college fencer, we've asked three fencers to share what an average day is like. While every day is different, we've asked them to recount a typical school day, rather than a competition day (which happens much less often). We've interviewed two recent graduates, Jeff Spear and Andrew Fischl, from Columbia University (Ivy / New York) and Vassar College (Niche Athletics), respectively. I've also shared a day from my college life at The Ohio State University (Big Athletics).

### Day in the Life for an Ivy League Student - Columbia University

Jeff Spear – class of 2013 from Columbia University: 2012 Olympic Team member, individual NCAA Champion in 2008, Columbia College salutatorian:

7:50am: Wake up, roll out of bed. I've set up my alarm across the room to keep myself from hitting the snooze button. I get breakfast - cereal and fruit or something that won't sit heavily in my stomach but will provide energy for my lesson.

8:40am: I set out across campus to get to my lesson. Spring is beginning to stir and the last snow piles are melting into deep puddles that create bottlenecks across college walk.

8:50am: I arrive at the gym and descend into the basement where the fencing room is hidden. I change into my fencing shoes and shorts. As I run through a quick warmup, Aladar walks back downstairs from his morning workout.

9:40am: As my lesson winds down, Daria (Schneider - now the head coach of Cornell University) arrives and Aladar (Kogler, Foil & Epee coach) leads us in a half an hour of footwork before giving Daria a lesson. Sometimes we do drills after footwork, but today I have a late morning class. I take a quick shower and devour an orange on my way across campus.

10:35am: My morning class is called Archaeology of Idols, a provocative name for a class exploring the anthropology of the graven image. For today's class we read Bruno Latour's essay "What is Iconoclasm?" The discussion had actually begun on a class blog over the previous week and today the professor asks a couple of us to clarify some points we made, sparking a brief conversation before he delves into his lecture.

12:00pm: I'm back in the gym, this time in the [strength training room](#). Given that we are now in the heart of the season, today is heavy on plyometrics and lighter on general strength. Box jumps and clap push-ups are always fun, but the real advantage of a plyo workout for me today is that it is shorter than most. My stomach is growling by the time I leave.

12:50pm: I'm back in my dorm to pull together a quick lunch in my floor's kitchen. Today is rice pasta with baked chicken, which I leave cooking while I drop back by my room to check my email. The other captains and I need to decide when to leave for Regionals on Saturday and there is a brief exchange regarding the merits of sleeping in vs free breakfast. I plow through my emails, trying to clear out my inbox.

1:30pm: Suddenly my stomach growls again and I realize I've forgotten my food. My pasta is soggy but my chicken is still surprisingly good. I don't do work while I eat this time. I watch YouTube videos about random Star Wars fan theories. No matter how busy I am, I always need time to unwind and lunch is a great time for that.

2:10pm: My afternoon class is called the Dynamics of Human Evolution. One of my classmates is giving a presentation on obligate bipedalism in early members of the genus *Homo*, which turns into a discussion branching from biomechanics to paleolithic archaeology to ice-age driven climate changes.

4:00pm: After class I stop to have a brief chat with my professor about assigning readings for my own presentation on the dispersal of *Homo sapiens* that is coming up in a few weeks. I had asked if I could have a time slot late in the semester because of the number of tournaments in early spring, and my professor had been gracious enough to allow it.

4:20pm: I'm back in my room, and I have almost two solid hours to get work done. One of my professors assigned an 8-page essay rather than a midterm, and that's what I open this afternoon. I know what my thesis will be but I always need to spend some time writing before I know where a paper will go.

6:00pm: I had hoped to have a solid start to my essay before practice, but most of my time was spent connecting disparate lines of thought into a coherent direction. I know the essay will be better for it, even if I'm not as far along as I'd have liked. I get a snack before practice and make a mental note that I need to go shopping soon. This weekend is shot with Regionals coming up but my Monday afternoons are light. If I can get enough done this weekend while we're away, I'll be able to devote a couple hours on Monday afternoon to buying food.

6:20pm: I head downtown to the New York Athletic Club for bouting practice and on the subway start some reading for next week.

7:00pm: I warm up and bout. At Columbia, we fence primarily in local clubs\* so only two of my teammates are there. With a tournament approaching but still a few days away, tonight is a moderate night. I'm there for a bit over two hours. Afterward I cool off, stretch, and shower.

10:00pm: I arrive back at my room and pull together a quick dinner - leftover chicken from lunch with vegetables and corn tortillas to make a wrap. No cooking this time, I'm too tired and hungry for that. Over dinner I put a bit more work into my essay, and it really starts to feel like my thoughts are coming together. I'm confident that a solid afternoon working on it should produce a reasonable first draft, but I'm not sure when I'll get that afternoon. Maybe tomorrow. I can do my reading on the bus home from Regionals on Sunday night.

11:15: I get ready for bed. When that's done, I sit down to meditate for 20 minutes. I do this every night to practice concentration and awareness. I'm in bed by 11:45. I know I need 8 hours of sleep when I'm training full time and I consider this just as important as practice.

*\*When I was in college we had, at most, one captains' practice per week as a team. Now there are two mandatory practices per week but most starters still get most of their bouting in clubs*

## Day in the Life for a Big Athletics Program – The Ohio State University

Jason Rogers – class of 2006 The Ohio State University: Olympic Silver Medalist, 2X Olympian, 3-time NCAA Bronze Medalist, graduated Summa Cum Laude.

7:00am: The alarm goes off. Although it's early, it's a typical start for my action packed day. I stumble to bathroom to brush my teeth and then throw on some OSU Fencing sweats. With half my mind still in slumber mode, I knock a few things over as I attempt to make a healthy breakfast of oatmeal and fruit.

7:45am: Running a few minutes late, I jump into my car, headed to pick up some of the junior classmen to bring to Steelwood, the fencing team's dedicated facility that it shares with gymnastics and wrestling about a half mile off campus.

8:03am: I hightail it into the gym where my other teammates are already lined up on the baseline awaiting instructions from Vladimir. We go through a standard warm up, sometimes

followed by soccer (if we are lucky). Then on to footwork, led by Vladimir. Like all days, he turns his attention to various fencers' body positions, ensuring they maintain balance.

8:45am: After footwork, we take a short water break. Then, each weapon squad breaks off into separate areas of the gym for further instruction. We spend another 25 minutes working on specific bladework and bout scenario drills, before opening the floor up to normal bouting.

9:30am: Periodic water breaks ensue as practice starts to wind down. A few fencers head off to shower as they have an early class to attend. The unlucky group that remains get called to the baseline for conditioning. We spend the remaining 20 minutes of practice running sprints, doing push ups and crunches. Then, a quick cool down and light stretching.

10:15am: I pop into the training room for a quick visit with the athletic trainer. I've been nursing a twisted ankle. He checks it out and sends me on my way with some ibuprofen and an ice pack wrapped around my ankle.

10:30am: I run home for a quick shower, a post-practice snack and then off to campus for my 11:30am psychopathology (study of mental disorders) class.

11:30am: Today we're talking about Obsessive Compulsive disorder. As the professor lists the common symptoms, like every student in this field, I paranoiacally search my memories for any evidence that I might be mildly OCD. Luckily, I don't find anything and tune back into the lecture. The professor reminds us of our upcoming midterm, which, while I've already started studying, I'm a bit nervous about it.

12:30pm: I stick around after class to remind the professor that I will be traveling to Budapest over the weekend for a World Cup and ask if there are any assignments for the next class which I will miss. He says he will send me the review sheet for the mid-term ahead of time and to email him with any questions. I make a mental note to bring both textbooks from the class to Hungary because each contains material for the midterm.

1:15pm: I meet up with a few fencers for lunch at the cafeteria by Mirror Lake for a quick sandwich before heading off to my British literature class.

2:20pm: I arrive at class a little early and try to finish the reading that didn't quite make it through the night before. When the professor arrives, we get our essays back from the previous week, before launching into a group discussion about James Joyce's short story collection, "Dubliners." After class, I remind the professor that I'll be away at the end of the week. Luckily, we don't have anything due, but he urges me to stay on top of my reading. I assure him that I will have plenty of time on the plane.

4:00pm: I head to [Younkin Success Center](#), the building dedicated to providing resources for student athletes, for an hour of quiet study. I run into a couple of friends from the swimming team. They invite me to a party over the weekend, but I tell them, sadly, I'll have to miss the fun because I get to be in Eastern Europe over the weekend. Yay.

5:00pm: I start heading home to prepare for evening practice and a lesson with Vladimir. While I'm not able to go every night because of schoolwork, I try to make it at least three times a week.

6:30pm: I arrive back at the gym and head to Vladimir's office to let him know I'm there before starting my warm up. My muscles are tired and stiff from the morning, so I grab a heat pack from the training room.

6:50pm: We begin the lesson, and as begins most lessons, we start with simple technique. The lesson grows increasingly difficult with Vladimir requiring me to stay in a lunge for extended periods while also working on bladework. Lately, we've been focusing on my footwork, aiming to improve my balance by keeping my back hip tucked underneath me.

7:30pm: As others arrive from the OSU and club teams, we finish up the lesson. Vladimir tells me to take it easy that night in preparation for the upcoming World Cup. I fence a couple bouts before deciding to call it a night. I cool down and stretch for another thirty minutes before heading home.

8:30pm: I make dinner, nothing complicated, but it's healthy and fills me up. While eating, I joke around with my roommate, Syvenna Siebert (a fencing teammate) before realizing it's getting late and I need to do some work.

9:15pm: I try to get in a hour and half of studying, but tonight, like most nights, I'm growing sleepy. I almost make it to the end before calling it quits.

10:30pm: I switch on the TV to watch some reality TV, my guilty pleasure. I found that adjusting to Columbus, Ohio from Los Angeles was a big culture shock. Shows like [Meet the Barkers](#)...and cough...[The Newlyweds](#), while not the most edifying programming, remind me of home.

11:30pm: I'm 90% asleep on the couch as the show ends, and I drag myself to bed, pausing only to half-heartedly brush my teeth, before tumbling into a deep sleep.

## Day in the Life of a Niche Athletics Student – Vassar College

Andrew Fischl – class of 2011 Vassar College - Ranked as high as 6th in the country, Won the Matthew Vassar Career Athlete Award, Four-time NCAA participant, NCAA All American team member.

10:14am: I wake up and check the time. My alarm isn't set for another 45 minutes - the absolute latest I can get up and still make my morning class. I wander downstairs and make myself some eggs instead of my usual cereal because I have the time.

11:20am: I quickly brush my teeth and head to class. Class starts in only 10 minutes, but I live on campus and everything is less than a ten minute walk away.

11:28am: I arrive at my cognitive science class on Perception and Action with a few minutes to spare. Overall, the class is on how the ability to perceive is a prerequisite for the ability to act, and how this translates into how we think and behave. Today, however, we're discussing the intricate details of what a robot would need to be able to pass the Turing Test (a test where an

Artificial Intelligence attempts to trick a human into thinking that the robot is a person). I find myself getting lost in the discussion, and the ideas from that class stick with me through my next few classes.

4:00pm: After my classes, I grab a quick lunch to keep my energy up for the rest of the day.

4:35pm: I stop by practice a little early to remind Bruce that I am going to miss practice on Wednesday because I have a big test on Friday. ‘School comes first’ was definitely the motto of the team, and he never has an issue with us missing a few practices a semester for important assignments.

4:45pm: Practice has officially started. The whole team spends the first 15 or 20 minutes playing games and warming up together, usually with ultimate frisbee. I enjoy this extra time with my teammates. Normally at this hour, I would take the train into NYC for practice at the New York Athletic Club and do problem sets or homework on the way to be efficient. But with my big test coming up soon, I decide not to go today because I need the extra time to get all of my school work done.

5:05pm: We section ourselves off into different weapons and the captains run some footwork and bouting drills. We finish off practice with some free fencing.

7:15pm: With practice officially over, most of the team goes together to the All Campus Dining Center (ACDC, although everyone just called it the Deec), to eat together. The food isn’t great, and we usually get there right before closing so the selection isn’t great either. But I enjoy the company of my team and the food is filling.

8:00pm: I say goodbye to my still-chatting teammates so I can get started on studying for my cognitive science exam in a couple of days. As I walk back to my suite, I take a minute to appreciate how beautiful the Vassar campus is at this time of year.

11:18pm: After a few hours of dutiful studying, my friend Adam comes by and asks me if I want to play some smash (referring to [Nintendo’s Super Smash Brothers Melee](#)). I spend a lot of the time when I’m not fencing or doing schoolwork playing the game, so my immediate reaction is to

jump at the chance, but I end up declining the offer. I need to not only finish studying for this test, but also get a good start on a homework assignment due next Monday. I hope to finish it early so I won't have to worry about it when we travel to Brandeis for a fencing meet this weekend.

12:20am: I am in my friend Adam's room playing smash. Today has been non-stop since I opened my eyes, and I can barely focus anymore. Since I made good progress on my assignment for next week, I feel comfortable taking a short study break.

1:35am: I pull myself away from the console, barely believing more than an hour has passed. I quickly walk back to my room and start studying anew for my cognitive science exam.

2:40am: I decide that's enough for tonight. I have a pretty good grasp on most of the material the test will cover. I'll have some more time to review tomorrow. I brush my teeth and get into bed, where sleep quickly takes me.

## NCAA Schools Aren't the Only Option

NCAA schools aren't the only option when it comes to fencing in college. Even if you aren't recruited to an NCAA school, or can't find an NCAA fencing school that is a good fit for you, there are lots of schools with club teams and even more schools located near non-university fencing clubs. If fencing in college is your passion, you will definitely be able to achieve that goal. In our interview, Coach Aufrichtig talked about some of the different options you have when pursuing fencing in college.

"Getting into a top Div I, II or III program is really tough because there aren't that many. However, there are something like ninety plus great schools that have a college club program. They also have the [College Fencing National Championships](#) which are really cool!" - Michael Aufrichtig, head coach of Columbia University fencing

Here's a quick guide to non-NCAA fencing programs:

### **Club Team:**

- School affiliated intramural or club team
- Eligible to compete at club national championships
- Team/self funded

#### **Non-university Fencing Club:**

- Private fencing club located near the school
- No team collegiate competitions
- Self funded

[Non-NCAA college fencing programs full list](#)

## NCAA Fencing

The NCAA competition season is fast paced and unlike anything most fencers will be used to. To give you a sense of what colleges are all working towards, we've give an overview of the main event, The NCAA Championships, and other important aspects, such as qualifying for this important competition.

### NCAA Championships Overview

The NCAA Championships is a high-octane event held every March. It's the moment when colleges around the country square off against each other for the ultimate title. Unlike other fencing tournaments where the primary match format is fifteen-touch bouts, this fencing frenzy demands athletes to face off against every single person in their event, competing for the best record of five-touch bouts. Because this is such an important tournament for college athletes (and unlike any other tournament in fencing), we've devoted a section here to the most significant tournament of the year in NCAA fencing.

### The Format

NCAA championships is held over four days, Thursday through Sunday, normally towards the end of March. Two days of that competition are devoted to the men, and two are for women. Every year the NCAA alternates which gender competes first. 24 fencers compete in each of the

six events, for a total of 144 fencers at the NCAA championship. Each individual fencer fences a total of 23, five-touch bouts, one with every fencer in their event, and the school team with the most total victories for men and women combined wins the NCAA team championships. If there's a tie in total bouts won, then the winner is determined by the indicator (who scored the most touches and received the least).

The individual competition is a little less straightforward. Each individual will fence in a round-robin competition against the 23 other fencers. These 23 bouts are fenced over five rounds, which all operate similar to a qualifying round at standard tournaments (often referred to as the 'pools'). While navigating these rounds, a fencer travels with a group of 3 other fencers, known as your 'pod'. You stay with the same pod for the entire tournament, and your pod rotates to fence other pods of four people. Each round consists of your pod fencing another pod, so you'll fence 4 bouts each round, with the exception of the first round, where you also fence your own pod (for a total of 7 bouts in the first round). The first three rounds are held on the first day for a total of 15 bouts. The last two rounds are held on the second day of competition.

If, at the end of all five rounds, you are ranked in the top four fencers in the round robin (based on total bouts won, how many touches you scored, and how many touches you received), you move on to the final rounds. The finals are a direct elimination format to fifteen touches. These bouts follow standard bracket practices, so the #1 seed will fence the #4 seed, while #2 and #3 will fence each other. The winners of these bouts will fence for the title of individual champion and second place, and the losers will fence for third place. These bouts to fifteen do not affect the team championship.

## Regionals and Qualifying for NCAAs

The NCAA Championships format gives a huge advantage to college teams with a full roster of twelve fencers. A team with only eleven fencers is severely disadvantaged because they have 23 fewer bouts (that their twelfth fencer would have fenced) they now cannot win. For this reason the real competition often starts weeks earlier, at the regional qualifying event.

Only a certain number of fencers qualify for the Championship tournament from each region, but the maximum can be no more than two athletes, per school, per weapon. Who qualifies is largely based on the Regionals format itself. The competition is split into three separate rounds of pools, with a percentage of fencers being cut after every round. It is the results of the final round of pools that determine who wins the tournament; the first two rounds only determine advancement into the next round.

However, Regionals isn't the entire picture. Season results also matter. If one fencer had a much better season than another fencer, they will get a bonus over that fencer in their final placement. How large that bonus is and whether it'll actually be enough to come out ahead depends on individual records for the season, the strength of the fencers you competed against during the season, the rating of those fencers, and of course, regional results.

We won't get into too much depth here about how qualifying at regionals works (there's arguably too much math involved - you can read more about it [here](#) if you are interested). Suffice it to know that qualifying for NCAAs is based largely on a fencer's performance at regionals, and to a smaller extent their performance during the whole season.

There is one additional 'at large' qualifying spot for a fencer who has done well throughout the season but for one reason or another did not qualify through Regionals. These 'at large' bids are put in by school coaches and are reviewed by an NCAA board. Only one fencer can qualify 'at large' per season for the NCAA Championships.

## NCAA Fencing Championships are Stressful

NCAA championships is one of the most intense competitions fencing has to offer. It has been said (by those who have competed at both types of competitions) to be almost as intense and emotionally draining as the Olympics. For schools, the entire athletic year has been gearing up for the few days of competition at the NCAAs. On the individual level, a single bout can make or break your record, or even mean the difference between a win or loss for your team. Unless you have the opportunity to compete at the World Championships or Olympics, the NCAA championships will likely be the most exhilarating and emotional competition of your life.

## What it Means to be an All-American and NCAA Champion

“All-American” is an accolade given to those that perform well individually at the NCAA championships. All-American comes in a few different tiers:

- First Team All-American is for those that finish 1-4 in their event
- Second Team All-American is for those that finish 5-8 in their event
- Third Team All-American is for those that finish 9-12 in their event

In some ways, although the NCAA isn’t technically the premier fencing honor, having NCAA accolades is actually more widely recognized by those who don’t fence. All-American status is something that almost every college graduate understands and, therefore, is widely recognized as a top achievement in the athletic world. It sounds strange to say, but you could argue that putting NCAA Champion on your future work resume could mean more to an employer than winning the season’s strongest Grand Prix World Cup, despite the fact that the latter achievement is much more difficult.

## My Experience at NCAAs

When I look back at my college career, this competition was one that eluded me. You might say it was my bête noire. I found it extremely difficult to fence such a high volume of five-touch matches. The pressure to win each and every match was tremendously uncomfortable because not only does your own result sometimes come down to a touch or two (more on that later), but so does your team’s result. It’s not uncommon for colleges in contention for the Championship to send along extra non-competing members of the team for moral support. That means that you have a group of hyped-up teammates next to your strip, which can be both a blessing and a curse. On one hand, their energy can lift you out of a bad mental place, but on the other, acutely aware that each and every touch you score directly affects each of them (the team).

Also, the competition sees athletes from all walks of life. There are those for whom the NCAAs is their exclusive focus, and others whose focus is elsewhere, perhaps the World Championships or Olympics. No matter how good you are, a five-touch match is difficult. Counterintuitively, for me, I found it more difficult to fence athletes with less experience than I because they are more unpredictable. In a five-touch bout, you cannot let your guard down, even for one touch, even if you are winning 4-0.

Unlike many other competitions, the slightest miscalculation, dip in focus or “lucky” touch by your opponent can really sink your ship. 2005 was my toughest year. I remember dropping a bout to a young fencer from Haverford, who was unknown to me. When all the five-touch matches finished, I found that I had missed out on being in the top four (those who would compete for the individual title) by just two touches, finishing in 5th place. I was devastated.

It was a similar story in the overall Championship. Each year I competed, OSU was in a position to win, but we never seemed to be fully in sync, finishing 4th (2002), 4th (2003), 2nd (2005) and 3rd (2006) – and only a few bouts separated us from the winners! It was only in 2004, the year I took off, that Ohio State won the Championship! Darn it!

## Summary

We hope that this article clarified some of the confusion that college fencing causes, so that you’re ready to make an informed decision about which school is the right fit for you (and why on earth you would want to fence in college to begin with!), and hit the ground running in those crucial early years. College fencing can be difficult to understand, given that it has many different rules and regulations from club and national fencing. On top of that, schools often have very disparate fencing programs with functional differences that don’t become apparent until after the application process is already over.

The complexity of college fencing must be navigated on top of the pressures of applying for college and attending school as a freshman. With all of these options, it can be difficult to feel comfortable that you’ve made the right decision for your fencing, even disregarding the

academic and social fit of the school itself. We aimed to shed light on the (often undiscussed) black box of college fencing, and to give you a taste of how the college selection process works and how to maximize your success in college, in both fencing and in academics.

## Resource Links

[NCAA Fencing Homepage](#)

[NCAA Recruiting Period Terminology](#)

[NCAA Recruiting Periods](#)

[NCAA Recruiting Periods Detailed](#)

[NCAA Fencing Resources](#)

[NCAA Division I Manual](#)

[NCAA 2017 Fantasy Bracket](#)

[NCAA Fencing Tournament Results](#)

[Fencing Scholarship Statistics](#)

[2017 Guide for the College-Bound Student Athlete](#)

[College Club Championship League](#)

[College Fencing 360](#)

## Footnotes

[Cover Image by Airman Magazine](#)