

# RAC College Swimming Recruiting Handbook

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## **i. What is all the excitement about? What is different about college swimming?**

Swimming in college is a unique and exciting pathway to experience getting a college degree. Universities in the U.S. host a wide range of programs with different levels of competition, commitment, and support. By the numbers (see more below): 633 schools offer programs in seven divisions, supporting more than 24,000 varsity student swimmers in colleges across the U.S. Many colleges also offer competitive swimming clubs – intramural versions of the varsity programs – to students interested in staying in the water. Swimmers in college experience a very different education from their peers – which also differs greatly from school to school.

Some benefits include:

- Swim teams provide an immediate group of peer support in a new environment.
- Coaches are invested in athlete’s safety, studies, and well-being on campus.
- Swim teams foster academic achievement, carrying a higher average GPA than other sports and earning more academic honors.
- Athletic departments often provide support for students including academic and advisory resources, medical services, and other auxiliary staff.
- Parents of swimmers can immediately connect with families of their athlete’s closest peers, some of whom have experienced several years with the school and coach.
- Swimmers are considered desirable by employers for their ability to work hard, be goal-oriented, and be self-sufficient as professionals. Having collegiate swimming on your resume sets you apart.
- Swim teams often contribute to powerful alumni networks from the school – also helping young professionals.

Often it is difficult to get a clear picture of what participating in swimming at a college or university is really like – one of the main purposes of the recruiting or college search process. Some general guidelines on what college swimming looks like:

- College swimming, including the recruiting process, number of hours allowed, and the season dates each year are determined by the division of the school: NCAA Divisions I, II, or III, NAIA, NJCAA, CCCAA, USCAA.
- The university or college athletic department allocates resources to each program and provides the support needed to reach each program’s goals. The athletic department works under or alongside the

administration of the university (admissions, registrar, advisors, etc.) and can play a different role at each school.

- Average team (men or women) size ranges from 40 to 15 depending on the school and can either be separated by gender or combined as one program.
- In the NCAA (namely divisions I & II) the swimmers have a set season: starting a week after classes through a championship meet in March, with a limit of 20 hours of activity per week. Outside of the season the coach can only require 8 hours of activity until the summer when they can host their own club swimming programs.
- Most programs use their full 20 hours as swim practices and/or weight sessions, which is about a 3-4 hour increase over what most swimmers experience in club swimming.
- Each season usually consists of 6-13 dual meets (2–4-hour contests head-to-head with other schools), a late fall invitational meets (a 3 day prelim-finals meet), and a conference championship followed by a divisional (NCAA) Championship.
- Teams will have varying goals depending on the program – some to compete for national championships, others for conference titles, or others to boost the academic profile of the university.
- In the summer, schools vary widely in culture and what they require. Highly competitive programs will host a club experience and offer chances to compete throughout the long course season. Other schools will recommend club programs nearby or at home to help athletes get ready for the next year.

Resources:

- ScholarshipStats.com (<http://www.scholarshipstats.com/swimming.htm>)
- <http://www.ncaa.org/>
- The NCAA Eligibility Center is an important place to start: [https://web3.ncaa.org/ECWR2/NCAA\\_EMS/NCAA.jsp](https://web3.ncaa.org/ECWR2/NCAA_EMS/NCAA.jsp)

## II. **Finding the best college fit for YOU!**

As a student-athlete (notice student is always first...) you can decide early in high school to begin searching for a college swimming program, but many people make this commitment later. The important part is simple – find a college program that fits you in every way possible: academically, athletically, and environmentally – where you feel success is not a question, but part of the process. For many student-athletes, their perception of college athletics comes from the media – big schools with football and basketball programs and a level of brand recognition. There are many options (633 schools!) that offer a unique and powerful experience as a college student-athlete, and narrowing the options is not as overwhelming as you think!

**The First Step** - To find your best fit (and there may be several!) the search starts with you. Becoming self-aware of your interests, learning styles, motivation, values, living preferences, social tendencies, and more will help you identify where you can best succeed. You can start this step at any time, and some of

these items may change. Work with your parents, teachers, and coaches to answer questions like these. Add your own to this list as well!

#### Family and Character Values:

- Do you or your family have character values you strive to live by? What kind of environments will be challenging to uphold those values?
- Are you growing in a community of faith? How can you continue that growth away from home?
- Is your key support group located at your home – are you comfortable reaching them long distances?
- Do you feel good about how to choose close friends – this is the most important influence on your life once you enter college!
- How big of a role will finances play in your decision?
- What do you do to build confidence?
- \_\_\_\_\_?

#### Academic Values:

- What kind of learner are you? Do you need structure to learn, or do you learn better when given the choice on how to cover material?
- Do you do well in big learning environments or small, intimate ones?
- Are you a more hands-on person or a more abstract learner?
- Do you currently seek one-on-one opportunities to learn? Are those helpful to you?
- Have you identified a field of study in which you are interested? A career path?
- Are you self-sufficient with your studies or do you need guidance and reminders along the way?  
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#### Athletic Values:

- How do you learn to trust the coach/program? What gives you confidence in your swimming?
- How important are teammates to you – men or women specifically? What is important about them?
- What positive skills or outcomes do you attribute to swimming (being good at time management for example)?
- What do you struggle with in practice or meets the most?
- Do you have an easy time setting goals – do you have long and short-term goals?
- Do you thrive in highly competitive environments or handle exciting races well?
- Is it motivating to you to contribute to a team indirectly or do you live to be the star player?
- \_\_\_\_\_?

Parents, this can be a difficult and stressful time – especially with the rising cost of higher education. Of course, you have some significant say in your child’s ultimate decision, however, the more this process can be their own, the better the chance of them finding the best fit. You can be a huge help by encouraging them to be open-minded, think about what is important to your family and core family values, and ask important questions that they may overlook.

### **III. How to search for and compare colleges and universities.**

The search for the best college fit can be tough, but it is not impossible and it is certainly exciting. There are hundreds of helpful search and comparison tools available to you (a quick google search for “finding the right college” returned more than 350 million hits). This process can often be confused with recruiting – the process by which colleges look for athletes. Even if you are an athlete who is recruited by dozens of schools – thinking through “The First Step” and knowing how to seek out information about schools can help with comparing your top choices.

Here are some suggestions on where to start:

- Tools like the US News Education website, the College Board’s search tool, and others can help you filter and sort by many categories. Spend some time looking through these as a starting point. Most importantly start to get a feel for what you like and how it affects cost, athletics, and more.
- Take a trip. Try to carve out time to visit college campuses. Stop by a nearby school after an away meet, on a weekend, or plan a visit during your spring break. All universities offer quick tours and presentations (a couple of hours at most) to get the highlights and learn the most important info about a school. It is recommended to tour a couple of schools that you have never heard of or do not at first consider top choices.
- Talk to your teammates/former teammates/coaches/teachers/whomever. Many people you encounter daily went to college, and some went to schools you are unfamiliar with. Even if they did not compete in a sport ask them specific questions about the school (What made you select that school? What did you like about the campus? What were some of your favorite classes?) Remember, the idea is not to decide, just to learn about what is available!
- Follow some of the teams or athletes you are interested in on social media – you may get an insider’s look at how the team culture is reflected through the team’s members. Many teams have their media – follow to see the day-to-day look and feel of the program. The same goes for the universities themselves!

Your goal as you continue to look at schools is to be able to compare apples to apples and oranges to oranges – being able to compare the same elements of academic and athletic programs between schools is important! Often you will find things that stand out to you as positives or negatives.

Resources:

Princeton Review College Rankings: <http://www.princetonreview.com/college-rankings/best-colleges>

The College Board (Home of the SAT) Search Tool:

<https://bigfuture.collegeboard.org/college-search?navid=gh-cs><https://bigfuture.collegeboard.org/college-search?navid=gh-cs>

US News Education Rankings & Advice: <http://www.usnews.com/education/best-colleges/right-school>

CollegeSwimming.com – <http://www.collegeswimming.com/> Now known as SwimNerd. (Team profiles, rankings, times, and more!)

[USA Swimming](#) – navigate to “times” > NCAA information > Select a division on the left > and Times Search and

Event rank buttons are available to display all college times!

### **A four-year plan to choosing a great fit.**

Of course, we all like to be 'ahead of the curve when it comes to planning the future – but the reality is people can step onto this path at any point and still make a great decision. No matter where you fall on this timeline, please take it as a guide and not the hard and fast rule.

**Before you start: Set a clear goal!** The goal should be to find the best personal fit for you as a student-athlete who will help you be a successful person, student, professional, and athlete (and in that order!).

#### **1. The First Step: 8th & 9th Graders – Learning what you like and what is out there.**

- A. The ideas in the above sections “The First Step” and “How to search and compare” are great ways to create a foundation for your college search.
- B. Learning what options are there and what you like will begin to steer you in a good direction – liberal arts vs. an engineering school, big city vs. small town, close to home or far away?
- C. More importantly – establish your best GPA and academic achievements early! It is difficult to raise a GPA – it is much easier to start in a great place. Do the extra work you need to be able to brag about your academics and become eligible for academic scholarship dollars!

#### **2. Making a Long List: 10th Graders – Determine a list of 15-20 ideal schools.**

- a. This list can change – but this should cover all your big “hot button” topics – the important attributes you identified over the last couple of years.
- b. Take some trips and begin to learn more. Try to visit 1-2 of the schools on this list. Follow the schools and teams on social media; begin to get a feel for what stands out among the schools on this list.
- c. Start to follow college swimming results – both dual meets and championship times to get an idea of how fast schools are.
- d. Register for the NCAA Eligibility Center – for any division.

#### **3. Shortening the list: 11th Graders – Get ready for recruiting and communication!**

- a) If you can, shorten your list by the spring of your junior year to 5-8 choices you like. Of course, you may still discover another great choice, but this will give you a chance to focus on the growing amount of communication with schools and coaches.
- b) **Take your standardized tests** – ACT and SAT scores play a huge part in admission and aid! Be sure to share your scores with the NCAA clearinghouse.
- c) Colleges can communicate with you at some point in this year – take advantage of this with the schools you are interested in and let them know you are excited and have been following them. As you begin your communication with them try to focus on the impression you get of the coaches - you will have a chance to learn more about the team later, but the head coach and staff direct the program.

- d) **Market yourself** – especially for your reach schools and for all schools on your list make sure they have updated copies of your times, the meets you plan to attend, your best test scores, grades, and any other
- e) exciting information about you.

e. Before beginning your senior year – **know the admission policies & financial cost for your top choices**  
- What does the application process entail? Feel free to contact the admissions department at any school  
– most will gladly walk you through the process.

#### 4. Final Choices: 12th Graders – **Visit the teams and compare your top choices.**

a. Senior year can look very different for different student-athletes. You can take up to 5 official recruiting visits and unlimited unofficial visits where you can still spend time at practice and with the team.

b. To accept a scholarship you will sign a National Letter of Intent (NLI) – but many athletes ‘walk on’ by giving a verbal commitment and completing the application process.

#### **The recruiting process – from a college coach’s perspective.**

Each college coach and staff approach recruiting slightly differently. All are governed by strict rules regarding when, how often, how, and even why they can speak to or contact you. The basic idea is the same – attract the best student-athletes for your program to your school using school resources, available scholarships, and team goals. Here are some bullet points to help you think about the recruiting process as if you were a coach:

- Finding student-athletes that fit the school/team is better than just finding fast swimmers. **Coaches look for athletes who they know will fit well at their school** – bigger schools with more majors have an advantage here because they may have something for everyone.
- Coaches use championship meets (mostly USA swimming meets) and times databases to get an idea of swimmers that are coming through high school. They will also get information from club coaches they know who talk up their swimmers, and from students who reach out to the program for information. Coaches use these sources to create a “long list” of recruitable athletes.
- Recruiting services are not always easy to work with. Emails from recruiting services can be frustrating – some do not list all the information about the athlete unless you “log in” to a site or some even charge for it. Some do a good job of easily displaying race videos which can be a big plus.
- **It is very easy to stop recruiting an athlete** who is rude, self-centered, disrespectful, or unruly. A recruited student-athlete is also being ‘interviewed.’ Most coaches look for swimmers that are a total “Add” to their program, in and out of the pool. Low grades can be frustrating. Talking with an athlete about joining the program only to find out the coach must beg for them to be admitted (which rarely works) can be a deal-breaker for a coach.
- **Know the rules!** Coaches take a test on NCAA rules every year – there are strict rules on when and how to contact athletes and violations can result in the school and athlete being penalized. It helps when athletes know the rules and help by contacting the coach when appropriate.

- Coaches talk with up to three hundred recruits (just men or women!) each season –be respectful but find ways to make yourself stand out by speaking confidently, replying quickly, and being transparent when appropriate.
- **Test scores, transcripts, and GPA information** are critical – have yours handy!

### Scholarship

- Scholarship money for each school is limited by the NCAA or division as well as the school itself. Many programs do not have the funds to offer the full allowed scholarship limit. Division I men’s programs can distribute 9.9 scholarships to the whole team (all 4 years) and women’s programs have 14.5. Some schools may only offer 2 or 3 of the allowed max. **Bottom line – be realistic about what to expect.**
- The scholarship is awarded on achievement, not on potential. Coaches look at what an athlete has accomplished – best times that score at conference and championship meets are the key – before they award money for an unproven athlete with ‘enormous potential.’
- Scholarship can be athletic or academic or both - depending on the rules for the division and the school.
- Scholarships can be offered in diverse ways over 4 years. For example, some schools will give a 50% scholarship for 4 years by giving an athlete a full ride for 2 years, and no scholarship for 2 years. Certain divisions have different rules for the minimum length a scholarship can be given – 4, 2, or 1 year.
- If you find a great fit for you – have an honest family discussion about the importance of scholarship. In some cases, taking a walk-on spot because the school is the best fit is better than holding out for an award.

### **The recruiting process – from a student-athlete perspective.**

It is important to note that the NCAA deems any student who is eligible to compete in NCAA Athletics a “recruitable student-athlete.” This distinction is not just for scholarship athletes or walk-ons, this applies to ANY student who is looking to compete in college sports. Regardless of if you are actively recruited by a school or seeking a position on the team, these ideas and steps are the same for both.

- Make getting your information to coach easy. Start with your club coach – give them updated email and contact info, and make sure it is the same information on your NCAA Eligibility Center profile. Put together a 1-page resume that includes a picture, times, GPA, test scores, and all other important info.
- Do not be afraid to make the first call! Reach out to your top choices via email, phone, or completing online questionnaires. This will ensure the coaches have your contact info and know you are interested. You are trying to set yourself apart – make it easy for the coaches!
- Be available to ALL programs –even if you do not plan to take a visit or you are not interested, answer or return calls from all coaches quickly. Coaches talk to each other, and a polite and prompt athlete will be highly sought after. It is always better to call and leave a message than an email or text!
- Plan to talk about scholarships – know what you or your family are looking for and be respectful in letting a coach make an offer (or not). Remember your goal is to find the best fit – not find the most money!

- Remember you still must apply and be accepted – keep an eye on application deadlines, processes and ask any questions you have early.

### **Recruiting Visits**

- Official or Unofficial – visits to universities to meet the coaches, athletes, and experience the school are the best way to learn about your top choices. **Remember these programs are also interviewing you!**
- Many colleges will ask you to choose a date to visit soon after July 1st preceding your senior year, if not before. You can eliminate some stress of picking dates by knowing what schools you would like to visit and answer coaches with a firm answer. Showing confidence in yourself is a wonderful way to stand out!
- If you are underage – **DO NOT DRINK!** The penalties and bad reputation you can create can easily cost you scholarships, admission to the university, or worse - land you in jail away from home. There will certainly be alcohol available on most campuses; tell your hosts when you arrive that you are excited to be social, but you are not going to drink. If they do not respect this, then you should consider how that reflects on the team!
- Be prepared with questions –You will have a lot of downtime with your hosts and the coaches. Practice carrying on a friendly conversation so you can be prepared to talk with them. If you need a moment to just be quiet, ask to take a break or go for a swim!
- Most schools will offer a chance to swim on your trip – coaches are not allowed to watch or coach you, but some may make note of this. It is suggested to bring a workout or at least some guidelines with you and take advantage of the opportunity to get a feel for the pool – you may be spending a lot of time there!
- The most important things to learn on a recruiting trip **are how you feel about the coaches and the team.** Do they value the same things you do (remember step one!) and do their goals align with what you want to do? Are you inspired or motivated by them? Remember it is people who will make the biggest impact on you!
- Finally; **ask yourself “What can I add to this program?”** The Jeffco philosophy used here is to practice adding to a team – look for the same opportunities in the teams you visit, not ‘what will I get if I go here?’
- Thank you, notes/emails are great ways, to stand out – especially to communicate that you arrived home safely!
- You should have a good idea of what the cost of your top schools is – and at this point, you can start to talk with coaches about any financial aid you are looking for or they are offering.

### **Use your resources!**

Ridgefield Aquatic Club coaches will work hard to make sure you feel supported in the college search process – whether you plan to swim or not. In the end, this process is owned by the student-athlete and their family, and it is up

to you to get all the information and make a good decision! Make sure you use these resources to help you along the way:



- Your coaches – If you have questions or concerns reach out to your coach and ask. If we do not know we can certainly help you find the right person to ask!
- RAC Alumni & Families – Many of them are still in town, and if you know an older swimmer (8&Us – make senior friends!) ask them or their families about their experiences. **Parents do not forget this includes you too!** Contact a RAC Coach if you need assistance linking with an experienced parent.
- Do your research – You can find hundreds of helpful links online. Of course, not all of it is the best advice, but you can find information about specific questions with an easy Google search.
- Your teachers and counselors at school – They talk with university representatives all the time and have a long list of potential scholarship opportunities. Remember grades play a big part so start early and be active in your school to get the most from them – especially college credit courses and testing prep information.

**Good luck and be sure to keep your RAC family updated so we can continue to inspire more young athletes to reach for their highest potential in swimming!**