



CARROT: NERVE

Examples of the Nerve

The Nerve is an important part what makes a college unique and interesting. However, it is sometimes difficult to put your finger on exactly what a college's Nerve is. Most college catalogs and web sites looks so similar you would think that all students ever did was sit around under trees next to brick buildings.

Read just about any college view book or online profile and you'll read about thing like student to faculty ratio¹ and their state-of-the art blah, blah, blah building. However, read carefully and you may be able to separate the wheat from the chaff.

For instance, Sweet Briar College in Sweet Briar, Virginia likes to talk about the fact that they are the only college in the US that has a residential artist colony on its campus. I'm not exactly sure what this means, but I'll bet it has something to do with its Nerve. Sweet Briar is also one of the few all-women's colleges in the US. Dig deeper and you may find that they consider themselves one of the "Sister" colleges that includes other all-women colleges like Mount Holyoake and Wellesley. These schools take pride in their students and the fact they offer an environment that provides ample opportunity for women in all areas of academic life.

As you conduct your college search, try to be aware of the common thread that exists from students to student. It is often apparent in the faculty as well. Your high school counselor is a good person to talk to. They have probably visited more colleges than anyone else you know (including me, even though you don't actually *know* me, but you get the point.)

Here are a few more sample Nerves.

Shimer College (Shimer.edu)

Located in Chicago, Shimer is one of a handful of "Great Books" Colleges in the US. A Great Books College is one that teaches students through the great books. For instance, if you are taking biology you will read Darwin, if you take Physics you will read Newton- there are no textbooks. So, the Nerve is a shared love of reading and the classics. Shimer understands this is well which is why, when they rent student names for marketing purposes, they generally put less weight on the math scores on the SAT and pay more attention to the reading comprehension.

¹ Numbers like this are terribly misleading, by the way...

Reed College (Reed.edu)

Known for really tough academic standards, Reed values high-intellect. They are the only college in the US with a real, honest-to-goodness Nuclear Reactor supporting their science efforts. Reed values its role as a college that serves braniacs so if you are one, make sure Reed knows it!

Soka College (Soka.edu)

You don't have to be a Buddhist to attend Soka College, but if you apply be sure to let them know how you want the influence of peace, human rights and the sanctity of life. Soka's Nerve is its relationship with Buddhism and the characteristics that Buddhism embodies. It's important to show how your values align with the values of the college. For Soka, the values are clear.

New College of Florida (ncf.edu)

Hate report cards? If so, New College of Florida may be the place for you. They are among a handful of colleges that don't regularly issues grades to students. Grades don't tell the full story. My grades certainly didn't and yours may not either. New College of Florida uses "Narrative Evaluation" to help students know how they are doing. Additionally, this flexible, individualize environment encourages independent research at the undergraduate level. Striking the New College Nerve will require you to show initiative, independence and maturity.

Berkeley University (Berkeley.edu)

With a history of being at the center of social activism Berkeley's Nerve is closely tied to public service and community-centered activities. Striking the Nerve means showing how you value the community and how you have worked to reach out beyond the walls of your high school. They don't necessarily want hippies and agitators, but they do want people with opinions and passion.

The Julliard School (Julliard.edu)

Sometimes there are no subtleties when it comes to the Nerve. If you want to study at Julliard you will clearly have to stand out in dance, music or theatre. However, while many colleges have arts programs, Julliard focuses on performing arts. Additionally, they pride themselves with their highly-selective admissions process. Striking their Nerve is easy if you are the best at what you do.

Kalamazoo College (Kzoo.edu)

Do you like to take risks? If so there is a little college in a little town in West Michigan that may be the place for you. Kalamazoo College boats the “K” Plan, which is designed to help you better understand the world you live in. Part of your study will include getting out of the classroom and out of town. Study-abroad is a central part of the plan as well as career development. The Nerve at Kzoo is very practical. Show them that you want to see the world and you will strike their Nerve.

Striking the Nerve is easier when the college has a clear mission. Many colleges do not. Many colleges seem quite vague with the same basic programs as everybody else. Dig deeper, ask questions and visit campus. You should start to get a feel for what they value and what they believe. Align yourself with these qualities and you will give them an excuse to put you on the “in” stack.