

Background

There are 4,360 higher education schools to choose from in the United States and over 23,000 higher education schools to choose from all over the world. The decision, for those who have to make it, is very daunting and oftentimes overwhelming. In 2000, the number of students looking for higher education was 100-million and increased to 207-million in 2014. However, that has not been the case since. Undergraduate enrollment has decreased 7.5% since 2019, though it has been falling since 2010. Reasons for these decreases include rising tuition costs, student loan debt, and the COVID-19 pandemic.

With the cost of tuition increasing each year, now in 2023, worldwide higher education costs range from \$1,000 to \$142,340 to attend per year. So, students are now faced with the decision of which higher education school they are going to attend and the question of how they are going to pay for it.

Problem

High school students are feeling extremely overwhelmed by the task of choosing where to go for their higher education due to the abundance of schools and not knowing what career path to choose.

A good education is very important to those applying to higher education schools and is a fundamental step toward career success. Since the decision of where to go is so important, it is imperative that the process is as simple and stress free as possible.

I am a good person to solve this problem because of my passion for it. For those who choose to further their education, it is super important to make sure the school or university that is chosen fits the person and is the best choice they can make. Education is the foundation to these students' successful careers and I want to do anything and everything I can to be able to jumpstart them into success.

Target Audience

The primary audience are high school students who are looking for schools to go to. They have the least amount of experience with the process and may not know

where to start. A lot of these students are unaware of the resources available which can make the process a lot more overwhelming.

The secondary audience are students looking to continue their education. Whether they are looking to get their master's degree or doctorate degree, they have more experience with the process, though it may still be overwhelming. They have an idea of what they would like to do, and what they would like to do differently from the last time.

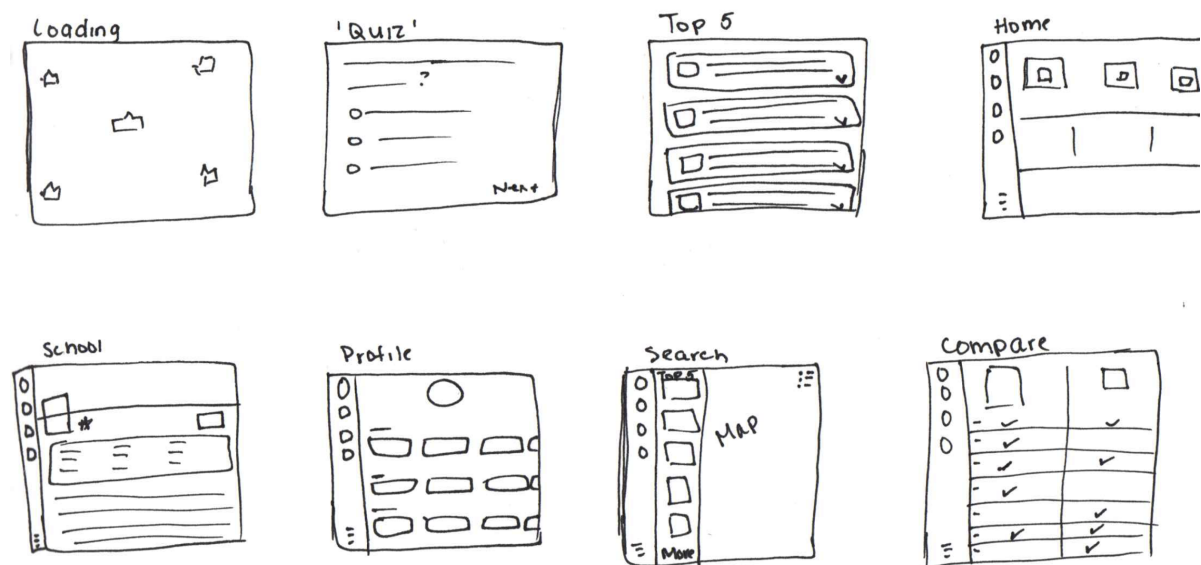
The tertiary audience for this product are parents. Though the student will be attending the school or university, it is most likely that the parent will be interested and/or paying for their child's education. Especially during the beginning of the process, the parent may be helping look for schools solo or looking for schools with their child. They also might be helping schedule tours, talking through possible career paths and answering any other questions their child may be asking about the next step in their education.

Since there are so many places to go to retrieve such important information, it is very hard to keep track of where the information was found, what tasks were completed and what, if anything, is left to do. All of these audiences would largely benefit from a product that would streamline and make the process of searching, applying and keeping track of the process easier.

Concept/Solution

The idea for this product was to give students a place to go for the very stressful and overwhelming process of searching, applying, and keeping track of all important information in one place. It would start out as a web app which gives users the biggest screen space to view all of the important information, but it would eventually be available in a mobile platform as well.

The initial concept for the product (shown below) included a quiz feature for students to be matched with a top 5 list of schools that they might be interested in attending. They could also take a quiz to be matched with a specific major if they are unsure of which career path they want to take. They would also be able to favorite schools they are interested in, compare their favorite schools, schedule tours for schools they are interested in and apply to the schools they want to go to through the product.



Research, Process & Concept Evolution

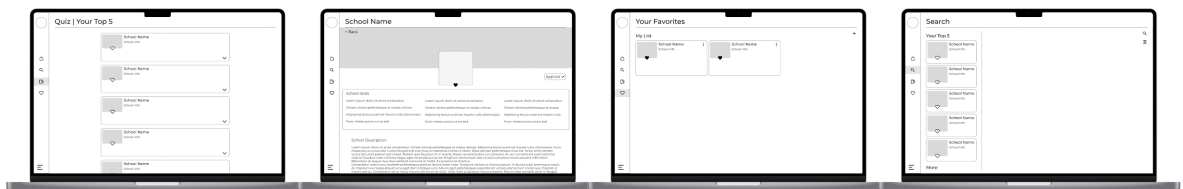
Knowing the project and problem that I wanted to tackle, I had to get a better understanding of the facts. Reading articles about how many schools there are around the world, where the top schools in the world are and why application rates are going down was just some of the secondary research I conducted to get an idea of the problem space I was in. A big trend I was seeing was that a rise in tuition costs was a large player in the decrease in application submissions- the interesting part being that not all schools were seeing a decrease. According to *U.S. College Enrollment Decline* 4-year public schools gained 17.5% and 4-year non-profit gained 3.4%. All other schools lost between 35 and 59% of enrollment.

I then set out researching products similar to the one I was designing. I did research on the top 4 that students seemed to be using: Cappex, Niche, myFUTURE, and College Board. All of these tools were similar to my concept, but not exact. Cappex and Niche have a quiz in the beginning to give you a list of schools that may be a good match for you. All of them allow you to filter through search results and all but myFuture allow you to save your favorites. When looking through reviews, Cappex received a 4.3/5 because it was easy to navigate and accessible. Niche received a 1.5/5 for having false and inaccurate school reviews. When looking for reviews for myFUTURE, I couldn't find any, anywhere. And CollegeBoard received a 4.5/5 because it was easy, convenient, and also helpful

for finding scholarships. When analyzing these tools, I was able to find features I wanted to implement and ones I didn't. I was also able to take it a step further and see ways their feature designs were successful.

I then conducted user interviews and a survey to get a feel for what the students currently going through this process and students who recently went through this process would want in a product like this. I asked questions like how they heard about the schools they were interested in, the most important thing to them about the school they would attend, and what features they would like to see in a product like the one I was going to be building (questions can be found in the appendix). I found that all of my participants had found their schools through online searches and word of mouth, and that quality and accreditation of the school they would be going to was the most important to them. When asked what features they would like to see in a product like this, participants gave me a list of features very similar to the one I had cultivated when first brainstorming: filters (location, remote/hybrid, major), financial information, "favorite" schools (use this to suggest other schools), student success rate, pro-con list/notes, compare schools, accessibility rating, student life/pictures, student reviews, course lists, school events, and contact information.

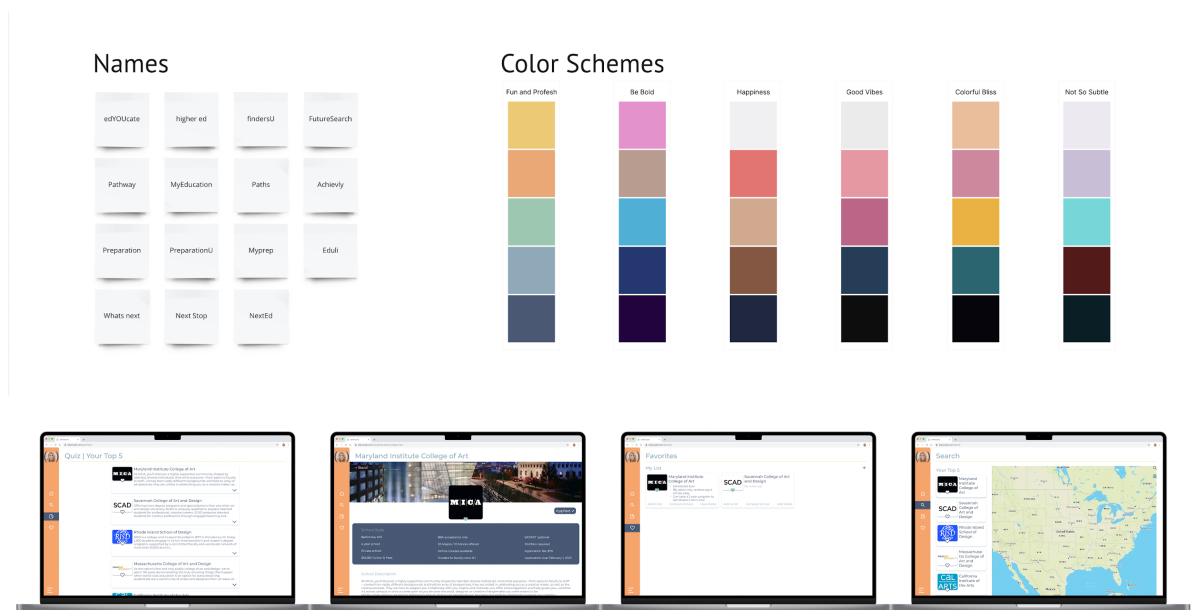
With all of this in mind, I got started on my lo-fi wireframes (shown below). The wireframes begin with creating an account, then the user is taken through a quiz that will curate a top 5 list of schools that match their preferences the best. They are then able to apply, schedule a tour, favorite, take notes on and compare the schools of their choice. They are also able to search for other schools, look for scholarships and financial aid, and look through a survival guide with helpful information about how to be successful in college.



These lo-fi wireframes were then tested with three participants, two of which were students and the other being a college coach. During this first round of testing, participants indicated they found the product easy to navigate and straightforward. They stated that they really enjoyed the amount of information

provided by the survival guide and financial aid page. “I think that's [the survival guide] really helpful to have that on there, it's really accessible as well” (Participant 3). Some indicated they wished there was more information provided about some icons and some found the compare schools and notes features hard to find. After receiving all of their feedback, I asked them to vote anonymously on their favorite name and color scheme for the product in Miro. Overall, when asked to rate their satisfaction out of 5, the wireframes were rated a 4.3/5.

It was then time to take the feedback I received and turn my lo-fi wireframes into hi-fi wireframes (shown below). I wanted the product to feel approachable and friendly but serious and academic at the same time so there were a lot of color schemes with both bright and muted colors. At the end of the vote, the color scheme “Fun and Profesh” and the name edYOUcate won.



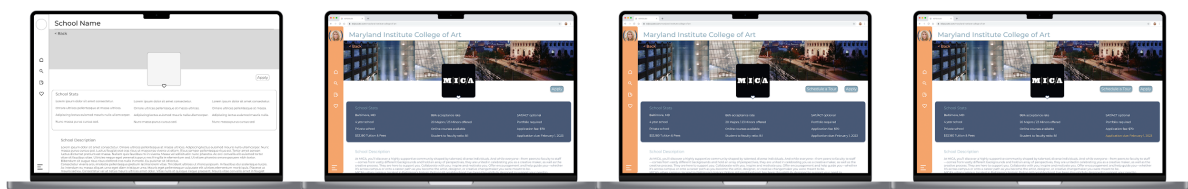
During my second round of testing, I asked my participants to complete the same tasks, such as completing the quiz, exploring a school and finding your favorites (full list of tasks can be found in the appendix), only this time all information was filled in instead of having filler text. It was interesting to watch each participant take their time answering each quiz question, as if they were using the product in real life, even though they knew it was a prototype and was set up to work a certain way. I received a lot of great feedback: it was agreed by all that this product simplified the process, everyone appreciated that the product was a one stop shop for all of the things they need to do during this stressful time, and all of

my participants indicated they would use this product. They did want the ability to choose more than one option for some quiz questions and it was hard to locate the search bar on the search page. Overall, for this round, when asked to rate their satisfaction out of 5, the wireframes were rated a 4/5.

I then got back to iterating. I made sure there was space for consistent branding and focus on the small details that my participants called out. I didn't have to change colors, type, or any major features of my product based on the feedback I had received.

For my third and final round of testing I was given more extremely helpful insight and feedback from my participants. They again validated my concept and found it straightforward, easy to navigate and very organized. Participants did want a guide to walk newer students who are just starting the process through what they need to do, additional search bars in areas where there is a lot of information or multiple categories to sift through, and multiple options when navigating through pages. Overall, for the last round, the wireframes were rated a 4.5/5, the highest score out of all the rounds.

Overall, I was pleased with the results of my usability testing. The feedback I got was very valuable and insightful. It also gave me new ideas to add or change features that I had already had in the design. The best part was that everyone liked the concept of the product. No one questioned the relevance or need, they added to it by telling their own experiences.



[Lo-fi wireframes](#)

[Hi-fi wireframes](#)

[Hi-fi wireframes](#)

[Final wireframes](#)

Outcome

I am extremely proud of the final product I was able to create during this final course. There were of course some challenges like the eight (8) week timeline to get all of the work I wanted to accomplish done, the fact that I am a one person team so I can't delegate tasks, I am working within the constraints of Figma

prototypes and I am limited to the resources I have access to. But I was able to overcome those challenges and create a highly functioning prototype. Time management and planning is super important when working within a limited time frame. I put all of my tasks and the date I wanted them to be done by in Airtable so I was able to see them in multiple views and mark them “To Do,” “In Progress,” and “Done” which helped me to process all that needed to be completed. It also was satisfying to see everything color coded and see the list become green as each task status was changed to “Done.”

There is so much more I would like to do with edYOUcate. I would love to build out the other school pages, add the more detailed elements such as filter, search and talk to a student, add other features such as the ability to share your favorites list with people such as your guidance counselor and more. I know that this product could really help students, so as a next step as well, getting edYOUcate in front of developers and stakeholders to make it a real product would be amazing. And, of course, iterate iterate iterate based on feedback from usability testing.

Looking back at not only the course but at the program, so much has been learned. The time has flown by and I cannot believe we have reached the end already. This course has challenged me and pushed me in ways that I will forever be grateful for. It forced me to think outside the box and come up with solutions for problems that I had not foreseen happening and that would benefit the user in the best possible way.

This program has also challenged me and made me a more well rounded designer. I have met some amazing peers and instructors along the way who have inspired me and taught me some invaluable and unforgettable lessons that I will take with me on my journey after graduating from MICA, and for that I owe them a huge thank you.

Timeline

- | | |
|-----------------|--|
| January 17 - 24 | Project management tools
Problem statement & pitch
Desk research |
| January 24 - 31 | Problem statement pitch refinement
Mindmap |

	Project plan
January 31 - February 7	Project brief part 1 Storyboarding & paper prototypes
February 7 - 14	Macro forces User research Project plan update
February 14 - 21	Competitive analysis
February 21 - 28	Pitch revision Lo-fi prototype Project plan update User research results
February 28 - March 7	Final presentation review Risk assignment
March 7	Final presentation
March 14 - 21	Capstone proposal Lo-fi prototype
March 21 - 28	Review previous capstone Usability testing round 1
March 28 - April 4	Findings, assumptions, limitations list Iterations from usability testing
April 4 - 11	Hi-fi prototype Usability testing round 2
April 11 - 18	Heuristic evaluation Iterations from usability testing
April 18 - 25	Usability testing round 3
April 25 - May 2	Iterations from usability testing
May 2	Case study Final prototype Final presentation

Sources

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Appendix

Survey Questions:

- What level of higher education are you looking for?
 - College
 - Graduate degree
 - Doctorate
- What will you be studying?
- How many schools will you apply for?
 - 1
 - 2-5
 - 6-10
 - Don't know yet
- How did you hear about these schools?
- What is the most important thing to you about the school you attend?
- Would you use an app/website to help you search for a school?
 - Yes
 - No
 - Maybe

- Why or why not?
- What features would you want to have in this app?
- Would you like to be contacted for a 30-min zoom call to test the app in a few weeks?
 - Yes
 - No
- First and last name
- Email

Interview Questions:

Intro

- What level of higher education are you looking for?
- How have you been looking for schools?
- How did you hear about the schools you want to apply for?
- What do you like/dislike about the process?
- How did you choose your major?

Introduce concept

- Would you use an app like this?
- What features would you like to see in an app like this?
- How do you think an app like this would affect the current process?

Wrapup

- Is there anything I didn't ask that you would like to add?

Usability Test:

Before test questions

- What country are you from?
- How did you find the school you wanted to go to?
- Have you ever used a website or app like this to help look for schools?
 - Why/ why not?
- How long did you look for schools?

Tasks

- Create an account, follow the steps until you get to your top 5.

- Next, tell me how you would go about exploring this page? Exploring a school?
- Tell me how you would schedule a tour for a school and apply for a school.
- Tell me where you would access your favorite schools? How would you use this page? Compare schools? Take notes on these schools?
- Tell me how you would search for schools?
- Browse around the rest of the app how you would normally use a new app.

After test questions

- What do you “like”, if anything, about using this app?
- What do you “dislike”, if anything, about using this app?
- How do you feel about using this app?
- Do you feel this app will improve the ease of finding and choosing a school to go to? Why or why not?
- If you had a magic wand, what would you do to make this app better?
- Would you recommend this app to another student?
- Please rate your experience from 1-5, with 5 being extremely positive and 1 being very negative.
 - Why did you give this rating?
- Would you continue to use this app if you continue your education?
 - Why or why not?
- Is there anything you would like to share with us that we have not asked?