



PLANNING *the Perfect* CAMPUS VISIT

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Great College Advice from

GREAT
COLLEGE
ADVICE



Planning the Perfect Campus Visit

The campus visit is one of the most important elements in choosing the best college for you. However, many students and their families do not take the time to plan how to make the most of their brief visit.

Campus visits contain some of the most important moments in the entire college selection and application process. You need to prepare. You need to be aware. And, you need to know which considerations are important to you, and which are not. As with every other aspect of the college search process, the focus should be on you: your abilities, your preferences, your needs, your aspirations. The primary question in your mind should be this: “does this campus fit me?”

The more you are able to keep yourself at the center of the visit, the more productive and helpful your campus visit will be.



This e-book contains tips and guidelines for
how to plan the perfect college visit

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General Considerations

When to Visit

As a prospective student, the best time to visit a college is when classes are in session. This is when you will find both students and professors populating and animating a campus. That said, it may be difficult for you and your family to take the time (and shoulder the expense) of traveling around the country during the school year. Summertime or school vacations may be the only time available to you. In that case, absolutely use the time you have available. No matter when you visit, make sure you plan ahead to get the most out of it.

Why You Should Visit

There are two reasons to visit a campus. The first is relatively obvious: you need to obtain a physical sense of the campus where you plan to spend four years of your life. You want to go beyond the websites and brochures and guidebooks to get a personal impression of the campus and the people who inhabit it. However, a second and equally important reason to visit a campus is that it demonstrates your interest in that campus—and “demonstrated interest” is often part of the decision colleges make about whom to accept and whom to reject.

Admissions officers like to accept students who are genuinely interested in their community. Some colleges won't even accept students who live within easy driving distance of campus if they haven't made the effort to come and see it. Therefore, you need to ensure that the admissions office knows you will be visiting. Even if you cannot arrive during normal office hours, or if you arrive on a Sunday, or during the week of Thanksgiving, be sure to email the admissions office in advance to let them know. You want these folks to be aware that you cared enough to pay them a visit.

Visit in the Afternoon and Evening

Often, colleges plan visits for the morning. Some offer tours at 9 am. This may be convenient for travelers, but a morning tour will give you a skewed sense of any college campus in America. Why? Because college students do not fully wake up until noon! Classes may be in session in the morning, but you generally will not feel the buzz and bustle of any campus until about 4 pm. One of my favorite times to really get a sense of a campus is around the dinner hour. Athletes are returning from practice, music and arts rehearsals are getting underway, student centers are vibrating with activity, and academic lectures and events are about to begin.



“You want these folks to be aware that you cared enough to pay them a visit.”

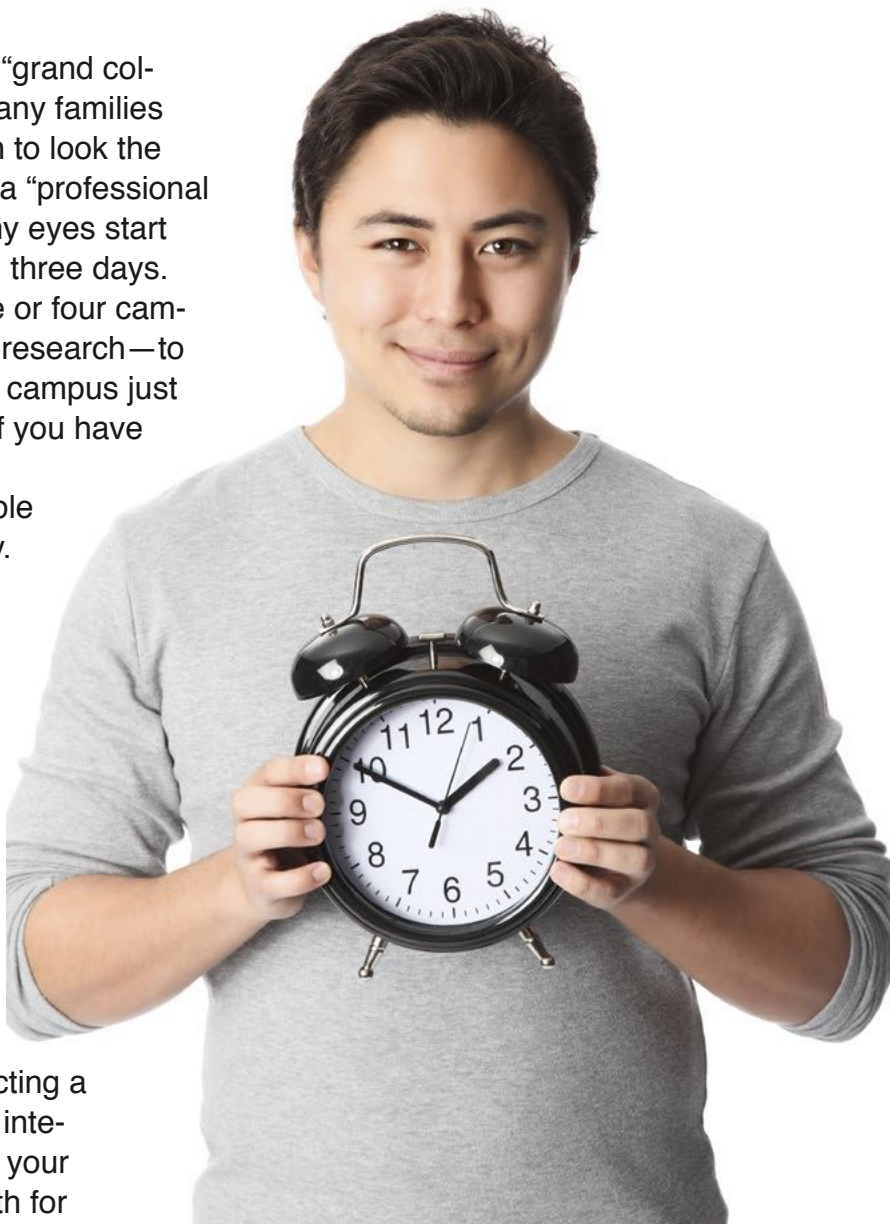


Fewer Visits, More Time For Each

One of the common problems with the “grand college tour” of multiple campuses that many families organize is that the campuses all begin to look the same after a couple of days. Even for a “professional college tour taker” like me, I find that my eyes start to glaze over after the eighth college in three days. My general advice is to target the three or four campuses that are most likely—given your research—to fit you well. Don’t waste time visiting a campus just because it’s nearby or along a route. If you have invested time in researching the best colleges for you, then you should be able to eliminate a bunch from your itinerary. Usually, I advise my clients not to visit more than three or four in a single trip.

Take Your Time

Spend as much time on each campus you have decided to visit as you possibly can—at least one full day. Remember that you are not simply choosing a piece of real estate in which to reside for four years. You are not choosing a resort or a spa. You are choosing where to invest your educational dollars. You are selecting a community of which you want to be an integral part for as much as five percent of your human life span, and be associated with for the rest of your life. A two-hour dash across the campus will not be very helpful in guiding your decisions. Again, it’s better to visit fewer campuses and explore each more thoroughly and carefully than to zip from one campus to the next to see as many as possible. Take your time.



“You are choosing where to invest your educational dollars. You are selecting a community of which you want to be an integral part...”



The Logistics



Check the website to know what times tours and information sessions begin. These are usually scheduled back-to-back, but it makes little difference which one you do first. If requested, sign up for an information session or tour in advance.



Make an appointment for an interview with an admissions officer, if this is an option. Many colleges will encourage personal interviews, so take advantage of the opportunity. And make sure you come prepared with a list of questions. You will find a list of questions you may want to ask in a later section of this guide.



Consider making an appointment to visit with a professor in a department in which you have a particular strength or interest. Often, the admissions office will help facilitate these appointments for you. But it can be much better if you contact the professor yourself and request a brief appointment—this shows initiative and interest (two things that admissions officers like to see). I will guide you through contacting and visiting a professor in a later chapter.



Athletes should also plan to meet with team coaches. You should contact the coach directly for an appointment. Use the same guidance below that I give for contacting professors.



Performing arts students should also plan for an interview or audition. The admissions office may facilitate these meetings, or you may have to call the departments directly.



If your visit takes place on a weekday, try to sit in on a class. The admissions office may be able to help you make these arrangements, so ask well in advance. Or here again, you may want to take some initiative and make the arrangements yourself. Find out how in the section on connecting with professors below.



Plan to take advantage of overnight stay options for students if they are available. These are great ways for the applicant to meet a variety of students and to get a ground-level view of the campus from a student's perspective. You are considering spending four years on this campus, so you may as well spend a night there before you apply so that you can imagine what the experience would be like.



Plan to dress neatly. No need for the cocktail dress or the suit and tie, but don't look slovenly, either: decent slacks, decent shirt or blouse, decent shoes. Your appearance is important, especially if you have arranged interviews or meetings with coaches or professors.



Tours and Information Sessions

The campus tour and official information session are the focal point of any campus visit. But it's important to remember that a lot of thought (and money) has gone into creating a wonderful experience for the visiting family. There are even consulting groups that do nothing but advise college admissions directors on how to improve the campus visit experience. Think of the information session as a sales pitch, and you'll probably be in the right frame of mind as you enter the admissions office for the first time.

General Tips

Arrive early, maybe 20 to 30 minutes. Sometimes visitor parking is not right next to the admissions office. Leave yourselves time to get lost and found again.

Sign in at the front desk in the admissions office. Colleges collect information about which applicants go on tours and which do not. You want to make sure your name is on the right list.

Confirm at the front desk any other arrangements or appointments you have made on campus, including meetings with professors, coaches, or interviews with admissions officers. Make sure you have phone numbers and email addresses of the people you plan to meet. The admissions staff can sometimes help you confirm these meetings. This is another reason to arrive well before the start of an information session or tour.



The Tour

Don't base your impression of the school on your impression of the tour guide. Some guides are great. Some are not. Some guides are people with whom you will instantly click. Others will have personalities that turn you off. Remember that the guide is only one student of hundreds or thousands (or tens of thousands). This person is only your guide. Sometimes they are a paid member of the admissions office staff and not an elected or official representative of the entire student body.

Remember that the student tour guides are told which route to take, which buildings and programs to highlight, and are coached on how to answer certain kinds of questions. But there may be many questions that are either too technical (e.g., "are chemistry exams normed or curved?") or too specific (e.g., "what percentage of the student body majors in chemistry?") for them to answer correctly. This is why you must find other ways to get answers to those questions—from faculty, from admissions staff, or from other students.

Keep in mind that the residence halls shown on the tour may be the nicest on campus. If they don't show you a residence hall, ask the tour guide about his or her own freshman dorm, and current living arrangements. Ask which is the worst freshman residence hall on campus (and perhaps pay a visit to that one after the tour!).



Similarly, the classrooms you will be shown may or may not be representative. Often, you will be shown very nice classrooms. Ask about the classrooms in which the tour guide is now taking classes. Where are those classrooms, and how do they compare with the one you are viewing? Are they larger? Smaller? More or less technologically equipped? You want to get a sense of the variety of classroom spaces on campus. Science students, especially, should be sure to see the science laboratory spaces.

Take note of which buildings and facilities were not on the tour. If the library is not on the tour, I take it as a red flag and make a beeline for it as soon as the tour is over. If there are particular facilities that you want to learn about and that interest you (e.g., the dance studio, art classrooms, labs, swimming pool, etc.), either ask whether you will have time on the tour to visit, or get directions on where to find these places after your tour.

After the tour, continue to wander the campus. Take your time. Sample campus food. Visit the student center. Pick up a student newspaper. Read bulletin boards. Wander the academic buildings, especially those in which you have a keen academic interest. And, if you pass a professor's office and the door is open, poke your head in, introduce yourself, and ask a couple of questions about the students on campus. You'll be amazed at how forthright professors can be!



The Information Session

The Information Session is an integral part of the campus visit experience. In essence, this is the “dog and pony show” of the admissions office. Each college runs these a bit differently. Sometimes you’ll have to sit through a slick marketing video (which is probably available off the college’s website, too). Sometimes, a student panel will offer their impressions. Sometimes it’s more of a lecture by an admissions representative.

Whatever the format, very little of the information you receive in this information session is different or even more useful than the things you get off the college’s website. These presentations are often heavily scripted, and admissions folks are coached to “stay on message.” Still, most information sessions are worth an hour of your time, if only because information you already have will be reinforced and reemphasized for you in a new way. More information is always better than less, as long as you just keep in mind that these are also sales pitches.

Here are some elements of the presentation you are likely to hear:

Student-to-faculty ratios. These are useless statistics that supposedly prove that the educational experience is intimate and of high quality. [Read this post on student-to-faculty ratios](#) to learn how bogus these statistics really are. Make sure they tell you about average class sizes, and the percentage of classes that enroll fewer than 25 students. Also ask how many lecture halls on campus accommodate more than 100 students.

Chances of admission. You may hear things about “average GPA” and “average test scores” in the presentation. Take these with a grain of salt. These are aggregate statistics and they have little or no bearing on your individual chances of admission. Your chances may be much better... or much worse. If you want a better indication, ask things like, “what percentage of your acceptances go to children of alumni?” or “what percentage of your acceptances go to recruited athletes?”





Bazillions of Clubs. Every college inflates the number of clubs, and then also tells students that if they want to start up a new one, all they have to do is ask. These aren't lies, but the number of clubs is usually inflated because the admissions office never culls the list of clubs or ensures that their figures reflect the number and kinds of clubs being administered by the Student Affairs office. Thus, you will find that a bunch of the clubs on the list have been inactive on campus for five or six years. Of course, this is not a problem, unless you are a juggler and you see that there is a juggling club, and then you matriculate to find that there is only one member of that club: you. Don't be impressed by the number and variety of clubs. Be impressed if they have an active group of students that cares about the things that interest you. So inquire as to the health and strength of the clubs that attract you the most.

We are a Community. Every campus wants you to feel welcome, that you will be loved and appreciated, that you will fit in. So, they will stand up and talk about how warm and friendly the place is. Some people are better at delivering this message than others. I have students who return from campus tours who have been lulled into a stupor by admissions folks who do a great job of delivering the "we are a happy family" speech. I'm not saying that this message is untrue. I'm only pointing out that this is a part of every college's marketing message. And it will be incumbent upon you, the visitor, to figure out whether or not you will feel comfortable and welcome in that community.

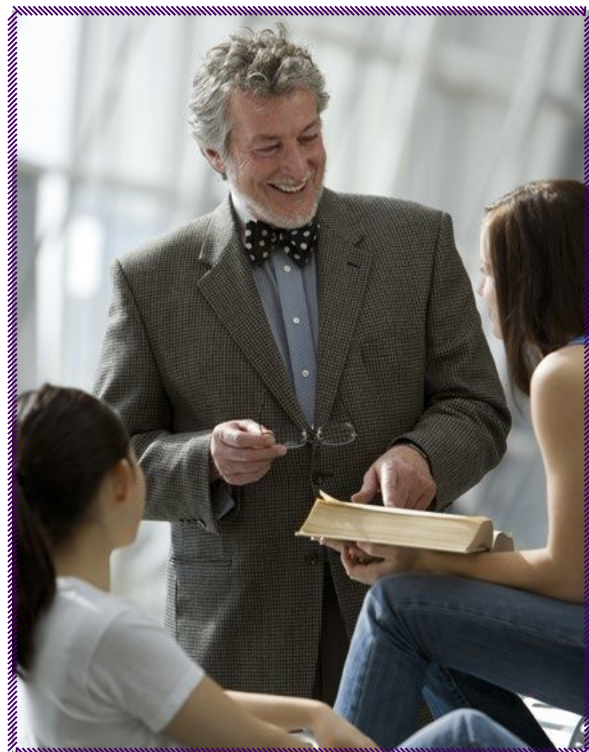
Connecting With a Professor

As students and their families organize themselves to visit college campuses, they usually focus on itineraries, on reserving hotel rooms, and scheduling campus tours. They may even try to land an admissions interview. Sometimes students will also sit in on a class or two, in hopes of getting a feel for what the educational experience will be like. Only a few, however, consider direct contact with professors during the visit.

Why would a visit with a professor be important?

Explore Majors

Many students are still trying to learn about different majors as part of the larger decision about which college to attend. What better way to learn about an unfamiliar major than to talk to an expert? A professor in the department can give a first-hand account of what one is supposed to learn in that department. Most professors are accustomed to “selling” their discipline to undergraduates, and most are willing to take the time to talk with a prospective student and to efficiently introduce them to the department.



To give a concrete example of this, a student client of mine was trying to decide whether she was well suited for a business and marketing degree, or whether she was more interested in psychology. She had taken some introductory courses in both during high school, and she liked both, but she didn’t quite understand what the difference would be in terms of the courses she would be required to take, the format of those courses, and the vastly different career paths of these disciplines. So when she toured three campuses, she talked to two professors on each campus—one in marketing and one in psychology. Upon her return, because she took the time and initiative to do this, she had developed a very clear idea that while she wanted to take a few more courses in psychology, she was absolutely sure that she would be a marketing major in college. This realization came to her because of well-organized discussions with experts. Not only was her application stronger for having made this effort, but she also became more certain of her academic path in college. The value of the self-awareness she gained from this extra effort, and the positive effect it will have on her career path for the next several decades of her life cannot be overemphasized.

Establish Contact With Someone Who Shares Your Academic Passions

If a student has a particular interest in, let’s say, the history of the Cold War, and believes he would like to focus on that period while pursuing a history major, it makes sense to learn more about the individuals in the history department who share that passion. And there is no better way to learn about a professor as a person than by sitting down with him in his office for a few minutes. By establishing rapport as an applicant, it will be easier to build on that rapport once you matriculate.



Gather Information That Will Help On Your Application

Admissions officers all want to know why you have chosen to apply to their college. If you have taken the initiative to meet with a professor, and you can clearly articulate what makes a particular department stand out, or that you want to pursue advanced study with a particular professor (of Cold War history, for example), then you can make a strong case for why you are academically suited for this school. Meeting with a professor demonstrates that you are doing your homework, and that you are really considering the academic fit between your interests and college's offerings.

If you decide to include a visit with a professor during your campus visits, here are some tips on contacting the professor and on making the meeting a success.



Identify The Appropriate Professor

For some purposes, you may want to start with the department chair. If you are hoping to talk to a specific person (because you share their academic interests), then go right to that faculty member. You can find full lists of faculty in every department on a college or university website. Make sure you find their bios, their teaching responsibilities, and perhaps even links to the courses they teach. Do your homework **BEFORE** you initiate contact. Remember: faculty members are teachers, and they like students who do their homework. You may also want to consult the website RateMyProfessor.com. Here you can find ratings of professors by students who have had them in class. This resource can help you identify the best teachers in the department. (You can also learn whether the professor is “hot” or not!)



Start With An Email

Explain briefly who you are, when you will be on campus, and why you want to meet with the professor. Address the professor formally and respectfully (i.e., not, “hey, professor!”, but rather, “Dear Dr. Smith”). Set the tone by demonstrating that you are serious. The note does not have to be dull, but it has to be formal. Sign your name at the bottom and give your email address and phone number. Also, your parents should not do this for you. The email must come from you. Professors have even less patience for parents than admissions officers do.



Establish Your Goals Or Agenda For The Meeting

Are you trying to learn more about a couple of different majors? Do you want to learn about research opportunities in a particular field or sub-field? Do you want to understand more about this professor's research and teaching interests? Do you want to know how well your particular interests can be supported in the department? Did you read about a particular program or curriculum element that interests you, about which you want to learn more? Don't just say “I'd really like to meet you.” Tell the recipient of your email exactly why you want to meet in this sort of above detail. Refer to specifics in the course catalog, the professor's publications, or the departmental website.



Follow Through

If the professor recommends that you contact someone else, thank her for the guidance, and then immediately turn around and follow that advice. Do not forget to say “thank you.” If the professor does agree to meet with you, make sure to write down the appointment (and tell your parent or whoever is accompanying you on the campus visit), and then call and/or email the professor the day before to confirm the appointment.

Be Prepared

Come to the interview with three or four relevant questions that relate to your agenda. Remember, this is not an admissions interview. You have asked for this appointment to gather information, so make sure you know what questions will give you that information. Come with a pad of paper and a pencil, or your tablet or laptop, and be ready to take a few notes. Since you’re asking for advice, be prepared to receive it. Furthermore, your notes may come in handy when you have to write that essay, “why I want to go to College X.” You can make some specific references to things your new professor friend taught you.



Don't Be Afraid

Just because someone has the letters “PhD” after his name does not make him particularly scary. Professors are people, too, and they actually like it when students take an interest in them and their work. Most have chosen this profession because they enjoy students and genuinely enjoy dispensing advice. So if a professor agrees to meet with you, it’s because he wants to, and because he takes his job seriously.

Don't Invite Your Parents

As you explore a campus—and the people who inhabit it—you need to act independently. Professors expect you to act like an adult. And nothing will make you seem more juvenile than having mom and dad in tow. Of course, mom and dad may like to hear what the professor has to say. But this is your journey of discovery. This relationship is one that you need to build yourself—adult to adult. So gently remind your parents that you are perfectly capable of handling this meeting alone, and that you will meet them at the front door of the building in thirty minutes. While some parents may be a bit miffed because they are not invited to this meeting, secretly they’ll be impressed by your demonstration of maturity and independence. And have them read this paragraph if they are reluctant to agree that you should go it alone.



Consider the Surrounding Community

When touring a campus, it's important to remember that in choosing a college you are also choosing the community in which the college or university exists. So, make time during your visit to investigate the town and the campus environs. You should drive into the neighborhoods that surround the campus. Be on the lookout for commercial centers near campus. Find out if the college offers some sort of shuttle bus: where do these go, and how regularly do they run?

As you become acquainted with the area surrounding the campus, here are a few things to keep in mind:

Most Students Stay On Campus Most Of The Time

For some students, the primary criteria for choosing a college is its relative proximity to a large city. Some want to be right in the urban core. Others want the boonies.

“ No matter whether it’s in the burg, ‘burbs, or boonies, you will spend most of your waking (and sleeping) hours in and around the campus property.”



Others seek the best of both worlds. However, most students spend the overwhelming majority of their college years on the campus they have chosen. No matter whether it's in the burg, 'burbs, or boonies, you will spend most of your waking (and sleeping) hours in and around the campus property.

Consider Where You Will Buy Essentials

Some campuses, whether urban, or suburban, or rural, can be far removed from commercial centers where you might expect to do your shopping. Where will you buy toiletries? Is there a drugstore or two nearby where you can pick up toothpaste, or do you need to drive to a shopping center? What about groceries? A haircut? A bank?



Consider The Necessity Of Owning A Car

The considerations above may make you think about another important life necessity in 21st century America: the car. Some campuses, no matter whether they are located in an urban, suburban, or rural setting, are oriented in a way that makes it completely unnecessary to have your own personal automobile. Mass transit options may be fantastic. Or perhaps everything you'd ever want and need is within walking or biking distance, and the weather allows for it most of the time. Other campuses may be very isolated, making it impossible to renew your toothpaste supply without a trip in the car. Moreover, consider the activities that you plan to participate in while in college. If, for example, you choose a campus because of its proximity to the ski slopes, how will you actually get to those slopes? Is there a shuttle or regular bus service? Or do you need to have your own wheels?

Conversely, if you want to live in the city but envision that you will want to get out and about on the weekends (to the beach, perhaps, or into the woods as an escape), how will you get there? Is public transportation available to get you where you want to go? Also keep in mind that some colleges and universities restrict which students can have cars on campus, and sometimes parking costs are prohibitive. If you think you really need to have a car, then make sure you know what the school's policies are in this regard. Also, many campuses in urban and suburban areas are becoming hubs for hourly rental car or private transportation services. If you want to save a bundle on parking fees, car insurance and maintenance, these services will be something to check out.

Don't Overplay Attractions That You're Unlikely To Frequent

I hear some students (and their parents) talk about certain attractions or amenities near campuses that really don't matter much in one's daily life as a student. Does it really matter how far the campus is from Disneyland? If you don't much care for museums or concerts, does it matter that these cultural facilities are within walking distance of campus? Of course, just because you don't have a lot of familiarity with particular cultural or physical features, doesn't mean you won't learn how to enjoy them. But put the local surroundings into their proper context: how likely is it that you will take advantage of the area surrounding the campus? And please remind yourself of the first item on this list ("most students spend most of their time on campus") before you answer that question. Once again, the campus should be the focal point of your college visit. Yet, understanding the surroundings will only help you in your final determination of which college fits you best, especially if you're finding it difficult to choose one over another. These more peripheral details may help you make your final decision.



Do's And Don'ts For Parents

Don't ask too many questions, either in the information session or during the campus tour. Even if your kid is silent, try to restrain yourself. Silence does not indicate that your child is comatose. I can guarantee that even the most taciturn teens are taking it all in, trying to incorporate new ideas about their own future, some of which are really exciting, and some of which may be sort of terrifying. Don't try to fill the silence and end up just embarrassing or annoying your child. I can't tell you how many tours I've taken on which students and their parents have traded eye-rolls, verbal jabs, and elbows to the ribs. This is a stressful time for everyone, so don't let your parental instincts interfere with your child's experience.

Do help your student to brainstorm the questions he or she has about this college and its campus before the visit starts. What information do you already know about this campus, and what questions remain? What things are important to see during the visit—facilities that may be important for your child? Encourage the student to ask the right questions by helping to formulate them in advance.

Do seek answers to your own parental questions. If you have particular questions about financial aid, for example, that remain unanswered in a general information session, you may want to call the financial aid office and seek their counsel. Similarly, if you want to learn more about a particular sports program, an academic offering, or more details about the curriculum, make sure that you check the college website thoroughly. Colleges have become pretty adept at putting tons and tons of information online. If you can't find what you seek, by all means pick up the phone. Or even better, if it's a question that you and your child share, encourage the student to do the communicating. Empower the student to take charge of gathering the information that will help him or her find the right college match.

Don't even think about accompanying your student to the interview with the admissions officer. Just asking the question could be a red flag for admissions officers who really don't want to have to deal with overbearing, bossy, and domineering parents. Assume that you are uninvited, and be surprised (and pleased) when the admissions officer engages you in some conversation before or after the interview. If such a conversation does take place, don't talk about anything beyond pleasantries. The worst thing you can ask is, "what are my kid's chances?" Not only will they dance around the question, but they may be a bit annoyed that you even ask it. So don't.



Do's And Don'ts For Students

Do take charge of the visit. Don't be passive. Don't let mom and dad do it all for you. Take your own notes. Look at the maps and figure out where you are and where you're going. Take the lead as you wander around campus. Know what you want to learn during the visit, and know how you are going to learn it. At this stage of your transition from high school to college, every parent is a bundle of nerves, and they hate a power vacuum. When parents sense that their student is disengaged, they engage more forcefully. So don't give them the chance. Do your homework, be involved in planning the visit, and take charge of the visit once underway.

Don't be afraid to ask questions. This is a big decision, and you are going to make it based on information you have gathered. This is not the same as asking a question about a proof in geometry class or about mitosis in biology. This is about your future. Everyone (including your parents) knows that you have about a zillion questions rolling around in your brain during a college visit. So ask a few, especially those that you think a tour guide or an admissions officer can answer. If you can't figure out how to formulate your own questions, perhaps memorize one or two from the list found later in this document.

Don't be afraid to talk to other students on campus, and to ask them what they like about their school. In most cases, students on campus love their choice of college, and will be only too happy to share their thoughts with you. You can also ask them what they don't like—for no place is nirvana. Usually they will readily tell you. Of course, the answers they give will be based on their own personal experience, and cannot be said to represent the entire student body. But if you ask several students the same question or questions, you may find a pattern that will help you confirm (or disconfirm) your own impressions.

Do focus on academic factors at least as much—if not more—than social, environmental, and geographical factors. Remember, you are choosing a school, not a vacation resort. You will spend a great deal of time in class, studying for exams, preparing lab reports, and writing papers. And you will spend a lot of time interacting (or not) with professors. So try to gather relevant information about the academic program. Tour guides will all say that “professors are accessible” and the “average class size is low.” Dig beneath those generalities, especially when you talk to other students on campus. Are professor-student interactions limited to office hours? Do academic departments host activities open to all students? Do guest lecturers come to the campus, or is there not enough of a scholarly audience (or budget) to attract them? Do professors offer open lectures frequently about their research or other timely and interesting topics? How active are academic societies on campus? Do the honorary societies merely hand out certificates, or do they sponsor academic activities? How often do individual professors or departments host meals or other social events for students?



Whom To Talk To And What To Ask

As you walk around the campus, engage people in conversations. Ask them questions. Most everyone you meet will be eager to share their perspective. And, the more perspectives you get, the better understanding you will have of whether you would feel comfortable in this community. So be brave, walk up to strangers, and ask questions!

Whom To Talk To

Whom should you talk to? Anyone you meet!

Admissions officers: These folks are trained to answer your questions, and they've heard it all. Their job is to give you a positive impression of the campus, so sometimes you'll hear only good news from these folks. But these people are also key decision makers (they will read your application!), so engage them in conversation.

Tour guides: These students are generally enthusiastic spokespeople for their universities, and they are eager to talk to you and share their experiences. Keep in mind, however, that the tour guide has only one perspective, so be sure to talk to...

Other students: Impromptu conversations in the dining hall, classroom buildings, libraries, or even stopping someone while walking across the quad can help you get a better sense of who the students are. Don't hesitate to identify yourself as a prospective student and ask a couple of quick questions. This may seem awkward, but after you do it a couple of times, you'll see that most students are eager to talk to you. And if you stop someone who happens to be in a hurry to get to class and does not have time to talk, then just try again with someone else.

Professors: Unlike admissions officers, professors tend to be pretty open and honest about academic life on campus. Walk the halls of academic buildings and as I mentioned above, don't be afraid to poke your head into an open doorway, identify yourself as a prospective student, and ask whether you might ask one or two quick questions. Often you'll end up in a lengthy conversation.

Librarians: While in the library, walk up to the reference counter and (QUIETLY!) ask a couple of questions about academic life at the college. See if you can get a glimpse of how serious students are. Do they do their own research? When is the library at its busiest, and how busy does it get? Do students take advantage of the knowledge of the reference librarian, or do they just use Google from their dorm rooms? Librarians are good barometers of the academic life on campus.

Custodians: Believe it or not, you can get a very helpful, interesting perspective on students by talking to custodians, groundskeepers, kitchen staff, and other support personnel on campus. What are the students like? Are they appreciative of their opportunities? Do they relate well with the surrounding community and local people? Remember, these campus employees are the local people. Are relations between the college and the community generally warm and positive, or are there conflicts?

Administrative support staff: Secretaries, project managers, lab assistants, and others can give you a sense of the students on campus, as well as information about the general availability and friendliness of faculty, and the resources available to undergraduates.



What To Ask

Below is a list of possible questions to help you craft your own list of questions that will help you understand the aspects of academic and student life that are most important to you. Keep in mind that many of these questions also can be answered by searching the college's website. But sometimes it's good to ask the question of a human being, too, for you may be able to get beyond a statistic or marketing factoid to understand the context and complexity. Again, colleges are communities of people, not simply sets of data or clusters of buildings.

Academic Life

- What is the average class size?
- How does your college help students select a major? What if I don't know what I want to major in?
- Which subjects tend to have the largest class sizes?
- Is _____ major available? Is it difficult to be admitted into that major?
- How easy is it to change majors?
- What is the most popular major on campus?
- What is the reputation of the _____ Department?
- Are most students academically motivated?
- Do you feel there is grade inflation on campus?
- Is the academic workload too much or not enough?
- Will I have an academic advisor? How often will I meet with my advisor?
- Will my academic advisor be a professor or a staff member?
- Can I sit in on a class?
- Can I meet with a professor?
- Are most of the classes taught by professors or by teaching assistants?
- Are most of the courses discussion or lecture based?
- Are there a lot of group projects required?
- How is the campus computing network? What computing resources are available to students? Is the entire campus wireless?
- Do professors generally have a reputation for caring about their students?
- Are professors available to help outside of class?
- Are there tutoring services available (i.e. a math or writing center)?
- Is there a general curriculum philosophy or learning goals?
- Are there opportunities for students to participate in research?
- Do professors support students with the graduate school application process?
- Do professors have professional experience within the field that they are teaching?
- What is the library like? Are the reference librarians helpful? Will I have access to libraries at any other universities?
- Will I have the option to take any courses at any other universities?
- Do you have a study abroad program? Where do most students go? Do students go for a semester? When do most students study abroad?



Student Life

- What is there to do for fun on-campus?
- What do students do for fun off campus?
- Do students go home on the weekends?
- How do you get around town (own car, public transportation, friends)?
- Do you like the surrounding area?
- Do fraternities and sororities dominate the social scene here?
- How many clubs and organizations are there? Is it easy to start a club?
- What clubs and organizations do you belong to?
- How do you become involved in student government?
- Do you feel well supported by the university community?
- Are people friendly around campus?
- Do you hang out with students from other universities?
- Do you enjoy your classes?
- Who is your favorite professor? Why?
- What has been your favorite course? Why?
- Have you had an internship? How did you obtain that internship?
- Have you had any interactions with alumni?
- What campus resources have you used (library, health center, academic advisor, etc.)?
- What is the food like on campus?
- Are there any opportunities to participate in the arts (clubs and organizations, performances, etc.)?
- Are there music practice rooms?
- How is _____ athletic team? Is it possible to meet with the coach?
- Is it difficult to be a student athlete?
- Are freshman required to live on-campus?
- How many students live on-campus?
- What are the residence halls like?
- Are there single rooms available? Are there mostly two students to a room or are there triples or quads?
- Are there quiet study areas in the residence halls?
- Are there quiet hours?
- Are there pretty strict rules in on-campus housing?
- Can I change rooms if I don't like my roommate?
- Can I room with someone I know?
- How easy is it to obtain your first choice of dorm?
- Are there resident assistants or resident directors living in the halls?
- What types of programs (social, academic, etc.) are available through the residence halls?
- Are there specialized communities (drug and alcohol free housing, living/learning communities, etc.)?
- Are the residence halls single-sex or coed? How many people do you have to share a bathroom with?
- Do you have a freshman orientation program? What is covered in that program?
- Are there any pre-orientation programs offered?
- Do you offer first year seminar programs? What are those programs like?



- Do you have faculty or peer mentors?
- What is security like on campus?
- Do students have a good relationship with the campus police?
- Is there a security escort service or shuttle that can help me get around safely at night?
- What services are offered by the health center?
- Does the health center refer students to a local hospital?

Graduation And Beyond

- What is your graduation rate?
- What types of support services are offered to students as they prepare for graduation?
- Do you have a Career Services office? What resources are available through career services? Do you have resume and cover letter writing workshops? Do you do mock interviews?
- How often can I meet with a career services professional?
- Do you have an internship program? What are some examples of internships offered?
- How many companies recruit on campus? What are some examples?
- What is your job placement rate for graduated students? What are some examples of jobs students have accepted? What is the average starting salary for your graduates?
- How many students go on to graduate school?
- Are alumni involved in assisting current students with job and internship searches?
- Do current students have access to an alumni network?
- Are your career services resources available to alumni?

Other Tips

As you walk around campus, look at what is advertised on the campus bulletin boards. Do these events seem like things you would like to attend?

Pick up a campus newspaper. What do you find interesting?

Can you see yourself in a class with the students you meet on campus?
Could you see yourself living with them?

Do you feel comfortable in the surrounding community?

Do the buildings and grounds seem well cared for?

Is there a lot of construction going on? Are there any major construction projects planned for when you may be a student there? Might they be disruptive?

Ask the same question to different people.



Don't Be Afraid To Ask The Tough Questions:

- What makes your university different?
- What is your university known for?
- Are there any issues the university is facing and how are these issues being addressed?
- What is one thing that you like/dislike about this university?



Developing Your List Of Important Questions

By the time you embark on your campus tour, you should have done plenty of research about the colleges on your itinerary. You should know the basics, because you are a master of the web, and you can get all the pertinent statistics on the college's website or on third-party college research sites like College-Data, College Navigator, or the College Board.

But the campus visit is your chance to get the questions answered that are most pertinent to your choice of which colleges will receive your applications, and which colleges you will attend. So start making a list.

This list of ten questions should be specific to YOU.

As a reminder, your questions will likely fall into these categories:

- Academics
- Student Life
- The Activities You Enjoy
- The Surrounding Community



So take a look back at the questions in the previous section, and review this guide, and take a last peek at the college's website, and then come up with your list of essential questions that will help you make some very important decisions.

Use the form on the following page to record your questions. Feel free to copy this form for each of the colleges on your tour, because your questions may vary from campus to campus.

Campus Visit Questions

NAME OF COLLEGE: _____

Academics

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Student Life

- 4.
- 5.
- 6.

My Activities

- 7.
- 8.
- 9.

The Surrounding Community

- 10.
- 11.
- 12.

Other Important Factors for Me

- 13.





The College Visit Checklist

Before You Go

- ☐ Schedule an information session and tour with the admissions office online, preferably a month in advance.
- ☐ Follow the school on social media, especially Facebook and read blogs written by students, faculty, and the campus community.
- ☐ Create a list of questions to ask of the people you meet on campus. Refer to “Campus Visit Questions” to help you come up with your personal list of questions, and use the “Ten Questions To Ask During My Campus Visit” worksheet to record your questions.
- ☐ Pack comfortable shoes, a camera and/or smartphone, your list of questions, a copy of the College Research Worksheet, and a small notebook to record your notes.

While You’re There

- ☐ Fill out an information card at the admissions office when you arrive.
- ☐ Get the contact information of the person who leads the information session, your tour guide, and the name of the admissions representative (sometimes known as the “area reader”) for your high school.
- ☐ Pick up a campus newspaper and read it during or after your visit.
- ☐ Pick up a hard copy of the course catalog or bulletin, if available (most of these are now exclusively online).
- ☐ Take notes and photos: you can’t remember everything.
- ☐ After the tour, visit parts of the campus that might not be on the tour and are important to you, such as the gym, the playing fields, the theater, the art studios, or specific facilities or libraries relevant to your academic interests.
- ☐ Eat in the student cafeteria (dinner is sometimes better than lunch for people watching).
- ☐ Walk or drive through the surrounding community to understand the basic geography and your relative comfort level with the area.

After The Visit

- ☐ Complete the Campus Visit Questionnaire online for this campus so that your counselor can understand your overall impressions of the school.
- ☐ Talk with your parents and share your impressions about the academics, student life, and the location of the school.
- ☐ Review your notes and photos; file them away so that you can return to them, if necessary, during the application process.
- ☐ Write a thank you email to each person you met on campus, including admissions officers, tour guide, professors, coaches, or other administrators.



About Mark Montgomery



Mark Montgomery is a life-long educator, and is dedicated to guiding students in their quest for a quality education. Before founding Montgomery Educational Consulting, he was an associate dean at the University of Denver, a professor at the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, an instructor at Harvard University, and a high school teacher of French. His views on college admission have appeared in US News & World Report, USA Today, Forbes, Money, and The Chronicle of Higher Education.

He holds a BA from Dartmouth College and a PhD from Tufts University's Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy. He lives in Denver with his wife and two boys, and enjoys skiing, hiking, and singing tenor in community choirs.

PLANNING
the Perfect
CAMPUS
VISIT





ABOUT GREAT COLLEGE ADVICE

Great College Advice offers personalized educational counseling to students and their families as they navigate the complex process of selecting and applying to colleges and universities.

Since 2006, our company has provided affordable Great College Advice to hundreds of students from across the United States and around the world. Our mission is to provide students and families with the highest standard of assistance in the college and graduate school selection and admissions process. We assist students in finding the school that best fits their abilities, interests, and aspirations and guide them as they complete their applications, write their essays, and present themselves in the best light throughout the admissions process.

Writing the perfect essay to the common application, plus myriad technical questions like these, are just part of the reason that so many families turn to independent educational consultants for assistance in the college application process. Recent surveys completed by the Independent Educational Consultants Association (IECA) indicate that at least 26% of students with standardized test scores above the national average receive help from an independent consultant.

So as you consider your own applications, the difficulty of identifying the right colleges for you, and completing the application process, you might want to consider getting professional help.

