

The Campus Visit

The importance of a first-hand look at those colleges in which you are interested cannot be overemphasized. Indeed, there is probably no better means of gaining valid insight into the character and suitability of a particular college or university than to visit the campus, talk with students and investigate facilities and programs firsthand. College admissions officers agree that, except where a visit is impossible, no student should choose a college without having spent some time there.

Although campus visits during the summers preceding junior and senior years or during vacation periods such as Easter, Thanksgiving or Christmas, are usually convenient times to get away, they normally preclude any chance to “interface” with regularly enrolled students. It is preferable to arrange your visit during those periods when college classes are in session. An interview on campus is one means of communicating your personal strengths, and sometimes it is a means of selling yourself to a first-choice college. Frequently, required interviews are conducted in the Dallas/Ft. Worth area with alumni of the colleges. (See some notes on the College Interview.)

Following are some tips to bear in mind when planning a college trip:

1. Narrow down your choices to a reasonable number before visiting. Five or six colleges (encompassing a vertical range of selectivity) are plenty to see in the span of a single week. If you try to squeeze in a greater number than this, your whirlwind itinerary may well leave you spinning with a bunch of blurred facts and images once you have returned home. Separate trips to additional colleges can always be made later if time and money permit.
2. Make telephone calls to admissions offices well in advance of your anticipated arrival; at least three or four weeks' notice is usually necessary. Arrange for a student-led tour of the campus. If possible, ask to visit a class and even spend the night on campus. Arrange for an interview with an admissions officer if this is required by the college or desirable on your part. Should you have firm ideas about your major field of study (e.g., music, history, engineering), inquire about the possibility of visiting with a professor from the appropriate department.
3. If you have questions about college expenses or scholarship opportunities, you should make an appointment with the financial aid office. Similarly, check out the career advisory office, psychological counseling and other support services. Is there a full-time physician in residence at the college?
4. Try to visit campuses during weekdays while classes are in session and avoid visiting during major college exam periods. At schools which especially interest you, an overnight stay in a dorm would be ideal; the admissions office will often make such arrangements for you upon request. (Your parents will be only too happy to stay at a nearby motel).
5. Before embarking on your trip, do some homework. The more you can learn about a college **before** you visit, the more sophisticated and relevant your questions will be. **Read the catalog.** Jot down a list of questions in a notebook which you can bring with you to the interview. Later, when leaving, you can use your notebook to record your impressions of the college.
6. While on campus, be sure to supplement the official admissions office tour with one of your own; your meanderings may lead you to some important findings about the campus. Be a careful **observer**. Watch how people interact with each other.
 - Is there an appropriate level of courtesy and friendliness displayed—a sense of community?
 - Do the students seem overly competitive and oblivious to the feelings of others?

- What are the predominant styles of dress?
 - How diverse does the student body appear to be geographically, ethnically, racially, politically, religiously?
 - Is the male/female ratio balanced?
 - Do fraternities and sororities tend to dominate the social life?
 - Is there any association with other colleges nearby?
 - How adequate is the library? Believe it or not, you will be spending a great deal of time in the library; you want it to be comfortable, well-equipped and well-staffed. How accessible are the stacks? Is the library automated? Inquire about weekday and weekend library hours as well. In the strong institutions, the libraries are apt to remain open for longer periods
7. Explore other facilities such as computer and science laboratories, the sports and recreational complex, the student union, the bookstore and any areas of special interest including art, music, radio/TV, or theater facilities.
 8. Make note of the distance between the campus and the nearest town or shopping center. If they are not within walking distance, are shuttle buses available? How about the distance to, and frequency of, train, bus, or air transportation? Are students allowed to have cars on campus?
 9. Investigate the variety of dormitory options, fraternity and sorority houses and other types of living arrangements on and off campus. Is there dorm space for everyone who wants it? How many single rooms are available? Are there any triples, single-sex or coed dorms? Investigate the adequacy of living space, air conditioning and heating in the rooms and bathrooms. Evaluate the maintenance and upkeep, places for privacy, communal kitchens, telephones, etc. Is the dormitory construction such that the noise level from room to room and in the hallways is minimal? Can you access the Internet from your dorm room?
 10. Find out the truth about campus security. Has there been a history of crime? If so, what preventive measures has the college taken? Will you feel reasonably safe living there? Every university is required to publish its crime statistics. If possible, return to the campus at night. How is the lighting? Walk the path from the library to the freshman residence hall. Do you feel safe?
 11. Check out the dining halls, the campus snack bar, the sub—student union building—(and its hours), and the variety of meal plans. Are there several dining halls on campus or is there just one cafeteria? How about the variety and quality of the food? Sample it!
 12. Now it's time to seek out some students. Be courteous but persistent in asking incisive questions which will give you a realistic picture of campus social life and dating patters, such as:
 - What do you like about the place?
 - What do you dislike?
 - How tough is the workload?
 - Does the faculty care about students?
 - How many hours a week do you study? Is that typical?
 - Do many students go home on weekends?
 - How easy is it to get the classes you want at registration?
 - If you had to do it again, would you still choose this college?
 13. If at all possible, pick up a copy of the student newspaper to bring home with you. Take time to read bulletin boards in the dorms and student union in order to find out what's happening on campus. Also look for a copy of the college's weekly or monthly calendar of events (movies, lectures, concerts, etc.). While you are waiting to see your admissions interviewer, a simple flip through the pages of the college yearbook will provide you with a visual impression of the college community.

In the final analysis, of course, what you most need to derive from your campus visit is a sense of the personal and academic compatibility you feel with the people who work and study there. Such "chemistry" will ultimately have a greater bearing on your happiness than the prestige value of the college's name.