

How to Make the Most of a College Visit



Prospective students take a tour of Hendrix College in Conway, Ark., in 2009.

NEEMAH A. ESMAEILPOUR FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

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Brennan Barnard is the director of college counseling at The Derryfield School in Manchester, N.H. He recently wrote our June college checklist for rising seniors, which details what the members of the class of 2013 should be doing as they prepare for college. In this essay, Mr. Barnard provides more in-depth advice about visiting college campuses this summer. - Tanya Caldwell

In this age of Google, GPS, virtual college tours, electronic guidebooks and private college tours, there is still no match for the gut feeling one gets when stepping on a college campus and talking face-to-face with the people who make that community what it is. The campus visit is one of the most important and enjoyable parts of the college application process.

Summer is an ideal time to set out on an adventure and create family memories while exploring colleges. Students can use this time to begin to clarify their criteria by visiting schools of all shapes and sizes, and develop a better sense of what their "negotiables" and "non-negotiables" are. Parents can see firsthand what they will be getting for their investment, while secretly dreaming that they themselves were having these opportunities.

Here is some advice to help you make the most of your college visits:

Bring an Inquisitive Mind

Be sure to arrive at the college visit armed with a host of questions that will allow you to assess the academic programs and campus life. Avoid inquiries that can easily be found on the Web site. College admissions officers cringe at questions like, "Do you have a psychology major?" Ask thoughtful questions about research opportunities, career paths for graduates, available internships and tough questions about social life and campus culture.

Ask About the Free Food

Most admissions offices have complimentary tickets to eat a meal in the dining hall. Make time to enjoy lunch or dinner on campus; it is a great way gauge the student culture. Is it an "eat and run" community? Do the students have their heads in a book as they devour their meals? Or do students sit for two hours over coffee and discuss philosophy and the meaning of life? If food options are important to you, find out if there are kosher, gluten-free and organic options available, and whether the school has a commitment to locally produced food.

Take Advantage of 'Recommended' Interviews

If a college admissions Web site recommends an interview, this should be read as "required." These are perfect opportunities for you to learn more about the college and for you to share information that might be harder to convey on paper. In an age of "fast apps" and increasing applicant pools, interviews also allow you to show the college that you are legitimately interested.

Stop by During Office Hours

If you know (or think you know) what you plan to study in college, stop by the department and see if you can talk to a professor or two. This is the best way to get a pulse on the type of scholarly work and research being conducted. It might also give you an idea of the accessibility of the faculty members.

Network With College Employees

Try to meet coaches and music directors while you are on campus. An e-mail or phone call a few weeks before your scheduled visit is wise, but at the very least, stop by their offices and introduce yourself. These relationships have the potential to play a significant part in your candidacy.

Break Loose From the Official Tour

I strongly recommend signing up for an official campus tour and information sessions, as it will earn you points in demonstrating interest. While you're on campus, however, be sure to go off the beaten path a bit after the admissions office spiel and do a behind-the-scenes look for yourself.

Talk to Strangers

Walk into whatever serves as the campus hub (this may be the student center, quad or dining hall) and stop a random student to ask his thoughts about the college. These unfiltered encounters often shed light on the campus culture.

Read the Paper

Pick up a copy of the student newspaper while you're on campus. It generally offers an uncensored take on the issues facing students and the college as a whole.

Pretend You're Lost

One of the best tips I have ever heard comes from Joe Greenberg, a regional director of admissions at George Washington University. The best way to get a sense for the culture and community at a college, he said, is to stand in the middle of campus with a map in hand, looking completely bewildered. It is very telling to watch how passers-by respond to a stranger who looks lost.

Spend a Night on the Town

If your schedule permits, spend the night in the town to get a better idea of the area. While chances are you will spend most of your college days on campus, you will want to know about life outside the gates, and the opinions that the townspeople have of students.

Take Time to Reflect

You will thank yourself if you take 10 minutes after each visit to record your thoughts. After about three college visits, your experiences will start to meld together in your mind and it will be hard to recall what you did and did not like about each institution. A quick list of pros and cons will be helpful as you talk with your counselor and discern your college preferences.

Remember to Say Thank You

A follow-up thank you note to your interviewer or host is always a good idea. (An e-mail is appropriate, but remember to keep a formal tone throughout your note and in all communication with the admissions office -- do not use shorthand or text language.) Be sure to articulate specific aspects of the college and your visit that you appreciated.

Don't forget to have fun! Allow yourself to get excited about what lies ahead, while also living in the moment and enjoying time spent with family and friends as you tour schools. Some of my fondest memories with my mother were created as I explored colleges and we laughed, bonded, got lost and found some impressive institutions. Load up the car, turn off the GPS, power down the cellphone and create some memories.

Readers of The Choice have suggested some helpful questions that visitors should ask when they arrive on campus. If you have more advice about campus visits, please share them in the comments box below.