

Making the Most of Your College Visit

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Choosing a college can be one of the most difficult decisions you make as you prepare for your educational journey. Many students enroll in their parents' or siblings' colleges simply because they don't know much about other colleges. Others may choose a school because some close friends plan to attend this institution. However, just as each individual is unique, each college has different characteristics that may or may not make it appropriate for every member of the family. The right college should nurture intellectual growth and provide opportunities that will increase the student's level of success. A college's ability to provide that type of environment varies with each student's goals and expectations. For these reasons, the decision of where to attend college should not be taken lightly.

Though it may seem like a complex and time consuming decision for some, finding the best college for each individual is possible with a little research and exploration. It's best to start this process as early as possible to allow plenty of time to feel comfortable with the information. Rushing a decision or not thoroughly investigating all the details can easily lead to a bad choice. Starting in the wrong college can lead to many different problems: not graduating on time, losing hours transferring to a different college, not to mention emotional stress.

Most high school students find that visiting a college campus helps them gain a more realistic view of what life would be like at that school. All college visits are not the same. A quick tour of the campus may leave you with a memory of the visual appeal of that institution, but still not give you all of the other information necessary to make a good decision. Even a formal visit with a college recruiter or campus guide may provide much general information, but not answer all of your specific questions. Visits that concentrate on the academic programs available may neglect issues related to the fact that this school will be your home for the next few years. The following discussion is offered to help you plan a college visit that will provide the many types of information needed to choose a college that will be "perfect" for you.

Where to Start

It is a good idea to start a college notebook as you begin making your decision. One of the large, three ring binders should be big enough to hold your notes and research materials. In the notebook, you will want to keep your list of requirements in the front of the book. It would be a good idea to keep a copy of those requirements with each college section. You can use it as a quick referencing tool to see which college matches each requirement on your list. You can also use the notebook to keep brochures, photos, and course listings organized.

Next, you should ask yourself some general questions before you start looking at catalogs or before going online to college websites. If you have a general idea of the type of college you are seeking, it will keep you from throwing in "maybe" colleges that could waste your time in making the right decision. It would be beneficial to ask yourself the following questions before proceeding:

What size of college would you prefer?

Do you want to attend a public or private college?

Is the average class size important to you?

Are your parents' finances (or your own) a factor?

Do you want to live in a large metropolis or a less populated area?

Have you decided on possible majors?

How far away from home are you willing to live?

Do you meet the testing (SAT/ACT) and/or class rank expectations of the college?

You have probably already thought of many of these questions or have answers based on your experiences. Some individuals learn best from discussion type classes where personal interaction is valued. Others may prefer to work

independently from lecture notes. If having cultural activities and many entertainment options is important to you, a college in an urban area may be one significant factor. Having one or two possible majors in mind is also extremely helpful, since not all colleges offer all majors or programs. It will be helpful for you to talk to your parents about finances, as well as many of the other questions. They may be able to give you new perspectives and suggest different aspects of each question. After considering the above questions, your starting list of colleges should be somewhat more manageable.

You will also need to work with your parents on planning college days. Many high schools allow two or three excused absence days for juniors or seniors to visit colleges. Find out when you are able to take those days and when your parents would be able to take time out of their schedules if you want them to join you. It is best to visit colleges during a regular session day, so take advantage of college days if you have them. You are more likely to see an accurate picture of the college during a regular session than in the summer or winter breaks.

Research and Preparation

Before looking through the information a college offers, you need to start a “wish list” of factors that relate to your preferences in college “lifestyle.” A few ideas to think about are listed below:

- Academic terms or yearly schedules
- Greek life
- Residential living options and quality
- Dining options and availability
- Parking or transportation options
- Campus safety
- Research or internship possibilities
- Cultural, religious, or social makeup of student body
- Percentage of commuting students
- Accessibility of facilities (labs, libraries, studios, gyms)
- Teacher to student ratio
- Intramural activities
- Athletics
- Accomplishments/reputation of professors
- Study abroad / exchange opportunities

These are just a few of the options you may want to add to the list you started earlier. Making a checklist with these “wishes” for each college will be helpful during the research process as well as during the actual visit. Allow room on your checklist for extra notes. You will also want to add a page to each school’s section for questions that you were unable to answer during your research. Taking the checklist and questions page with you on the visit will allow you to spend time on the factors important *to you*.

Thankfully, most colleges now have terrific websites that offer online catalogs, handbooks, and course schedules. You can also pick those things up at the admissions office on your visit, but it is much better to be prepared for the visit than to have to call back for more questions. You can usually request a catalog be sent to you through regular mail, as well. Remember that most of the brochures and general information a college sends to you are selling tools. They are designed to make the college appear as appealing as possible. Usually, photographs show happy students, reading or conversing on the lawn, in front of the most architecturally beautiful building on campus. The most valuable information for you probably will not be in the brochures. Catalogs are a terrific source of information for the goals of the college as well as detailed information about individual schools and programs. Websites can also be invaluable sources of information. Most colleges proudly display the achievements of faculty and students. Use the Internet to take a look at current research projects, campus news, and instructor, student, and campus organization homepages. These resources can help you get a feel for campus life before you visit.

After completing this step of the process, you should have narrowed your list to a few schools that meet most of your requirements. Check with the colleges you plan to visit to schedule appointments, if necessary. Be sure to make hotel reservations and arrange for transportation if you are not going to stay on campus.

The Visit

Armed with your notebook and new knowledge, your visit will most likely be a successful one. Along with your checklist and questions, it will serve you well to take a camera with you. Having photographs will help you recall highlights that may not have been in the college brochures or your expectations. One of the best suggestions while visiting is to talk to as many people as possible to get details about the overall environment. There are several places on campus you need to visit, and several you will want to visit, if time allows.

Administration Offices

You may be required to go through a campus tour with a representative. These tours can be helpful, but may not cover all of your areas of interest. Call in advance to see if you must have a guide to visit all of the locations or if you will be on your own. You almost always make arrangements in advance to sit-in on classes. Make those requests in advance over the telephone or email. When you arrive, you will want to locate the Registrar's Office, the Bursar's Office, and the Financial Aid Office. If you are on a guided tour, you may well meet your guide in one of these buildings. It is necessary for you to know where to register, access your records, make financial transactions, and become involved with work/study programs if that is of interest to you. Most of those services are available online, but it is also not uncommon for websites to freeze or shut down during the busiest times of the year. Check to see if the administration offices offer services online and/or by telephone to make these activities more convenient for you, but do not rely on them to be available at all times.

Academic Departments

You can usually make arrangements to sit-in on classes. Make those requests in advance over the telephone or email. Make sure you visit the departments you are considering. Talk to students who would be in your department about their experiences with the facilities, professors, and college. Is the department adequately funded? What are the academic expectations for students? What are lab hours? How accessible are the professors? How many of the students graduate within the expected number of years (this may vary by major)? It is not a bad idea to talk to professors, if possible. They may be willing to share information with you about the program that you cannot find elsewhere.

Many schools have full-time staff members available to help freshmen with troublesome required courses such as expository writing (English) and calculus. If you are expecting difficulties with one or both of these subjects, knowing there is an opportunity to work with these tutors will be important.

Residential Facilities

You may want to plan an overnight stay at the college. This is a great way to gain first-hand experience about the living situation. You may be roomed with a volunteer or have a private room. Either way, make sure you talk to residents about how they feel about the facilities. Ask questions about aspects of dorm life that would affect you if you lived there. Are there frequent problems? Is maintenance regular and quick to respond to emergencies or problems? Are restroom facilities shared or private? What are the crime rates? Are there regulations on visitors or curfews? What measures are taken for student safety? You also need to find out about separate facilities for sororities and fraternities, freshmen, or individual schools. Make sure you know what your chances are of getting into the dorm or apartment of your choice.

Libraries

You can often learn a lot about a college from its library system. First, find out if the college you are visiting has several libraries. You may only visit one, but it is necessary to know if there are more. A good library will have a large variety of subject material on hand. Depending on your major, you may also need a good selection of audio/visual materials, research databases, and access to interlibrary loan programs. This is another good place to talk to students, if you can do so without disturbing them. Find out if they have trouble accessing reserved material. Ask if they are satisfied with the resources available to them for their assignments and projects.

Other Facilities

Drop by the student union building. You will usually find a large group of students there. It is often the hub for student organizations, clubs, and activities. This is where you will most likely find access to campus newspapers, radio stations, and groups of interest to you. Talk to members of clubs you are interested in joining, and grab any literature available if representatives are not able to meet with you.

Have lunch in the dining facilities. Find out all the food service options available and the hours of operation. If you are in a program that meets at odd hours, you may need to find out if late meals or take-out is available from the cafeteria. If not, see if outside restaurants are within a reasonable distance.

If you are a fitness enthusiast, locate the gyms, courts, and fields. Request information on intramural sports. Some colleges have great workout facilities, but getting in around team workouts may be a problem.

Talk to campus police about parking and transportation. Look around and see if you would have a parking place. If you do not have or are not allowed to have a car, check into college or public transportation. You may also want to discuss campus safety. If you are walking across a large campus, will there be adequate light at night? Are there call boxes available for emergencies? What are the major crime problems on campus? What steps are security personnel taking to prevent crime, and what are their suggestions for protecting yourself?

Final Steps

By taking the time to prepare for your college visit, you will probably find you have plenty of time to see what is most important to you. When you return from your last visit, hopefully you will have a notebook of information to reflect on when making your final decision. Look back over your checklists. Which college met most or all of your requirements? Glance at your photographs to recall things that impressed you or made you question a college. Recall discussions with students and faculty. With adequate preparation, your visits should have made making your final decision much easier. When the first day of class rolls around, you should feel confident about finding the college that is right for you.

You may have siblings or friends who have gone through the visiting process and were still unable to make a decision. It is not uncommon for future college students to visit the campus and leave with memories of the only the visual appeal of the environment. However, with a little planning, you should be able to take the information you gather from the visits and use it to make your final decision much easier. Talking to campus guides and recruitment personnel is a good starting point for learning about what each college has to offer, but you will want to be prepared with the questions that will matter *to you*. The guides will probably be able to answer most of your questions or will help you find someone who can. But they may not be quick to offer information on a certain department or resource that is less appealing than those covered by the general information they typically present. You've probably already thought of a few colleges you might want to attend. As you narrow down your large list, keep in mind that you are not only looking for the educational qualities that will best suit you, but you are also looking for your home for at least the next four years.