

Things Parents Should Look for When Visiting a College Campus

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Visiting a college campus that your child is considering attending can be a very enjoyable experience. It's fun to walk around the campus with your son or daughter and get a feel for the place. It's also a great opportunity for you to explore something new together and begin preparing both of you for this next phase of your child's life.

While a physical tour of the campus is very helpful, there is something else I recommend students do **before** they visit their schools of interest. They need to take an internet tour of the college major they are considering pursuing. Let's say that your daughter has decided to major in English. She can't decide whether she wants to go to Baylor, the University of Texas or Southwestern. The first thing she needs to do is visit the English department's website for each of these schools and read the bio of the professors in the English department. She needs to pay attention to each professor's area of specialization. What is the primary focus of their work? What things are they currently studying? What are the topics of the books and articles that they have published? She needs to identify which professors are interested in and studying the kind of things that she is interested in studying. If none of the professors at Southwestern are focusing their work on things that are of interest to her, then she may decide she doesn't need to visit that particular school.

Once your daughter has identified which professors at which schools are doing research and work in areas that interest her, she needs to contact those professors to schedule an interview. She can also ask if she can sit in on one of their classes. When she contacts the professor she needs to explain that she has an interest in the professor's work, and would like to ask for advice about pursuing a degree at their university/college. If possible, try to schedule the interview with the professor on the same day that you will be visiting the campus for a tour. If you simply cannot arrange an in-person interview with the professor, see if they would be agreeable to a phone interview or have your child ask questions via e-mail.

These tips are applicable to all students and all majors. If your son is thinking he wants to go into Mechanical Engineering but he can't decide between Texas A&M or Texas Tech, he too needs to look at the websites for the Mechanical Engineering department at both schools. Which school has the most professors involved in the type of work that your son thinks would be the most interesting to him?

Once your son or daughter has done some internet research about the various programs that interest them, it's time to take a physical tour of the college they are considering. If possible, make sure you sign up for a campus tour before arriving at the college or university. Go to the visitor's center and get an overview of what the school is all about.

You may want to encourage your child to mention their visit to the campus and what impressed them about the school in their admission essay (if the school they are applying to requires an essay). Your child may also want to mention what intrigued them about their visit with the professors they interviewed. Here's an example of how a student might get started when answering the following question on the application for admission into XYZ University: ***Why do you want to attend XYZ University?***

I recently had the opportunity to visit XYZ University and was very excited to learn about several study abroad opportunities that would allow me to pursue my interest in nautical archeology. I also visited with Dr. Whoever in the Anthropology department and was fascinated to hear about his research in underwater archeology.

This example of a student's response for application to XYZ University definitely needs to be further developed. However, it is intended to help you help your child think through questions like; "Why do I want to get a certain degree at a certain college" and "Are the professors and programs available at the college I am considering the best fit for me?" If the college and the major is a good match for your student, he/she should be able to articulate that in the college admission essay.

Here's a few other things you can do and watch for during your campus visit.

- Be sure to pick up a student newspaper to learn about the issues that are being discussed among the student body.
- Go to the campus bookstore. Encourage your child to look at the textbooks and discuss which ones are the most interesting to him/her.
- Stop by the career center and see what kind of assistance is offered to students to help them secure internships and jobs after graduation.
- Visit the recreation center and sports complex just for fun and to see what kind of facilities and health programs are available to the students.

It's also a good idea to visit the student programs office and talk with someone about your student's goals and objectives for their college experience, as well as their potential career goals. You want to find out which organizations the student programs director or representative thinks would best help your student achieve his/her goals. (Encourage your student to be the one who is asking most of the questions. Sometimes parents become over zealous, and their child misses the opportunity to ask questions and make connections). Here are some other questions you can encourage your child to ask:

- What are the 3 largest student organizations on campus?
- What is the largest religious organization?
- If someone doesn't want to join a fraternity or sorority are there other options?
- Which organization is considered to be the most service oriented?

I encourage students to pick at least one organization just for fun. Sometimes intramural sports or clubs devoted to things like ultimate frisbee, extreme croquet, or urban tree climbing can be great ways for students to relieve stress and stay in shape. These kind of activities can also be a way for your child to make new friends and connect to their new community.

Make sure you listen carefully to your child's comments and observations as you explore various campuses. Besides pointing out the "hot" girls or guys, what is your son or daughter noticing? Are they making comments about the size of the campus, the architectural style of the buildings, the "mood" of the students on campus, etc.? Are they noticing whether or not the school is a commuter school or a school with a variety of activities and organizations for students to participate in while on campus? Your child's comments and observations can help you identify what things are important to them and maybe give you some insight into what they are looking for in a school. You may even be surprised to learn that things that were important to your child during high school no longer seem as important. They may be looking for a college where they can get a fresh start and "redefine" who they are.

I was surprised about what my youngest daughter noticed on one of our college campus tours. We were visiting a school that she was certain she wanted to attend. She had gone to this particular school for a summer camp when she was in high school and had fallen in love with the campus, the dorms, the old buildings, etc. When it came time to start looking at colleges this school was one of the first ones we visited.

My daughter had indicated that she wanted to go to a small private college. I suggested that we stand in the main part of the campus while classes were changing so she could experience what it felt like during the busiest part of the day. After the students had come through the main courtyard area where we were standing and were back in their classes she said, "That's it! Where are all the students?" Later in the day after most of the classes were over we were walking around the campus and she commented that there wasn't much going on. She was expecting to see students outside playing frisbee, walking around, sitting together on the grass outside their dorm studying together, etc.

She kept commenting about how there just weren't that many students around. She began to realize that she really wanted to go to a large school. She had been on other campuses with a large student population and had experienced what it felt like when thousands of students change classes and how much activity occurred between classes and after classes as students converged on the campus to attend meetings or just hang out and throw a football or frisbee together.

There were, of course, many other factors that she considered before she decided where she wanted to attend college. But the point of this example is to encourage you to pay attention to what your children are noticing during their campus visit. There is so much to take in, and your child may be surprised to find out that a "dream school" isn't their dream after all. If this happens to your child, let them know that their trip to their "dream school" was not a waste of time. At least they got more information about what

they are truly looking for. You can help them evaluate all the things they liked and didn't like. Once your child has a better idea of what they are looking for you can use this information to help identify other schools you may need to visit. Here are a few books you may find helpful when evaluating various colleges and universities.

Fiske Guide To Colleges by Edward B. Fiske. You may find other guides offered by Edward Fiske to be very helpful as well. The website is www.fiskeguide.com

Colleges That Change Lives: 40 Schools That Will Change the Way You Think About Colleges by Loren Pope.

Choosing the Right College: The Whole Truth about America's Top Schools by William J. Bennett, and Winfield J.C. Myers.