

College visits are one of the best tools available to determine if a college is a good match to your interests and goals. You can learn a lot more from an actual college visit than you can from virtual visits, websites, school pamphlets, college fairs or live chats with current students. Even though visiting colleges takes a lot of time, effort, and expense; it will pay off in the long run. Many students change their mind after visiting colleges; which is a lot better finding out before moving and starting college, that the college of your choice is not a good fit. Try to visit at least the top two colleges on your list. Make the most of your college visit by utilizing some of these helpful tips:

Schedule appointments

Make sure you schedule an appointment ahead of time with an admission counselor, financial aid officer, professor and academic advisor in your intended major, and coaches. Schedule a tour of the campus. Tours are an excellent way of seeing some of the highlights of the school and often learning some fun and interesting facts. If you have mobility issues, inform the admissions office ahead of time. Ask if current students will be there that day, so you can see what a typical school day is like; avoid atypical days such as holidays and special events such as homecoming or finals week. Inquire if you can stay on campus in a dorm for a night. Remember to dress casually, but neatly, when touring, but do not wear sweat pants. Wear comfortable shoes for walking the campus. You will need to dress more formally if the school requires an interview for admissions.

Plan Ahead

Check the weather forecast and dress appropriately. Bring coats or umbrellas if necessary. Go online and download a map or request a map when you schedule an appointment. Map out your day including parking before leaving home to best utilize your time. Get to know the campus ahead of time. Bring family members along to provide additional people to share the experience and provide a good sounding board to help you to make a final decision. Having family members experience first-hand the college can also help to ease the transition from home to school for everyone.

Chat with students

Students who are not tour guides are your best unsolicited source of information about the college. Remember tour guides are paid to market the college and most questions will be answered in only the most positive light. Students will tell you if they like or dislike the school more than any admission script will offer. Interview several students to ensure that you get a good sampling of students. Watch students during your visit and gauge how they appear. Do they look happy? Or do they look stressed?

Campus Dining

You will be eating on campus everyday, so it is important to check out the cafeteria for not only the taste of the food, but the variety of food offered. When can you eat? Will the times be a good match for your personal eating schedule? Before you eat in the dining hall, ask the admission office if they offer complimentary tickets for free meals on campus. Inquire about meal plans.

Spend the Night in a Dorm

Some colleges permit potential new students to stay on campus during a campus visit if scheduled ahead of time. Take advantage of this great opportunity to talk to students, eat in a dining hall and check out the dorms firsthand. This is great way to see what the campus is like on the week night. If staying on campus is not possible, stay in town to get a feel for the surrounding area and townfolk and make sure you ask to see dorms that are **not** on the tour. Look for room size, facilities, cleanliness, and available amenities including the bathroom.

Admission

Meet with an admission counselor to learn about costs, academics, admission requirements, and deadlines for admission and dorm signup. Do they require ACT or SAT? Ask about the placement record for graduates. Ask about transportation options. Do they offer honor courses or study abroad opportunities? Do students have chances to do internship in their major?

Financial aid

Talk to a financial aid officer. Find out about deadlines, forms required for financial aid, scholarships availability, and institutional aid.

Investigate your academic program

Meet with an academic advisor for your major. They will be able to give you a list of all courses needed for your major. Can you transfer any credits you earned in high school? Meet with faculty members. Talk to professors about research and any exciting news happening within the department. Check out the physical areas that pertain to your major, such as computer labs and science labs.

Read bulletin boards, newspapers and activity calendars

Student newspapers and activity calendars give a wonderful sense of the college culture and the students who attend the college. Newspapers are usually available all across most campuses, but almost always in the student union. When on tour, or walking to scheduled appointments, note what is on the bulletin boards around campus. What activities are being offered to students? Does anything appeal to you? What is offered on the weekends for entertainment? Browse the college website for social activities.

Record

Bring a notebook and jot down not only facts, but impressions during the day. Bring a camera and take pictures. This is a good way to differentiate colleges after visiting several, instead of relying on memory only. Jot down the names and emails, and gather business cards of staff members who took time out of their busy schedules to talk to you and send a thank-you note or email after the visit. Keep different folders for each college with pictures, brochures, and catalogs inside.

Campus facilities

Explore the library and computer labs. Where can you go to relax, to study, or to have fun? Does the college offer career planning and employment placement services? Ask if tutoring is available. The student union often offers an excellent sense of the student population. Does the college offer health and counseling services? Is there a fitness center on campus or nearby? Play close attention to the condition and cleanliness of the buildings on your tour and the upkeep of the grounds. Is Greek Life strong on campus?

Classes

In order to attend a lecture in your major, you will need to schedule in advance with the admission office. This is a good opportunity to meet students and professors, especially in your major. If you are interested in an honors program, sit in an honors class. Talk to students after class to get their opinions.

Venture on your own

Keep in mind that official campus tours are designed to show the school in the best light, but should still be high on your "must do" list when visiting a college. However, a look behind the scene is also a great way to see the campus in its everyday light. Venture out on campus and the surrounding area on your own to get that behind the scene look. Investigate halls and facilities without a guide to get a better sense of the campus. Drive and walk around the neighborhood and the nearest town. Explore things that are important to you such as theaters, gymnasiums, restaurants or athletic events. Is there transportation available? Does it seem safe? Is there a local grocery store?

Listen to the college radio station if available.

Questions to ask

Ahead of the visit, write down questions that you want to ask staff and students. There are many websites available that list some of the top questions to ask when visiting a college, so utilize this resource before you leave your house.

Look lost

Stand in the middle of campus and look lost. See how students and staff react to you and your parents. It has been said that this is a fantastic way to get an idea of the atmosphere of the campus.

Thank-you Remember to send a quick thank-you note to everyone that spends time with you during your visit. Either a note or email is acceptable.

Have fun

Remember to enjoy the day with your parents! Memories will be made that will last you a lifetime.