

Touring Colleges: Making Campus Visits Productive

College visits are a great way to check out potential schools and light a motivational fire under prospective applicants. There's no substitute for a personal visit when it comes to assessing how a college fits with your personality and interests. While you can get a feel for a school by just walking around, there's a lot you can do to make college visits more useful and worthwhile. These best practice tips will help you a great deal when you visit colleges.

- **Surf First.** Instead of going in cold, research colleges online before setting foot on campus. In addition to school web portals and the on-line edition of the student newspaper, check out sites that offer everything from online tours to student reviews and ratings. (See InLikeMe Resource List) Save your money for visiting schools that genuinely interest you.
- **Plan Your Visit.** Browse the Admissions Office web site (or call) ahead to find out about schedules for tours and information sessions. Planning is essential to an efficient visit. Some tours and information sessions require pre-registration, and limit attendance. Many colleges and universities provide an overview of the school in classroom-style information sessions. This session, often led by an admissions officer, generally focuses on academic life, student life, the campus, and the admissions process (and statistics) with time at the end for questions. Then prospective students (and their parents) typically break off into groups for student-led tours.
- **Arrive with a List of Questions.** When doing your research, jot down notes, impressions, concerns and questions you'd like to have answered.
- **Visit When School is in Session** (when practical). Most colleges encourage prospective students to visit the campus any time of year. However, to observe the campus in action, and meet students, the best time to schedule a visit is when school is in session. Summer session can be an excellent time.
- **Remember First Impressions, But Keep an Open Mind and Positive Attitude.** Maybe the weather is really ugly or your tour guide is an arrogant snob. Restrain yourself from immediately writing off the school. Remain interested and you may find some appealing qualities and people.
- **Sign In.** Make your interest known to colleges by registering on a college's web site. Sign in at the admissions office when you visit the school, even if you are not taking an official tour.
- **Explore On Your Own.** Make time before or after the scheduled activities to explore on your own. The student guides are trained to show you the school's best features. Visit a dormitory and the book store. Check out the posters on the bulletin boards in the student center and around campus to see what's going on that weekend.
- **Sample the Food.** If you are able to, eat in the dining hall or food court. Strike up some conversations with students.

- **Check out a Class.** If school is in session, see if you can sit in on a class – perhaps in your intended major, if you have one. Before or after class, engage some students to get their impressions of the professors, courses and student life.
- **Sleep Over.** Many schools have overnight stay programs for prospective students – staying overnight can give you a deeper feel for the school and whether or not it's a good fit for you.
- **Chat with Students.** Since campus tours are usually led by a current undergraduate, a conversation with your guide will provide one student's perspective of the school. The tour guide will be glad to answer your questions and speak with you about a variety of subjects such as courses, dormitories, campus life, academics, recreation, etc. But don't rely exclusively on the views of your tour guide. Strike up conversations with a mix of students if you possibly can.
- **Meet Coaches.** If you're an athlete, schedule a meeting with a college coach. Find out how you could fit into the program, and what is required.
- **Investigate An On-Campus Interview.** Some schools offer an on-campus interview. If so, and you're prepared, it can be a good opportunity to express your interest in the college and make a positive impression.
- **Take Notes, Photos & Video.** College visits can be confusing and blend together. Capture your impression. During and after visiting each school, take mental and hand-written notes. A Blackberry, PDA or cell phone with a voice recorder can come in handy as well.

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