

Advice on College Visits

By Diane Schaefer

Editor's Note: Diane Schaefer is an educational consultant, who made an extremely informative presentation to us last October on "Maximizing Financial Aid for College." She will speak to us again in March on the topic of researching colleges. Diane has graciously agreed to write a regular column for us this year on a variety of topics related to college admissions.

Even though, at the time of writing this article, we are still under many feet of snow, springtime is just around the corner, and that's the time when many families head off to visit college campuses. This article will address some of what to look for when visiting schools and how to make your stay on campus more beneficial.

Do Research on Schools

When visiting a school, do your research *before* you get there. First gain some background information about the school by reading a subjective opinion, (Fiske Guide, Insider's Guide, Best 357 Colleges) and follow that up with significant time on the web researching both the academic offerings and the social side of campus. Some questions that you might formulate:

1. What is the academic rigor of the school? How fast does the curriculum get delivered and with what methods? Mostly lecture, small group, discussion? What is the level of writing, reading expected from freshmen?
2. What is the social climate on campus? Is there an effort to provide diverse groups the support needed to thrive? (Diversity exists in more than the obvious cultural and racial groups and is present in divergent ideas, customs, geographical backgrounds, etc.) Are my interests represented through clubs and with others with similar profiles? What and how would I have the opportunity to contribute to this community?

Campus Tours

Make arrangements with the college for a campus tour, informational session and/or interview either by phoning the office of admission or contacting them through their website. Generally speaking you can only visit two schools per day, one in the a.m. and the other in the afternoon. The more time you can spend on campus, however, the better your understanding. Try to arrange time to attend a class, talk with a professor, coach, or club sponsor. If you know current students that attend, try to make contact with them to get their "unprompted" perspectives. When on campus, you will participate in a tour conducted by a trained student that works for the admission office. These students have a wealth of factual information and are usually chosen for their effectiveness as an energetic communicator. Be sure to return to an area of the school after the official tour is over and speak with students who attend but are outside of that admission viewpoint. Their input is very valuable and unrehearsed.

Interviews

All schools do not offer interviews; however, if you find your visit might also include this option, be sure to take the opportunity to do one. Interviews come in two flavors: evaluative and informational. An evaluative interview is one where there are notes taken and you are assessed after the interview. The evaluative interview carries some weight in your admission decision and is often referred to during the application period, especially when a student is a borderline applicant. Many schools will only consider the assessment notes from an evaluative interview if they are positive and help the student. If you do one of these kinds of interviews, take it seriously and prepare questions to ask.

An informational interview is more casual and may appear as a group meeting, or an arranged talk with admission personnel. It is your chance to ask questions to gain more information. No matter which type of interview is used, prepare through thorough research. Nothing is worse for an admission representative than to have a youngster who is passive, unprepared and without ideas about what they want. Make a good impression by preparing a list of questions to take into the interview. Your enthusiasm and interest level will be noted. Use the interview not so much to "impress" as to "qualify" the school for you. Remember, that trying to keep this process student-centered is going to help you find a school that fits your needs. Here are some more sample questions to consider for your research and interviews: Would you fit into the culture there? Would you want to spend the next four years studying and learning there? Does the college offer you the specifics for your academic and social needs?

A word to parents about visiting colleges

Anxiety about the visiting process can overwhelm your best efforts to help your students gain the experience this opportunity provides. It is not possible to visit all the schools of interest. It is more important to visit schools that target potential admissions

than to spend too much time trying to see them all. A student that has had the chance to visit a college does have more to say specifically on their application about the reasons they want to apply. Visiting gives them a context for questions and answers on the applications as well as to help them identify more of what they want from the college experience. I can always see a difference in my students after they spend some time looking over campuses. The process becomes more their own and believable. Because of the competition that grips admissions today, colleges are sometimes more reluctant to give admission to students that cannot convince them about their interest in the college. Visiting is just one part of that interest; so if you are unable to visit a school, develop your interest in other ways. Continue to talk with admissions through email and college fairs and seek out opportunities to talk to current students and alumni. There are many compromises that will most likely be needed during the entire college investigation process and visiting decisions will be part of that.

Lastly, visiting is helpful no matter when it occurs. Summers and spring break are the most likely times, but even next fall and into winter are possible times for visiting. The most ideal time is when the campus is alive with students and in session. However, students coming from greater distances must compromise and get there when they can. It is an exciting “right of passage” and parents and students alike can find it a very productive, fun and helpful experience.

Diane Schaefer, MA, LPC is an Educational Planner and consults independently with students and parents about the process of finding and applying to college. Watch for her new website, www.schaefereducationalplanning.com.