

Planning a Campus Visit

Each year thousands of students pack overnight bags to make pilgrimages to colleges they may be interested in attending. There is nothing new about students visiting colleges they're interested in. What is new, however, is that college visits are a lot more important than they were in the past. About 20 percent of college applicants make campus visits. It's safe to assume that this figure will increase as college tuition continues to climb.

While campus visits are important, and valuable in terms of making the right choice, they're also expensive. So it pays to make each visit count. Advance planning is crucial and highly recommended. To make your campus visit worthwhile, divide each trip into a two-stage process. First, there is the pre-planning stage and secondly, the actual trip to the college.

During the pre-planning stage, here are some things to keep in mind.

1. Decide what colleges you would like to visit. Remember that each trip is expensive, especially if the entire family goes along for the ride. Start with a list of ten colleges you're interested in and then narrow the list to three or four strong possibilities. Prior to making the trip, decide whether the trip is absolutely essential. Very often a trip can be bypassed if you feel you're satisfied with the information at hand.
2. What do you expect out of each college? In your preplanning stage, choose colleges that are different. What do you expect from the college you'd like to attend? In putting together the list of schools you'd like to visit, choose ones that are dissimilar in terms of size, student body and location.
3. Research each school. Find out all you can about the school before you leave home. This way, when you get there, you can get right to the serious questions you want answered.
4. Prepare a checklist of questions. Leave nothing to chance. Go to the school armed with questions. After researching a school, you should have at least 10 important questions that need to be answered.
5. Spend time planning each trip. For example, if two out-of-town schools you're interested in are within 20 miles of each other, plan a weekend trip so that you can visit both. This way you're killing two birds with one stone, as the saying goes.

When you are finally on campus, here are some valuable pointers to keep in mind:

1. Try to spend more than a day. This isn't always possible, but try to spend a weekend at a school. It gives you the opportunity to go beyond the routine campus visit and wander off by yourself and see what the school is really like. A night spent in a student dorm, for example, can be a valuable experience in terms of getting to know students and helping to formulate an impression of the school.
2. Ask questions. Don't be afraid to ask questions. Remember that college is going to cost you (and your parents) a great deal of money. You're also going to spend from two to four years there, so don't hesitate to ask questions. When you finally decide on a college, you'll have no doubts about your decision.
3. Take notes. Don't expect to remember everything that is said to you. Play reporter and don't go anywhere without a notebook and pen.