

The Campus Visit: An Opportunity To Shape The College Experience

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Instruct:

As the heat of the summer begins to temper into fall, parents and their students begin to schedule visits to the colleges and universities on their short lists. We've been on both sides of such visits for many years, answering parent questions and meeting with prospective students, as well as visiting schools with our own children, and often we find that these visits are not what they could or should be.

Students themselves sometimes focus on aspects of the visit that, while somewhat important, will say very little in the end about the quality of the education the college or university will provide them. And parents, while intent on finding answers to their questions about colleges, sometimes miss the opportunities both to ask specific, important questions and to help their sons and daughters see their future home through the right set of lenses.

Influence:

Parents are important partners in guiding their future college students' decisions about finding the right institution, and they can focus on several items to achieve a successful, substantive visit:

1) Seeing infrastructure versus facilities: Many students are over-impressed by facilities that have more to do with comfort and entertainment than with education and training. Colleges that have invested in well-dressed new residence halls have doubtless made significant marketing investments that do indeed impress potential students. Parents, though, have the opportunity to teach their students to be smart, rather than impressionable, visitors. Instead of focusing on residences and impressive landscaping, turn your student's attention to more educational issues. How crowded and current are the library and the classrooms? Does the campus have the lab space it needs, and the equipment the labs need to conduct good research?

2) Meeting instructors and students rather than tour guides: Campus visit tour guides are often model, vivacious, high-trained student representatives—who parents and

prospective students will never see again. Set up appointments beyond the tour to get an accurate and meaningful picture of where your son or daughter will be spending their next four years. Arrange to sit-in on a class. Hang around and ask students about the class and about their educational experiences in general at the college. Meet with a representative of the academic department that likely will house your student's major. Ask about programs, course availability, research and internship opportunities, and how students in the major get academic advising (through an advising center or through face-to-face discussions with a professor)?

3) Real student-faculty ratios: Colleges and universities are required to report student to faculty ratios as a measure of how much interaction students will get with their professors. These ratios can be less than representative, however, when trying to gage your student's potential educational experience. Ask the admissions representative how many teacher assistants or part time faculty teach first- and second-year courses. How large are those courses? What is the teaching load of the typical professor (how many courses are taught per term by each), and ask about how much of that load is spent with graduate students rather than with undergraduates? If the representative doesn't know, insist on finding out.

4) Safety concerns vs. safety education: We find that parents are concerned—and rightly so, given today's headlines—with safety on campus. In our experience serving on faculty and administrative panels during campus visits, the overwhelming percentage of questions asked by parents have to do with safety. It's important to know, though, that most colleges and universities both take safety very seriously and have little control over the initial actions of outlier students who are intent on behaving badly. Rather than spend too much of your visit asking too many questions about safety—a tactic that will likely encourage your son or daughter to tune out—speak to them directly about how to be safe on a college campus or in the community that surrounds it. As an adult parent who has navigated these waters, share your experience.

5) Thinking about your student's specific needs and campus resources: During the campus visit, do not be hesitant to ask about the services available to your son and daughter and help them to connect with needed resources before they step foot on campus as a new student. (We find that many students do not succeed because they do not seek out and gain the help they need—and that's available—early enough in their college careers.) Does your student have a learning disability? Ask about and find the

appropriate campus office. Is there a history of depression or anxiety? Check out the counseling center. Does your student have a medical condition? Check out student health services, and be clear about what your health insurance and the student health insurance offered by the college does and does not cover. Does your student have a deficit in a particular subject area? Ask questions about tutorial services. Use your time on campus to walk your student to and through these offices so that they know where they are and so that they have been there before they begin college.

The campus visit is a great opportunity for spending quality time together. Enjoy meals, get to know the area, and do some local sightseeing. But make the most of the visit to the campus itself. It's your opportunity to get beyond marketing materials and to talk to the people who will become the next major influences in the lives of your sons and daughters.

Inspire:

Right click on the photo and copy this to share with your teen! It's a great way to open up conversation and teach them what you've learned.

Stress is...

- Not Being Prepared for Campus Visit
- C** Choosing the right College
- A** Answering the questions asked
- M** Making sure my parents don't embarrass me
- P** Putting my best foot forward with my 1st choice school
- U** Upstaging my peers
- S** Selling myself and helping them understand why they'd be silly to not accept me

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campus map

Find Help Here

Generating Winners

(David C. Pecoraro and Daniel de Roulet share over 50 years of experience in college teaching and administration. They are the co-founders of [The Student Caring Project](#).)