



Strategizing for College Visits: How to decide where to visit and what to look for

Visiting schools is an important part of the college search process, primarily during the spring of junior and fall of senior year of high school. Most applicants have a hard time envisioning the differences between colleges and how they'll react to them until they actually experience a few different kinds. Others have little interest in a given school simply because they never heard of it until a guidance counselor mentioned it, but when they visit, they feel instantly that it would be a good place for them.

It's important to get a sense of the student populations and cultures, so it's best to visit when plenty of students are on campus. The information sessions can be maddeningly similar and boring. Still, every once in a while you'll learn something worthwhile from them – possibly about new or special academic programs or about what they're looking for in applications. The tours are a must, though, not so much because of the buildings they'll take you to, but because they are given by students who will tell you about their personal experiences. Unless you have friends at a school who invite you for a visit, this is a great opportunity to find out what kinds of students are happy there.

If possible, ask students very specific questions about things that will help you understand the culture. For instance, you might ask them what they like best about their school and what they'd change if they could. You can ask them how heavy the workload is, what people do on weekends, how competitive the environment is, and how they find the teaching and advising. You can also ask them about anything else that interests you like a specific extra-curricular activity or the experiences they or their friends have had obtaining study abroad, internship and research opportunities or using the career placement office.

In addition to giving you a good sense of which colleges would be a good fit for you, the visits may actually help you get in. Since "yield," the percentage of admitted students who choose to attend, figures into most of the ratings that drive too much of the admissions process these days, many admissions offices have a policy of considering "demonstrated interest" when making their decisions. It's difficult to convince them that you're really eager to attend their school and have good reasons for thinking it's a good fit for you if you've never bothered to visit even though you live within driving distance. They know that not everyone can fly all over the country visiting distant schools, so if you live far away, they won't hold it against you if you haven't visited, but they're sure to be impressed if you have. Always sign your name in the admissions office so they have a record of your visit.

Large state schools are far less likely than the smaller liberal arts colleges to care about demonstrated interest. It's not a bad idea if you think you want a large school, though, to see at least one such place early on in the process because there's always the possibility you may change your mind after seeing how spread out things are. Still, if you can't see every place you're thinking about before you apply, you can hold off on visiting some of the larger state schools until after you know where you've been admitted and are actually deciding where to attend.

Before filing a binding early decision application anywhere, it's wise to go back for a second visit and stay overnight in a dorm. If you don't know anyone there who can host you, the admissions office will set you up with someone. Or, if you will be part of a particular community within the college, you can have someone tied to that community, for instance a team coach or a Hillel representative; find you a student to stay with.