

College Tour de Force

Make the most of your campus visit

You and your teen have researched colleges and have a good list to work with—now what? You can review college brochures, read statistics, and even take interactive college web tours and still not get a real “feel” for a school until you set foot on campus. Doing college tours is a necessity for college-bound students. But where do you start?

Before your tour

The best advice before your tour is to prepare. First, log onto the college website. Most school websites are comprehensive if not downright overwhelming! Look for tabs that are labeled “Admissions” or “Future Students.” You should be able to find a place online to register for a campus tour. If you can’t find the online sign-up, feel free to call the school and ask to speak with the Admissions Department. Try to schedule your visit during school hours when students are around, rather than holidays or school breaks. When registering, use your child’s formal name, not yours. Many schools are now tracking what they call “Demonstrated Interest.” It is the school’s attempt to measure the student’s effort or level of interest in the college. You want the efforts he is making by taking the tour to be tied to his application at a later date. This will demonstrate to the members of the Admissions Board that he has done his research, and that he is sincere about his interest in attending their school.

After registering for a campus tour, sit down with your teen and read about what the school has to offer for her specific areas of interests. The school website and view books should do a good job of introducing the strengths of the campus. What does she plan to study — does the school offer a special program or something especially appealing? Note the names of department heads, professors, directors, or coaches related to her interests and request a brief meeting while on campus. This will allow your child to ask questions and get a personal perspective on an individual who could be a key to her future success. She can also request to sit in on a class in her area of study to gain another opportunity for interaction.

During your tour

Allow your child to be the main spokesperson for your family during the tour; there is nothing more embarrassing to a teen than a parent asking too many questions! You can always call the Admissions Department later and ask your list of questions. Encourage your student to talk to as many people as possible to get different perspectives. Stop by the cafeteria, bookstore, library, and other student “hang-outs” to allow for interaction. Give your child an opportunity to stroll around campus on his own for a while. After all, the family won’t be there on the first day of school!

Some colleges offer admissions interviews. If your child is comfortable with the concept of an interview, encourage him to take the opportunity to make another personal contact at the school. Offer your support in brainstorming a few questions that will demonstrate that he is prepared and has done some research. Students should bring a copy of their transcripts, résumés, and a list of activities for the interview. Leave your child with the empowering reminder that he is interviewing the college as much as the college is interviewing him.

Finally, some say that “Comfortable footwear is the key to a happy life.” I don’t know about that, but it sure can make a campus tour more enjoyable! Wear comfortable walking shoes for the tour and be prepared for the local weather. Encourage your teen to dress for success. He doesn’t have to dress in business clothing, but do save the trendy, ripped jeans and rock-band t-shirts for after his acceptance to college.

After your tour

When your school tour is complete, only half the job is done. Finding a good college match for your teen includes exploring the surrounding area where she will potentially be living for the next four years. What is the weather like? Is the school in a small town or a big city? Is it near the beach or in the mountains? Does it offer an atmosphere where she can thrive?

Assuming that you and your son will be taking tours of several different schools, be sure to urge your teen to take notes and photos, and to gather any school newspapers and publications to help him remember the college. After two or three tours, the schools tend to blend together and you will hear, “Which school had the cool cafeteria?” or “Was it this school that had the amazing computer lab?” Organize a file to keep track of information and opinions of each school to help everyone in the family keep their sanity.

Last, make a list of the names and contact information for all the people you and your teen connected with throughout the day. Your son or daughter should send off a brief thank you email to each individual. Emails are preferred as they allow the college to more easily track with whom they have communicated. Some examples of appropriate thank you card recipients include the student who gave the tour, the department head or professor with whom the student met, the admissions representative who participated in the interview, athletes who gave her some insight into the coach, and anyone else who was helpful. File this contact information in case it is needed during the application process.

With a focus on preparation, an effort to interact with people on campus, and a bit of organization, you can turn your campus visit into a college tour de force!