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College Visits: Get the Whole Picture

Sure, a picture may be worth a thousand words. But, when it comes to choosing your school, a visit to campus is worth a gazillion college brochures! Nothing's better than walking around the college grounds to get an initial feel for what the school's like. Even so, you need to look far beyond the green grass of the quad and amazing architecture of that newly-erected science building to know if this is the right place for you!

Getting the whole picture on college visits requires more than just finding your way to the admissions office in time for your campus tour. Of course — by all means — go ahead and take the tour! After all, it's a great way to get an overview of the college, academics, the student body, and campus life. Yet, you'll quickly realize that the tour presents only a broad-brush portrait of the school. On top of that, your tour guide is likely a student who's really, really pleased with her college choice. (After all, if she weren't happy, she probably wouldn't have been selected to lead tours in the first place, right?)

Bottom line — what you see on the tour provides a rather narrow view of the institution. To find out what you really need to know about the school, your college visit must be focused. **Your primary goal in doing a campus visit is to get all the information needed to make an informed decision about whether this is a good fit for you — academically, socially, and emotionally** — while preparing you for the world of work. That means you've got to do some homework before you hit campus.

Before the Campus Visit

To make the most of your campus visits, you need to prepare in advance.

Do your research. Learn all you can about the college through the many resources that are readily available *without visiting*. For example, as a result of the pandemic, colleges have *greatly enhanced* the information available for prospective students on their websites, including **virtual campus tours**.

Also talk with your school counselor to find out what resources / college search tools are available to you through your school. Most importantly, find out whether the college offers the major(s) you're considering.



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- ✓ **Schedule your visit.** If you determine through your research that a particular college might be a good fit for you, plan your trip to campus. Contact the admissions office to:
 - Register for a campus tour.
 - Ask whether any information sessions are scheduled on the day of your visit; if so, register for the sessions of interest to you (ex: admissions process, financial aid, etc.).
 - Arrange to sit in on a class – *ideally one that’s directly related to your intended major*.
 - Find out how to set up an academic department visit.
 - Request an overnight stay in a residence hall, if you’re interested in doing so.

- ✓ **Prepare your questions.** Most importantly, write a list of the questions you still need answered...*the things you want to know but couldn’t uncover through research.*

Whether touring a campus in person or by connecting with college staff virtually, use the questions below as guidelines. Adapt the questions to meet your specific needs.

Questions to Ask on Campus Visits

Admissions

- What academic factors are considered in the admissions process? How are they weighted?
- What’s the average class size for freshman / sophomore / general education classes? Department / major / upper-level classes? (*The answers to these questions give you a much clearer image of the classroom experience than does student-to-faculty ratio*).
- Overall, what percentages of classes are taught by full-time faculty, adjunct faculty, and / or graduate / teaching assistants? What’s the breakdown specifically for freshman courses?



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Questions to Ask on Campus Visits

- How are classes selected? How often are students wait-listed for or unable to get into classes they must take?
- How's my academic advisor assigned to me? What's her role?
- Is there a study abroad program? Do all credits transfer? What's the cost?
- Is the downtown area within walking distance from campus?
- Are there shuttle services on campus? Into town? How early / late do they run?
- *Questions for your tour guide and / or students on campus:* If there were only one thing you could change about this college, what would it be? What surprised you the most about this school? Any disappointments? In your opinion, what are the best reasons to choose this school?

Financial Aid

- What's the cost of attendance (e.g., tuition, room, board, fees, books, supplies, transportation, personal expenses)?
- Are tuition / fees the same for all majors? *Some majors, such as engineering, may have special fees.*
- When was tuition last increased? By what percent? Outlook over the next five years?
- What percentage of students receive financial assistance freshman year? Sophomore, junior, and senior years?
- How many work-study jobs are available on campus? How / when are they filled? What's the average hourly rate of pay?
- What academic scholarships are available? Athletic scholarships? How are they awarded?

Housing / Meals

- How are dorms, rooms, and roommates assigned?



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Questions to Ask on Campus Visits

- What are the rules for students living in the residence halls?
- Are there any substance-free dorms on campus? Do any residence halls have floors for students studying a particular major? Quiet floors? Living-learning options? Special interest housing or thematic communities?
- Are incoming freshmen guaranteed housing? For all four years?
- What's the policy on moving off campus? Having a car on campus? Parking?
- Do all residence halls have laundry facilities? Internet access? Computer labs?
- What meal plans are available? Do all residence halls have food services? Hours of operation?

Career Services

- How many non-work-study jobs are available on campus? How and when are they filled? Average hourly rate of pay?
- What assistance is available to help me find part-time jobs, internships, or cooperative opportunities while I'm in school?
- Which employers actively recruit here? For what majors / occupational fields?
- What assistance is available to help me with job search as I prepare to graduate?
- What percentage of students graduating with a major in (xxx) get *full-time jobs in their field of study within six months of graduation*?

Supports for Student Success

- Does this school offer a "First-Year Experience" class to facilitate a smooth transition into college?
- What tutoring services are offered on campus? How do I get assistance if needed? Any fees?
- Is there a writing center on campus? What services are offered?



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Questions to Ask on Campus Visits

- What support services are available for students with learning disabilities?

Student Life / Activities

- What are the most popular extracurricular activities? The most unique?
- How many students participate in Greek Life? Which fraternities / sororities are represented on campus?
- Which club or intramural sports are offered?
- Do most students stay on campus or go home on weekends?
- What is a typical weekend like?
- What religious organizations are represented on or near campus?

Health / Welfare

- What services are offered by the student health center? Any fees?
- What happens if I need to be hospitalized? How far is the hospital?
- Is there a fitness center on campus? Any fees?
- What mental health / counseling services are available on campus? Any fees?

Safety

- What procedures and technology are in place to notify students and parents of a campus emergency?
- How large is the campus security police force? How often is the campus patrolled? How do you protect students who live off campus?
- How many emergency phones are on campus?
- Do residence halls / academic buildings have security systems barring outsiders from entering?
- Is there a pick-up service for students walking at night? Hours of operation?



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Questions to Ask on Campus Visits

- What prevention programs are offered to educate students about campus safety?
- How do you protect students during a natural disaster?

Academic Department / Professors

- What makes this academic program / major stand apart from similar programs at other schools?
- What are the key characteristics / attributes of students who have done well in this program / major? Students who have not done well?
- Is there a specific grade point average (GPA) required for acceptance into this major? Does this GPA ever change? Is there a limit on the number of students accepted?
- Are students required to maintain a specific GPA to remain in the program? What percentage is not able to achieve it?
- Are there any special requirements that students must complete in this program (e.g., field placements, internships, practicum experiences, etc.)? What assistance is available to find these placements? (*Example: Are students majoring in education required to find their own student teaching placement?*)
- Are research opportunities available to undergraduate students? Please share an example of a research project in which undergraduate students were involved?
- I'm interested in a career in (xxx) and I plan to major in (xxx). Do you have any recommendations for a double major? Minor? Interdisciplinary major?
- Will I be able to take a class in my major during my freshman year?
- What's the typical class size for courses within this major? Faculty / student ratio?
- What percentage of classes in this major is taught by professors, adjunct instructors, and graduate / teaching assistants?



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Questions to Ask on Campus Visits

- How do you evaluate your students academically? Can you share a syllabus and / or a sample reading assignment from one of your classes?
- Do students in this major have difficulty getting into required classes and / or building an academic plan to ensure graduation in four years? How often are classes cancelled for insufficient enrollment? Is the cancelled class substituted with another that prepares me for future coursework in my major, while meeting graduating requirements?
- Are there any specific programs or services available in this department to support academic success?
- Are professors in this department required to keep scheduled office hours to provide extra help for students as well as academic and / or career advising?
- Will I work with an academic advisor or a faculty advisor in developing my academic plan? How is my advisor assigned to me? How many times will I meet with her during my freshman year? How many times during my four years here?
- Are there specific campus organizations or professional associations related to my field of study that you would recommend I join?
- What percentage of students in this major graduate in four years?
- What types of jobs do students typically get after graduating from this program?
- How does this department stay connected to employers / employment trends to ensure that course content is current?
- From an employer's perspective, what are the most important skills students in this major should acquire?
- What percentage of students graduating with this major go on to graduate or professional school? What schools do they commonly attend?



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- ✓ **Load up your backpack.** Be sure to take your list of questions, a pen, and a note pad to take notes throughout your visit. Wear comfortable shoes and bring bottled water; you'll be walking a lot. Don't forget your phone and a charger.

During Your Visit

While at the school, actively engage in your experience and assess your impressions. Remember, this is your time to get the information you need to make an informed college choice! Pay attention to the campus environment. Take a look at the bulletin boards and postings on campus. Pick up the school newspaper. Hang out in different locations on campus and eat in the cafeteria. Talk to lots of students. These things can tell you a lot about the campus culture.

Also be sure to:

- ✓ Take plenty of notes and pictures on the tour and during information sessions. Once you've gone on several college visits, it can be hard to remember all the important things you've heard and seen.
- ✓ Check whether you see students waiting in line to see their professors when visiting an academic department. After each meeting with a department representative or professor, ask for a business card. And, when you leave the department, take time to write down your thoughts. What did you find most impressive about your conversation? Least impressive? What questions do you still have? How can you get the answers to those questions?
- ✓ Jot down your thoughts after sitting in on a class, too. What were your impressions about the quality of instruction? How would you describe the rapport between the professor and students? Did the instructor allow time for discussion and questions?

After Your Visit

Shortly after each college visit, send a thank you note to each department representative or professor you met with. In addition, start a college notebook to keep track of your college search resources and materials, notes, and the pictures you took on campus.



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Most importantly, take time to reflect on your experience after each college visit and evaluate each school. How well did it fit you – *academically, socially, and emotionally?* Then, ask yourself a very important question: “*Can I picture myself here?*”