

COLLEGE VISITS

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It's important that you visit schools you might want to attend. Visiting a school gives you a close-up look; a chance to focus on the details and actually experience the college before you make a commitment.

The number of schools you visit depends on your time and money. You probably won't be able to visit every school you're considering, but try to at least visit schools that'll provide a variety of experiences.

For example, check out a large and a small school, or go to one urban and one small-town campus. For those you can't visit, do the best you can with research and word-of-mouth.

After you visit a college, remember to send thank you notes to everyone you met with. It's a little courtesy that will help get you noticed.

Use these pointers to make the most of your visits:

Do some prep work: Before your visit, decide what you want to learn about the school and put together a list of questions. Use the same list for every school so you can make fair comparisons. You might also want to run a few practice interviews with family or friends so you're comfortable speaking about your high school achievements and your future plans.

Visit while classes are in session: This is the best time to visit schools. Most counselors suggest you schedule visits from March through late April of your junior year in high school or in the fall of your senior year.

Schedule your visit at least two weeks in advance: Call the admissions office to arrange your visit. Ask if you could sit in on classes, eat with the students, spend the night in a dorm, and use the campus facilities. Find out if you can get a campus tour.

Schedule interviews with faculty and admissions staff: When scheduling your visit, try to arrange to meet with faculty members and admissions staff. Meet with professors who teach in your area of interest. You'll get to know a staff member and hear an inside opinion of the school. Meet with admissions staff to find out about the school, to verify admission requirements, and to discuss costs and financial aid.

Take the campus tour: If the school offers an escorted tour, take advantage of it. You'll get access to more of the campus, and your escort can be a great source of candid information.

Attend information sessions, if offered: Schedule your interviews after the information session and the campus tour, if you can. You'll speak more knowledgeably and come up with better questions.

Ask lots of questions: This is your chance to discover things you'll learn no other way. Ask questions of the students, the faculty, the admissions staff. Ask students what they like best and least; what they'd change; what the campus is like on weekends; which professors are best. Possible questions include: What activities and services are available to help students get settled (academically and socially) during their first year? How big are the classes? (Ask students) How easy is it to meet with faculty? (Ask students) Are you able to register for the classes you want? What is the total cost of attending the college? What types of financial aid does the college offer and how do I apply? Are all freshmen assigned to an academic advisor? Where do most freshmen live? What activities are available for students? Who teaches the courses for first-year students? How successful are the college's graduates in finding jobs? What services (such as transportation and shopping) are available locally? What is there to do on weekends? Do most students stay or leave campus on weekends?

Trust your instincts and take notes: Pay attention to how you feel, especially your first impressions. Is this where you want to live and go to school for four years? Drive through surrounding neighborhoods and get a feel for the community. Make notes to jog your memory when decision time comes and when something catches your interest follow up with a phone call or e-mail.