

CAMPUS VISIT HOW-TO HANDBOOK

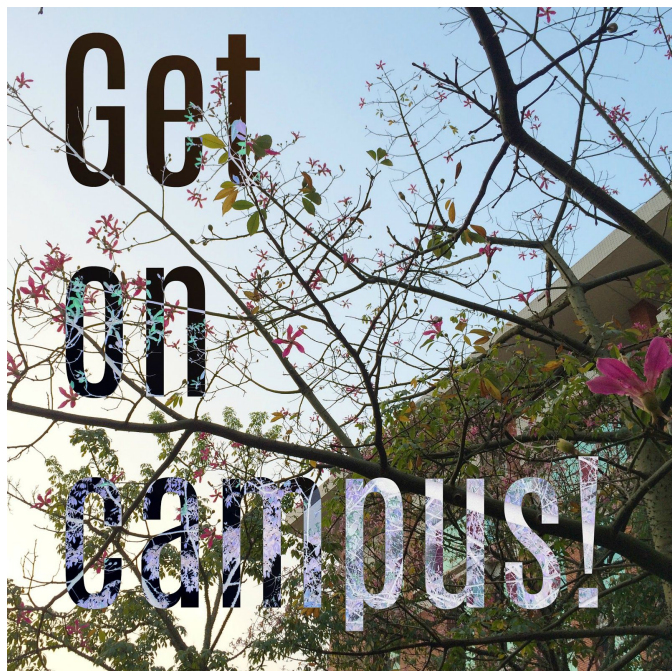
**10 Never-Skip Steps
For Making the Most
of Campus Visits**

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10 Never-Skip Steps for Making the Most of Campus Visits



Get on campus! Visit campuses, lots of them. There's a reason I named my business "OnCampus" College Planning. My passion and my purpose is to help families navigate a successful, stress-free *and enjoyable* journey from high school to the day when your student arrives on campus at the university of your dreams. I live to help students get on campus! But not just any campus. My job's not done until you ultimately land on the campus that is your absolute best fit! It's what I call your "University of You". It's the college or university that best fits your aspirations, learning style, personality and career goals. Your college "soulmate", if you will.

Imagine making a commitment to a 4+-year friendship or dating relationship without meeting

that person beforehand. Or imagine making that 4-year commitment after just spending an hour walking around and listening to them talk, without actively engaging them in conversation, asking deep, probing questions, meeting other people in their lives, sharing a meal with them, seeing where and how they live and sharing from your heart about what you hope to gain from the relationship. Ridiculous, right?

And yet, I'm shocked when I hear that a student has decided to spend their next four years (and six figures in college tuition) at a college where they've spend little or no time! Or to hear them say, "Well I've applied there and I'll visit if I get accepted." I also cringe when I ask a family about a recent college visit and what they did while they were there, and they say, "Well our tour guide was really nice. The guided tour was about an hour long and then we stopped at Olive Garden on the way out of town." I ask follow-up questions and learn that on their guided tour, they saw the football stadium, the campus gym, the main cafeteria and the main public areas as well as the outside of main buildings. But they didn't speak to a single person except for the student tour guide. They didn't schedule a meeting with a professor in their student's desired field. They didn't spend any time in the classrooms or buildings where the student would spend most of their time. They didn't eat in the school cafeteria, but instead chose a chain restaurant like Olive Garden. They left with little or no sense of what life on that campus would be like for THEIR student. They settled for the edited, abbreviated view that was provided on the guided tour. They asked no questions. They didn't engage the students that currently attend there. In short, they missed an opportunity to maximize that campus visit.

In my view, this is the equivalent of deciding who you're going to marry based on a match.com profile alone, without truly getting to know who's behind the filtered photos and edited paragraphs. What a

shame. It COULD work out, sure. I hope it will. But do you really want to leave your future to chance by settling for less than a full and exhaustive view of what life with that person (in this case, that university) would be like?

This doesn't have to be you! I can equip you to make the most of every single campus visit, so that it's a pivotal part of your college decision-making process.

At the heart of your college planning process is physically getting on campus. The campus visit should be the single most powerful tool in your college planning toolkit. I work with students on ACT and SAT test prep, college selection, financial aid counseling, college application guidance and more. But nothing gives you a better glimpse into what life at a university would be like more than physically visiting that campus. Yes, you can and should do online research. You can glean tons of valuable information from college brochures, slick websites and social media, as well as from talking to friends or family members who've been students at those colleges. But these research methods pale in comparison to the experience of walking across the quad, taking in the sights, smells and sounds of a college campus, and having honest-to-goodness conversations with real-live college students who are likely to give their unfettered opinions.

Visiting a campus isn't difficult. It's free (except for travel expenses to get there). And registration is a snap. But the quality and long-term value of your campus visits have nothing to do with cost or ease of registration, because this is not a *box to be checked* or a *path of least resistance* to be sought. Better campus visits simply require you to be better informed, which is what you'll gain by reading the rest of this e-book and applying the principles I teach. Once you're equipped with this insider information, you'll be prepared to make a conscious and committed shift from being a passive campus visit participant to being an active and engaged, savvy college consumer.

From my 124 (and counting) campus visits I've implemented this HOW-TO-HANDBOOK including my 10-step process for making the most of campus visits, so that you truly understand what life on that campus would be like FOR YOU. Here in this CAMPUS VISIT HOW-TO HANDBOOK, I've outlined and described them for you. And I've created a *Campus Visit Capture Tool*, and included it at the end of this e-guide. It's a template you can print and use for EACH campus visit. Stick all your completed Campus Visit Capture Tool worksheets in a 3-ring binder. This will be a hugely beneficial resource during your college selection process during your senior year of high school! You will then have your very own campus visit journal, with a record of your experiences to make it easy to review and remember later as you're making your all-important college decision during the spring of your senior year of high school.

Timing is Everything. Best Times for Getting On Campus.



Most students start visiting campuses at some point during their junior year of high school. Some do not start visiting until their senior year, but I think this is a mistake. By that time, you're facing the emotional pressure of your senior year and you're in the midst of academics, activities and the actual college application process. More visits sooner always wins.

When you really start thinking about what you want to do after high school, typically the spring semester of your junior year, you should schedule your first college visit as part of your college planning process. By this time, you will likely still have little or no solid idea of where you want to attend college. That's okay. It's a good idea to get your first campus visit under your belt long before serious decision time starts (during your senior year). The first few

campus visits my son Jack took were to colleges he *knew he would not care to attend*. He was tagging along because I was visiting those campuses. It was valuable for him to get a sense of what a campus visit was like before he started visiting THE campuses he was serious about. That way, by the time his college search got underway, he already knew the drill and had a good foundational base of knowledge of what campus visits are typically like.

It's never too soon to check out College (Big C). Family vacations, college sporting events, visiting older cousins or siblings and checking out the campuses in your hometown are great ways of just getting on campus for young students and getting a feel for what College is like.

Once you are ready to schedule your campus visit during your own college planning process, be sure to follow these guidelines for timing your visit when you'll get the best idea of what that college is actually like in full swing.

- Avoid college breaks when there are no students around. A quick call to the admissions office or the college website will help you know when these breaks occur. You want to see the campus during times when students and faculty are doing what they do, and when professors are available to meet with you during your visit.
- Avoid weekend visits for the same reason. Yes, this means taking off school and work for your campus visit. It's worth it, though, to make the most of campus visits.
- Take the time to learn the best time to visit that campus, based on major events going on. Before you schedule your visit, call the admissions office to ask about home games, festivals,

concerts, city events, peak season for great weather and other things that you'd benefit from seeing or experiencing during your visit.

- Summer visits are fine. In fact, this is when it's most convenient for many families to take trips. But check with the admissions office to make sure summer courses are in session. I prefer trips during the fall and spring when the weather's mild and there's plenty going on around campus.

Tom's 10 Never-Skip Steps for Making the Most of Campus Visits



Here are my 10 never-skip steps for making the most of your campus visits.

1. Ask more questions of more people.
2. Ask Tom's 3 Magic Questions.
3. Take Good Notes & Capture Sound Bites.
4. Map Your Route and Do a Victory Lap.
5. Expect the "big blue light on a pole" speech.
6. Spend time with a professor.
7. Schedule downtime.
8. Eat twice: once on campus, once off.
9. Don't bring excess baggage.
10. Avoid major decisions.

1. Ask more questions of more people.



I am shocked when I ask a student or parent about a recent campus visit, and learn that the only person the student talked with was their tour guide. In fact, I sometimes even learn that the student didn't actually engage with the tour guide -- they just listened to the tour guide talk. To get the most out of your campus visit, you will need to ask questions. Ask more open-ended questions of more people. Get them to open up and give you the information you need to make informed decisions.

The best way to learn more is to listen more. That bears repeating. To learn more, you need to listen more. And to listen more you need to get people talking. And to get them talking you need to ask

them good, probing questions. The people you see on a college campus possess a wealth of information, experiences, attitudes and wisdom. But it's not their job to stop you and offer their opinions. It's your job to harvest their opinions, insights and observations by engaging them in meaningful dialogue.

Ask questions of the people who make up the college community:

- Admissions representatives who greet you and give a formal presentation known as an "information session";
- Students tour guides;
- Student workers in the admissions office;
- Students you find on the quad, in the student union or anyplace else you find them (more info in tip #2);
- Students who work in the university book store
- Professors and staff within the areas of study that interests you;
- And even the people who live and work near the campus.

Ask, ask, ask. And then do two things: listen extremely well to what they are saying (without projecting what you *think* they are saying); and document what was said (tip #3).

Make no mistake. What sets apart a great campus visit from one that is ho-hum is not the weather or the quality of your tour or the school's sticker price. It's *your ability* to engage members of the campus community in meaningful dialogue. It's the difference between walking the streets of Manhattan with a native New Yorker versus seeing the city from the top of a double-decker tour bus while listening to someone drone on over a megaphone. This is the main reason you came here. It's why you got up early and perhaps drove (or flew) here the night before, or why you're taking a day off work. You're here to walk through the campus, to get a feel for its size and scope, to experience how the buildings and open spaces fit together into something more than buildings and open space. And to meet the people you'd work with, learn from and live among if you chose to attend. Make it count.

2. Ask these 3 questions of 10 students.



The “typical” campus visit tends to be way too passive. Parents and their student sign up for the provided agenda, attend the guided tour, walk around a bit on their own, visit the bookstore for a T-shirt, eat at a familiar chain restaurant and then head home. This is what I’d call a ho-hum visit, and it misses the opportunity to truly discover what the college experience would be like FOR YOU on that campus. One essential component of making a campus visit count is to conduct interviews with students while you’re there. Okay, “interviews” makes it sound really formal, right? It’s not. It’s simply an intentional, brief chat where you ask questions and listen to their responses. You’re simply getting to know the campus through the perspective of someone who truly knows, a current

student. While this makes some people squeamish, I promise you it will become easier after the first or second try. You’ll be surprised how easy it is to draw students out about the college they’ve chosen and are enthusiastic to share. The bonus benefit is, that with each person you engage, you’ll feel the campus become a little bit more familiar to you, and you’ll feel like you know it better.

So, here’s my challenge to you for making the most of your next campus visit. Conduct informal chats with 5-10 students during each campus visit. Each chat or “interview” will probably take less than five minutes. These are Tom’s Magic Questions to Ask College Students. I’ve finessed them over the course of my 124 different campus visits, and I’ve personally found they work really well. Ask these questions in order:

1. Why did you choose College X? (NOTE: Always try to use the name of the college when asking questions instead of a more generic “this college” or “this school”.)
2. Do you mind if I ask what other colleges you considered, and what tipped the scales in favor of this college?
3. If you had a magic wand, what one thing about this college would you change?

To get the very most out of these student chats, remember that you’re a visitor and you’re interrupting this person’s day. Be courteous of their time and express your sincere gratitude. If you sense a student is willing to go more in-depth, just ask if they have a few more minutes. If you really hit it off, you offer to buy them a soda or a quick cup of coffee, and get ready to learn more than you ever dreamed you would about that campus.

I generally avoid people who are walking or look deep in thought. Instead, I look for places where students are already stopped to study, hang out or eat (like the campus union, cafeteria, the quad or other common areas, or outside of classroom buildings). I smile as I approach. I try to catch their eye as I walk toward them. I extend my hand and introduce myself. Even though they already suspect it, I identify myself as a visitor because it helps establish them as the expert and me as the guy asking for help. Your introduction might sound something like this, “Hello, my name’s Jane. I’m a junior in high school visiting U of M as a prospective student, and I’d love to get your opinion as a current student. Do you mind if I take a couple of minutes of your time to ask three very brief questions?”

Asking what “tipped the scales” automatically forces students to go right to their own decision making process and pull up the top reasons why they chose one over another. This question is best asked after question #1 and the first part of question #2, because you’ve asked the open-ended “why” and then created some context by bringing in the other schools on their list. Now they can see not only this college but the others, and can likely remember those key factors which made the difference.

I used to phrase question #3 differently -- “What’s lacking on this campus?” or “What would you like to see improved?”. But I have found that the magic wand phrase shifts what could be a potentially defensive response (“Nothing is wrong with this campus!”) to a very open-minded, ‘gee that’s a good question’ response. People like this one. My experience is that it really gets at honest feedback that you would never get from the guided tour or the admissions office.

3. Take good notes and capture sound bites.



It’s essential to capture what you’re hearing, seeing, feeling, thinking and wondering while the impressions are still fresh in your mind, and the best way to do this is to keep it simple. At the end of this CAMPUS VISIT HOW-TO HANDBOOK, I’ve included the Campus Visit Capture Tool you can print and use on your own campus visits, one for each campus. It’s a handy, all-in-one-place to have my recommended questions handy along with space for your answers. But use whatever works best for you. Take videos, or photos and sound recordings on your phone. Keep a small notebook. Use a hand-held voice recorder to record your thoughts throughout the day. The best tools and technology are the ones you’re most likely to use in the moment. The pre-visit desire for exhaustive annotation is inevitably met with the harsh reality of post-visit exhaustion and hunger. So

plan in advance to have your info-capture method in place and readily accessible. And while the

student is the one responsible for capturing all of this information, it makes a lot of sense for parents to jot a few things down, too.

I tend to keep things pretty simple. I prefer a small, thin notebook that I can keep in my shirt pocket and pull out even during the tour to make a quick note. (If you prefer digital, try *Evernote*.) Knowing I can always come back to the website for more information or contact someone with a question, I tend to write as little as possible. I use bullets and keywords instead of complete sentences. My notes are extremely abbreviated while I'm on the move. As I've reviewed my notes from past campus visits, I commonly see things like "lots of preppers" or "the Berkeley of the Midwest" or "love the professors and no classes larger than 30". Only after I've had time to sit and gather my thoughts am I likely to write in complete sentences and thoughts. So if your documentation is more along the lines of a jot, a scribble, a scrawl or a sketch, that's okay. Any note-taking is better than no note-taking.

A great way to capture your thoughts is to make a voice recording immediately after the tour ends. Tour guides usually stop outside the admissions office or wherever the tour began and do a quick wrap-up. There's usually no need to go back into admissions, so just walk a few paces out of the way of main traffic, turn on a voice recorder or use your phone. Stand close to one another and answer these questions without too much thought. Have one person hold the recorder or phone and act as the interviewer, repeating the question for each family member who attended the tour. This may feel a little funny at first, but you'd be surprised how quick and easy this is, and how helpful you'll find it later on, when you're trying to keep 8-10 different campus visits straight in your mind.

What stood out?

Was there an "aha" moment for you? When and where did it occur?

What did you not see or did they not mention that you need to know more about or expected to see?

Was there anything that surprised you?

What about the visit helped you "see yourself here"? (or "see your student here"), OR just as helpful, "what about the visit made you think perhaps this isn't a good fit?"

If this is your very first campus tour, answer a few questions about campus tours in general.

How did you feel touring a college?

Was this what you expected?

Would you do anything differently next time?

4. Map your route and do a victory lap.



I'm a map guy. I like to know where things are. And I like to know where I am in relationship to everything else, so I try to memorize a few key landmarks such as the student center, admissions office and visitor parking lots.

When I visit a campus, I get to the campus well before the guided tour starts, so that I can drive once around the perimeter and through the main areas of the campus, before parking and attending the tour. If the campus is far enough away that I had to stay overnight the night before, I do this as soon as I get into town and let my overall sense of the campus percolate a bit overnight before the tour the next day. My pre-tour drive around campus gives me a good idea of the breadth and width of the campus. It also lets me check out surrounding neighborhoods and

commercial districts. I pay attention to the names of major streets that border and cut through a campus, because it makes getting directions for that great local burger point later on so much easier. I've also found that the tour guide and students I talk to will tend to reference major hot spots on and near campus. It helps me if I've seen some of them myself on a brief drive before we talk.

Once I have the lay of the land, I go ahead and conduct my campus visit as I'm outlining here in this guide. Finally, one of my favorite things to do after a visit is look at a campus map and compare my thoughts pre-visit with post-visit. I usually do a final drive around campus at the end of my visit as a refresher course for my visual brain, and then I'm off, with a great sense of what this campus is all about. I call this my victory lap. One more campus visit, in the books!

5. Expect the “big blue light on a pole” speech (and other cliches).



If you only visit one campus, (and I don't recommend that) you won't realize that some of the key features and benefits you hear about are very typical -- even cliché. The “big blue light on a pole” speech is one of these.

Don't get me wrong. Your safety is vitally important. But realize that on every tour you're bound to hear the same spiel about campus safety. Every college in America has some form of emergency response system in place, the most common being a series of emergency phones attached to tall poles, each of which sports a big blue light on top for easy identification. Campus security are positioned to respond within minutes, typically one to two. This is great news for anyone and it should not be taken lightly, but the point is that all campuses have this,

so that warm, fuzzy feeling Mom has when she first hears this should not translate into, “This is the place where I want my daughter to go to school.” These systems are a necessity, not a luxury.

My point is not to diminish the need for safety measures such as this, but to highlight the need to distinguish between the specific and unique things I hear on *this tour* with those things I am likely to hear on *every tour*. On your first tour you have no way of knowing that the big blue light on a pole spiel is standard practice -- hence, the need to visit, visit, visit.

Think of this like shopping for a car. If the first car salesperson tells you, “You'll love this vehicle because it has airbags to protect you, and four wheels to help you get where you're going.” If you're thinking, “Wow, that sounds really great because I do want to be safe, and four wheels is exactly the number of wheels I've been looking for!”...then you're going to buy that first car without kicking the tires at the three dealers immediately across the street. Know what matters to you, and be aware of how colleges communicate.

You'll also hear other features and benefits that are wonderful, but pretty typical on most campuses these days. Personal access to professors and academic advisors, workout or extracurricular/intramural and dining amenities, sports and theater events & more. The more campuses you visit, the better able you'll be to discern what is truly unique from what is simply table stakes for being an appealing campus experience.

6. Spend time with a professor in your desired area of study.



This is crazy, but it's the way it's always been with campus tours. The one thing they don't show you on 99% of campus tours is a real, live professor! This seems odd to me, since faculty are such an important ingredient in the college experience. Yes, they're busy people. But if I were in charge, I'd trot out a few rockstar professors who can instantly connect with the kids and impress the adults, and then I'd let them do their thing. More important than the luxury suite-style dorms or the rock climbing wall or the Gigant-o-Dome is what happens in the college classroom between those professors and the students who are there to learn.

Take matters into your own hands. Several weeks or a month before you plan to visit a campus, call the department office that houses your potential major.

Tell them who you are and when you're visiting. Emphasize how "great it would be to meet a professor since we're driving all the way from _____". To save yourself time, don't try to contact a professor directly. Instead, find an administrative assistant or program coordinator who can do the legwork for you. They know who is not only available, but who will relate well to prospective students and families.

Let me share this anecdote as proof: On two successive days, my son and I visited two universities in the same state. Both offer similar degrees with similar costs and similar likely outcomes. Before we drove the 10 hours to get to College A, we were pretty sure it was the hands-down favorite where he'd eventually enroll. College A didn't disappoint. Our overall impression was very favorable. Highlights included 30 minutes with a very engaging professor in College A's Honors College.

My son Jack and I approached the tour of College B with a "well, we're here so we might as well go through with this" demeanor, and maintained that attitude until we met Ben. And then everything changed. Ben is a 30-something professor and the director of the program Jack's interested in. (I realized that I had seen Ben's faculty webpage before and remember thinking this was a guy to whom Jack would relate.) In a span of 20 minutes, in a cramped office in a visually unimpressive building...everything changed. I faded into the background (my proper place anyway) as these two like-minded individuals found a million common points of interest and began what will become a critical mentor-mentee relationship over the next four years. Jack sat in on Ben's class while I grabbed some lunch. At that moment, the Dad in me -- the part of me who isn't a rational college planner -- knew where Jack was meant to be for the next four years.

Later that day we talked about Ben and the role he'd potentially play in Jack's education and career, and I reminded us both that: a) Ben might take a job elsewhere, so don't base your decision on Ben alone; b) he'd teach a limited number of classes; and c) it was Ben's job to sell us on the department, College B and the city in which this all took place.

However, my point is this. That professor was passionate about and intimately familiar with College B, as well as the specific educational and career path Jack wants to pursue. He was intimately familiar with what Jack's college experience would be like in his chosen area of study. He could speak firsthand to the types of students Jack would spend most of his time with. He could describe in detail what Jack's first semester would look like, the types of classes, extracurricular activities and internships Jack will likely engage in. He offered helpful recommendations about what Jack could be doing while still in high school to get a leg up once he arrived on campus. He could give these types of insights because he's the head of THAT DEPARTMENT and spends 100% of his time in THAT world. No tour guide can be expected to provide that level of detail about the myriad programs on campus. It's your job to seek out this additional level of information to make the most of your campus visit.

There's nothing wrong with the guided tour. You should take the guided tour. But don't stop there. To truly get a sense of what THIS college will be like FOR YOU, you ALSO need to spend time with the people in your chosen area of study.

If you do not yet know your chosen field of study, and many students do NOT when they set foot on campus (and that's OKAY), then pick a school subject you enjoy or have considered pursuing, and spend time with a professor in that department. Getting a specific perspective from a professor, even if you go on to change majors, pick a different university or pursue something else, is still going to help give you a much better perspective on what life would be like for you as a student on that particular campus.

In my experience, you only need to ask one or two questions of a professor before they jump in and keep the rest of the conversation going. They're professors, after all. They love to teach! So here are a few good conversation starters for your sit-down with a professor on your next campus visit.

Can you tell me a little bit about what you've observed about the students who excel here in this field of study? What do they have in common, in terms of experiences, interests, attitudes or habits?

I'm interested in studying _____, and pursuing a career in _____. Can you give me a sense of how the University of X is uniquely able to help me to achieve my goals?

What are the most common "overlap schools" for the University of X, and what sets this school apart in your experience? (An overlap school is essentially the same as a "top competitor" for a college -- a school to which students who've chosen to attend this school typically also apply, or in some cases, where students would opt to attend instead of THIS college.)

I plan to major in _____. Could you give me a sense of what a typical freshman year would look

like for me in terms of classes, activities, etc. and what classes I may take from you during that time?

7. Schedule downtime.



A campus visit can be an exhausting day filled with the essentials of getting there, finding your way to the right buildings, eating and even driving back home. In between all this you need to give yourselves time to think and reflect. And it's emotionally charged, which can be tiring. You may be nervous, excited, apprehensive or a combination of all three.

One of the most valuable (and easiest) things you can do is nothing, i.e. find a place to sit and do absolutely nothing other than observing and thinking. After you've taken the guided tour and chatted with a professor and a few students, pause and enjoy some downtime to process.

Think.

Reflect.

Consider the possibilities.

Open up your mind.

Imagine what it might be like to be sitting at that very point on campus a year or two from now, or during your final semester.

Don't check social media or email. Just sit and watch. Take it in. After 10 minutes or as long as you can stand it, capture what you're seeing, hearing, smelling and thinking.

8. Eat twice: once on campus and then once off campus.



Trust me. This not a punishment, nor an obligation. This is fun. The college cafeterias of the 1980s and 1990s have been miraculously replaced by tasty, healthy options suitable for all taste preferences, diets and special needs. (Think “food court” instead of “school cafeteria”.) These days, it’s rare to find a dining hall that doesn’t offer multiple entrees, massive salad bars, 20+ cereal choices, gourmet coffee, panini grills and wood-fired ovens for personal pizzas.

And then there’s the omnipresent do-it-yourself Belgian waffle irons. These metal monsters sit off to the side, searing somewhere around 500 degrees Kelvin, with premixed batter and perfect-measure cups nearby. While I tend to think college students have it too “cushy” these days in general and this is

just one more example of that, the waffle craze has infiltrated academia nonetheless. Beyond syrup, there are troughs of strawberries, blueberries, peaches, chocolate chips and chocolate sauce, and mounds of whipped cream. The kind that comes in a can and can be shot into your mouth. Mmmm.

It’s an all-you-can eat world and even the most finicky eater would be hard-pressed to honestly say they have run out of dining options on campus. Most campuses have supplemental dining options such as a grill, coffee house or late-night eatery. Students can purchase meals with “points” – money either added to a student ID or included as part of the standard meal plan. If students can’t make it to a cafeteria or one of these options, it’s likely that a C-store, a mini-convenience store somewhere in the union, offers snacks and beverages. Students eat and drink coffee, tea, water and other designer beverages more freely during class than ever before. With all this it’s a wonder the “freshman 15” has not ballooned up to 25 or more pounds. (The amazing workout facilities on every campus may be directly related to this.)

Schools brag about their food, and I’ve been to no less than three campuses that claim to have “the best” or second-best food in the nation, statistical probabilities notwithstanding.

Whether you choose the larger dining hall or a smaller venue, a meal on campus is a **MUST** in order to make the most of your campus visit. Admissions offices often dole out free meal tickets, but sometimes you have to ask. Surprisingly, an \$8-10 free lunch is not a given; many campuses tell you “it’s not policy”. If they do not provide a meal voucher, you can pay cash or use a credit/debit card. Both the quality and quantity at the dining hall will rival most local eateries.

Having said that, it's a good idea to get off campus for a second meal, if time permits. During your interviews/chats with students, ask where the best pizzeria is, or where you can get a great sub or wrap. You'll learn more about where students hang out and get a better flavor (pun intended) for areas beyond the campus.

Eat at a local restaurant. Ask staff or students for recommendations. Avoid chain restaurants at all costs because an Applebee's in Champaign, Illinois, is exactly like the one in Los Angeles, which is exactly like the one three miles from your home. Live a little.

9. Don't bring excessive baggage.



I don't mean bring your smallest suitcase, although that sounds convenient, too. I mean that you should do your best to start your campus visit with an open mind. Perhaps you have a friend who hated it there, and you're predisposed to think you will, too. Perhaps it's a campus you think you already know well, because it's in your hometown or you've been to football games there. Ditch the biases you have, and get ready to soak up new information. Starting your campus visit convinced you already know what to expect will prevent you from truly absorbing what it could be for you.

And leave the family squabble baggage behind, too. In my experience, campus visits can be a wonderful time for parents to take a back seat and observe their student as the young adult that she is, leading

the way in what could be her world for the next four years. Parents, let the student be the guide. In fact, urge or even require them to take the lead on campus visit planning and the conversations you have while you're there.

In terms of family "baggage", pack lightly, too. Leave your petty disputes and the dysfunctional relationships that all parents and children have at home. This isn't the time to scold Hannah for her *surprisingly low third quarter geometry grade*.

And students -- cut your parents some slack. They've taken off work to be here and incurred expense to bring you along. They're likely freaking out at the possibility of you living away from home or figuring out how to pay for all this. True, you're the one attending college, but this is a major life change for the whole family. Acknowledge that you're not the only one with emotions running high during a campus visit. Act like the adult that you are and respect your parents' sacrifice to make this visit possible. No eye rolling or "whatever" remarks.

Everybody has skin in the game, and it behooves you to work as a team to find the best options.

In my experience, some of the most fun trips my son Jack and I have had have been campus visits out of town. When it's just the two of us, the dynamic's different than when the whole family's along. We relate to one another differently. On campus, I see him in a new light and realize that in just a little while, he's going to be setting foot on campus on his own. Some of our best, deepest conversations have happened on the way to or home from a campus visit. Getting on campus has a way of opening your mind and your heart. This is just one of the many reasons I love visiting campuses.

10. Avoid major decisions.



You may be tempted to fall in love and make a final decision after the first visit. Don't. I've heard the following from students on numerous occasions.

"I just knew from the moment I walked into campus..." This is a cliché and there's certainly validity to the impact a strong first impression can have on your final decision. But don't discount the homework you still have to do and all the factors to be weighed. Ever. I often say that if I'm really doing it well, my job as a college planner is to put students in the position of having to make a really, really hard decision from among several ideal options. With ACT/SAT test prep that helps achieve awesome scores, guiding course decisions, advising on which campuses to consider and counseling on the financial aspect of the college planning process, my

goal is that there are 2-3 campuses in the end that the student is in love with, and would be happy with any of the three. Then in the spring of your senior year of high school, you have to choose just one of these appealing options as your college destination. A lot of work and research has to happen to make a truly informed decision from among these three. The campus visit is one essential part of the decision making process, but it's not the only one.

Resist the temptation to fall in love at first sight. That sudden rush of euphoria you felt may be as much about skipping out on high school chemistry and calculus to visit the campus, as it is about what you're actually seeing. To me, there is nothing quite like the early morning dew beneath your feet as you stroll across a luscious green quad towards the spires of a library decked out in collegiate Gothic trimmings. If it happens to be an autumn Friday or Saturday, with the crisp smell of leaves in the air and the hum of a far-off marching band practicing before the big game, it's almost impossible

not to tell yourself, “Oh yes, this is where I belong!” But that very scene plays out at hundreds of campuses across the country -- not just this one. So fill up your dance card with campus visits to all sorts of schools before you get too starry eyed. You’ll be glad you did.

I’m convinced the best thing you can do at the end of the visit is talk. Talk amongst yourselves. It’s tempting to pile in the car, plop down on a hotel bed or say, “Hmm, that was nice. Who’s hungry?” The best thing, however, is to find a spot and not only go through the questions above, but raise more questions.

- How does this compare to our last visit?
- Which programs, features and benefits stuck out and why?
- What was the preeminent vibe on campus?
- How do I see myself fitting in with the students we saw?

Grab some coffee or a meal and share your impressions and memories of the day’s events. Tell each other what stuck out in your mind and share your reactions to the people, places and activities you witnessed. Not everyone will have the same opinions or impressions, and that’s perfectly acceptable. Dad’s impressions of the dorms are less important than the prospective student’s. But it’s good to get things out in the open and be very honest with each other about what matters and what doesn’t. I highly recommend the student and even one parent jot down notes and do some quick journaling to capture everything in as great a detail as possible.

If you’re all too fried from travel and the barrage of information to talk right away, agree to a time shortly after the visit to debrief, and get it on the schedule now, within a couple of days of the visit, so the information’s fresh in your mind. And remember, there is no one, single way to visit, and each successive trip will help you become a better overall judge of the quality – and qualities – of a college.

How Your Campus Visit Fits Into the Overall Picture



Visiting a campus is like tasting a new food. You don't know what something tastes like by reading the recipe. And of course it's not enough to just click through the website or take a virtual tour because you can't get a true flavor from mere text and images. Experience leads to knowledge and better understanding. After each visit, no matter how positive or negative, you'll be that much better prepared to make an informed decision. In a way, a campus visit is a very inexpensive way to test-drive or "own" a college for a day. The value of that experience cannot be underestimated.

Your visit is the experiential part of your overall college planning process. When combined with preparing yourself academically and for great ACT/SAT test scores, conducting online research,

reading about each campus, talking to current and former students, talking with faculty members, comparing your own notes of campus visits and your research to see how the campuses stack up against one another and your college application process, you'll get a complete picture of which colleges could be your best fit. Combine that with some careful self-reflection and introspection about how your college experience will be a key tool to get you where you want to go, and what type of person and student you are, and you'll have the information you need to make an informed college decision during the spring of your senior year of high school.

I wish you all the best. Now it's time to get that next campus visit scheduled! Good luck!

Don't forget to use my Campus Visit Capture Tool on the following pages. For each campus you visit, print a copy of these pages of this PDF and use it (one for each campus) to document your campus visits. Or print one copy and keep your own notes in a notebook or even on your phone. *Evernote* is a great app you can use for note-taking, as well. And remember to refer often to this e-book, the 10 Never-Skip Steps for Making The Most of Campus Visits.



Campus Visit Capture Tool

BASIC INFO

Name of College/University: Visit Date:

Weather/Conditions: Tour Guide Name/Contact Info:

Cool People I Met:

GUIDED TOUR NOTES/OVERALL IMPRESSIONS (Take some time immediately following your guided tour of the campus to record your thoughts. You may wish to jot additional notes on the way home or shortly after your campus visit.)

1. What stood out?
2. Was there an “aha” moment for you? When and where did it occur?
3. What did you not see or did they not mention that you need to know more about or expected to see?
4. Was there anything that surprised you?
5. What about the visit helped you “see yourself here”? (or “see your student here”), OR just as helpful, “what about the visit made you think perhaps this isn’t a good fit?”

If this is your very first campus tour, answer a few questions about campus tours in general.

1. How did you feel touring a college?
2. Was this what you expected?
3. Would you do anything differently next time?

STUDENT CHATS (Chat with AT LEAST 5 students, & ideally more. Capture notes from their responses to 1-3 in the boxes below.)

1. Why did you choose College X? (NOTE: Always try to use the name of the college when asking questions instead of a generic "this school".)
2. Do you mind if I ask what other colleges you considered, and what tipped the scales in favor of this college?
3. If you had a magic wand, what one thing about this college would you change?

Student 1 Name:
Major/Year in School:
Responses:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Student 2 Name:
Major/Year in School:
Responses:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Student 3 Name:
Major/Year in School:
Responses:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Student 4 Name:
Major/Year in School:
Responses:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Student 5 Name:
Major/Year in School:
Responses:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Student 6 Name:
Major/Year in School:
Responses:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

PROFESSOR CHAT (Chat with a professor in your desired field of study. Capture brief notes below. These questions are just ideas. Feel free to include your own.)

1. Can you tell me a little bit about what you've observed about the students who excel here in this field of study? What do they have in common, in terms of experiences, interests, attitudes or habits?

2. I'm interested in studying _____, and pursuing a career in _____. Can you give me a sense of how the University of X is uniquely able to help me to achieve my goals?

3. What are the most common "overlap schools" for the University of X, and what sets this school apart in your experience? (An overlap school is essentially the same as a "top competitor" for a college -- a school to which students who've chosen to attend this school typically also apply, or in some cases, where students would opt to attend instead of THIS college.)

4. I plan to major in _____. Could you give me a sense of what a typical freshman year would look like for me in terms of classes, activities, etc. and what, if any, classes I might take from you during that time?

DOWNTIME THOUGHTS

Find some time during your visit to process, some downtime to let your thoughts flow.

Think. Reflect. Consider the possibilities. Open up your mind. Imagine what it might be like to be sitting at that very point on campus a year or two from now, or during your final semester. Capture your thoughts here.

Post-Visit Debrief

1. How does this compare to our last visit?
2. Which programs, features and benefits stuck out and why?
3. What was the preeminent vibe on campus?
4. How do I see myself fitting in with the students we saw?

CAMPUS HOT SPOTS & HANGOUTS:

COOL CHARACTERS I MET OR SAW:

WHAT EXCITES ME MOST ABOUT THIS CAMPUS:

WHAT CONCERNS ME MOST ABOUT THIS CAMPUS:

OTHER THOUGHTS:

NEXT STEPS:

(Actions you can take or more information you need to track down about this campus.)