

making the most of college visits

“Can’t I just take a virtual tour online?”

While a virtual tour is a great way to *begin* the college search, there’s a big difference between how a campus looks and feels in real life versus how it appears in a slick brochure or on the Web. By visiting in person, you can:

- get a feel for that school’s distinct vibe, and a firsthand look at college facilities
- schedule a personal interview with admissions personnel
- talk with professors and students face to face
- view the surrounding area

When to go

Your goal is to meet students and faculty, so plan to visit when the college is in session. Spring of junior year, and late summer (after college classes resume) or early September of your senior year are great times to visit.

Arranging the visit

Schedule your visit online or by phone ahead of time. Ideally, you want to be on campus during the week so that you can see college life in action and perhaps stay overnight in the dorm.

- Sign up for a tour and an info session, arrange to sit in on a class, and set up meetings with faculty or coaches if desired. Will the college provide a meal or overnight accommodations? Is an interview encouraged?
- Do you have questions about college financing? Make an appointment with the financial aid office.

Once you’re on campus

- **Take a student-led tour.** Ask guides what they like and dislike about the college. Why did they choose to study there?
- **Talk to students and faculty members.** Chat with students you meet, admissions and financial aid staff, and faculty and coaches. Find out all you can!
- **Hang out at different locations on campus,** taking in the surroundings and student vibe. Walk around by yourself to get a feel for the campus. Do you like the buildings and the campus layout? Think about what the campus would be like in different seasons. Can you picture yourself there for four years?
- **Inquire about the social scene.** Do students stay on campus or head elsewhere on weekends? How much of a role does Greek life (sororities and fraternities) play on campus?
- **Check out the nearest town.** Can you walk there? What transportation is available? Where are the closest parks, grocery stores, coffee houses, restaurants, or malls? Do you like the area? Will you be able to continue to do the activities you enjoy?

Tip: Getting a head start junior year is helpful for students who plan to apply early action or early decision, will participate in fall sports and extracurricular commitments, or plan to visit a number of out-of-state schools. Do your research online to pare down the possibilities, then plan to visit those colleges that most interest you.

The interview quandary.

Talking with someone in the admissions office can indicate to the college that you’re interested in what the school has to offer as well as give you insight on campus life. Think of any interview as a conversation — it’s an opportunity for you to get an inside look at the college and a chance for the admissions folks to get to know more about you. Prepare a few questions ahead of time. Then relax and be yourself!

Be sure to check out

residence halls How are they set up? Are first-year students separated or with upper-class students? Options for special-interest housing? What are the bathrooms like?

student center Are students hanging out or studying there? What facilities are available? Coffee shops or other eateries?

dining hall(s) How many are there? When are they open? What are the meal plan options? Sample the food!

sports or other facilities How state-of-the-art are the facilities? Who is using them? Hours open?

library How big is it, and how are study areas organized? Are online resources/databases easily accessible?

computer lab Are the computers up-to-date? Are lab techs available for trouble-shooting? Any special programs for buying a computer as an incoming student?

science labs What equipment is available for undergraduate use?

campus bookstore What can you buy? How expensive is it? Hours open?

health center/medical office How close is it to the dorms? What is the typical wait for treatment?

career planning office What resources are available? Is there help with internships or part-time work for undergraduates? Tutoring or support services? Job guidance for graduates?

art/music studios and galleries What is displayed? Who is using the space?

The freshman experience.

What happens outside of class will be a huge part of your life on campus. Your roommates, hall-mates, and dorm-mates are the first people you meet when you arrive and are often the initial way students make friends. Find out the options for freshman housing, orientation programs, and special first-year student trips or seminars.

Bottom line:

Seeing is believing. Go visit, *without* your friends along. Spend a night on campus, eat in the dining halls, attend a class, read bulletin boards, and talk with current students. Ask yourself: **Can I see myself living here?** Go with your gut instinct. Better to find that out now than when you're moving into the dorm. Above all, don't let where your friends are going shape your decision. This is about YOU!

Questions to ask admissions officers, campus tour guides, or students

- What makes this college unique?
- What are the smallest and largest class sizes?
- How many classes are taught by a teacher's assistant (TA)? By a professor?
- How competitive is the school academically? In sports?
- How does academic advising work?
- What day trips or weekend excursions do students take? Are weekend activities offered on campus?
- What clubs/student groups exist?
- Where are the nearest coffee houses?
- How are student housing decisions made? Are students required to live on campus? Is housing guaranteed? Does the college or university lease off-campus housing for students or is it all through private individuals?
- Are first-year students permitted to have cars on campus? What other types of transportation are available?
- What employment and work-study options are available?
- What percentage of graduates get jobs within six months of graduation?
- How effective is campus security?

Take it with you

- Pick up copies of campus newspapers for a glimpse into day-to-day campus life, politics, and general attitudes.
- Get official school materials, such as department brochures and course catalogs to look over later.
- Obtain business cards of admissions or financial aid personnel so that you'll have contacts for further questions.
- Take notes and photos. While the campus may seem distinct in your mind now, a reminder can be useful once you're back home.

Stay on track with more college planning tips at www.vsacroadmaps.org