

What to Look for on Campus

Having worked with many students after fruitful campus visits, we find that they usually return with new impressions and different thoughts about places they knew only from written material, pictures, and what people had told them. These changed ideas are more valuable when the student organizes them into a coherent pattern that can be used in later decision-making. The College Visit Summary Sheet should be filled out immediately after the end of the visit. Students who have used this sheet tell us that they take notes during the visit and then consult them when filling out the sheet.

To gather the kind of information you will need, ask questions, like the ones that follow, of the admissions staff, students, faculty, coaches, alumni, and employees like campus security personnel. After a couple of visits, you will develop your own investigative routine and will discern which questions are most important to you.

The Social Concerns

- What are the living arrangements in dormitories and fraternity or sorority houses? What options are there for choosing roommates? Is off-campus housing available at reasonable rents? Are there residency requirements or guaranteed housing? For which years?
- Are there coeducational dormitories by floor? By building? None? Are there quiet study hours? If so, are the hours enforced? Are there upper-class student RAs (resident advisors) or faculty in the dorms?
- Is student housing adequate and pleasant? Are students happy or unhappy with accommodations? How are roommates assigned? How flexible is the school about changing or reassigning roommates?
- If there are fraternities and sororities, what percentage of the students belong to them and what percentage live in their housing? Is there first-year rushing? What is the college's official attitude toward them? Is there a stated policy on possible fraternity or sorority discrimination?
- What are the social opportunities if you choose not to join a Greek organization or club, or if they do not exist on campus? What facilities are available for parties, dances, and other activities? Is there another formal residential life system, based on clusters or social houses, for example?
- What activities, such as concerts, speakers, informal athletics, and tours, does the college sponsor? Do most students remain on campus on weekends or is it a "suitcase" college?
- What is the makeup of the student body in terms of geographical origin, and what are the students' academic interests? What are the most popular majors? How many students go on to graduate school?
- Are there advantages to the school's size? Disadvantages?
- How good is campus security? Is crime a concern? Is there alcohol or drug abuse?
- Is there much political activism? Is there pressure to conform, or can you "do your own thing"?
- What control do students have over campus social and academic life?
- Is there a diverse student body to allow for exposure to a variety of backgrounds and experience? What percentage of the student body is African-American, Hispanic, Caucasian, Asian, Native American? What percentage is Catholic, Protestant, Muslim, Jewish, or other significant religious faiths?

Are the facilities for various religious groups adequate? If the college is religiously affiliated, how do students of differing faiths fit in?

How are ethnic and racial minorities accommodated? Are there special programs and facilities for minority members who want them? Is there affinity housing? A multicultural resource center?

Are jobs available to those not receiving financial aid? What services are there for job placement in the summer or after graduating?

What is the ratio of men to women? Is there any evidence of sexism?

For single-sex colleges: What arrangements are there for dating? What are the social activities?

What are the most common student complaints? What procedures exist for students to convey their complaints to someone in authority? What do students say they like most about the college?

Before leaving any campus, make sure that you have been provided with all relevant statistical data you may not have found on the college's Web site or in its viewbook. Often, colleges will make their longer course bulletin or catalog available in their admissions office, along with many smaller pamphlets and brochures describing particular clubs and programs.

The Academic Concerns

What departments are considered outstanding, average, or weak? (Admissions officers and faculty members can be surprisingly candid about this.) Is there more academic opportunity than is listed in the catalog (special research projects, field trips, and so on)? Perhaps a new program has been recently created?

Can you create your own interdepartmental major?

Do you have to do independent work? Are there off-campus reading periods? What would be your chances of getting into an honors program?

Are there college-sponsored foreign study programs? Internship opportunities? How easy does the college make it for students to participate in these activities, and how many students take advantage of them?

Are classes large or small? How many lecture courses will you take? In courses with large enrollments, are there small sections?

Is the faculty available to students after class? (Ask students this one.) Is there diversity in faculty background? That is, do most of the members come from different regions or from one region? Have most of them been educated at one kind of university or at many different kinds of universities? Is there ethnic, racial, international, and gender diversity among the faculty?

Are most course requirements cut-and-dried, with two-hour exams, one paper, and a final examination? Or is there individuality in the way different professors grade and structure their classes?

Are introductory courses taught by professors or by graduate assistants? Are freshmen taught by top members of the faculty?

- What recognition is there for advanced courses taken in high school?
- How good is faculty advising? Are there remedial or tutorial services? Is there a learning support program, and if so, how well developed is it?
- How good is the career counseling and placement office in helping students plan for jobs or graduate schools?
- What are the most important factors influencing admission decisions?
- In the interviewer's (or tour guide's or alumni's or professor's) view, what makes this college distinctive, compared to other colleges of its size and type?

The Facilities

- What health care arrangements are there?
- Does the library have most of the research materials you will need in your field?
- Are freshmen given space and carrels in the library for study? If not, is other space assigned for study? Where?
- How good is the bookstore?
- Are there enough parking spaces? Will you need or be allowed to have a car?
- Are laboratories kept up-to-date? Are art studios available? How good is the theater? Are there music practice facilities?
- Are athletic facilities taken up mostly by varsity sports, and will you be able to use the gymnasium, pool, or tennis courts on a regular basis? What kind of intramural athletic programs are there?
- Is the campus well wired for the Internet? Are dorm rooms, commons areas, and the library connected to the Internet? Is there a campus intranet, including e-mail services and a common laser printing facility? Are students furnished with or expected to have their own laptop or desktop computer? How up-to-date are the public computing facilities?
- What commercial outlets are nearby? Are "town-gown" relations tense? Are there restaurants and motels nearby for visiting relatives and friends?
- What meal plans are available? What dining facilities are available? Are students happy with the facilities and choices? Can students get food deliveries?