

Putting colleges to the test

How students and their parents can make the most of campus tours

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Somewhere in the middle of an Ultimate Frisbee game in USC's quad, Jesuit High School senior Brandon Wong knew this was the college for him.

The game took place during a weekend experiment in USC dorm life in March, designed to help Brandon make his decision. He'd already been accepted to the university, but he was nervous about his application to participate in an intense honors program when he happened to join the Frisbee game with some guys who were already in the program.

"A lot of them had nothing to say but great things about the program," says Brandon, 17. "It helped me be less nervous about how hard it was going to be."

Visiting college campuses has been a family project since Brandon's freshman year of high school. Nearly every vacation since then has involved a stop or two at a college, and he's been to more than 10, including several ivy-covered universities back East.

Like Brandon, many high school seniors are making their final trips to the colleges that have accepted them, as the decision deadline approaches in early May. At the same time, some juniors are using spring break to start their searches.

These prospective college students are among more than 16 million students who will be enrolled in American colleges and universities this fall, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. With the price of tuition, room and board having doubled since 1990, the pressure to pick the right school is greater than ever.

So how can you make the most of a campus visit? Is it a good idea to bring friends along? Should parents ask a lot of questions or let their teen take the lead? What are the right questions to ask?

Get up and get out there

The best way to really get the feel of a college campus may be to shut off the computer and go see it.

"I tell kids, 'If you attend a college you've never visited, it's like marrying someone you've never met,' " says Pat Stokes, a guidance counselor at C.K. McClatchy High School in Sacramento. "I feel very scared when a kid's going to college and they've never seen it."

"It kind of really brings it home," agrees Brandon's dad, Stephen Wong. "All the picture books look the same; they're all beautiful. I think they all get their pictures from the same place."

A visit to a college campus gives students a chance to observe everything from the weather to the students' wardrobes.

While you're wandering the campus, pay attention to whether the students are sitting together or alone, to get an idea of how they relate to one another, says Sonja Montiel, president of College Confidence, an independent college counseling service.

Montiel gives this advice:

- * Be sure to head to the residence halls and peek into a dorm room. If you can, check out one they didn't show you on the tour and ask yourself whether you could live there.

- * Stop a student on campus and ask for an opinion of the school - if given the choice, would that student go there again? Student tour guides may respond with rehearsed answers, but the random student in the quad tends to be more honest.

"College students are very opinionated," Stephen Wong says. "We never have any problem getting them to express their opinion."

- * Keep the weather in mind during your visit - could a California kid really handle a school located in a snowy or cold environment?

- * Jot down everything that crosses your mind, and make sure that you don't visit more than two campuses a day; otherwise, the specifics of the universities will start to blur.

Quinn McCutchan, a 22-year-old student tour guide at UC Berkeley, says she wishes students and parents would research more of the numbers before they hit the campus. She's committed all the numbers - such as enrollment and financial figures - to memory, but she says students should be asking more pointed, personal questions of the tour guide. She suggests asking guides about such matters as how many of their friends graduated in four years or studied abroad.

Ask the tough questions

Experts advise parents to avoid being overbearing, but it's important for parents to ask the questions their kids might not have considered.

"You don't want to be the only one whose parents are asking a dumb question," says Brandon, who suffered a cringe-worthy moment when his dad asked a question about the honors program Brandon had applied to: "So, like, really - how hard is it to get into here?"

Brandon reacted in classic teenage fashion: "I'd look away and pretend that he wasn't my dad."

Students often have stories of their parents embarrassing them on college visits, but while the teens are turning eight shades of red after another "Did-he-really-just-ask-that?" moment, they're often learning more about the campus than they would have without their goofy parents by their side.

Brandon says he's glad his parents were there, armed with questions that he wouldn't have thought to ask.

"I didn't really ask that many questions, 'cause I wasn't that comfortable," Brandon says.

Parents should ask most of the detailed questions, leaving the teens free to explore the campus, experts say. At every campus they've visited, Sheree Wong has been sure to ask about the faculty-student ratio, the attention the students are getting, the safety of the campus and more obscure things such as how easy it is to get to the airport.

"Those things the kids just don't ever think about," she says.

Teens often are more interested in the dorms, the student hangouts and wandering the campus extensively.

"We just kind of let him do what he wants to do, and we just follow him around," Sheree Wong says. "I actually think that it helps him to know that Mom and Dad are taking care of all the details like that. There's a sixth sense of knowing that the campus feels right."

Productive with parents

And while checking out campuses with a bunch of friends may be more fun, students often are better off touring the school with just their parents, since friends may distract them, says Mary Hesser, the director of guidance services at Christian Brothers High School in Sacramento.

Elizabeth Shirey, a 17-year-old senior at St. Francis High School in Sacramento, has visited schools with her friends and just with her mom. She says it was fun to have friends along, but it was easier to focus with her mother.

"I probably wouldn't recommend it," Elizabeth says of touring with buddies. "If you get bogged down in talking to your friends, you lose focus on the campus."

Eighteen-year-old Julie Clark says she's had fun checking out schools with her mom, since it's given them a last chance to bond before she heads to Lookout Mountain, Ga., to attend Covenant College in the fall.

"It's just cool that I have my mom there, to kind of have my last little bit of, 'Mom, what do I do?' " says Julie, a senior at St. Francis. "I know I can always still call her, but she's not going to be there."

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