

A Guide to Visiting Colleges

A visit to a college of interest is the best way to know if it is potentially a good fit for you. Visits can be time-consuming and expensive, but considering the cost of higher education today, you should make these trips if possible. Visits in the Northwest (even if you don't intend to attend college here) can provide a student with a good feel for the different types and sizes of colleges.

Timing of Visits

College visits make sense during two different phases of this process. **The first is when you are in the “shopping around” stage:** during your junior year and the fall of your senior year. This time frame has the advantage of helping you decide which colleges truly interest you. Visits early in the process are also the ideal way to determine what you are looking for in a college and to assess the role that various factors might play as you decide where to apply. (A handful of students begin to visit colleges—usually on a more casual and exploratory basis—prior to the junior year. Some students are ready for this and others are not.)

The second stage of visits comes after you have received admission decisions. Students considering more distant colleges sometimes visit *after* they have been accepted (hopefully these students have already visited *some* of the colleges on their application list). Visits after a student has been admitted can be very helpful in deciding which college to attend. This option can work well, but you need to keep in mind that you may only have a few weeks in which to visit and make a decision by May 1 (the date colleges expect to hear back from you). It is not unusual for colleges to plan special programs for accepted candidates in April.

Colleges also offer visitation days for groups of prospective students throughout the year. The advantage of these events is that the college will have an array of people available and programs designed to help you learn more about the college. The disadvantage is that you are seeing the campus with a large group of prospective students and in a carefully orchestrated program that may not match the day to day feel of the campus.

It is ideal to visit a college when it is in session. However, there is also much to be gained from a visit when the college is not in session (you can still get a sense of the setting and facilities, and the tour guides are usually current students).

Arranging College Visits

Most visits are arranged by calling the admissions office or by signing up online. Give the admissions office plenty of notice so that they can accommodate your interests and arrange a good visit for you (at least two weeks and more at certain times of year and in some locations). Tours and interview slots may fill up.

Colleges generally have information on their websites (under admissions) about tour times and other opportunities for visiting students and parents. You will often find directions, hotel information, and other useful tips for those traveling to campus.

When planning a trip to multiple campuses, pace yourself. We generally recommend one to two visits per day.

What to Include in a Campus Visit

In addition to the usual components of a campus visit listed below, you may want to explore the campus on your own, pick up a school newspaper, eat in the dining hall, chat with students that you see on campus, etc.

- All colleges offer **tours** for students and parents. Tours are almost always led by current students. Some colleges offer tours on Saturdays.
- Many colleges also offer **group information sessions** for students and parents. These are typically hosted by a representative from the admission office.
- Some colleges offer **interviews** or an opportunity for the student to meet with an admission representative. Interview slots fill quickly at certain times of year, so plan ahead.
- Students may be able to **visit classes**.
- If appropriate, inquire about arranging to meet with a **coach** or a **faculty member** of a department of interest.
- Some colleges offer **overnight visits** hosted by a current student. Typically these are on weeknights only.

(At some colleges interviews, class visits, and overnights may be limited to seniors.)

After a Visit

- It is a good idea to make notes soon after the visit while information and impressions are still fresh in your mind.
- Parents: We encourage you to share your impressions of a campus, but only after you have heard what your child thinks. Listen carefully and ask questions that will help the student reflect thoughtfully on the information gathered from a visit.
- A word of caution: In your visits you will interact with a variety of students, faculty, and administrators. There are excellent tour guides and ineffective tour guides and there will be admissions representatives that you will connect with and those you won't. Try not to let one mediocre tour guide or one not so dynamic admissions representative spoil a campus that might otherwise be a good match for you.

THE INTERVIEW

The interview can be one of the most stress-producing elements of the college application process. In reality, interviews are not usually required by colleges and generally don't play a significant role in admissions decisions. That said, an interview can be a positive factor and students should take advantage of the opportunity interviews offer (to show interest, learn more about the college, and provide the interviewer with a good impression of you that will be noted in your file). Actually a conversation or an "exchange of information" might be a better term to use here, since this more accurately describes the situation and makes students feel less "on the spot."

Very few colleges require interviews and there are a number of colleges that don't offer interviews. Some colleges recommend interviews and others offer them and simply leave it up to the student. Options for interviews may vary at a college (as does the value attached to them at different colleges). There are on-campus interviews and interviews held in the Portland area by alumni or visiting admissions representatives. Inquire early in your senior year about interview options for the colleges that interest you.

Remember in your interview, as in your essay, to be yourself. Colleges are looking for a mix of students. Of course, a certain amount of nervousness goes along with this type of situation. The interviewers realize this, too. Try to overcome those initial "butterflies," feel comfortable talking about yourself, and get on to learning what you want to know about the college. Admissions officers understand that some students are shy, but making eye contact and speaking up are important.

In **preparing for the interview**, give some thought to how you will answer questions about common topics and types of questions for these interviews. Why are you interested in this college? Describe an intellectually stimulating class that you have had in high school. What qualities and strengths will you bring to your campus community? What extracurricular activity has been the most meaningful to you and why? What books have you enjoyed reading in the past year? How did you spend the last two summers? Describe a challenge you have faced and overcome. What do you do for fun? Describe some of your goals for college. What interests do you want to pursue in college? There are no right or wrong answers to these questions, but having some thoughts organized about these topics in advance will help.

Admissions officers want this to be an occasion when you can obtain information, too. Come prepared with thoughtful questions about the college (you should have some knowledge of the college, but you do not need to be an expert). Alumni interviewers may want to share their enthusiasm for their college. Listen carefully and respond graciously. Shake the person's hand firmly and look him or her in the eye. Avoid extremes with your clothing (not too dressy or casual).

POSSIBLE QUESTIONS FOR STUDENTS TO ASK COLLEGES

STUDENT LIFE

- What is unique about your college?
- What are the advantages and disadvantages of the college's location and setting?
- Describe the strengths and weaknesses of this college.
- Where do your students come from geographically?
- Talk about the diversity of the students and faculty. In relation to issues of diversity, what challenges does the school face and what strengths does it have?
- What kinds of activities are available to students? Which organizations are the largest and most active?
- What percent of students live on campus? Is housing guaranteed for four years? How affordable is off-campus housing and how easy is it to obtain?
- What are the various types of dorm/housing options? How are dormitories supervised? Rules? Security?

- How are roommates selected?
- Are you a commuter campus? Do most students stay on campus during the weekends?
- What are the dining options and meal plans?
- What opportunities do students have to interact with the administration?
- What are some current issues of concern on campus among students? Among faculty?
- What role do groups such as sororities/fraternities play on campus?
- Are athletics a major part of the school?
- What is the role of religion on campus?
- How is public transportation? What transportation does the school provide?
- What do you think are the main reasons why students who are admitted decide to enroll here? Why do students leave the college?

ACADEMICS

- What is the average class size and the range of class sizes?
- Describe your academic advising.
- Describe the relationship between faculty and students.
- Do professors teach all classes or are there graduate students involved in teaching or leading sections?
- Describe your distribution requirements or core requirements for students?
- What are the most popular majors? (Don't necessarily equate popular with "best" or vice versa, but it is interesting to know which majors have high numbers of students.)
- Tell me about your _____ Department (depth and breadth of courses, areas of concentration, facilities, opportunities for research and internships, co-op programs)
- What percentage of students who begin at your college complete a degree at your college?
- What percentage of your students go on to graduate school? Jobs?
- Tell me about options for study abroad (length of programs, who leads, programs with other colleges, faculty led). What portion of students participate?
- What laboratory facilities are available for science majors or language majors? Studios for artists/musicians?
- Can you transfer from one major/school to another with ease?

APPLICATION PROCEDURES/FINANCIAL AID

- What are your deadline options?
- If the college offers early action or early decision, what are the advantages and disadvantages of these options for the applicant?
- What do you focus on in making admissions decisions?
- Does my choice of major/school impact my chance for admission?
- What role do college admission tests play in your admissions process?
- Do you consider demonstrated interest in admissions decisions (the amount and type of contact the student has had with the college)?
- Do you have options for students to interview? What role do interviews play in the admissions process?
- What role do special interests/qualities play in the decision process (legacy, ethnicity, special talents)?
- Do you admit on a "need blind" or "need aware" basis in relation to financial aid?
- What portion of demonstrated financial need are you typically able to meet?
- Do you offer merit-aid and are there special applications or deadlines that I should be aware of?