

The Ultimate Scouting Trip: An Insider's Guide to Seeing Beyond the Tour into the Heart of the School

Is what you see really what you get? Is the frosting as good as the cake? The experts suggest there is no perfect school for everyone but rather just a perfect fit. Hopefully, my experience in admissions will help you gain a clearer picture of choosing the right school for you. Here's some advice to make the most of your college visit.

Plan Ahead: *Do your homework beforehand.*

1. Prioritize your non-negotiable punch list. Research the school before you visit. What components of the school do you absolutely need to see? For instance, a potential theater major would desire to see the theater; a chemist, the labs; and a lacrosse player, the playing fields.
2. Each school tries to fill a niche in the market. What's this particular school's specialty? Is their niche the golden calf or are there other programs equally as strong?
3. Does the school allow interviews with admissions representatives? If so, take time in your trip to schedule an interview.
4. Make sure you schedule your visit while class is in session, preferably on a Monday, Wednesday or Friday in the late morning. The majority of students nationwide take an 11:00 a.m. class on these days. Visiting a school with an active student body will paint a drastically different picture than an empty campus.
5. In addition, do your best to connect with friends, family, or alumni from your high school already familiar with the school. A true insider for a university will offer a wealth of knowledge not found in the glossy brochures. If possible, stay with a college student overnight.

The Tour:

1. When visiting a college, do your best to keep in mind that a college is much more than bricks and mortar; rather, a college provides endless opportunities for growth academically, socially, and spiritually through an extensive community of individuals. Relationships in college will serve as the cornerstone for your development. As you interact with individuals on the tour, ask yourself, "will this environment serve as catalyst for personal growth?"
2. Tour guides are not necessarily representative of the school. Do not discount or endorse a school on any one person. Keep in mind that tour guides are trained to give you the "right" answer. Most schools ask visitors to evaluate tour guides. Those tour guides who continually receive poor ratings are no longer tour guides.
3. Make sure to pick up a current student newspaper. Admissions offices have been known to get rid of bad newspapers and will rarely offer disparaging news about their university while a current newspaper will give you a clear pipeline to the student's voice.
4. Stop and ask students or professors questions. Their willingness or reluctance to answer questions will offer a window into the heart of the school. In most cases, if students love their college, they are more than willing to give their opinions.

5. Do your best to see a dorm room other than the one they show you on the tour. Most tours will display one of their roomier dorm rooms. Also, remember that size only matters if you plan on spending lots of time in your dorm room. In addition, if it matters to you, check and see if the bathrooms are communal or private. You also might want to see who cleans the bathrooms.
6. While on the tour, ask the guide what sort of traditions the school has that makes it unique. For instance, at Wake Forest after major school accomplishments the students “roll the quad,” and around Christmas there is a Moravian Lovefeast that serves as a student favorite event.
7. Take time to eat the food. Remember, if you do not have a car, you will be eating this food for four years. Check out the variety of options available as well as their hours. How does the meal plan work? Ask the current students which option most upperclassmen choose.
8. As you walk across the campus take note of students’ computer usage. In today’s technological age, wireless access anywhere on campus is a major push on college campuses. Are students online as they are studying outside on a nice sunny day? Do students need to purchase a certain type of computer, is it included in tuition, or are there computer labs?
9. Do you observe any construction? Construction on a campus might be an annoyance when visiting, but it indicates growth, resources, and a desire for the college to improve its facilities. Are the other facilities up to your needs? The library? Music practice rooms? Chapel? Workout facilities? Most schools have different facilities for scholarship athletes and the general population, so be sure to ask about the difference.
10. Stop by the post office and the student center. Both of these locations are historically plastered with flyers from student groups. Read the flyers in order to get a better feel for the student body.

Schools do not exist in a vacuum. In addition, to the actual tour, take time to visit the surrounding area. How do the locals view the school? Are students involved in the community? College is a defining time in your life. Choosing the right college for you is one of the biggest decisions in your young lives. Hopefully this quick overview will offer additional insight when making your decision.

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Sidebar

“I hate it when tour guides act like machines, as if they have a canned response for your every question” Katie (senior in high school).

“My biggest turnoff occurred when the school failed to mention their academics, rather, instead continually heralded their football program. By the end of my visit, it became

very apparent where academics stood in the hierarchy of the school” Alexandria (senior in high school).

“Spending the night offered me the real feel for the school” Rex (senior in high school).

“Sitting in classes allowed me to ask questions as well as to discern whether students truly owned their education” Tripp (senior in high school).

“One school I visited praised the safety of their campus. I kid you not; I turned the corner to find myself right in the middle of a crime scene with blood everywhere. Needless to say, I cut that school from my list” Maggie (senior in high school).