

A PICTURE IS NOT THE NEXT BEST THING TO BEING THERE: MAKE COLLEGE VISITS COUNT

From the little notes in your in-box asking why you haven't yet filed an application to campus pictures designed to make you believe the quad is as comfortable as a resort, colleges are savvy marketers. A visit gives you the inside scoop. There are ways to make a visit count. First make sure you record your name with the admissions office in case they track student interest by visits.

Use your cellphone to take photos and keep notes, so you can remember what you saw. Otherwise if you visit more than one campus on a trip, you'll forget very quickly what makes each place unique.

Make sure that the friendly environment that the website touts is a reality outside the admissions office. Are students walking in big groups? Sitting alone in the cafeteria? Does your tour guide say hello to random people on school walkways? If you're lost on campus, does someone stop to take you where you're going and lead you there? Pick up a copy of the school newspaper, so you have a sense of the issues the college website doesn't cover.

Ask pointed questions, not just of your tour guide, so you can figure out if these are "your people". What are kids on campus talking about? Are the conversations in line with the things that are important to you? Are kids talking about a class that changed their perspective or a job they're going for? Is the social life organized around fraternities and sororities? What role do sporting events play on weekends? Do people dress the way you do? A pair of Frye boots or Birkenstocks can make you feel at home or not, so you have to be sensitive to certain vibes. Does the school bring in speakers on topics of interest to you? Concerts by performers you follow?

Walk the campus and see whether the physical plant is in line with the way you think college should be. Get a sense of the distance between dorms and classes and dorms and the gym and find out what and where the various dining options are. If you need to escape for a few hours, can you get a latte a few blocks from campus? Is there a central gathering place on campus, a student center or a main walkway? Can you cover the whole campus on foot? Is it okay with you

if you need to take a bus to get from one end of campus to another? Most schools look great when the sun shines. If you fall in love with a campus in a snowstorm or rainstorm, chances are this is a good fit for you.

Often the times you are most available to visit, in the summer, colleges are quietest. Is it worth it to see a campus that has cleared out for vacation? On a slow day, you can get your questions answered and better evaluate some of the external issues that may draw you to or detract from a place, such as walkability of the campus and proximity to culture or restaurants. You can always make a second visit if needed.