

Visit Colleges This Summer

When you begin to consider colleges to apply to, the options can be overwhelming. Knowing whether you want a big university or a small liberal arts college, if you prefer an urban or rural setting, and how far you are willing to go from home, can help to narrow your list. But categorizing schools by these criteria too early in your search can be a bit misleading.

For example, you may value the intimacy of a small college, but honors colleges and special programs at larger universities can make you feel like you are part of a small college community. You may be drawn to rural campuses because you dislike the congestion of cities, yet some urban colleges have lush green campuses with expansive lawns and little nearby street noise. As for the distance from home, you may find you will need a car to get to a college just a few hours away, while more distant destinations might offer easy access to mass transit options.

The best way to get a sense of whether a college is right for you is to see it in person. Even touring colleges that you don't plan to attend can help you define what is important to you. Summer, with fewer demands on your time than during the school year, can be a great time to make initial visits. You might consider planning a summer vacation that combines college visits with detours to historical sites and tourist attractions.

Before you go, peruse college websites to view their academic offerings, admission and financial aid policies, and housing options. If you have particular needs such as finding an accredited program in a particular major, wanting to study abroad during college, or hoping to be extensively involved in a particular extracurricular activity, look online for information about offerings. Create a list of questions you hope to have answered during your visit.

Schedules for group information sessions and campus tours should be available online; be sure to check if you need to register in advance. Consider whether you also want to schedule an interview with an admissions officer. While on-campus interviews are optional at most colleges, they can be a chance to make a positive impression and have more of your questions answered.

Group information sessions provide a forum to learn general information about the college, including admissions and financial aid policies and procedures. The guide for the campus tour will probably be a current undergraduate who should be a good source of information about life on campus. As you walk through the campus, look at classrooms,



common spaces, and dormitories. If it's summer, ask the tour guide how the atmosphere differs when classes are in session. Inquire about residential life, activities, accessibility of professors, and anything else that concerns or interests you.

After you complete the guided tour, walk around on your own. Go to the library and the bookstore. Eat a meal in the dining hall. Talk to students. Read the bulletin boards, and the school newspaper if it is available. Try to get a feel for campus life.

If you plan to board at college, remember that this will be your home for four years, so venture into the neighborhood. Where do students hang out? Are there restaurants or coffee shops that appeal to you? How much cultural life (plays, concerts, museums) are you seeking, and is it available, either on campus or nearby? If you like nature, are parks, lakes, or hiking trails accessible? What about transportation to and from home—is there easy access to a train station or airport if you will need to use them?

As you visit colleges, a short list of those to which you might want to apply will gradually emerge. Try to revisit these schools during the academic year to identify those that you really would like to attend. At that time, you can see classes in session, talk to more students, and possibly spend a night in a dorm. But do take advantage of summer to identify the colleges that warrant that second look.

Have fun touring! ■