

College Beat

What do Early Options Mean in the Process?

By
Nancy Federspiel

Visiting colleges can be an overwhelming part of the college selection process for both parents and students alike. With over 3,600 colleges in the country how do you know where to start and what do you look for? There is so much to know about each school - even if you had some incredible database in your mind about what each school offers, does your seventeen year-old even know what her preferences are anyway?

Ideally, you would have a list of schools that you are interested in and you would methodically tick off the list as you visit away. But what about all of you who don't have a list yet? It is a bit of a catch-22. How do I know what schools to visit if I don't have a list yet but how could I possibly have a list if I haven't visited any schools yet to learn what I like? My advice is to start off visiting schools that fall into very different categories that could help you identify some broad preferences. For example, visit an urban school and a rural school, a large school and a small school, a private school and a public school. (Some schools will overlap and fulfill more than one of these requirements and that is just fine.) By identifying your student's preferences for these broad categories you can start whittling down the possibilities for your list by process of elimination.

In order to gain the most benefit from a campus visit be sure to sign up for a campus tour and information session. They are truly informative and provide a perfect opportunity to ask whatever questions you may have about the institution. Beyond this, there are some other college visiting tips to keep in mind. First of all, try to avoid visiting campuses during the summer. Even though this is when you probably have the most free-time, you want to see the college in action with students to see and talk with. There is more to a campus than the physical buildings. You want your student to be able to see if she thinks she would fit in with the students she sees walking around campus.

Second, try to experience some of the college life away from your tour group. Have lunch in the dining hall or the student union before or after your tour. Hear what people are talking about and watch how they act - ideally you can wind up chatting with a student or two at lunch to see how they like it there.

Third, take notes about what you see. After fifteen visits and a year and a half of time passes the details will start to blur. Make sure that those notes are the student's

impressions of the college and not Mom and Dad's – ultimately they will be the one living through their college years at this institution and some one else's impressions may not ring true for them.

Fourth, ask a ton of questions. Tour guides are almost always students and they know first-hand what life is like on campus. Be particularly mindful to ask questions about the activities you hope to participate in if you were to attend college there. Questions like; "Do many underclassmen ever get parts in the theatrical productions? Or; "Is the study abroad program competitive to get into?" can go a long way in managing a student's expectations.

Lastly, enjoy yourselves. The college search process is such an exciting time of examining possibilities. Take your time with it and do whatever you can to relieve stress throughout the journey.

Bolton resident Nancy Federspiel is the Director of College Consulting Services. For more information, please visit www.ccs4college.com or call 978.634.1690.

