

Up Close and Personal with Campus Tours

You've thumbed through the glossy brochures and visited the Web sites. But beyond the pictures, what's life on a college campus really like? The best way to get the inside scoop is to go offline and take a campus tour. After all, there's nothing virtual about your college choice.

Scheduling Your Trip

Pick a normal school day when the regular flow of students is on campus. A weekday is best; but if you have to visit on a Saturday, make sure there will be staff members available to give you a tour and that you'll have access to university buildings. Some dates to avoid:

- Major events like graduation. Chaos never makes for a good visit.
- Popular three-day weekends and open houses. You'll get more out of it if there aren't six hundred people on the tour.
- University holidays. Most of the students will be gone, making the school appear empty.

Some schools allow prospective students to stay in a dorm or on-campus residence overnight. This will give you the chance to talk with current students and get a good sense of what life on campus is really like. If you're visiting more than one school, be sure to schedule rest time in between visits. You want to be mentally fresh to get an accurate impression of each campus.

Before You Go

Think ahead to make sure your trip goes smoothly and that you learn everything you want to know about the school. Follow these quick tips:

- Contact the school and confirm their tour, visit and interview policies. Note weekend hours and dates when the admissions office will be closed.
- Bring along a list of questions for each school. After visiting a few schools, details can get blurry, so make a note of points about the school that stand out.
- If you're planning an overnight trip, arrange to stay in a dorm room if possible. Not only will you save money, you'll have a better opportunity to talk to students and see what campus life is really like.
- Dress for the occasion. If you are interviewing, pack something a little nicer in addition to your "touring clothes."
- Check around to see if any of your friends want to share your trip. Touring together can be more fun, and your friends might ask questions you haven't thought of.

On Campus

There's so much to do on campus! Be sure you get a well-rounded impression of what your school has to offer. Follow these tips to get the most out of your campus visit:

- Take the guided tour and go to informational sessions to get an overview of what the school is all about.
- Go to class. How do you feel about the size of the classes, the instructors and the level of competition?
- Check out the dorm rooms, the cafeteria and campus facilities such as the library, computer labs and health and recreational facilities.
- Talk to the students. Do they seem happy? Enthusiastic? Stressed out? Bored?
- Take a tour of the town that could be your home for the next four years. Ask yourself, "Is this a place I want to live?"

A campus tour can give you a preview of college life and help you make the right decision about where you want to go to school.