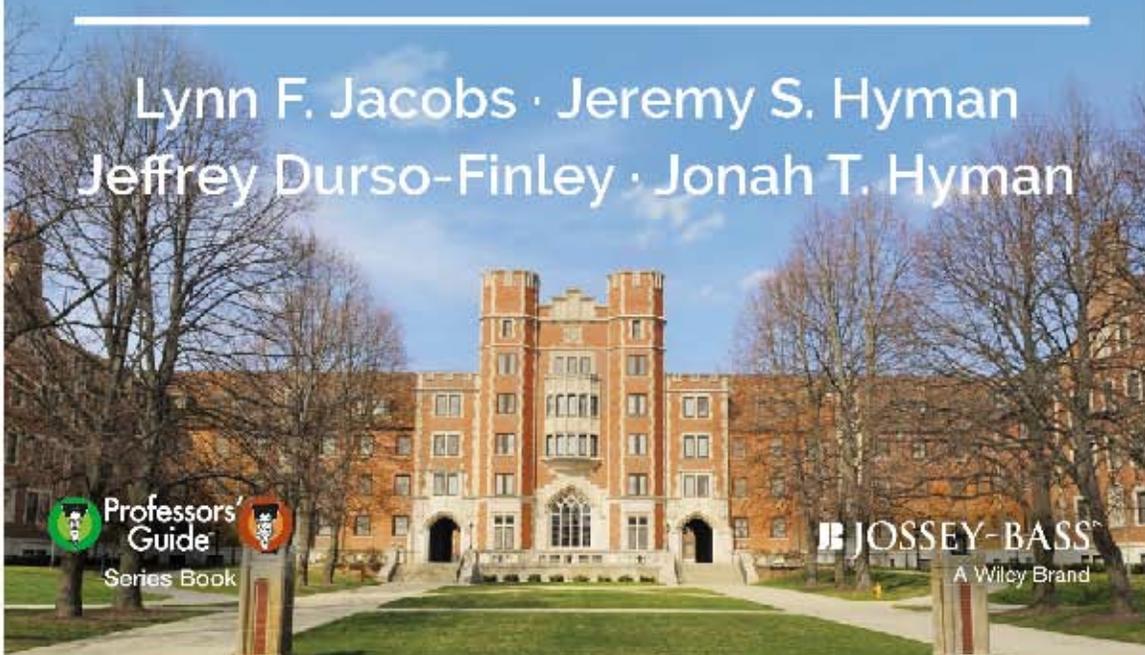




OVER **600** TIPS, TECHNIQUES,
AND STRATEGIES REVEALED

The Secrets of **PICKING A COLLEGE** (and Getting In!)

Lynn F. Jacobs · Jeremy S. Hyman
Jeffrey Durso-Finley · Jonah T. Hyman



Professors'
Guide
Series Book



JOSSEY-BASS
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The Professors' Guide™ Icons



EXTRA POINTER. An additional tip that applies to a special situation.



5-STAR TIP. A really high-value suggestion that you should be sure to use.



BEST-KEPT SECRET. One of the things no one wants you to know but will be really helpful.



REALITY CHECK. An invitation to step back and assess what's really going on.



RULE OF THUMB. A general principle that will work in most (but perhaps not all) situations.



EPIC FAIL! A giant blunder that should be avoided at all costs.



IOHO. (IN OUR HUMBLE OPINION). Our perspective on some controversial issue. Not everyone will agree.



xxii The Professors' Guide™ Icons



ON THE WEB. A useful link for getting additional tips or more information on a specific subject.



BONUS TIP. For those who can't get enough, one more tip.



FLASH! Late-breaking information that you'll want to know.





3 GOING ON TOUR

At a certain point you need to take the show on the road and make some tours of college campuses. While you can learn lots from the web, from your high school counselor, and from college nights, fairs, and rep visits, there's just some stuff you can only get by putting boots on the ground and experiencing the colleges in real space and real time. You'll be amazed at how much you learn from these visits and how your perception of some, or all, of the colleges will change—maybe a lot, maybe just a little.

There's no question that, in many cases, these tours require a significant expenditure of both time and money. So you certainly want to make the most of these tours and get as much information as you can during your visit. You also want to be sure to get something more intangible from your visit: a better feel for the place and what it would be like to actually go there. This chapter will help you maximize the benefits of your college visits. In it you will learn:

- ▶ FAQs for planning your college visits
- ▶ Top 10 things to see and do on a college visit
- ▶ 21 must-ask questions on the campus tour (and why you should ask them)
- ▶ 10 things to look for when visiting a class (or two)
- ▶ Top 12 tips for nailing an on- (or off-) campus interview



FAQs for Planning Your College Visits: A Beginner's Guide

1. What's the point of making campus visits, anyway? Isn't all the information available on the web? While there are tons of very useful information about colleges on the web, nothing beats a real in-person look-over. It's very hard to get a fully accurate feel for the place just by looking at what the college puts on its website—or by scanning conflicting opinions posted on other sites. When you're at the college in person, you can see real students and real professors—and even get a chance to talk to them face to face. You can see actual classes in action, poke your nose into dorms, see what's really being served in the cafeterias, and find out just how hard it is to park on campus. Plus, there are activities offered at the college—information sessions, campus tours, attending classes, stays in dorms, in-person interviews, consultations with admissions staff, and sometimes even professors and departmental advisors—that simply are not available virtually. So, get ready to make the grand tour—and see what you're buying, in the flesh.

2. When should one think of starting to visit—freshman, sophomore, junior, or senior year? How soon is too soon? How late is too late? Although we know of parents dragging their thirteen-year-olds around college campuses, the best time to undertake college visits is during the junior year—or if that doesn't work for you, the very beginning of your senior year. Generally high school students don't have their minds around college during their freshmen and sophomore years, so visits undertaken at that point could be wastes of time—especially because interests can change dramatically over the course of high school. But by the junior year, most high school students have the college search well underway—having met their



high school counselor, taken a standardized test or two, and maybe even formulated a preliminary list of where they'd like to apply—so that would be a good time to integrate college visits into the mix.



5-STAR TIP. If you're planning to apply early decision (see "Applying Early? 10 Questions to Ask If You're Considering Early Decision or Early Action" in chapter 2), then a junior-year visit to the college of your choice is a must.

3. What's the best time of year to visit the colleges? Over the summer, during spring break, or whenever you happen to be in the area? Most people plan to visit colleges over the summer. After all, that's when everyone has the most free time to travel, and travel to colleges won't require missing any high school classes—and possibly messing up one's GPA, SAT/ACT testing, or AP prep. Unfortunately, that's also the worst time to visit colleges (unless the college you're interested in has special summer programs—some do). The college scene in the summer is totally different from that during the regular year: much smaller classes, often different faculty (graduate students or non-regular faculty), fewer students, and a sense of laid-back-ness that you probably won't find during the school year—in short, a very distorted picture of what the college is really like. A better idea is to go during your spring break, when at least the regular students and the regular faculty members will be there (be sure that *your* spring break doesn't correspond with *their* spring break—you wouldn't want to arrive at the college only to find that their whole student body is in Cancun). Still, the best is whenever, during term time, you happen to be in the area or happen to be able to get to the area: if you're already there it's free, and if you pick your time, well, at least it's convenient for you.

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EXTRA POINTER. Spring break can be at any of three different weeks in March. So if you're planning a tour of many colleges, make sure your itinerary avoids the spring break at each of the schools you want to visit. Check out the academic calendar on each of the college's website before setting your trip in stone.

Another way to find out when spring break is at each of the colleges you're thinking of visiting, sortable by states and by individual colleges, is at WWW.STSTRAVEL.COM/COLLEGE-SPRING-BREAK-DATES. Very useful if you have lots of colleges to search.



BEST-KEPT SECRET. At many schools, spring semester ends as early as the third week in April. So if you're trying to coordinate the college's being in session with your high school's end of semester, you're going to have trouble. Better idea? Take the time off during your semester.



5-STAR TIP. Many schools in the South start classes in August, so if your high school is in the North and hasn't started you could visit colleges in August. On the other hand, if you're in the South, and your high school gets out at the end of May, you could visit colleges in early June without missing school.



EXTRA POINTER. Batch your visits and chart an itinerary. The more colleges you can visit on a single trip, especially if you're driving, the cheaper it will be. Some web sites that can help you plan your college visits include CAMPUSVISIT.COM, CAPPEX.COM, GOSEECAMPUS.COM, and TRIPIT.COM. Some of them have tools that will order your itinerary in the most efficient way and some even provide campus maps.



4. Is it best to visit schools during the beginning, middle, or end of the college-application process? And should one visit every school on one's application list?

In the best of all possible worlds, it's good to visit all schools that are serious contenders and to visit them early in the process. This gives you the maximum information before the application process is complete and can help you refine and improve your application choices. But realistically, if you're applying to ten or more colleges, it requires quite a bit of time and, in many cases, money to visit them all.

If you don't have the time, energy, or financial resources to do a full set of visits, consider visiting one of each *type* of school you're applying to (large Midwestern state university, college in your own or a neighboring state, small liberal arts college, church-affiliated college, or whatever): sample the wares rather than tasting them all. And if you know you're only going to be able to visit two or three schools, save your tour until the *end* of the application process—when you've gotten your acceptances, financial aid packages (if any), and you know where you really might want to go.



BEST-KEPT SECRET. If you can't swing visiting more than a couple of the actual colleges you're applying to, you can still benefit by visiting a similar school near where you live: every state has its own (series of) state universities and community colleges, and most every residence in the United States is within fifty miles of a small, liberal arts college or large megaversity.



IOHO. If your choice is between visiting a lot of schools really briefly and a smaller number really intensively, choose the smaller number. A two-hour visit to a campus to give it the "once over lightly" is often no better than what can be had on the web. (For what you might do on a full-day college visit, see "Top 10 Things to See and Do on a College Visit" coming up next.)



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5. Should parents go along on the visits? Yes, if possible.

Many schools have activities designed specifically for parents who come to visit. And when parents come along on the campus tours, they can provide additional eyes and ears that can help assess (and record—think of them as scribes) differences and similarities between schools. There's often a lot to take in on these visits and having another person to help you record and debrief after the visit can be enormously helpful. Also, parents are likely to ask questions that you might not dare to ask but actually would be nice to know the answers to (How many classes are taught by TAs? How much do you spend on textbooks?).

But probably the biggest reason for parents to come along is that they are likely to be footing a good portion of the bill for college. So they should have the right to see for themselves what they're buying.

6. How long should you plan to spend at each campus? We think you should plan on putting in a full day at each campus to be sure to have a thorough visit (two days, if you're lucky enough to be staying in a dorm). Sure, it's possible to do the basic admissions activities (the information session and campus tour) in half a day. But it's the extra time you spend hanging around at the school, the nonscripted moments—say, when you get a chance to talk to another student in the dining hall or coffee shop who's majoring in the field you're thinking of majoring in, or when you overhear a bunch of conversations in a student lounge, or when you get to talk to a departmental advisor and/or visit a class or two—that might give you the best insights into what it's like to be a student there and help you differentiate between somewhat similar colleges. Also, a longer visit will give you a better chance to experience the environs around the campus, which is good because it is likely that you will actually get off campus from time to time over your four or five years at the place.



EXTRA POINTER. Some colleges have arranged for discount rates at hotels nearby. Check the college website, under **ADMISSIONS** or **PROSPECTIVE STUDENTS**, for information.



5-STAR TIP. Amtrak offers a special discount for students making a campus tour. Details are here WWW.AMTRAK.COM/BUY-ONE-GET-ONE-50-OFF-WITH-COLLEGE-CAMPUS-VISIT or here WWW.CAMPUSVISIT.COM/AMTRAK/.

7. What should I do in preparation for my visit? The more preparation you can do before the visit, the more you will get out of the visit. The first thing to do is visit the admissions office website and see what activities they offer visitors and at what times they're offered. In some cases you will be able to—or have to—reserve information sessions, tours and other activities online prior to your visit (try to schedule the information session and campus tour, one after the other). Stay-overs at dorms nearly always require reservations—and usually they have to be made a long time in advance because space is very limited. Also, reservations need to be made for on-campus interviews if you're planning to do those (these days, not so many colleges offer these, but it's worth checking it out).



EXTRA POINTER. Always be sure to do a basic look-over of the college website before your trip. That way you'll be able to ask intelligent questions of the tour leader, the admissions official, the financial aid person, or whomever you run into on the college trip—and get useful, otherwise hard-to-get answers! Good also to print out a campus map—that way you'll know where you have to be—and to calendar a schedule—that way you'll know when you have to be there.



5-STAR TIP. If you know what you want to study, it is often possible to set up a meeting with an undergraduate advisor in the exact field you want to study. Go the departmental webpage for the field in question, search for the undergraduate advisor, and e-mail him or her to ask if you could set up a meeting. And, after the meeting, ask if he or she could set you up (either in person or by e-mail) with a student in that major. The combination of a faculty person meeting and a student follow-up can give you a real sense of what that college is about—and how it differs from other colleges you might be considering.

8. Should I visit only my “reach schools”? No. In making your college visits it’s important that you visit schools at all levels of likelihood of getting in. It’s very tempting to visit only the schools you dream of getting in to; but get real, make sure to visit a representative selection of all the schools you’re considering—and that are considering you.

9. Is it ever worth revisiting a school? Absolutely. Especially after you have received acceptances and gotten your choice down to two or three colleges, you can use a revisit to compare the schools directly, one against another, and also to examine more carefully factors that might tip the scales in one direction or another (especially if it’s a close call between the choices). Also, you should consider a second look if you think you got a poor impression of a campus based on extraneous factors, such as a sudden monsoon, an encounter with a severely demoralized student, or a knock-down fight with your parents in the car. Another visit might give you a clearer—and more accurate—picture of what the school is like.



Top 10 Things to See and Do on a College Visit

You've just spent the last nine hours on I-80 or three hours delayed at O'Hare. But now you're there, at the big U. Building after building, with little plaques saying what departments are located there and who gave the money for all that research. Where to start? What to do? You'll have the very best campus visit if you make sure to see our top ten destinations on any college visit.

1. The admissions office. Just like in Monopoly, when the game begins by placing your token on "Start," so too every college visit should begin with your visiting the admissions office. There you'll not only find an often annotated map of the campus, with suggestions of sites to visit and things to do, but also you'll typically be offered an "information session"—an hour-long presentation conducted by an admissions officer or in some cases an undergraduate student, designed to acquaint you with the college and, sometimes, its admission procedures (take really good notes if they give any info about what they're looking for in admissions).



5-STAR TIP. Once you've visited a number of these information sessions, you'll begin to realize that many of them are quite similar. Most colleges will tell you that they

- ▶ read applications *holistically* (that is, that they take the whole application into consideration, no one component is necessary or sufficient for admission);
- ▶ consider applications *contextually* (that is, that you're not at a disadvantage if you go to a no-name high school);



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- ▶ are looking for *passion* (that is, they want to see that you really committed yourself to something and did it for many years in high school);
- ▶ want you to take the *most rigorous courses you can* (especially Honors, AP, and IB courses, if your school has those).

But what you should be on the lookout for are “differentiators”—things that one college says about themselves that other colleges are *not* saying. Recognizing these features will be very helpful not only in eliminating colleges that don’t fit what you’re looking for in a school (you might not want 12 required core courses if you’d like to design your own program) but also in tweaking your application to highlight features you have that might fit what the college is looking for (say, they value community service and you’ve done lots of that). Whatever the case, take careful notes: they’ll be very useful later when composing your list and doing the actual applications.

2. The campus tour. A staple of all college visits is the tour of the college, usually offered via the admissions office by current students, who are distinguished by their enthusiastic attitude and uncanny ability to talk while walking backward. The tour usually covers the main buildings on campus, the library, a dorm (or, at least, the outside of a dorm), the student center, and a sample classroom or, sometimes, a lab or computer center. And undoubtedly you will be treated to a sampling of college lore and traditions: never walk on the big M as you cross the center of the campus, always squeal like a wild boar when passing the president’s house—as well as the chance to ask anything you want to know about the college (within reason) from a real, flesh-and-blood student. (For more on things to ask on a campus tour, see “21 Must-Ask Questions on the Campus Tour (and Why You Should Ask Them),” coming soon.)



EXTRA POINTER. At some campuses, and for students at some stages of the application process, there might be the opportunity to interview with a regional representative or other member of the admissions staff. If this is offered, by all means take him or her up on it. You'll learn more from a one-to-one meeting and, relax, they won't be judging you. At least, not too much. (For more on college interviews, check out the admissions page on the college website. And see the section "Top 12 Tips for for Nailing an On- (or Off-) Campus Interview," later in this chapter.)

3. A class (or two). Many colleges now know they have to show the product they're selling—no, not the dating scene or the food court—but the actual classes. Some colleges offer a list of suggested classes to visit, complete with times, places, the name of the professor, and the course title; but even if there's no such official list, the admissions staff will usually be happy to provide information and suggestions geared to your needs and interests. For more information on what to look for when visiting a class, see "10 Things to Look for When Visiting a Class (or Two)," later in this chapter.



EXTRA POINTER. In considering which class(es) to visit, consider three factors: the schedule of your visit (some classes only meet on two or three days a week); what field or area you might be interested in (good to compare the same field and, if possible, the same course at different schools so you can compare apples to apples); and the level of the class (it's usually best to include at least one first-year or intro class in your visit—indicated in the course schedule by a low number such as 100 or 1000, but not always the lowest number, which can be reserved for remedial courses). And don't shy away from large lectures: if you're going to a mega university, you might have to take some of those.



BEST-KEPT SECRET. In many cases if you're strolling across the campus and happen on a class that might interest you—especially if it's a large class in a ginormous auditorium—feel free to stop in and sit in the back (no one will notice). Parents are allowed, too. One exception, though, is that in high-security campuses (usually in larger, urban centers) you need special ID to even get into the campus building. In such a case, check with the admissions department, or undergraduate advisor in the relevant department, to see if they can get you in (often best arranged in advance of your visit).



REALITY CHECK. If you're visiting during the summer, keep in mind that summer school courses can be very different animals than their regular term-time brethren: much smaller size, visiting professors, non-regular faculty, and even graduate student teachers, more laid-back students, sometimes even slackers, in short, not necessarily what you'll find come fall of your first year. So don't infer too much from a summer school class.

4. A professor or departmental undergraduate advisor. Some, especially small, teaching-oriented colleges, offer you the opportunity to meet a real live professor, typically someone in the field of study you're interested in pursuing or an undergraduate advisor in a department of interest to you. These meetings give you a chance to learn more about the program in your possible major and to get a sense of what the (nice) professors at the place are like.

Here again the admissions office is the place to go to set up a visit with a professor—usually the departmental advisor, departmental recruitment officer, or a faculty member who works in the area closest to your interests. Or, you might try e-mailing a professor or the departmental undergraduate advisor (contact information is available either on the university directory web page or the individual departmental page) in advance of your visit and see if he or she bites.

Top 10 Things to See and Do on a College Visit **87**

Many will—especially if you explain your interest in the university or college and the field or major.



EXTRA POINTER. Keep in mind that you're wasting your meeting if you ask for information easily available on the web. Use this meeting to get specific information not available elsewhere.

5. A campus building of special interest to you. The tours don't cover everything, but you can use the campus map and visit the physics department, or the college's museum of musical instruments, or athletic facilities. Some colleges will not allow you into certain places without a college ID (especially the dorms), but many facilities, especially the academic departments, are accessible to all. In some cases, what you see on this "customized" part of your visit will be the deciding factor in your choice between two in-other-ways-quite-similar colleges.



EXTRA POINTER. If you're a practicing member of a religion, you'll want to visit the church, synagogue, mosque, temple, or campus religious organization that you might attend at college. Denominations, and even houses of worship under a single denomination, vary widely, so it's good to see what you'll be getting if you pick that college.



BEST-KEPT SECRET. As you walk through the campus check out the bulletin boards. Often you can get a really good sense of what the campus culture is like by seeing what upcoming events are. Just keep in mind that at some schools anyone is able to post (while at other schools only registered student organizations can post), so what you are seeing may not be school-sponsored or sanctioned activities.

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6. The student center (or student union). At most colleges the student center is the hub of campus activities. Not only will you find there a plethora of entertainment and academic options—ranging from video games, bowling alley, food court, art gallery, movie theater, bookstore, computer lab, game room, and so on—but also a variety of student services—writing center, counseling service, career planning and placement, veterans’ affairs, and countless others. Check out whatever you think might be of interest to you.



5-STAR TIP. Most college students are quite friendly to prospective students, so be sure to approach a few students (especially if you’re at the food court or snack bar) and ask them a couple of questions about what they like (and don’t like quite as much) about the school. People-on-the-street info is often more valuable than canned, tour-guide presentations.

7. The bookstore. Perusing the shelves of books (arranged by class) can give you a window into the level of instruction, the sophistication of the work at home, and the amount expected of students at that college. If you’re not sure which are the beginning and which are the advanced courses, ask a worker (often a student): he or she will direct you to what you’re looking for and even explain to you the four-letter abbreviations for departments (who would have known that SOAS is South Asian Studies?).

8. The dorms (or fraternities or sororities). Though it’s not always possible to gain access to a dorm (especially at security-conscious schools), you might be able to get a peek at a room during a campus tour, or—if you’re really lucky and really nice—coax a student you meet into showing you his or her room. It’s important. We recently visited a college whose name you would know whose dorms weren’t air-conditioned (it was eighty-five-degrees the day we visited), which looked like it was built in 1952, and where the curtains looked like they hadn’t been cleaned since then. Amazing! Consider the fact that you’re going to have to live in one of these places for at least a year (for many students, more). Who can learn well when living in a pigpen?



5-STAR TIP. If the college you're visiting has a stay in the dorm, see-what-it's-like, type of program (check the admissions website), by all means sign up, especially if it's one of the colleges you're seriously considering attending. Nothing beats first-hand experience.



EXTRA POINTER. If someone who graduated your high school a year or two ago is a student at the college you're visiting, consider asking him or her to put you up for a night. Often graduates of your high school are proud of their colleges and will be happy to show you the inside story.

9. The food service. You gotta eat. Check out the choices at the dorm cafeteria, especially if you have any special preferences such as vegetarian, vegan, kosher, halal, gluten-free, or whatever. And find out if there's a choice of dorms in which you can eat: at some colleges you can take lunch, for example, near your classes, and at some colleges different dorms offer different menus.



EXTRA POINTER. Find out how many meals a week you get with your plan: what happens on Saturday and Sunday? And, if you're planning to stay on campus over holidays (e.g., Thanksgiving) and breaks (e.g., winter or spring break), what happens with the grub then? All, good things to know.

10. The town or city. Chances are you'll actually be getting off campus from time to time and it's useful to see how pleasant (or not) the town is and what amenities are offered there. So, if yours is a longer visit, set aside some time for a bit of a walk or drive around town and for stops at places that are important for your lifestyle—whether it's the Thai restaurant, a jazz club, place of

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worship, art museum, concert hall, the barber shop, or the mall. Life is more than just the college quad—investigate beyond.



BONUS TIP. Before visiting any campus, you should make a schedule: a list of each of the activities you're going to do (information session, campus tour, sample class, meeting with advisor or professor, lunch at student center)—complete with place and time. Then stick to it, even if some activity doesn't go according to plan or some class or meeting sours you on the school. Sometimes things (and your impressions of them) turn around completely, and if you bail out of the schedule in the middle, you might miss something that would have totally changed your mind. And, to the extent possible, it's good to standardize your activities across the different colleges you'll be visiting. That way you'll be able to directly compare one college against another.





21 Must-Ask Questions on the Campus Tour (and Why You Should Ask Them)

In addition to a general walk-around, the campus tour is your chance to have your questions about the school addressed by a real-live student at the school. This is a great opportunity you should definitely make the most of. Keep in mind, though, that the student leading the tour has likely been selected for his or her upbeat, enthusiastic, and frequently, perky attitude. So the tour guides are always going to put the college in the best possible light and their canned presentation (in many cases) is going to make the school sound better than heaven on earth. However, the guides are always eager to answer questions. So, if you ask the right kinds of questions, in the right way, you can get beyond the sales pitch to an authentic look at what it's really like going to that school. Which is the reason that you're on the tour in the first place. So get ready to fire these queries as you tour the college and be alert to the insights you can gain from the answers you get (and from reading between the lines of the answers you get).

1. Are the professors good? Who was your best professor? Why?

The main thing you're buying at college is an education, so it's important to get some sense of how good the teachers are. The tour guide is likely to assure you that every teacher on campus is awesome, so if he or she is hesitant in answering this question, consider that to be a red flag about the quality of teaching. Also, note what the tour guide thinks was good about their best professor. Admiring a professor just because he or she is charismatic, or clowns around a lot in class, or is a good showman could be a sign that serious learning isn't a big value at the school. However, if the tour guide highlights the professor's knowledge of the field or concern that the students learn, this can be a good sign.

2. Are the courses challenging? Everyone wants to know how hard the classes are going to be: some students worry about being



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blown away by killer courses while others hope for courses that will not bore them to tears by being even easier than their high school classes. Asking the question in an open-ended way (“How hard are the courses here?” or “Are there a lot of easy courses here?”) will encourage the tour guide to give an objective read on the courses rather than just telling you what they think you want to hear.

3. Are there lots of large lecture classes in the first year? If so, how large? Large lecture classes (i.e., ones bigger than fifty) are not necessarily bad classes, but in general, the quality of learning (and degree of individual attention) is better in smaller-sized classes. It’s useful to find out how many large classes you’re likely to take—and just how big the largest classes can run—because there’s a big difference between having to take one class of 250 students and four classes each averaging 700 students.

4. How hard is it to get into classes? The course offerings in the catalog can look pretty impressive until you realize that there’s a two-year waiting list to get into the most popular—and, in some cases, required—courses. The trend in colleges these days (especially at many cash-strapped state universities) is to increase student body without increasing the number of faculty, so it’s becoming harder and harder to get into classes at many campuses. Watch out for any long, pregnant pauses or major hemming and hawing as your tour guide addresses this question.

5. How many of your classes have been taught by TAs? Teaching assistants (that is, graduate students as opposed to real professors) are controversial, though indispensable, parts of the instructional staff at many universities. These are teachers-in-training and their quality can vary greatly depending on how good the graduate programs are at that particular school and also, how much graduate work is required before the TAs can teach their own courses. You should assess schools where TAs carry a large portion of the teaching load in this light.

6. Are some of the courses taught online? Are some of the required courses taught online? Look, we’re not saying that going to college online is necessarily bad. After all, there could be teachers who give a good show online, and there are students who like the ability to take classes when they want and to play back sections of the

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lecture they haven't fully understood. But some students can't learn this way and much prefer classes with flesh-and-blood professors. Colleges, we think, should disclose—openly and without apology—when you're going to get a less-than-in-person instructor, especially in a required first-year class such as math or English comp. Which is why you should ask.

7. How serious are the students here about academics? You'll want to know whether students are likely to spend their time 24/7 studying or 24/7 partying. Then you can match up your own goals with what the school's culture is.

8. What are the most popular majors here and what majors is the school particularly strong in? This question will help you gauge whether students here tend to be interested in business, science, liberal arts, or whatever. Also, it's good to know if the school is particularly strong in particular fields: if your interests lie in one of these areas, picking that school and doing that major may offer some real advantages in your life post-college. And, while you're at it, you might want to ask if everyone can get into a major: some majors, especially arts ones, require auditions, portfolios, or other materials in order to be accepted. Important to know.

9. What are the requirements like and how easy is it to place out of them? Surely you don't want to show up at your new college only to learn for the first time that everyone at the place is required to take four lab sciences, or three years of foreign language, or write a hundred-page senior thesis? Or that you'll have to take exactly the same Spanish or American History course you took in high school just because the college (or state legislature) requires it of all incoming students. Ask the tour leader how burdensome were the requirements, and whether he or she was required to take any do-overs or could easily place out (say, by using AP credit or by taking more advanced courses in the same field).

10. Are there lots of opportunities for internships or for collaborations with a professor? Many students report that individual work with professors is *the* most valuable educational experience they had in college, so find out if you could have this opportunity here (especially good is if there are established setups for internships). Ask the tour guide if he or she ever did one-on-one work with a prof and if

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the work was a substantial research partnership or more like cleaning test tubes or proofreading the professor's papers.

11. Do lots of students go to study abroad? Study abroad is another opportunity that you might like to take advantage of in your later years in college (especially if you want to major in a foreign language or some form of international study). So check to see if this is something that is regularly offered at this college. It's good also to ask if your financial aid goes with you when you study abroad and/or whether there are specific scholarships for study abroad. Many colleges have substantial moneys set aside to encourage study abroad.

12. Do you ever feel lost at such a big school (or smothered at such a small school)? At college, size really does matter. You probably will know before your visit how large or small the school is (information easily obtained from the school website). But what you might not know is what it's really like to go to a school one hundred times larger than your high school (or 1/10th its size). Ask the tour guide about his or her personal experience and feelings.

13. Do a lot of students live in the dorms and what's the food like? Hey, everybody's got to eat and sleep, so why not figure out what the best dorms are and which has the best food service. Also be sure to find out if most students live in dorms, in off-campus apartments, or commute from home. Having a living arrangement that's vastly different from what most students are doing can put you out of the mainstream and lead to feelings of isolation and alienation.

14. Is there Wi-Fi in the dorms and are the dorms air-conditioned? How're you gonna Facebook, Tweet, Tinder, or Instagram 24/7 if your college is still in the Stone Age? And do you really want to live in a dorm that's hotter than you-know-where?

15. Are fraternities and sororities big deals on campus? Whether you're in a frenzy to go Greek or wouldn't be caught dead at a kegger, this question will let you know how well your attitudes fit in with the rest of the campus. You wouldn't want to pick a school where everyone who counts is living at Rho Rho Rho, while you're slumming it at Zardoz Hall.

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16. Where do students like to hang out? What goes on here on weekends? If you're planning on having a life outside classes, you'll want to know what students around the place do in their spare time. Keep the question general (rather than asking about some super-specific interest of yours) so that you can find out what things most students like to do—and what facilities are offered to do them.

17. What's the social life like on campus? How easy is it to meet other students? Are they mostly like you or different? Your tour guide should be glowing about the social scene on campus. If not, take note. The question of whether the students are generally similar to, or different from, your tour guide is an important barometer of the diversity of the student body. It's quite a different experience to be at a school that is more homogeneous—where you could wind up in the minority—and one where there's no one predominant type of student—in which you're free to move in whatever social group you'd like.

18. Do you ever get into the town? What do you do there?

Campuses can be pretty fun places, but at many, especially smaller, campuses, students want to migrate into the town or city. The question of whether the environs of the college offer lots of things to do or whether they roll up the sidewalks at 9 pm can have a real impact on your enjoyment at college. Also, in some cases it would be worth it to ask how safe the environs are. You wouldn't want to find out the hard way.

19. If you could change one thing about the school, what would it be? This question could force your guide down from his or her perpetually cheerful guise into an honest assessment of some things that are wrong at the school. However, if your guide is trained enough to turn every negative into a positive (“the only thing wrong about this college is that it's over in four years”), you won't get much useful information out of this question.

20. What's been your best experience at college? Your worst?

Here's another way to try to get at the strengths and weaknesses of the school in question—and whether what's cited as strengths or weaknesses would be important to you. If your guide considers something to be a strength that you consider a weakness—well, that's a fact, too.

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21. If you had to do it again, would you consider another college? Which one(s)? Probably your guide will not admit (even in a moment of great weakness) that he or she should have gone to a different school given how glorious and wondrous this college is (as you have just seen on the tour). But you might pry out of the tour guide some relevant alternatives that other students consider and that you could consider applying to.



BONUS TIP. Any of these 21 questions can be asked at the information session, if for whatever reason you're not going on the tour. You probably won't get as candid answers if the session is being led by an admissions professional.





10 Things to Look for When Visiting a Class (or Two)

We are big believers that sitting in on a couple of classes is really important to do during your college visit. But it can be puzzling to know what to *do* while you're in that class. Just how are you supposed to assess a class in a subject you might not be all that up on or a class taking place in the middle of a semester? You'll have good success in forming an opinion of how good a professor you're watching—and, by extension, how good the classes are at the college you're visiting—if you ask yourself the following questions as the minutes in the lecture tick by.

1. Does the professor present the material clearly or is he or she in a complete fog? Even though you might be walking into a class in the middle of a semester or even in the middle of a lecture, things shouldn't be a total muddle—especially if you're attending a first-year class that's supposed to be the introduction to a subject. Being able to get the material out clearly, in a way that the students can understand, is a fundamental skill that every professor should have, so if the class makes absolutely no sense—well, that's a red flag.



5-STAR TIP. Pay special attention when the prof is explaining any technical term or language special to the field. How he or she explains the nonordinary items will shed light on how well he or she can explain the ordinary ones.

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EXTRA POINTER. When selecting which class to sit in on, try to pick first-year classes or classes in a field just a step up from your current high school class level. Many colleges will provide you with a list of the most popular first-year classes and these are good ones to select from. It's not reasonable to expect to be able to understand a Calculus 4 class, when you've never taken Calculus 1.

2. Is the professor organized or totally scattered? A good class presents topics in a logical manner rather than flitting from topic to topic for no evident reason. Keep in mind that a class that lacks any discernible structure or order is one that will be very hard to learn in. Think of how hard it would be to study for a test on material presented in what seems to be a random way.



EXTRA POINTER. Look for an outline, PowerPoint, or at least a clear division of the class into sections (preferably with an introduction at the beginning and a summary at the end). Professors who take the time to put up such “signposts” are often professors who've thought the material out carefully.

3. Does the professor seem to know his or her stuff, or does he or she seem unsure about the material? A confident presentation often reflects the professor's mastery of the material and the fact that he or she has taught the course before (and worked out all the kinks). On the other hand, a halting, tentative presentation can reflect the professor's less-than-stellar command of the material—never a good thing.

4. Does the class have at least some entertainment value, or is it deadly boring? Face it, college isn't meant to be “Comedy Central” and most professors aren't going to put on an extravaganza complete with drum rolls and fireworks. (In fact, you should be suspicious if you encounter a professor whose class consists entirely of clowning

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around because how much are you going to learn from that?) Still, in college you're going to have to sit through hundreds of hour- to hour-and-a-half long lectures, so you surely don't want to be stuck at a school whose classes are 100 percent tedium.

5. Does the professor just lecture or does he or she incorporate some visuals or multimedia? Nowadays most classrooms are set up to project PowerPoint, connect to the Internet, and use a variety of interactive tools (including, sometimes, clickers to poll student response). Look for some of these additional elements to see just how up-to-date the professors and classrooms at this college are.

6. Does the professor seem concerned that students learn or does he or she just want to get through his or her notes? The real job of the professor isn't to just spew out content but rather to ensure that the students learn, so look for signs that the professor in some way or other involves the students. One good sign is if the professor engages the class in discussion or, at least, has breaks in the lecture when the students can ask questions. Less good is when the professor pays only lip service to student questions—trying to get through them as quickly as possible or, worse, totally ignoring hands waving in the audience. Often you can gauge how seriously a school takes teaching by how seriously the professor takes the students in the room.



EPIC FAIL! If the professor comes off as condescending, stuck up, or arrogant, those are other signs that the professor doesn't hold the students in high regard—and probably isn't all that good of a teacher. It could just be a bad egg, but it could also be a sign that good teaching isn't all that important at that school.

7. Does the professor fill the class time or does he or she end early or late? You might not think that watching the clock would net you any useful information, but actually it does. Ending a class early is often a sign of an inexperienced teacher who does not know the material in enough depth to fill the entire period. Going over time can indicate an inexperienced teacher who doesn't know how much material can appropriately be covered in a single class (or it could

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reveal an experienced teacher who has no regard for the fact that he or she might be making students late to their next class—also not a good thing).

8. Is the course taught at the appropriate level or is it much too easy or hard? If you show up at a college chemistry class and they're explaining what the periodic table is—this is cause for concern. You'll be wasting time and money if you go to a college where all the classes are covering stuff you already learned. However, if you attend a required first-year class and they're using stoichiometry to calculate the molarity of HCl, you might want to give some thought (in certain cases) about whether this school (or at least this class) isn't too challenging for you (see if they have tiered classes for that subject—good if they do).

9. Do the students look interested or are they bummed out?

Teaching is a two-way street. So, don't neglect to gauge the reactions of other people sitting in on this class, specifically, the students actually enrolled and taking it. Do they look like they are engaged by the class presentation? Some positive signs: they ask questions, they're assiduously taking notes, they respond to jokes the professor makes, they seem relaxed. Bad signs: they're putting their heads down on the desk and sleeping, they're using their laptops to put in bids on eBay or their phones to text, they are wearing earphones and not actually listening to the professor, or they trickle in fifteen minutes late or migrate out halfway through the class.



EXTRA POINTER. Pay special attention to students sitting at the back of the room. These are usually the most alienated students, even in a good class, so don't think too badly of the professor if there are no signs of life back there. But if you can sense some excitement even in the back rows—now that's a sign of something special.

10. Does the professor seem like one you'd like to learn from?

While you're sitting in that class, perform the following thought experiment: Next year (if I go to this school) I might be taking this



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class or a class very much like it. Would I enjoy learning from this professor and others, perhaps, just like him or her? If the answer is yes, then you've found a college that should be on your "seriously consider" list. If not, well, that's a fact, too.



REALITY CHECK. Keep in mind that in visiting a single class or two, you're *sampling* the instruction at that school. And, as with any small sample, the results can be skewed.





Top 12 Tips for Nailing an On- (or Off-) Campus Interview

One of the most important—and least-thought-out—parts of the college- application process is the interview. The interview could be on campus with an admissions officer, in your own town or city with an alumnus or alumna of the school, or even by Skype with someone who is at, or who went to, the school. But whoever the question-asker, it's your chance to strut your stuff. And to find out a little more about the school you're considering. You'll up your chances of winning the interviewer over, if you follow our dozen best tips.

1. Step up to bat. Though some schools pitch the interview as “optional,” it is almost always worthwhile to take advantage of the chance. Colleges have literally thousands of applicants, so anything you can do to up your chances can only help. It's generally better to help the admissions staff put a personality on the application, and the report the interviewer will write can help them do this—no matter how optional they say it is.



RULE OF THUMB. The smaller the school, the more importance they put on the interview. Sometimes, if you don't bother to interview they'll even think you don't want to go to their college and throw your application into the “deny” pile (or at least view it less favorably).

2. Pick an on-campus interview. Colleges know that not every student can visit their campus, so they offer remote alternatives such as the Skype interview or the coffee-shop-in-your-home-city interview.

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But, if everything is perfectly equal, avoid these choices (if everything is not perfectly equal, these choices will work, too).



REALITY CHECK. Book early—especially if you’re wanting to interview in the summer. On-campus interview spaces fill up quickly, so request them as soon as you have any idea that you’ll be applying to that college (you can always cancel—no charge). But keep in mind that many schools offer on-campus interviews only during certain months—and not necessarily the month you’ll be visiting. Check the admissions page on the college website for exact details.



5-STAR TIP. Some schools only offer interviews to certain students and only at certain times at the admissions cycle (for example, only after you’ve applied or only after you’ve made some initial cut). Other schools require *you* to set up the interview (again, in some cases, only after you’ve applied). Whatever the case, make sure you understand exactly what’s being asked interview-wise at each of the schools you’re applying to. The admissions page on the college website will tell you what you need to be on top of.

3. Pick a time that’s comfortable for you (if you can). You might have thought that bright and early in the morning would be best. Not for all. If you’re a morning person, ready to shine at the crack of dawn, that’s great. But if it takes you half the day to get in gear and be your best self, aim for an afternoon time. You’ll do better if you feel better.



EXTRA POINTER. One advantage of the later afternoon on-campus interview is that it typically takes place after you've had the tour of the campus—thus giving you a chance to think up a few questions that will communicate your interest in going to that college. If you pick a morning time, take the time to prepare a few questions from the college website—perhaps about the character and traditions of the school, the kinds of majors and special programs they offer, or even the clubs and teams at that school.

4. Outfit yourself with the right duds. Every school has a culture that is reflected in how people dress there. Dress appropriately for that campus. Some schools expect that interviewees will wear business-like attire (button-down shirt and nice pants for guys, dress pants, skirt, or dress for gals); others are more casual and easy-going (just about any clean pants or even a polo shirt will do). In any case, pick clothes that fit well and in which you will feel comfortable (brand-new clothes, never worn, are usually not the best choice); you won't want to be tugging at the collar or adjusting your pants throughout the interview.

5. Come on time—and alone. No interviewer likes a student who saunters in 20 minutes late, offering some dumb excuse about why they couldn't find the building or were held up at lunch. Nor do interviewers want to interview your parents (though some might entertain brief questions from your parents after your interview is done). So, unless directed otherwise, leave your parents in the waiting room (or send them off for coffee) while you're visiting with the interviewer.



5-STAR TIP. You'll increase your chances of making it to the interview on time if you check out Google Maps or the college website well before your appointment. And keep in mind that, depending on the school, the interview location might not be at the admissions office or welcome site, so be sure to know exactly where you're going. Also, if you're coming by car, make sure you have some idea where you're going to park. Not every college offers on-campus parking.



EXTRA POINTER. There's no point arriving ultra-early, because the interviewer probably won't see you early, and you'll just sit there waiting, stewing in your own juices.

6. Be prepared with the basics. Make sure you have prepared answers for each of the schools you're interviewing at to the magic three questions: *Why do you want to come to our college?* *What do you want to study at our college?* (the more particular the better), and *What work have you done in that area?* You're practically guaranteed to be asked these questions and in many cases the success of the interview depends on how well—and with how many detail and specificity—you can answer them.



BEST-KEPT SECRET. A number of colleges say on their website what questions will be asked on the interview or at least what areas will be probed. Be sure to consult this important resource and prepare accordingly.



5-STAR TIP. It might occur to you to prepare a résumé or tear sheet to give to the interviewer. Some colleges welcome this, while others do not allow it. Again, check the website for details.

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7. Tailor your answers to the situation. You'll want to make your answers appropriate to the nature of the interview. If you're talking to an admissions officer behind his or her desk, asking you a scripted set of questions, you'll want to answer, simply and directly, just what's being asked (the interviewer might even be noting down how—and how well—you're answering the specific things the college wants to know about you). If, on the other hand, you're having a walk in the park or a trip to the ice cream store with an alumnus or alumna of the school, you'll want to make your answers more conversational and informal. Adjust your answers to the setting. And be sure to let the discussion develop naturally. After all, even an interview is a two-way exchange of information, and you should be sensitive to how the discussion is progressing and what the other person is saying.



5-STAR TIP. Try to keep your answers to a good length.

Monosyllabic answers—*bad* (no one wants to talk to someone who has barely anything to say). Droning on and on—*not such a hot idea* (no one wants to be lectured). Keep in mind that the interviewer can always ask a follow-up if he or she is interested in learning more.



BEST-KEPT SECRET. One thing that can help an interview—and help put a human face on you as a candidate—is to have prepared a few tidy stories or anecdotes to liven up the discussion. Of course, the prepared stories have to fit into the ongoing discussion and have to seem authentic, not canned; still, many students can benefit by having prepared a few anecdotes in advance.



EXTRA POINTER. Don't get flummoxed if the interviewer offers no response to your answers. Certain admissions officers or alumni think their job is to just ask a series of standardized questions, and their not commenting on your answers doesn't reflect any judgment on their part.

8. Be aware that there isn't always a right answer. Some questions are thought questions—designed to see how good you are at thinking on your feet and to get some sense of you as a person. Be on the lookout for these questions, where all you need to do is be yourself and try not to sweat them (even if you're used to yes-no questions).



EXTRA POINTER. Many students report difficulty with “least” and “most” questions, for example, “What subject in high school did you like least?” or “What was the most important, nonacademic experience you've ever had?” If you get one of these, don't tie yourself up in knots, weighing one choice against another; just pick one and start talking about it. What's most important is how you develop your thoughts about the question asked, not what particular thing you rank as “most” (or “least”).

9. Learn how to finesse difficult questions. Once in a while, you get asked about controversial issues at that particular college. For example, suppose you're asked, “Do you think it would be a good idea for us to disband our athletic program and use the money saved for more academic purposes?” or “Do you think all students in the dorms should be given an opposite-sex roommate?” Don't feel you have to come down 100 percent on one side of the issue—sometimes it's good to recognize and explore both sides of an issue (that way, you come off as thoughtful and nondogmatic). Consider drawing a distinction or staking out a middle ground (for example, if the football

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team gets into the BCS ranking, some additional funds could be donated to the college; or, different-sex roommates should be given the option of sharing a room, if both agree).



5-STAR TIP. If at all possible, don't go political/religious/lifestyle.

Try not to open up hot-button issues by asking questions or making unsolicited statements about religion, politics, sex, and drugs. You don't know what your interviewer's biases are, so why stick out your neck if you don't have to? And, if you're specifically asked about some controversial item in the news, try not to stake out the most extreme position.



REALITY CHECK. Avoid excuses or confessions. No interviewer wants to hear your explanations about why you have a low GPA or why you did badly on the SAT or ACT. (If directly asked, give as short, though honest, an answer as possible). And don't bring up your personal problems. The college interview is an attempt to size up how you'll fit in at their college, not a therapy session in which you get to vent all your difficulties in life.

10. Be authentic. Don't overstate your achievements but, at the same time, don't be too shy to highlight what you've really accomplished. Keep in mind that you're trying to convince the college to admit you, and how will they be able to do that if you don't see what's good about you? However, there's selling and then there's overselling. You want to come off as believable, sincere, and honest—not as a used car salesman.

11. Realize that you're interviewing them, too. Even in the most formal interview there's always room for discussion and for you to ask questions. The half-hour or hour you spend with the college representative is not only their chance to find out about and evaluate you but also your time to find out about them. Keep in mind that

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someone (you or your parents, grandparents, or the student-loan company) is going to be spending a lot of money for you to go this college, so you're entitled to find out what you want to know from the living, breathing representative of that college.



5-STAR TIP. If you're being interviewed by an alum, ask them about their experience, how they've seen the college change, what their favorite memory was, and how their college experience led (or didn't) to their current career. People love to talk about their memories and about places that meant something to them, and, if the person is interviewing for the college, he or she probably had a great time there.

12. Be friendly. On a bad day, the on-campus interviewer might have to conduct six, eight, or even ten interviews, and he or she is likely to remember the students who were actually nice. Be sure to thank the interviewer at the end for taking the time to talk to you, and say how much you've enjoyed visiting the campus and that you hope to be there in the future. And always send a follow-up, thank-you e-mail, or, even perhaps a handwritten note. Thank-you's are now a standard part of the application etiquette.



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