



Campus Visits on the College Search Trail

*By David R. Parker, Ph.D.
(Postsecondary Disability Specialist)*

For older high school students and their parents, summer is a wonderful time to visit colleges of interest. The months after a student's sophomore or junior year are an ideal time to do this. Websites provide a wealth of information, but nothing replaces the experience of soaking up campus sites and sounds in person. That said, time and travel expenses can limit a family's ability to carry out an extensive search. This article offers suggestions for maximizing the benefits of any trips you can make.

✓ Which campuses to visit?

Variety can enrich the search process. If you can only visit two campuses, try to select diverse settings that give you and your teen a wide range of options to discuss. With college costs rapidly rising, the search phase is a critical time to learn about different campuses, settings, and services so that an informed choice can be made. Visit a small college (under 5,000 students) as well as a large one (over 15,000), for example. Or a private college (Marion University) vs. a public institution (Purdue). Conversely, consider visiting a college in an urban setting (DePaul University) vs. one in a more rural setting (Anderson University).

In addition to selecting the "About" tab on a college website's homepage, the Internet provides useful tools for doing your homework about college choices. The College Board (which administers the SAT) provides a free "College Search" page on its website: <https://bigfuture.collegeboard.org/college-search>. This search engine allows you to specify preferences such as region/state, size of college, and majors. Once you do so, the site generates names of colleges that match your choices and live links to their websites. Students are wise to use search engines such as this one repeatedly as they visit campuses and refine their understanding of their needs and preferences.

Another helpful Internet site is COLLEGEdata (<http://www.collegedata.com/>). This free site includes a Quick College Finder search window on the main page. Type in the name of a specific college or university and then read its "cover" page with helpful facts such as tuition costs, admissions rates, graduation rates, and size. Click the name of the campus on the cover page and find a wealth of additional information. Most helpful is information about the GPAs, SAT/ACT scores, and other demographics of recently-admitted freshmen classes. Students can compare their GPA and SAT/ACT scores to determine how realistic this campus is for them.



✓ *Before you go*

College applications are on the rise (http://www.usatoday.com/news/education/2010-01-14-college-admissions_N.htm). Although college admissions have become more competitive, campuses have also increased their marketing efforts to attract the students they want. Consequently, high school students can be bombarded with information from recruiters and their own Guidance department. Create a system for organizing all this information! A simple Excel spreadsheet, coupled with a 10-pocket accordion filing folder, can help you store facts, brochures, and correspondence as your campus search unfolds. Determine what you want to know more about before you visit a specific campus. Make a “Top 10” list of preferences and use this to search that school’s website before you visit. This will help you plan your day, schedule appointments with relevant campus personnel, and generate a list of questions to ask while there.

Students with learning disabilities (LD), ADHD, Asperger’s, anxiety, or other diagnosed learning or mood disorders should plan to visit the Disability Services (DS) office. Teenagers can be resistant to this suggestion, particularly if they have not used accommodations or special education services in high school. They may think that a DS office is the college version of a Special Education room, which is not the case. However, the transition to college can quickly exacerbate the reading/studying/time management/self-regulation difficulties these students experience. Unlike high schools, colleges have no responsibility for reaching out to students in need and do not have to accommodate “after the fact.” If a student with ADHD, for example, does not make contact with a DS office during her first semester, gets overwhelmed, stops going to lectures and fails a course, she cannot disclose her disability at that late date and expect the college to take any corrective action.

So...be proactive. Meet with a staff member in the DS office during your campus visit. Call or email in advance to schedule an appointment. Promote your teen’s self-advocacy by having him/her set this up. Bring your teen’s documentation (the assessment report that diagnoses his/her disability and any IEP’s or 504 Plans from school). Show it to the DS person to find out if new or updated testing will be necessary to meet the college’s documentation guidelines. When scheduling the meeting, ask if one or two students who use that office and have the same disability as your son or daughter could meet with him/her as part of the visit. They could go have a Coke or coffee nearby before or after you both meet with the DS person. Those students would enjoy “giving back” to a future college student by sharing tips about their own transitions, use of accommodations, interactions with professors, etc.

✓ *Once you are there*

Successful transitions to college unfold when teens have some experience being in charge of themselves. They need to learn how to meet adults they do not know and ask those individuals for information or assistance. Support this growth by letting your teen take the lead as much as possible during the campus visit. Let him/her, for example, make the introductions when entering someone’s office. Encourage your teen to bring a notebook and questions so he/she can



direct the conversation whenever possible. Prompt him/her in advance to ask each person with whom you meet for a business card.

Orchestrate other experiences that help your son or daughter experience a visceral sense of what it would be like to live on that campus. For example, if there is a bus service on campus, take a ride. Have a meal if possible in a campus dining facility. Visit the campus bookstore and encourage your teen to flip through several textbooks assigned to classes he/she might take as a freshman. Visit other facilities on or near campus that might be a part of your teen's life there, too, such as a recreational facility or a church/synagogue.

During your meeting with a DS staff member, ask the following questions if they are relevant to your teen's situation:

- Would you advise me to disclose information about my disability in the personal essay when applying to this college? If I do, how does this work?
- Does your college/university offer course substitutions in foreign language or math?
- What assistive/learning technology would I have access to on this campus?
- If I need to take any placement tests during the summer orientation, can I request accommodations for those tests?
- Does your office provide any summer transition programs for incoming students?
- When and how would I request accommodations if I came here?

✓ **After your trip**

Remember: the college search process is bigger than “just” finding the right college or university (a huge task in itself!). It is about helping your teen develop greater independence and a realistic sense of how college will differ from high school. One of the biggest factors that contribute to a student's happiness and success in college is “engagement,” or creating meaningful interactions with people and activities on that campus. Support the process of engagement by encouraging your teen to take two steps after each campus visit. First, he/she should write a brief thank you note to each person with whom you met. This could be done via email or a small box of Thank You cards but not via text messaging. Second, rate each item on the Top 10 Preference List after visiting that campus. Use a simple rating system such as: Awesome; Good; Disappointing; Not Applicable for each preference. Do this soon after the visit while impressions are still fresh. Follow up with a targeted search of the campus website or phone calls to obtain any additional information you were unable to locate while on site.

By carrying out several campus visits in this manner, you and your teen will gain invaluable information, clarify his/her needs and preferences, and go a long way to promote the student's confidence and informed decision-making about the college choice.

Dr. Parker works with families to help them organize and carry out individualized college searches. For more information, call CRG at (317) 575-9111 or visit <http://www.childrensresourcegroup.com/services/college-search-transition-services/>.



HELPFUL RESOURCES

College for Students with LD and/or AD/HD

http://www.dys-add.com/resources/Adults_College/CollegeInfo.pdf

Peterson's Guide to College Programs for Students with LD or ADD

<http://www.amazon.com/Petersons-Colleges-Disabilities-Attention-Disorders/dp/156079853X>

K&W Guide to Colleges for Students with Learning Disabilities

http://www.amazon.com/Colleges-Students-Learning-Disabilities-Admissions/dp/0375429611/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1336495230&sr=1-1

College Programs for Students with Asperger Syndrome

<http://collegeautismspectrum.com/collegeprograms.html>

Ready for Take-Off: Preparing Your Teen and ADHD or LD for College

<http://www.apa.org/pubs/magination/441B063.aspx>

Summer Pre-College Programs for Students with Disabilities (HEATH Resource Center)

<http://www.heath.gwu.edu/publications/archived/seasonal-programs/>