



parents league
of new york

the review 2018

Essential Articles on
Parenting & Education

The College Visit

Elizabeth Hannan, Director of College Counseling
Saint Ann's School

College visiting at my school, Saint Ann's School, is a subject surrounded by much lore. Our founding Head of School Stanley Bosworth was an education visionary. In 1965, he and others started a school that did not grade or rank its students; rather, teachers wrote narrative reports for each student in every class taken. The idea was to put children together with grown-ups who were brilliant in their fields, cultivating a sacred bond between student and teacher. Add to that bond the placement of art, music, writing, theatre and dance at the center of the curriculum on equal footing with serious academics and you have the dream school he imagined.

Back in the old days of the 1970s and 80s, Stanley hit the road to spread the good word of his mad experiment back in Brooklyn and to prove it worked. Off he went to colleges and universities to meet with anyone and everyone who would listen to him, often with students in tow to show them off and ensure they would be given a fair shake against their peers at more established schools. What started as an advertisement for his school morphed into college visiting as he would pile the group of students interested in Amherst or Brown in the car and off they zoomed up to New England.

This is where the lore comes in—alums who went on these grand adventure college car trips have varying tall tales of what actually happened on them and what they actually accomplished. I can't tell you how often these visits still get mentioned in family meetings, even all these years later.

The Value of Visiting

Growing up in northern Florida, my own college process began with a weeklong bus trip through Georgia, the Carolinas, Tennessee and Alabama. We saw 18 diverse colleges and universities—everything from Agnes Scott to Duke to Clemson—in an overly-scheduled itinerary of admissions tours and information sessions. It was an exhausting whirlwind and, even though I ended up applying to very few of the schools I saw that week, I learned a lot. It brought me closer to realizing that I wanted to be in New England for college; together with my parents and my college counselor, I reconfigured my research approach.

The world of college admissions has changed in about a million different ways since Stanley's special car trips and my Southern bus adventure. My school's college list has grown exponentially over the years as students have broadened the scope of their search beyond the handful of New England colleges to more than a hundred schools throughout the country and beyond.

Visiting, however, remains an important piece of the college process and I encourage the families I work with to plan some trips. Certainly not everyone has the luxury or financial means to do so, but if it is possible it is absolutely a worthwhile step to take with your student. If visiting farther-flung places is not an option, there are many different kinds of schools right here in the New York City area that can inform your student's process and, ultimately, college list—see a large research university, a small liberal arts college, a women's college, a city campus, or an art school. All of these kinds of institutions are only a subway or Metro-North ride away.

Your Itinerary

When putting together a college visit itinerary, there are a few things to keep in mind. Junior year is the ideal and most productive time to start visiting; cases can be made for seeing schools earlier in high school (if you are traveling to a faraway city, state or country you wouldn't normally visit, if your student might be a recruited athlete, etc.) but a return visit closer to the time of application might be advised. By April of junior year, admissions offices have mostly wrapped up the cycle before and are ready to turn their attention to the juniors who will apply in the fall. School vacations in the spring of junior year are good times to visit but they are also popular times, so check university and college websites to make sure tours and info sessions are available and sign up ahead of time.

Try to do the official school tour, but if that is not an option for some reason, students should always be sure to sign in at the admissions office. At many colleges, it is important to demonstrate interest in the school and visiting is one way to accomplish this, so be sure to get "credit" for the visit. When designing your trips, don't try to do too many schools at once. The reason why my college tour bus trip is so memorable is because it was a blur of quads and stadiums, art studios and tour guides walking backwards; I saw too much all at once. Beware of burnout. You definitely want to have time on campus to do the tour and info session but build in time to go off the beaten path and see things that the official tour might not show you.

When planning the list of schools to see, start with a destination and talk to your school counselor about the various kinds of schools in that area. Or if there is a particular school your student definitely wants to see, make that the foundation on which to build a balanced visit. At the beginning when juniors have no idea what exactly they are looking for, it can be good to see a range of schools, size-wise and selectivity-wise. Visits will inform the list as it is built, so heading to the Boston area and only seeing Harvard, MIT and Tufts with stops at Brown and Yale along the way will not help expand the list. Because of the nature of this nutty process, I believe that seeing potential midrange and likely schools is equally important as seeing the reach end of the list—if not more so.

It is vital that students imagine themselves at a range of schools in this process; visiting is one way this can happen.

Tour Guides and the Weather

There are a couple of universal influences that affect college visits and will either make a student hate a school or make a student want to enroll immediately: tour guides and the weather. Keep in mind that tour guides do not define the entire student body anywhere. When one of my juniors blames a bad visit on the tour guide, I instantly dismiss this reasoning. It is so arbitrary who you get to tour you around. Sometimes you can choose amongst a group of student guides by major or hometown, but mostly you choose the guide because you are closest to him in the info session room or you like his blue hair. Think about going on a different tour from the one your student is on. This way, you get two takes, two different angles on the same school, and you can compare notes afterwards. Also, it allows you to freely ask all the embarrassing parental questions you like—with no eye-rolling, no annoyed looks, no daggers shot your way.

The other absolute mental asterisk I observe when helping a student think about a college visit is what the weather was like that day. Seeing Bowdoin and the University of Michigan on a beautiful June day is very different from what an academic year would be like at one of these fine institutions. It is most ideal to experience campuses like these wearing a parka in February, but summer is a practical time for visiting so just make a mental note of this while you are strolling around in your flip-flops.

Gather Impressions

I encourage my families to leave time after the official admissions tour to visit the department buildings where their son or daughter might

spend time in college. Stroll through the campus or student center and look at bulletin boards—check out the social events, the groups and clubs represented. Who are the speakers coming to campus? What music and performances are advertised? Have a coffee in the student union and check out what the students sitting at the other tables are like. What are they reading? Pick up a student newspaper and other school publications to see what the news is on campus.

If there is time, have your student make a plan to meet up with a graduate from his high school who is currently enrolled at the school you are visiting. This is a good way to get a personalized perspective on the institution, one from a reliable source who comes from New York City. This can also be a way to see the inside of a dorm and a real student's room or suite, something not all tours are able to show you.

Another eye-opening way for a student to get a closer look at a school is to sit in on a class or two. This can be coordinated through the admissions offices; not all schools allow it and not all classes can be visited, but definitely look into it before you head off on your college trip. This is a not-to-be-missed opportunity to see both professors and undergraduates in action.

Admission interviews might also be available on campus. If a student is very interested in the school and wants to demonstrate this and find out more personalized information, she should book one in advance online. Admissions officers often conduct these interviews but sometimes they use undergraduate interviewers, which can be the perfect time to ask student life questions and dig in more about life on campus. (Note: Not every school holds on-campus interviews; many schools have mobilized their alumni base to interview in New York City after applications have been submitted.)

As soon as you leave campus, encourage your student to write down some quick impressions of the school visited. Besides helping to clarify thoughts, these notes often come in handy later when writing school-specific supplements in the application.

Special Opportunities

High school students get inundated with daily emails and mail from colleges and universities and it can be hard to wade through it all. There is certainly a lot of junk but a few things for students to keep an eye on. For example, many colleges hold special programming for students of color. These programs, known as “fly-ins,” offer free transportation to and from campus. Fly-ins are by application only; these applications become

available in the spring, summer and early fall depending on the college. Many schools also offer specialized programming or experience days for certain intended majors —arts and humanities, business, engineering, sciences, etc. It can be smart for students to make these visits for a different look at a school beyond the normal tour.

Enjoy the Ride

Whether driving down I-95 or a small country road in Maine, there are a few certainties that will transpire while college visiting: your child will control the music the whole trip, you will get royally lost at least once, and you will wonder what your child actually learned in driver's ed. And don't be surprised if, after a five-hour drive through a monsoon, you find yourself coaxing your child to even get out of the car on a campus because he has "a bad vibe" about the place.

You will also laugh and talk and get to know the young adult next to you in new ways. Perhaps the best thing to come out of college visiting is spending time with your almost-senior.

Elizabeth Hannan is Director of College Counseling at Saint Ann's School, a preschool through 12th grade school in Brooklyn.

This article first appeared in the 2018 issue of *Parents League Review*.
© 2018 Parents League of New York www.parentsleague.org.