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Drive

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COLLEGE TOURING 101

by Marcy Black



ONE IOWA DAD REMEMBERS THE COLLEGE ROAD TRIPS WITH HIS DAUGHTER AS “ ... THE BEST DAYS I HAVE EVER LIVED.” HE SAID, “SHE SPENT MOST OF HIGH SCHOOL IN OPEN REBELLION. THIS TIME TOURING COLLEGE CAMPUSES BEGAN A HEALING PROCESS. LOCKED INTO THE FAMILY CAR TOGETHER, WE BEGAN TO REESTABLISH COMMUNICATION.”

Driving past the tidy farms of Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, my 17-year-old daughter asked if we could pull over to watch a family of Amish women in bonnets and long dresses. I asked how she'd feel if folks pulled off the road to watch her at home.

A few days later we cruised through a gritty barrio neighborhood of Hartford, Connecticut. “Slow down,” she said. “I want to read the signs.” We crept past the bodegas and restaurants so she could practice her Spanish.

These were two very different glimpses of America and two learning experiences for my teenager, who had spent her life in small-town Maine. They were opportunities stemming from that most unique road trip - the college tour.

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CAMPUS VISITS

In spring and fall, hordes of high school students hit the highway with their parents to visit colleges and universities across the country. Three out of four schools report more prospective students are visiting campus each year. Would-be applicants check out schools that they've classified as "reach," "likely," and "safety." Accepted seniors compare colleges to decide which one they will attend.



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These tours open a rare door, giving parents a chance to bond with their offspring before they leave the nest. If not planned carefully, they also can lead to sulking and screaming, and I'm not just talking about the teens.

PLANNING

You can lay the groundwork for college trips on the Internet. School admission offices provide extensive resources. First, see if students are on campus when you plan to visit. Note the schedules for campus tours and informational sessions; some require advance registration. If you sign up online, you may receive maps and parking passes in the mail.



Few schools offer or require interviews, but some are available on campus. Spaces are limited, so sign up early.

Don't attempt to visit more than two schools a day. Allow extra time, as tours and informational sessions frequently run late, and traffic may be erratic. Plot your routes and book hotels in advance. Some places offer discounts for local college visitors, so mention the area schools you're touring.

Practicality dictates that a driving trip should focus on schools in a single geographic area. You can tighten your net by concentrating on schools that meet particular criteria.

DRIVING TOGETHER

Being in close proximity with your teen for hours at a time can be a trial or an opportunity. Steven Roy Goodman, an educational consultant and admission strategist in Washington, D.C., cautions about "the power dynamic of the road trip" in the parents' car, with parents driving, buying the gas, and choosing the radio station. No wonder teens tend to plug into their MP3 players and snooze in

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the back seat. Remove the ear buds and cell phone, let your teen ride shotgun - or drive - and you've got his or her attention.

Topics for talk are as vast as the American landscape through which you're driving. Take the opportunity to ask what your offspring is looking for in a college, a career, or a friend.

AT THE SCHOOLS

Once you arrive on campus, let your teen register at the admissions office. Schools keep track of all contacts with applicants. In a recent survey, 46 percent of schools said campus visits have a positive influence on the admissions decision.

Informational sessions and campus tours often follow one after the other. For the most part, let your teen ask the questions. You may choose to rest while your teenager tromps around campus. If you take a tour, wear your walking shoes.

Try to grab a meal in the cafeteria and engage some students in conversation. They are the most authoritative source of information about the campus environment. Ask about what happens on weekends. Is there a big Greek influence? Are professors approachable? Read the student newspaper. Scope out the neighborhood.

Your teen should carry a notebook to jot down impressions after each visit. That'll help them keep recollections straight after visiting multiple schools.

LISTENING

Sometimes a student reacts to a school with his or her gut. My daughter was turned off by one campus where all the students looked like they stepped out of a J.Crew catalog. If your teen is put off by graffiti on the sidewalks or the icky rice pudding in the cafeteria, you have to accept his or her judgment. Likewise, you can rejoice when your teen notices smiling faces on every student or the wealth of activities advertised on bulletin boards.

You never know what's going to resonate. That's why campus tours are so important.

Soon your child will be leaving home, family, and adolescence behind. A driving trip to explore your teen's educational options may help shape your future relationship with that fledgling adult.

ONLINE EXCLUSIVE

10 COLLEGE TOURING DON'Ts AND DO's

1. "Don't be your child's secretary. Let them take the lead contacting schools, scheduling visits, and asking questions."
Katherine Cohen, CEO of IvyWise and ApplyWise.com
2. Do have your teen sign in and try to meet your regional representative in the admissions office. Don't leave campus without the school knowing your child has been there.
3. Don't visit more than two schools a day.
4. Do take a separate campus tour from your child so you can "ask the embarrassing questions, which will save him or her some mortification."
Joan Pfeffer, Director of College Guidance, Laurel School, Shaker Heights, OH
5. Don't judge a school solely on the basis of the tour guide - or the weather - during your visit.
6. Do have your teen contact a department head to arrange to sit in on a class. That can establish a personal relationship with an ally come admissions time.

7. Don't ask, "What did you think?" on your way out of the campus parking lot. Give your teen time to process the visit.
8. Do - if at all possible - leave much younger siblings at home. "They won't remember the colleges when it's their turn, they're likely to feel resentful, and you won't have to monitor their behavior at the motel."
Dick Tobin, Director of College Counseling, Greenhills School, Ann Arbor, MI
9. Don't forget to schedule some fun to defuse the stress of the trip. "Take time to see some sights or have a quiet meal together at a nice place."
Katherine Sillin, Director of College Counseling, North Yarmouth Academy, Yarmouth, ME
10. Do make sure your teen gets cards from the tour guide and "writes thank you notes to anyone who interviews them or arranges to let them sit in on a class."
Cristiana Quinn, College Admission Advisors, Providence, RI

TAKING ADVANTAGE OF SERENDIPITY

Don't let a tight schedule prevent you from taking advantage of serendipity. One of my sons cemented his interest in attending Boston University when the student guide leading a large group encouraged him to tour the College of Communications. We extended our visit to allow him an impromptu, one-on-one tour of the facility.

Another time, my husband and I sent our daughter on the walking tour of a hilly campus while we basked in the sun on benches in front of the admissions office. Striking up a conversation with a friendly fellow with a briefcase, we discovered we were chatting with the university president.

SELECTED SAMPLE ITINERARIES

Small-Town Pennsylvania Schools

- Lafayette College in Easton
- Lehigh University in Bethlehem
- Moravian College in Bethlehem
- Muhlenberg College in Allentown
- Bucknell University in Lewisburg
- Dickinson College in Carlisle
- Gettysburg College in Gettysburg
- Franklin & Marshall College in Lancaster

Southern California Schools

- University of California Los Angeles
- University of Southern California in Los Angeles
- Occidental College in Los Angeles
- California Institute of Technology in Pasadena
- Whittier College in Whittier
- Chapman University in Orange
- Claremont Colleges (Pomona, Scripps, Claremont McKenna, Harvey Mudd, Pitzer) in Claremont
- University of California San Diego
- San Diego State University

Engineering Schools in the Northeast

- Massachusetts Institute of Technology in Cambridge, MA
- Tufts University in Medford, MA
- Worcester Polytechnic Institute in Worcester, MA
- Binghamton University (SUNY) in Binghamton, NY
- Rochester Institute of Technology in Rochester, NY
- Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in Troy, NY
- Clarkson University in Potsdam, NY