

Campus visits — by Kathleen King



Trip tips help you find the good, the bad and the ugly.

In September of 1968, my grandparents put my father on a plane, wished him well and told him they'd see him at Christmas.

My dad was headed to begin his freshman year at Dartmouth College in Hanover, N.H. He had never been on an airplane, lived away from home or set foot on Dartmouth's picturesque New England campus before that day.

Now, many years later, I am shocked that anyone would choose a college having never seen it. These days many high school juniors spend the summer before and the fall during their senior year visiting colleges and universities.

These college visits are an important aspect of selecting a place to live and continue your education. (But it's OK to have a little fun along the way as well!) I visited some colleges in the summer, and picked up valuable tips that would help me out with the remainder of my visits.

More than brochures

The most important thing I learned is that the college life and atmosphere cannot be summed up in a brochure: The grass is not always green, the buildings are not always freshly painted, and the sky is not always bright and sunny. Because most students catch on to that, they want to actually visit and see for themselves what a college is like.

Getting on a tour isn't hard; just look at the school's Web site to look for times and then call ahead of time. The tours—typically given by college students—usually take about two hours and cover a good amount of the campus by foot, so wear comfortable shoes. You will visit the cafeteria, dorm rooms, and other important offices and buildings on campus.

From my experiences, the student tour guides are a fantastic resource. I was able to ask the students about their school's social life, activities, teachers, workload, food and other topics. For the most part, it seemed that they told me about the reality of a student's life at their college.

I quickly realized, though, that if I wanted the good, the bad and the ugly of what a college has to offer, I should seek out the opinion of a student not being paid to give a tour. For example, the official tours I have taken have often shown me the best possible living situations on campus, like the few spacious dorm rooms with a view. But, in talking to other students at one school, I discovered that

there are many less desirable living situations—especially for freshmen. So, I recommend that you also take an unofficial tour.

Find out about food and fun

I made sure that I didn't leave campus without sampling the cafeteria's menu! My parents and I had lunch in one of the cafeterias on campus to find out what types of meals are prepared and, most importantly, what they will taste like! I definitely discovered that each school's menu is different.

In college, I probably won't be spending all of my free time on campus, so I've made sure to spend some time exploring the town or city in which the school is located, as well as the surrounding area. My parents and I spent the afternoon checking out the restaurants, the stores, the things to do, as well as the facilities, resources and opportunities the city offers. I made sure to ask students where the hot spots were and what they enjoyed doing.

A make-or-break decision

Fortunately for my dad, he found his way from the airport to the college campus and, after a few lonely days, experienced four great years! He looks back with fond memories of his college days and hopes I enjoy a similar experience. However, the college search process has changed a lot since he was a student.

As competition to get into college has dramatically increased, students are applying to more schools. Campus visits have the potential to make or break a decision. Take advantage of your opportunities to visit places so you can make the best decision for yourself. Hey, if nothing else, you may get a mini-vacation or at least a day off from school.

