



During Your College Visit, Ask These 8 Questions Focus on 'What's Right for Me?' Forget Magazine Ratings.

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Research materials and suggestions for families engaging in a college search are prolific. Families should use them all – but, be careful because college rating guides can be misleading.

One of the most popular of these guides is published annually by *U.S. News & World Report*. It relies primarily on the “academic reputation” of a college as its most important variable in determining annual ratings. The magazine obtains this information by surveying presidents, deans and admissions directors at the nation’s colleges and universities. However, few of these administrators are at all aware of developments at the colleges in their regions, and so mistakes are made.

For instance, several years ago, in *U.S. News & World Report*, one of the small liberal arts colleges rated the highest in the northeastern tier was Trinity College in Vermont. Shortly afterwards, Trinity announced it would close due to a lack of students and money.

Because of the inherent discrepancies in the method of collecting data, it’s no wonder that college freshmen often disregard nationally-known magazines. In fact, an annual poll of college freshmen conducted by Sanford Austin of UCLA suggests that only 10 percent of students pay serious attention to the reports; 30 percent pay moderate attention; and, 60 percent pay no attention at all to these guides. College administrators themselves give low ratings to national college ratings.



With such a major decision at stake, what are a prospective student and his or her parents to do, given the questionable validity of these national college rankings and the onslaught of materials that successful high school juniors and seniors receive from colleges and universities?

A first step is to narrow the kind of institution a student is considering. Trusted high school teachers, counselors, and alumni of various colleges and universities can help, but the first and most important rule is “**know thyself.**”

Know what kind of institution you want -- and what will best meet your needs.

Consider size of the institution and its location as well as academic reputation and majors. Once your choices are narrowed, the important

process of the campus visits begins.

Here are some questions you should consider during your visit:

1. Ask specifically about a college’s “retention” rate. How many students enter as freshmen and graduate as seniors within four years? This is important because the cost of a fifth or sixth year in college is high. Not only does it include the additional tuition, room and board a family pays, but the substantial opportunity cost you realize by not going onto graduate school or entering the workforce for one or two years.

2. Ask about a college’s job placement and graduate school placement rate. Count the number of career counselors at each college and divide them by the number of students. This will give you some idea as to
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whether the career office is used by all students from freshmen on up as it should be -- or just by desperate seniors seeking help with their resumes.

3. Ask who teaches. At many universities, undergraduates can progress through their first two or three years of college without having a professor in class. They are, instead, taught by graduate students.

4. Ask about the average and median class size. It should be 30 or lower. Occasionally, a university or college will have what appears to be an acceptable student-teacher ratio, but that ratio may be heavily weighted by a small enrollment in upper division classes.

5. Ask about advising. Faculty advisors are an important part of a quality college experience, but many colleges and universities relegate academic advising to a low priority -- and faculty are hardly encouraged to provide the time to help undergraduates choose the right classes, internships and graduate schools.

6. Ask as much about the core curriculum of a college as you do about their majors. Students today are inordinately interested in a particular major. But, more than 50 percent of freshmen change their major in their first year, and many change it more than once. Therefore, a solid broad-based core curriculum is important because it allows you to sample different fields of study and provides you with what most employers and graduate schools say they want -- an individual well-schooled in the liberal arts.

7. Ask about the opportunities to engage in undergraduate research with faculty. At most large universities, graduate students, not undergraduates, participate in the research.

8. Ask about admission to "programs" as well as the college or university itself. Often a student is admitted into a university only to find out two years later that there is no room in the program or major he or she desires.



After a student is admitted into a few colleges or universities, he or she and their families are usually presented with another dizzying array of alternatives related to financial aid.

If a family has been wise enough to save through SAGE and/or various other college savings programs, their options are much greater.

But, regardless, these key questions should still be asked.

- **Ask about the various types of aid that are included in the award letter.** Be sure you differentiate grant and scholarship assistance from loan programs that eventually need to be repaid -- and from work programs through which students accept jobs on or off campus to earn the funds listed in the award letter.

- **Ask the Financial Aid Office at each college if the aid they are offering you has terms and conditions for continued eligibility.**

- **Find out if the scholarships or aid offered will be continued at the same level** during the student's sophomore year as in his/her freshmen year. This is important because freshmen occasionally receive larger packages in their first year than in succeeding years.

- **Ask about the historical average annual increase in tuition.**

Remember, you will be paying tuition for at least four years.

- **Ask the college or university if a different tuition rate (and/or room rate) is charged for certain programs** -- or if a substantial fee is added to the bills of certain majors. Often, there is a surcharge for certain majors.

Most important, don't be overly concerned about the listed tuition -- at least not at the start of your college search. Most private colleges offer aid which does much to span the gap between public taxpayer-subsidized large institutions and private ones.

When all the questions have been asked and answered, when all the information is in, the final choice must be made on the basis of "fit". It is essential to find a college or university where a student feels comfortable and knows he or she can do well.

The only thing more expensive than a college education is making the wrong choice about which college or university to attend. So, visit the colleges that are of interest to you -- and ask good questions.

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