

College tours: How to make the most of your time on campus

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Sabrina Knipe knew Hofstra University had a top-ranked music business program, but it wasn't until she visited the campus in early 2022 that she felt certain it was the school for her.

During a tour of the 244-acre campus in Hempstead, Knipe met with professors and current students and auditioned as a prospective soprano vocal student and music business major.

"I always tell people that I didn't have an 'aha moment,' but instead felt feelings of belonging and ... I could see how I fit into the Hofstra atmosphere," recalled Knipe, now a senior who estimates she has led roughly 10,000 people around the school during her four years as a campus tour guide. "I needed to be a part of a community that was supportive and encouraging, especially coming out of the pandemic where everyone felt totally isolated."

In spite of all the information available online - 360-degree virtual tours on college websites, "day in the life" videos and other social media posts and apps for college applicants such as ZeeMee - admissions officers say there's no replacement for an in-person tour.

A rite of passage for many college-bound high school juniors and seniors, tours can give applicants a chance to hear from a student guide, ask questions and get a feel for the campus.

"You don't know what you want until you get onto campus and can say, 'I can see myself here,' or, just as importantly... 'I cannot see myself here,'" said Meagan Schuster, associate director for campus visits and experiences at Stony Brook University.

Going on a tour also is a way to show interest in a school, a factor many colleges track when they're making admissions decisions.

But there's an art to getting the most out of a tour, college students and admissions officers say.

For prospective students and their families embarking on college tours, whether during spring break or at other times of the year, below is some of the best advice Newsday gathered in interviews with college admissions officers, students and high school counselors.

Before the campus tour

Register for a tour as far in advance as possible, especially at busy times of year. If tours are full, contact the admissions office and ask if they've had any cancellations. Take note if the staff is welcoming or inaccessible. That could be a sign of the campus culture. Also keep in mind that some colleges will arrange private tours. "A little known secret, if there is no room in the tour, if they call the admissions office ... we will always set up a private tour and help them walk through on a day that they're available," said Stephen Ostendorff, assistant vice president for admissions and enrollment technology at Molloy University in Rockville Centre.

Look up information such as student-faculty ratio, academic majors and extracurriculars on the college's website

or publications such as U.S. News & World Report, Peterson's or the College Board. "I always recommend to students and families to do a little bit of research beforehand," said Melissa Bellantonio, director of undergraduate admissions at Adelphi University in Garden City. "They don't have to have everything figured out, but just have a sense of what they're curious about, what drew them to that institution. That way the visit can become more meaningful."

Read student comments on sites such as Niche or College Confidential and on social media apps like ZeeMee, where college applicants and current students can connect. Also search for student-posted videos on YouTube.

Spend time thinking about what you want. Are you looking for a large research university, a liberal arts college or a career-focused education? A close-knit community of dedicated scholars, a raging party scene or a "suitcase school" where you won't miss much if you go home each weekend since others do the same? Do you want to study in an urban, suburban or rural setting?

On the tour

Wear comfortable shoes. Many tour guides say high schoolers show up wearing anything from ripped jeans to business casual attire; most say it doesn't matter what you wear (though some admissions officers recommend looking tidy).

Plan to show up a few minutes early. Many tours start with an information session in the admissions office, but some depart for a walking tour right away.

Look out for your personal "red flags" and "green flags." For instance, "if students and faculty are stopping and saying hello to your tour guide, that's an interesting, subtle message that says it's a tight-knit community," said Jessica Eads, senior vice president for student enrollment, engagement and success at Hofstra.

Ask open-ended questions you can't easily get the answers to online. "You really do get that insight from the tour guides who are students, and really understand what it is to be here at this university and what the day-to-day may look like," said Itzel Garcia, 21, a senior psychology major and professional writing minor at Stony Brook University who works as a campus tour guide. "The more questions, the better," said Jeanne Soto, executive director of admissions at Farmingdale State College. "We would rather you ask 10,000 questions than none at all."

Some questions to consider

Why did you choose this school?

What are weekends like here?

What are the best things to do on campus and off campus?

Who is your favorite professor, and why?

If there's been a time when you or a friend struggled with something, were you able to get help?

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What's your most and least favorite spot on campus?

What do you like most about the school?

If you could change one thing about the school, what would it be?

What has surprised you most about the school?

After the tour

Drop by the campus dining center or cafe and observe how students interact. If you're up to it, let a student know you're considering the school and ask how they like it.

If possible, visit the department you're most interested in and see if a professor is available for a short chat, or see how professors and students interact.

Take notes on each visit. If you're too tired to write notes, speak into a voice memo app that generates a transcript, and include the school's name in the memo title. Photos of key features also can help refresh your memory. "Schools will start to blend together," Schuster said, "so keep the notes of what you liked, what you maybe didn't like or what you're unsure about, so that you have all that information written down while it's still fresh."

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