
When to Start those Campus Visits?

Parents frequently ask me when they should start taking their son or daughter on a round of college campus visits. I used to say 'junior year' – a standard response -- but a couple of years ago, I changed my tune. I've dropped back about 7 years – yes! Now when I'm asked about campus visits I strongly encourage 4th grade . . . if not age 4. Here's why.

It's the week (or two) of Spring Break in your daughter's junior year. You've taken time off for the ritual college tour, and there is a lot of anxiety in the pit of your stomach. This trip signifies so much change. Change for your daughter, Catherine . . . is she ready? Change for your whole family . . . are *you* ready?? It's still cold, damp and dreary, but you're off on a many hundred mile trek around six or eight college campuses – some that she wants to see, and some you want to show her, because . . . well, just because. And that includes your alma mater.

Cramped in the car for a two hundred mile drive, there has been none of the conversation about colleges you'd anticipated (in fact Catherine has pretty much refused to take off her headphones from which her music emanates loudly enough to be heard over your NPR radio). You'd thought, "finally, we'll be spending some quality time together, focusing on colleges. We can talk about what she's really looking for, I can find out what she knows, I can offer my help . . ." but that talk hasn't happened, yet. Instead, there is a strange tension and you can see the avoidance that shuts down her face.

You arrive at your first site and cruise slowly around the campus, until your daughter tells you, crossly, to please speed up -- she feels like she's on parade and everyone must be staring at her. Finally you pull wearily into a parking spot as close as you can get to the Admissions Office, and open your door, ready to find the reception rooms and the bathrooms, and sit and talk with a few other parents doing the 'campus tour'.

But Catherine does not open her door. You open it for her. 'No,' she says, 'no need . . . I'm not getting out. I could never go here. This place is just not right for me. I can tell. I'd never want to go here.' 'Why?!?' you blurt out, 'how do you know?' You're

in shock. What happened? 'I can tell,' she says. 'Look at the kids, for God's sake!! Never would I look like that! And besides, I don't like the looks of it. It's just . . . too big. Too cold. And there's nothing to do here.' Dumbly, you get back in your car and head for a service station, and a place to eat and *talk*.

How did you get into this situation? And how could you have avoided this . . . this *tension*?

As a former Ivy League dean, I have peered out my window during spring and seen so many families, rain or shine, following their fearless back-tracking student guide around campus. I've seen the looks of excitement, and the scowls. And I've overheard the conversations as I walk to the Blue Room for coffee with a colleague. I know each of these families is going through a moment of crisis – one of the first in a long line of crises and times of tension that will lead up to the moment when they share their last hugs at the door of their child's dorm room, and the parents walk stiffly, often wet-eyed, off the campus that will rapidly become their child's new home.

So what could you do to make this important transition more comfortable, for everyone? How could you help your child to 'see' colleges in a fuller, more accepting manner?

Two Suggestions . . .

I have a couple of suggestions. First, if you want college to be an important part of your child's preparation for life, then you can't start too soon preparing them to feel familiar and comfortable with the college experience, and the experience of a college.

By the time young people are juniors in high school, the very word 'college' has become associated with pressure, fear, and questions of identity. By then, 'going to college' has a mystique that borders on the promise of going to Avalon. Stories from parents and siblings, books and films, all interweave with expectations from their school, their peers and their families to make many young people dream of college – a time and place for self-development, professional preparation, and a large dose of fun. But are they really ready, personally, for the challenges and transformations awaiting them? *Believe me, every high school junior and senior is secretly wondering that very thing.*

Fourth-graders generally have a home-and-family orientation and security that can allow them to become comfortable with any environment they visit often – without questioning their own ability to actually survive or thrive there, all on their own. They're still willing, even eager to go places with their family, too . . . so go, now!

Visiting a college campus when you're wondering if this is a place you would want to be (*or where you would be wanted!*) can be overwhelming. Teens are often so self-conscious that they make their college choice based on where they had a friendly conversation with a student while they sat on a bench waiting for you to get a cup of

coffee and find the proverbial restroom. By the time you sink back into your car, do you/they feel you know more? Or are you all more confused? How does each of you see a campus deeply, beyond the buildings and the trees?

First, you and your child have to feel comfortable just being there - - which is why, no doubt, so many parents urge their child to consider applying to their alma mater. I certainly think a visit to parents' alma maters is an excellent idea - but start early! Take your young kids back to your reunions (I know, you'd like it to be a time by yourself, with old friends), and play Frisbee on the lawns again. Let them listen to your stories as you visit with those special never-to-be-forgotten college friends.

More importantly, make colleges part of your life. Drive through campuses when you visit other cities. Stop in the libraries, the art galleries. Above all, get connected to the colleges and universities that are closest to where you live. Colleges are so rich with exciting, dynamic activity- and not too many Americans live more than 50 miles from a campus!

Start taking your fourth-grader to college sports events. Let her meet some of the young women on the soccer team; or introduce yourself and your son to the hockey coach. Come home from the game with a hockey stick that was used in the game. Young players are always receptive to younger fans!

But be sure to break out beyond the athletic fields - *get on campus*. Go to plays, concerts, dance concerts, public lectures. See if you can get a pass to use the library, even if you can't take books out. Introduce your child, and your family, to the amazingly rich array of resources and creative activities that any and every college in this country holds!

Believe me, when you begin that slalom of campus visits in your child's junior year, you'll *all* be more comfortable. Your child will be out of the car to check out the theater, the campus shop, the exercise rooms -- while you're hunting for that cup of coffee and the restrooms, with a sigh of relief. And of course you'll both be wondering . . . can I see my self/son/daughter here?

Too Late for the Fourth Grade approach? Send Your Teen to a Summer Program, or on a college tour!

So go out and visit as many colleges as you can; but if that is not possible, consider sending your college-bound youngster off on a guided college tour for a week - or, better yet, let them enroll in a terrific on-campus residential summer program. These programs, and tours, can be tempting and motivational. Students come home weary, but with some fire in the belly because they have tasted the experience of college. An organized, guided college tour is an opportunity for your child to visit 10 or more colleges, draw comparisons and develop a sense of where and how they would fit in. Traveling with a few other students, they can compare notes, get the feel of self-

exploration and doing research, begin to understand the challenges and joys of making decisions and choices that will literally last a lifetime.

Better yet, studying on a college campus during a summer program has made A-level achievers out of many B-level students, because they just catch fire, thrilled with the possibilities in the intense atmosphere of a great learning community. After 2-4 weeks on campus, every young person returns home with greatly enhanced learning skills and motivation, and with a real understanding about what they need to accomplish in order to obtain their personal and academic goals.

Statistically, visits to college are the most significant factor in the choice of a college . . . even if the applicants haven't visited the college s/he ultimately chooses! That's because having spent time on one or more campuses, young people gain a sense of what is important to them, and they thrill to the possibilities and resources that will be available to them when they matriculate in a fine college or university. The opportunity to study on campus or visit campuses without the parental presence can be the most informational, motivational and decisive factor in the application and selection process.

Thinking about going to college shouldn't be the major headache that it has become, for students and parents alike. Get as much help and coaching as you can, and try to relax and enjoy the process. Above all, appreciate this time. It is truly an opportunity for transition and growth in the life of a young person, and in the development of a family. Yes, it *will* lead to re-structuring in your family, but handled with grace, good will and communication, I know it can lead to fuller, richer, more exciting relationships and family dynamics.