



Connecting with Colleges

By Katie McKoon

If you're starting your college search, you may be thinking, "I don't know how to learn about all of the different colleges and universities. Where do I even begin?" Never fear. There are so many ways in which you can connect with colleges, both on campus and in your own backyard! Here's a look at all of the different methods you can use to begin learning about colleges, determine your fit and feel, and get to know the people you will be spending four years of your life with!

The college comes to you

College fairs

College fairs are a great way to have loads of colleges at your fingertips. The purpose of a college fair is to collect as much information about as many colleges as you can. Colleges and universities will send admission counselors or alumni representatives to various college fairs all over the country. This is your opportunity to ask these representatives about majors, athletic opportunities, financial aid, extracurricular activities, etc. Think of it like a giant food court where you can get free samples at every booth! Make sure you bring a pen, a notebook to make notes of anything you may have learned, a list of questions, and a bag to hold all the brochures you receive. If you find a college that you really like, give them your information to get on their mailing list so you are made aware of deadlines, campus visit opportunities, and new happenings around the school. To make this process quicker, bring sticky labels

that have your contact information on them (name, address, and e-mail). Don't be afraid to talk to schools that you've never heard of. Who knows, it might be the perfect school for you!

Think about attending a national college fair; these fairs tend to have the most schools in attendance from all over the world. For these large fairs, you may want to check out the floor plan before you go to make sure you can visit the tables of all the colleges you want to see. A schedule of fairs and more information can be found at www.nacacnet.org in the "Events" section of the website.

High school visits

Surely you have heard an announcement over your high school's loud-speaker saying, "Attention students, a representative from XYZ University will be here on such and such a day and time. Please sign up in the guidance office if you're interested in attending." College representatives enjoy coming to your high school to connect with you as well as your guidance counselor. By attending a high school visit, you will have the opportunity to meet your potential admission counselor. Typically, the person coming to your high school has a big say in your admission to a university. Why not make a good impression early? The high school visit is also a great opportunity to learn about schools you might not have heard of before—you'll hear a nice overview of the school from the representative, receive some key publications and

brochures, and maybe even be given an application fee waiver! It is also a great opportunity for you to get your questions answered and to make sure the school has what you're looking for. Ask for a business card after the session and make sure to follow up with the representative if it is a school you are interested in.

Receptions

How do free food, knowledgeable people, and lots of information sound to you? Welcome to college receptions! This is another great way in which colleges come to your own backyard to connect with you. Typically, colleges will have events in areas many of their current students call home. Not only will at least one admission representative be present, but other members of the campus community attend as well. You'll have opportunities to connect with faculty, staff, alumni, and current students. There will usually be some type of presentation to show you more about the school, as well as a plethora of printed materials to take home and look over. Bring a pen and a notebook to jot down any notes. It's also a great opportunity to meet other students who are going through the same process you are and just might be your future classmates! Universities will usually let your high school know if they'll be in the area. If you're on that school's mailing list, you will probably be contacted directly too. Don't be afraid to e-mail, call, or check the admission website to see if an event will be held in your area.

Visiting the college

Visit days

Visit days are a great way to learn a lot about a college in a short period of time. Visit days usually last all day and are

located on a college campus. You'll probably be shown some type of informational presentation giving you an overview of the campus and go on a campus tour led by a current student. Pay attention to your surroundings on this tour. Pick up a newspaper and check out the bulletin boards to see what the student body is really like. Grab a bite to eat in the dining hall if you can; they will most likely take you there on the tour. You will also get the chance to learn about a couple of majors or programs that are of interest to you. There are sometimes special interest sessions regarding topics like financial aid, studying abroad, student life, religious life, or honors opportunities. It's a great way to get a lot of information, a good feel for the campus, and an opportunity to meet a lot of great people!

Individual visits

For an individual visit, you can usually just take a look at your schedule, talk it over with your parents, and decide what day and time works for you to visit the college. Then, just call the admission office or go onto their website to set up an appointment. Make sure you visit at a time when classes are in session so you can get a feel for what the campus vibe is like. A general visit includes a meeting with an admission counselor or participating in a group information session about the school, as well as taking part in a campus tour led by a current student. You could also sit in on a class, meet with a professor of your academic area, talk with a coach of your sport, and sample the campus food. Every school has different ways of setting these appointments up for you, so make sure to check with each one regarding their processes.

Overnight visits

An overnight visit is a great way to learn about your top few schools, especially when you're having a hard time deciding which one to attend. Check with the admission office to see if they offer a formal visit. If they don't, you could possibly arrange to stay with someone you know from your hometown. Typically, the university will pair you up with a current student who will serve as your host for the evening. You'll see what residential living is like, maybe attend a club meeting with your host, go to a social event, and eat some dining hall food! It's a great way to answer the questions, "Can I sleep here? Can I eat here? Can I live here?" Think about pairing an individual visit with your overnight visit and what you should try to work into your schedule to best show you what it's like to be a student at the university.

Personal communication

Don't forget the power of a phone call or e-mail! At many colleges and universities, you have an assigned admission counselor who reviews your file, meets with you when you're on campus, and

is at your local or high school college fair.

Networking is a very powerful tool, so get to know your admission counselor!

No matter how you connect with colleges, take your time and really examine all the information you are given closely.

Take notes on everything you find interesting and refer to them later to jog your memory. Get involved and ask questions! And get the information of anyone you found helpful along the way to send them thank you notes. **PC&U**

Hear it from an Expert

Gavin Roy is a junior at Valparaiso University (VU) in Valparaiso, Indiana. He is a meteorology major originally from Medina, Ohio. Like many students before him, and many students to come, Gavin has been successful in navigating the tough college admission process. Now, Gavin helps students connect with his college, and he shares how the admission process shaped his decision.

“Many factors influenced my college decision, but none more than personal communication did. In a world of mass media and ubiquitous telecommunication, I feel that interaction on an individual level absolutely makes the difference, especially in a decision-making process as monumental as a college search. For me, talking to current students during a campus visit day, receiving hand-written mail from my admission counselor, and even receiving a call from the president of Valparaiso University himself all made a lasting impression on me and are largely what influenced me to enroll at VU.

Now, as I work as an ambassador in admission, I help VU reach out to high school students as I was once reached out to. I believe that we understand the importance of connecting with these prospective students, and I also believe that the prospective students appreciate this connection as well, whether they realize it or not. Once the initial individual connection is made and the door is opened, these prospective students seem to be much less hesitant to connect with the university on their own. Less hesitation means more questions answered, and more questions answered means a greater feeling of comfort with the school that took the initiative to make that first move.”

Katie McKoon is a former Assistant Director of Admission at Valparaiso University. She is currently pursuing a Master of Arts in Educational Psychology at the University of Connecticut.