

TRAVEL

# 5 Tips on How to Make College Tours Fun Instead of Grueling

The Getaway

By ELAINE GLUSAC    SEPT. 22, 2016

At Amherst College in Amherst, Mass., my family, including our son, prospective applicant Seth, enjoyed the natural history museum and spied on swim team practice. At Colby College in Waterville, Me., we appreciated the colonial architecture and the modern art collection. At the University of Chicago, we loved the Hogwarts-like reading room and the pierogi truck.

So it goes with college campus visits, a mix of research and entertainment through which high schoolers shop for their academic future.

As college applications have grown — up 6 percent in fall 2015 over the prior year, according to the National Association for College Admission Counseling — so have campus visits. Boston University had nearly 80,000 visitors in the last year, up from about 65,000 in 2011. The University of California, Berkeley, reported a 14 percent increase in visitors in the last year. This year, the Ohio Independent College Visit Days program grew 30 percent.

“If you have the time and the money, I think a campus visit is a good idea,” said Lynn O’Shaughnessy, a higher education consultant who writes the [College Solution Blog](#). “You get a sense of the school, and you can meet people and ask them some questions.”

Fall is largely celebrated as college football season, but for high school upperclassmen and their families, it’s also college touring season. Or one of them. Over the last 18 months, we’ve embraced the school circuit as our travel theme, making campus calls over weekend getaways and even longer trips. Here are a few ways to make your college research a vacation, too.

## 1. Use your vacation budget.

Depending on how far you range from home, college visits are expensive. We’ve done road trips and plane trips, and booked cheaper chain hotels like the Hampton Inn in Rome, N.Y., and splurges including the Hotel Vermont in Burlington. We’ve saved money using home rentals and by dining where students have recommended, including Den Den Café Asiana near Brown University in Providence, R.I.

By any measure, we’ve invested in travel while visiting colleges, and, given the expense, it is useful to look at the trips, at least in part, as vacations. We used our vacation budget, building college visits into leisure trips (for example, we paired Cape Cod and Brown) and spending long winter weekends in Boston, a hub for regional schools, where we also sought out the trendy new Tiger Mama restaurant from the chef Tiffani Faison and took a historic walking tour. Though we sacrificed that year’s ski trip, we still managed to throw snowballs in Boston Common after our Tufts University tour.

## 2. Make a two-year plan.

Polled by admissions officers on our college tours, the majority of the other students visiting college campuses, we learned, have been juniors and seniors, with a few sophomores sheepishly raising their hands. But sophomore year, especially late in the year, isn’t too early. We started touring schools when our son was 15.

“You have to gauge a little by your own child,” said Janice Caine, the owner of Custom College Visits, an agency that organizes campus tours for families. “You don’t necessarily want to pressure them, but I think it’s a good time if you have a school that is local to go see them and get an idea of what it’s like to be on a college campus and what kinds of questions people are asking.”

Some start with spring break trips. High season for college visits follows, during summer vacation. But campuses then are relatively empty (as we found at Middlebury College in Vermont in August), an argument for visits between September and May.

One potential academic benefit to starting college research early in a child’s high school career is motivation. “Sometimes colleges get them very excited,” Ms. Caine said. “So excited they may work harder when they see what it takes.”

### 3. Don’t cram.

As with academics, so with college visits: For best results, don’t cram.

Most visits begin with a 60- to 90-minute information session led by an admissions officer. It is invariably chock-full of facts, figures and tips, requiring full concentration. Following that is the relatively breezy campus tour, usually led by a current student adept at walking backward while pointing out the library, cafeterias, dorms and some version of the campus icon that gets painted as a student prank.

Morning sessions usually end by lunch, making a second afternoon tour possible in places with many schools. But we’ve found a decompression talk over a substantial sandwich (reason to visit the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor: Zingerman’s Delicatessen) is our digestive limit.

“Beyond one a day, it becomes overload,” Ms. Caine said. One school, she said, means that you can take your time watching life on campus “or go through the student union and read the bulletin boards.”

### 4. Go off the campus tour itinerary.

Think of the campus tour as your skeletal overview. Then go back and fill in the details, for both education and amusement.

“We encourage students to spend free time in the bookstore or walk around and strike up conversations with people in the cafeteria to see if it’s a place you feel comfortable,” said Robert Rummerfield, the founder and director of College Visits, an agency that runs group college tours.

Campuses are often the cultural focus of college towns, with worthwhile attractions including the music conservatory at Oberlin College in Ohio and the art and natural history museums at Yale. St. Olaf College in Minnesota and Davidson College in North Carolina are among the many that have hiking trails. And college towns tend to attract independent shops and eclectic restaurants, where we have happily frittered away many a post-tour hour.

“There are things worth exploring other than academics,” Ms. Caine said. “We remind students that they are only in class a certain number of hours per week, and other times you will want to know what’s going on.”

## 5. Consider the journey, whatever the destination.

Hard as we’ve tried to vet our destinations with the help of the “Fiske Guide to Colleges,” we’ve picked a few duds. Aiming for diversity, we’ve visited schools that are large, small, rural, urban, public and private. Some are wrong for unexpected reasons (I heard “too preppy” a lot). But we’ve never regretted the bad pick. Sometimes it helps refine your selection criteria. All the time, it’s fun.

As with any family trip, it’s not where you go, but whom you’re with. College trips offer concentrated time with your child, when available time is increasingly rare. On college tours, we’ve discussed everything from campus drinking and the merits of core curriculums to the best road-trip playlists and the preponderance of cute mascots at liberal arts schools (looking at your polar bear, Bowdoin College).

Judith Weinstein, a mother of three in Chicago, took her daughter, now a college senior in California, on a memorable mid-Atlantic trip several years ago. “She played D.J. with her iPhone and I can still sing some of the songs from that trip,” she

said. “When we got to Dulles Airport and she turned to me and pronounced, ‘This was a good trip,’ I knew she wasn’t talking about the schools. She was talking about the bonding experience.”

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