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Top Ten Ways To "Test Drive" a College

Freshman year in college is a year of big change. The transition can be particularly rough if you find yourself on a campus that is nothing like you expected. Personal visits to college campuses before you make your college choice can give you insights that can make the difference between a comfortable fit and a lot of surprises when classes start.

"Visiting campuses is an important part of a family's college search," stated Judith Berg, president of the Independent Educational Consultants Association. (IECA) "You can't really get the 'feel' for a campus by looking over their brochures or even viewing a CD-ROM," Berg said.

"You can learn a great deal from even a few hours on campus," said Mark Sklarow, Executive Director of IECA, "but it's best to come prepared with a 'game plan' so you make the most of the visit." To help students and their families learn as much as they can from a trip to the college, IECA developed Top Ten Ways to "Test Drive" a College. The guidelines are based on a survey of IECA members, professionals who have counseled thousands of students on school and college options.

The educators recommend that students and their families play an active role in a campus visit, such as meeting "with department heads in the subjects of interest and coaches in sports where the student excels." "Bring a resume that highlights your experience in your area of expertise," and "write down the names of any officials you meet with to send thank-you notes when you return home," the guidelines urge. Get a feel for life on campus by "reading notices up in dorms or on bulletin boards" and talking "with student all over campus about their impressions of the school."

Find Your College Match

Educational consultants work with students and their families to help identify schools and colleges that are a good match for the student. IECA, based in Fairfax, VA., is the national professional association representing full-time experienced educational consultants.

IECA provides a free hotline (800-808-IECA) to help families find a nearby educational consultant who is experienced, competently trained, and committed to honest and ethical practices. IECA will mail a free copy of the advice on college visits along with the Top Ten Things Colleges Look for in a High School Student, a guide that is useful in planning a student's high school career. In addition, IECA offers information on how an educational consultant works with a family in selecting a school or college that matches their individual student's needs and interests.

Top Ten Ways to "Test Drive" a College

- 1. Learn about the college before you visit.** Read materials from the college and check out their web site. If you are visiting more than one on a particular day, refresh your memory about that school just before you arrive. Be sure to spend at least one-half day at each college.
- 2. Evaluate the environment of the campus.** Is the campus too big or too small for you? Do you like the nearby town or do you feel isolated? Consider how you would get around campus—particularly in the rain or snow.
- 3. Visit the admissions office and participate in the information session.** Ask questions that help you clarify the academic program at the school and the type of student who is most comfortable and successful there. You may choose to have a formal interview with an admissions staff member. Bring a resume of your grades and activities. Dress nicely, but not out of character.
- 4. Take the student-led tour of campus.** Take advantage of the opportunity to ask questions about campus life from a peer. Recognize, however, that tour guides are not necessarily typical of all students since they formally represent the school.
- 5. Check out the dorms.** Find out about the dorm options available, such as all-Freshman or co-ed. Arrange in advance to spend the night in a dorm, if possible. Picture yourself living in a dorm. Are you comfortable with where they are located on campus, such as the proximity to classes or the campus center?
- 6. Arrange for campus meetings with department heads in the subjects that interest you, coaches in sports where you excel, and former graduates from your high school.** Bring a resume that highlights your experience in your area of expertise. Ask about opportunities based on your skills and interests. Write down the names of any officials you meet with and send personal thank-you notes when you return home.
- 7. Sit in on classes and check out the library.** How is the rapport between students and faculty in the classroom? Look through the books at the library in your area of interest. Look for quiet places to study.
- 8. Look into life beyond academics.** Check out the athletic facilities, theater, and student center. Read the notices up in the dorms or on bulletin boards. Can you see yourself joining in?
- 9. Have lunch in the student center and watch student interactions.** Talk with students all over campus about their impressions of the school. Look at the students themselves. Do you feel comfortable among the students?
- 10. After each visit, write down your impressions of that college.** After a while, the visions of different schools start to blur if you don't immediately stop to record your thoughts! Keep a list of pros and cons for comparison.