

Nothing Substitutes for a First Hand Tour of Colleges

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This is what I tell my students and their families. And, I take my own advice; I have recently passed the 200 mark on college visits, and that figure doesn't include the colleges I have seen more than one time. Touring colleges and universities and getting the feel of the campus and being able to see the students and how they interact is an invaluable tool in helping to find the right fit for our students.

I have taken advantage of the IECA pre-conference tours and I visit colleges on my own. But the vast majority of colleges and universities that I tour are part of a consortium. The names are familiar to many of you, the CRUSSH, the Crab Crawl, the 5 Colleges. I am something of a tour junkie and I participate in as many as I can each year.

What makes these tours so special? Everything. We begin with the mood—these tours are unfailingly upbeat. Excited admissions professionals are happy to share with us all that is new and what is in the works for their campus. We are excited to take all of this in. Next is the camaraderie—even though IECs are usually a minority on these tours, the majority of school-based counselors are friendly and happy to share their knowledge and ask for our input as well. I have met many people on these tours and it is a rare occasion when I find myself on a tour not having met someone on a previous tour. It almost becomes a game—'Name That Tour'—to figure out which one it was. Some counselors have become good friends and we continue that friendship and professional relationship long after the tour has ended. Once in a while I meet someone I knew when he or she was on "the other side of the desk," having switched from a secondary school counselor to college admissions or the other way around. I value these relationships as much as I value those with my IECA colleagues.

These tours usually include a student panel and often presentations by department deans. We are able to ask questions and we really get a good sense of what makes the college special. I take a lot of pictures and copious notes, all of which I keep on my computer. When advising students and their families, I can refer back to these notes and the campus comes back to life again.

Another fun aspect is when we are entertained by student groups. On a recent tour, I had the pleasure of hearing half a dozen a capella groups. While touring another university that has a conservatory, we were treated to a performance. I was expecting a string ensemble or maybe a small jazz group. Instead, we saw an African drumming and dance group. It was very exciting—especially since they invited all of us to join them on stage to learn a few easy dance moves. Mindful that this is the Internet age, I stood between two taller counselors and when this ended up on Youtube—by the end of that day—I am pretty hard to spot. Needless to say, that is a tour I will not forget.