

ARE YOU ASKING THE WRONG QUESTIONS ON CAMPUS VISITS?

By College App Wizard on March 21, 2014

As a good consumer on the verge of making a major investment, you will likely ask some very astute questions (or your parents ask a barrage of them, mortifying you in the process). Proactively asking questions as you visit colleges can give you valuable information, but are you really getting the information you're looking for? Probably not. Phraseology may make the info you're getting meaningless. **Know what *meaningful* questions to ask and which to avoid.**

Don't Ask: "*How many students go here?*" This is a very broad question that doesn't really tell you what you want to know. If you are 17 or 18 years old, you likely don't care how many students are studying for a PhD in Art History or the number enrolled in the MBA program.

ASK: *How many undergraduates are there?* At some schools, like Franklin and Marshall College, a liberal arts college in PA, there are 2400 students total, all undergrad. However, at a comprehensive research university like the University of Pennsylvania, the difference can be dramatic. The school's total population is 24,725 but of that number, less than half (11,678) are undergraduates. When you envision the number of students trying to use the dining halls or vying for classroom spots, this difference can be dramatic.

Don't Ask: *What is the student: teacher ratio?* Here, you are asking for the number of students per faculty member employed by the college; however, who is in that faculty number? Are those on sabbatical included? Are faculty who only teach graduate or upper level classes in that number?

ASK: *What is the average class size?* Given that your entry level classes are apt to be significantly larger than your intimate upper level classes, how many students will you really encounter? I like nothing better than when a tour guide tells me that XX% of classes are under 50 students. At one very large university, 80% of classes were under 45 people. This gives me a reasonable idea of how many people will be in class with me.

Don't Ask: (This question gives me hives...) "*How much does it cost to go to school here?*" Why my visceral response? Because, the answer doesn't tell you what this school is going to cost *you*, and the answer to that depends on a number of factors like whether or not you will qualify for need based or merit aid. Usually, at least half of students (and sometimes many more) at a college receive some type of financial assistance, so asking the sticker price isn't particularly useful if so few people are paying it.

ASK: *What percentage of students receive some type of financial aid/scholarships?* If the number is 80%, odds are good that you'll be in that number. If the school offers no merit scholarships (like the Ivies) and you know (from doing an Expected Family Contribution calculator) that you will not qualify for need-based aid, you can venture a very good guess as to what you will be paying to attend that college.

Don't Ask: "How's your job placement?" This is an increasingly popular and seemingly valid question, but the phraseology is hiding the info you really want. In "Push to Prove Career Success Tests Colleges" from the Wall Street Journal on 3/17/14, the author talks about some pretty impressive job placement stats among surveyed colleges; however, upon digging further, some of these tremendous results were derived from surveys to which markedly few graduates responded. A survey response rate of 17% renders a 93% job placement rate much less impressive. However, when schools boast a job placement survey response rate of 85-90%, that data is clearly much more reliable. You will also want to know, not only how many people are employed, but how many are employed in a field related to their area of study and if any among this number are "under-employed". Someone working at a fast food restaurant in order to pay the bills cannot be considered optimally employed after spending four years in college.

ASK: *What percentage of graduates are employed in their field or in grad school within 6 months of graduation?* Who is counted in these numbers? (survey size, underemployed?)

There are two more questions that I think are important and revealing:

ASK: *What is your retention rate?* (the number of first year college students who continue on to their second year at a given institution...It's a great measure of student satisfaction)*The national average retention rate is 77%

ASK: *What is your graduation rate?* (measured as the % of students who graduate in 6 years at a 4 year school).**It is a federal requirement to report the 6 year graduation rate for four year colleges. The national average is 55% (figures for 2009)

Bottom line in all of this...you are a consumer. You are allowed to politely and tactfully ask the questions that get you the meaningful information to allow you to make a well-informed decision.

-You can get statistics on a variety of sites including <http://nces.ed.gov/collegenavigator/>

See more at: <http://collegeappwizard.com/college-101/are-you-asking-the-wrong-questions-on-campus-visits/#sthash.GSaCNBm1.dpuf>