

How To Boost The Return On Investment Of College Visits

[Robert Cole](#) Forbes May 24, 2019

With summer approaching, many of you with children in high school will be hitting the road. Destination — your child's dream college.

It's no secret that college is expensive today. According to The College Board's [latest annual survey](#), the average cost of a public, four-year college in state was \$10,230 for 2018-2019. For a private, nonprofit college, the number was \$35,830. With those costs, it's important for students (and parents) to make the right choice. What should you do to prepare and make those college visits meaningful? Follow these five steps:

1. Talk with your children early about what they want from college. What course of studies interests them? What careers are they considering? What colleges have strong reputations preparing students for those careers? Do they hope to attend college nearby or far away? Urban, suburban or rural? Be prepared to discuss with them your own experience and that of friends or relatives. This is the kind of hard thinking that should be done before loading the car and heading out for any campus visit.

2. Help them be realistic about what your family can afford. A college education is both a purchase and an investment. It's an investment in the child's future, but for the parent, it is a current purchase. Families should be realistic about what they can afford to pay. If a student has no financial limits placed on his or her college options, the situation may not end well. But I don't mean parents should start by eliminating colleges simply by looking at the posted "sticker" price on a school's website. All colleges offer multiple forms of financial aid, and all colleges are required to display an online "net price calculator." That is a useful tool to help parents estimate how much aid their child may receive so they will know the net cost of attending that institution. As a rule of thumb, private colleges and universities list higher sticker prices but also offer more generous aid packages. Don't abandon the road trip to a private college your daughter or son is interested in simply because the sticker price looks high.

3. Research campuses ahead of time. Today's families don't shop for a new home simply by driving from open house to open house on Sundays. Instead, they seek counsel from a real estate agent they trust, review the specifications of the building and lot, and view photos and video walkthroughs online before deciding whether to even drive by the house. The student should communicate with the school's admissions office, which will trigger an onslaught of information from the school. Reviewing that information is a good start on research, but the family should do more. There are numerous college ratings in print and online, but be aware of what the criteria are for rating the schools. In the digital era, there also are many sites families can view to research institutions, such as The College Board's website or [campustours.com](#). Many services offer reviews of colleges written by current students and alums. The more information you have ahead of time, the better.

4. Don't settle for just the packaged tour. Your son or daughter will be in communication with an admissions representative, who will set your family up with a tour and a student guide. Plan to spend more time on campus than they schedule. Attempt to meet with a faculty member in the major your child is contemplating. Try to visit a classroom if school is in session. Visit common areas, like student unions and libraries, so your son or daughter can see how students interact with each other. Try to connect with any students your child knows, perhaps someone a year or two ahead from high school. If you've done an

initial visit and your child and is having trouble deciding, some schools offer overnight options where they can stay the night in the dorm and shadow a current student to get a “day in the life” experience.

5. Don’t avoid money talk, even in a first visit. While admissions offices are the first line of communication for initial information about schools, they aren’t the only offices that can help. Talking with a representative in the financial aid office can be beneficial to understand the “true” cost of attendance, the difference between need-based and merit aid, scholarships versus loans, the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) and any separate applications for financial aid specific to that school and important deadlines. If you’ve saved for college in a 529 plan, you might also want to discuss the best way to use those assets to help pay for your child’s education. For example, if you’ve saved in a 529 prepaid plan, you may want to wait to use those assets until your child’s junior or senior years. Talking about finances can be sensitive, but know that the financial aid office staff is there to ease your mind and help you navigate any cost questions.

Visiting colleges with your child will involve both time and money. Much like you wouldn’t make an important decision for your business without giving it a lot of thought, you don’t want to rush these visits. With good preparation and forethought, you can get the most return from those investments.