



BYRON HIGH SCHOOL COUNSELING OFFICE

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College Fairs Explained - What They Are and How to Get the Most Out of One

Article: Aimee Heller - International College Counselors

Choosing the right college is one of the most important decisions a student will make—and with thousands of options, the process can feel overwhelming. College fairs help simplify that search. Whether held in person or online, these events allow students and parents to efficiently gather information, compare schools, and speak directly with admissions representatives all in one place. Below, we explain why college fairs matter and share practical tips to help you make the most of them.

What is a College Fair?

A college fair is an event where students and parents can meet admissions representatives from multiple colleges in one place—either in person or online—to learn about academics, admissions, and financial aid.

A college fair brings together representatives from colleges and universities across the country and often around the world. Each school hosts a table (or virtual booth) staffed by an admissions representative. Families can ask questions about academics, campus life, admissions, and financial aid. Larger fairs also offer information sessions on key topics such as applications, scholarships, and testing policies. Virtual fairs replicate much of this experience through live sessions and one-on-one chats. No travel required.

Why College Fairs Matter for Students and Parents

Explore Many Colleges at Once

College fairs make it possible to compare dozens—even hundreds—of schools in a single morning or afternoon. You'll see everything from large public universities to small liberal arts colleges, and you may discover excellent options you hadn't previously considered.

Get Answers Straight from Admissions

Speaking directly with admissions representatives is invaluable. Ask targeted questions about majors, internships, study abroad, campus culture, application requirements, and scholarships. These conversations provide clarity that brochures and websites often can't.

Demonstrate Interest and Make Connections

Introducing yourself, asking thoughtful questions, and scanning your barcode at each table shows "demonstrated interest." Admissions officers may remember these interactions when reviewing applications, especially when they're genuine and informed.

Learn About Current Admissions Trends

Many fairs include sessions on essays, financial aid, test-optional policies, and other evolving admissions practices. Staying informed helps students apply strategically and confidently.

Discover Financial Aid and Scholarships

Some colleges promote scholarships and grants. You may learn about merit awards, institutional aid, or state-specific programs that make college more affordable.



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In-Person College Fairs: What to Expect

In-person fairs offer an immersive experience. Walking the floor, collecting materials, and engaging face-to-face can spark insights you might not get online and help you gauge your excitement about different schools.

Where to Attend College Fairs

Every spring and fall, the National Association of College Admission Counseling (NACAC) will host college fairs nationwide, each featuring 600+ colleges and universities. Families can view the full schedule and register at nacacattend.org/fairs.

Virtual College Fairs: How They Work

Virtual college fairs allow students to explore hundreds of colleges from home. Expect live information sessions, one-on-one meetings, and real-time Q&A. This is ideal for students with busy schedules or those whose cities aren't hosting an in-person fair.

Tips for Making the Most of Any College Fair

Do Your Research Ahead of Time

Before the fair, review the list of attending colleges and universities. Identify a mix of priority schools (those already on your list) and exploration schools (those you know little about but want to investigate). Look up basic facts including location, size, majors offered, and admissions selectivity, so you can use your time for deeper, more meaningful conversations.

Prepare Smart, Targeted Questions

Generic questions are easy to answer but don't give you much insight. Prepare specific questions that reflect your interests and goals, such as: "What distinguishes your XYZ program from similar programs at other schools?" or "How do undergraduates typically get involved in research, internships, or experiential learning?"

Asking thoughtful questions signals genuine interest and helps you evaluate fit.

Take Notes Immediately

After each conversation, step aside and write down key takeaways such as what excited you, what concerned you, and anything unique the representative shared. Schools can blur together quickly, and these notes will be invaluable when narrowing your college list later.

Keep an Open Mind

Use college fairs as a discovery tool. Some of the most exciting options may be schools you've never heard of or hadn't previously considered. Visit a few "wild card" tables. You may uncover programs, campuses, or opportunities that surprise you.

Follow Up After the Fair

Collect business cards or contact information and send a short, polite thank-you email within a few days. Reference something specific from your conversation and ask any remaining questions. This reinforces your interest and helps build a relationship with the admissions office.



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Come Prepared and Organized

Bring a tote bag or backpack for brochures and materials, along with a notebook, pen, and phone (fully charged) for notes and QR code scans. Comfortable shoes are also a must. You'll be on your feet longer than you expect.

After the fair, dive deeper. Visit college websites—especially academic departments—schedule campus visits when possible, and reflect on which schools truly stood out.

Using these strategies will help you move beyond collecting brochures and instead gain real insight into which colleges may be the best academic, social, and personal fit.