Campus Differences Matter in the College Search

After visiting a few college campuses, most people begin to think that they are all alike – and in some ways they are right. Most colleges offer students a variety of factors that seem similar: rigorous academics, varied social activities, and meaningful ways to connect with the community.

We often talk about the importance of having students make themselves distinctive during the application and interview process, a strategy designed to help them “stand out” in very competitive applicant pools.

The Five First-Choice Colleges approach, highlighted in the spring 2015 *Journal of College Admission*, requires that students spend a fair amount of time thinking about what has worked for them during high school (academic rigor and success, social life, leadership, athletics, community service, and civic engagement). After the “Know Thyself” phase, they begin drafting essays they hope will share more about their distinctive qualities with college admission officers.

But in an increasingly broad and competitive admission landscape, we must focus as much attention on the other side of the process.

What if we ask what makes each college different? Understanding the history, ethos, and culture of each campus on a student’s list can lead to a much more satisfying college search and selection process.

Preparing a variety of penetrating questions which require deeper analysis can help students begin to distinguish between colleges with similar profiles. Examples include:

- Why was this college founded? What stands out about the school’s history? Was it founded in religion and does religion still play a part in the lives of its students? Was there a historic context in time or place that was – and perhaps still is – relevant?
- Is this a Jesuit institution? An HBCU? A women’s college? What does that mean and what happens differently in the classroom for the professors and for the students?
- Is this a campus dedicated to community service? What difference does that make in the dorms and in the dining halls? How are things different on the campus because of the focus and commitment to the larger community?
- Is a senior thesis or culminating capstone project required to graduate? What types of projects have students done in the past? Are these on display somewhere on campus?

A student’s ability to discern nuances among colleges will take more time and effort than they may realize. But it’s time well spent. Know Thyself + Know Thy College = Five First-Choice College opportunities – an approach that should improve outcomes and lower stress in this competitive admission landscape.

Bingo!

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Great relationships with professors</th>
<th>Organic, locally grown produce in the dining hall</th>
<th>Full professors teach all the classes</th>
<th>Undergraduate research starting in your first year</th>
<th>Really helpful Writing Center staff</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>We had more apps this year than ever in school history</td>
<td>You can print to the library printers at no charge</td>
<td>Our Career Center will help you write your resume</td>
<td>You will love the rock wall in our fitness center</td>
<td>Our first-year seminar classes are small</td>
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<td>Our alums are amazing</td>
<td>Our interlibrary loan can get any book here in 48 hours</td>
<td>College Campus Bingo</td>
<td>The library gets quieter as you move up the different floors</td>
<td>Delayed rush for Greek life</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lots of great food options in the dining hall/food court</td>
<td>We have funding for summer research</td>
<td>We have small classes</td>
<td>Everyone has great school spirit here</td>
<td>They bring in puppies during exams to reduce our stress</td>
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<tr>
<td>Blue lights for safety – response times are less than a minute</td>
<td>The student activities board always plans great events for weekends</td>
<td>If we don’t have a club you want, you can start one with a few friends</td>
<td>Our professors travel with students during school breaks and summers</td>
<td>Bonus: Mark off any square if students wish your tour guide a happy birthday 🎉</td>
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Courtesy of Barbara Conner
Barbara Conner is Director of College Counseling at Foxcroft School, a college-preparatory boarding and day school for girls in grades 9 – 12 located in Middleburg, VA and a frequent speaker on ethical admission practices and current trends/best practices in college counseling, for Potomac and Chesapeake ACAC and Virginia Association of Independent Schools. She earned her M.Ed at The University of Virginia.

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