

Seven tips to make the most of a campus tour

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You can learn a lot about a university by visiting its website: programs, tuition rates, scholarships, student services. What you can't tell, though, is how you'll feel when you set foot on campus. That's why a campus tour is so important when you're considering attending a university, says Ken Withers, director of student recruitment at the University of Toronto.

"When I walk on to that campus, do I feel like I'm 'home'? You get that feeling instinctually. You think, 'I'd love to spend four years here,' or, 'This really isn't for me, I'm not sure I'd be comfortable here.'"

Quinn Runkle, who is a senior student ambassador for the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, says her campus visit was how she decided the university was the right place for her. "That was where I came to a better understanding of what the university had to offer, and I really felt like I fit there."

During a typical campus tour you'll hear from recruiting staff about admission requirements and the application process, and you'll get to see the campus. "Where students hang out, where they eat, where they live, where they study," Runkle says. But one of the most valuable parts of a campus tour is the ability to interact with the tour guide, who is usually a current student at the university.

"You shouldn't be afraid to ask anything," Runkle says. "It's your opportunity to have an honest conversation with a current student. The range of questions I've had is phenomenal, so don't hold back."

Your tour guide can give you an idea of what student life is really like at a university, says Lisa Kachulak-Babey, director of student recruitment for the University of Manitoba in Winnipeg.

"A lot of students may be coming from small schools and it can be overwhelming," she says. "On a tour they can find where they could potentially hang out, meet people, about clubs and activities."

Withers advises that students ask, "Where do students go between classes? Where is that student common space? Where do people grab lunch? What happens during orientation?"

He adds, "The truth of the matter is buildings are buildings. It's really, 'What's the heartbeat of the university?'"

When it comes to their academic experience, students can ask questions about study-abroad opportunities, tutoring and disability services, financial aid and scholarships. And if you're looking for more specific information about a particular faculty, Withers says, don't be afraid to ask. Recruiters can connect you with someone, either that day or after your visit by phone or e-mail.

But what if you can't make it to campus for a tour? Most universities offer extensive online interaction, through virtual campus tours, online chats with recruiters and blogs with student mentors (check with their office of student recruitment). And because university recruiters travel across the country (and the world) throughout the year, students can also find out whether someone will be coming to their area.

If you've decided on a university and you still have questions, be sure to attend orientation week, Withers says, whether you're on or off campus.

"More and more universities offer a very extensive orientation period," he says. "It's like a week-long campus tour."

Here are seven essential questions you should ask on your campus tour:

1 Why did you choose to attend this school? Most campus tour guides are current students, so ask them to share what it is they like about their school, and what makes it unique.

2 What was your first year like? Tour guides can give you an idea of what the workload was like in first year, how it compared with high school, what orientation week is like, plus some of the leisure activities and clubs on offer.

3 Where do students hang out? You should ask about where students like to study and relax during the day, as well as what they do for fun on the weekends. Then ask yourself, is this the kind of experience I could see myself enjoying?

4 What are my options when it comes to accommodation? Most schools offer dorm-style residences on campus, but some also offer apartment or townhouse-style living. Your tour guide can give you an idea of the cost, the food and the vibe of each residence (for example, is it okay for introverts or is it seriously loud?). Also ask: Do most students live on or off campus?

5 How wired is the campus? Ask whether there is WiFi in the residences, the commons areas, the libraries. If you're the type of person who brings your laptop everywhere, this will matter.

6 What was the overall cost of your first year? Your tour guide can give you an idea of the real cost of attending that university, including tuition, books, food, transit or parking and social expenses. Also, your tour guide can tell you the kinds of part-time jobs students can get on campus or in the nearby community.

7 Where can I get help if I need it? Ask about student services, financial services, mentoring, peer tutoring. Your guide can also give you a sense of how available professors and teaching assistants were during first year, and how he or she dealt with challenging courses.