

Written by Interview by Melissa Larsen

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**As we head into the school year, college is front-of-mind for many students and parents. Jessica Sharkey, of Sharkey College Consulting, educates students, informs parents and guides families through each step of the college admission process. Here, she provides helpful tips for those embarking on their college search and how to make it a fun, stress-free time for all those involved.**

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AFM: How can a student and family make the college search an enjoyable—instead of stressful—situation?

JS: To reduce stress, don't focus on college all through high school. Parents cannot micromanage the process; they must let their kids lead the way because it's their life and their future. This must be a student-driven, student-centered experience. Parents cannot force their children into the college search. With that said, starting the process prior to junior year can help reduce stress. At the onset of the college search, create realistic expectations. Consider setting up specific times to discuss college, perhaps every Thursday during dinner. This is a great way to establish healthy communication and to discuss ideas, interests, needs and plans pertaining to college. Within these conversations, develop a family timeline and include important milestones such as when to take standardized tests, schedule college visits and prepare applications. I also encourage families to schedule periodic meetings with the student's guidance or college counselor to share interests, goals and dreams for the future. When counselors know that a student is thinking about the college search, they stay on their radar. Read all correspondence from the high school, take advantage of high school/school district college planning events and workshops and attend all meetings related to college prep.

AFM: What should a student consider when choosing an in-state versus an out-of-state school?

JS: A family's ability to pay—the cost of tuition, room and board, and travel definitely affects whether a student attends an in-state versus an out-of-state school. Will the student require merit-based scholarships in order to attend a university? This may be one of the most important variables when considering a school's overall fit. It is imperative that families research what their net price may be for attending an in-state or out-of-state school. Consider running numbers through various colleges' Net Price Calculators. Do not shelter students from the financial part of the process. Understanding their parents' ability to pay must factor into their college search. Other factors that are important in choosing a college include academic majors/programs, undergraduate size and location. A few questions to ask: Are there any concerns about the student becoming homesick? Will the student be able to graduate in four years? What is the freshmen retention rate (the percent of students who return for sophomore year)? Is it a regional school or does it attract students nationally? Will the student feel safe living in this community? Where will the student be more engaged in the classroom? Outside the classroom? Considering an in-state school versus out-of-state school is no different from choosing the 'best' school from the 'second best' school. If the best fit happens to be in-state, then that's where a student should enroll.

AFM: When visiting a campus, what should a student look for?

JS: Prior to any campus visit, students should engage in some research to ensure that they can get a more accurate overview of what the school is like. You need to create a reason to visit. Go to the college's Web site to schedule a tour, peruse a campus map or look at Google Satellite to get a feel for the campus layout, and review the school's academic calendar to make sure school's in session. Try and steer clear of visiting during a college's fall, winter or spring break. I encourage students to look for three activities, traditions or events that they would enjoy

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participating in on campus. If they cannot discover at least three, then it may not be a good-fit environment. College visits are fact-finding missions, ones that will uncover pros and cons. Do the positives outweigh the negatives? For example, if merit scholarships are necessary to help finance college, does the school offer these (some do not)? If they don't, then that might be a sign that it's not the right school. Perhaps a student learns that a school is too rural and that they now want to look at schools in a more urban area. After visiting a college, I have heard many students convey that they had a gut reaction when they stepped on to campus. Most describe an overall campus vibe—positive or negative—and that they could picture (or not picture) themselves living in the residence halls, eating in the campus dining center and attending classes at that school. If a student wants to buy a shirt or phone case at the bookstore, that's a great sign that they like the school. Keep in mind that there may be some experiences that can negatively impact a visit, i.e. bad tour guide, rude staff member and terrible weather. These have a tendency to affect the overall vibe. That's why pre-work and research may be a better indicator of whether a school is a good potential fit—even before investing the money to visit.

AFM: What are your tips for visiting schools?

JS: Prepare a list of questions, and be sure to seek out the answers during every campus visit. This will help you compare apples to apples afterwards. Most colleges offer admissions information sessions before or after a college tour. Don't forget to attend one of these to understand their application process. Also schedule an interview (if available) with an admissions counselor and financial aid officer (usually always available to seniors). If time allows, meet with an advisor or faculty mentor in your intended academic area of study. At the very least, attempt to explore the building and facilities that house your academic interest. Ask for business cards from the staff you meet, and make sure you ask if there is a specific admissions officer for Arizona applicants. Try to introduce yourself to this individual. Observe! Eat a meal in the student center. Visit a class in session, attend a sporting event or fine arts performance. Note the physical upkeep—is the school updating buildings, is it clean, is there a sense of pride and care? Visit the areas of campus you are likely to frequent. Read bulletin boards and kiosks for evening/weekend activities. Go into town and explore the surrounding areas. Get a feel for your transportation options on and off campus. Bring a camera and take pictures. After three campus visits, you might forget which school had the really cool mascot sculpture or the floor-to-ceiling windowed building. Pick up and read a student newspaper. Nothing will give you greater insight into the current climate on campus than what makes the front-page news. Always follow up with admissions after a positive college visit. Stay in touch through ways you feel are most appropriate. Don't fall off the radar.

AFM: Have you found that families are making college visits into a vacation opportunity?

JS: In my experience, families have scheduled college visits during vacations and vice versa. If they are near a college of interest while vacationing at Disney World, perhaps they will schedule a half-day visit to a Florida-area school. They may also plan a vacation around school visits. Are you visiting schools in the northeast? Perhaps you fly in to New York and see a Broadway show or buy tickets to a Mets game the weekend before. When families visit relatives and friends out-of-state, it's quite common to look at a map for nearby colleges and plan visits accordingly. Most college-visit trips involve a number of schools in a general location or region so that a family gets more college-visit bang for their buck. This ultimately helps students explore an area surrounding a college, familiarize themselves with local experiences and opportunities, and discover the culture of a new region.

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