

# Chapter 3

## Helping students research colleges

### Overview

As a counselor, your goal is to help students learn to research colleges *on their own* (and to keep records of the information they collect).

Included in this chapter are suggestions to counselors who have large caseloads and may not have the time to work individually with students undertaking the college search, as well as strategies for counselors who do have the time. This chapter describes the basic tools and activities that will launch students on the college selection journey in a rational, thoughtful way — and will help them decide which college would be most suitable for them.

This chapter also contains a one-page information sheet on how you can learn about colleges (see *How counselors can learn about colleges* on page 3-2).

### The counselor's role

- Provide your students with the tools for researching colleges — websites, guide books, lists of resources.
- Emphasize to your students that the first step in researching colleges is to examine their own interests, goals and plans for the future.
- Communicate often with students and, if possible, with parents — through newsletters, emails and parent nights.
- Conduct college fairs or participate in local fairs organized by other schools or organizations.
- Distribute handouts and calendars that will help guide students along the college search.

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- Employ various means of learning as much as you can about the colleges to which many of your students will apply: Talk with the college representatives, study the college catalogs, observe the admission process and take campus tours.
- Include parents in the college search whenever possible.

## How counselors can learn about colleges

There are 3,900 accredited, degree-granting undergraduate institutions in the United States. In this *Sourcebook*, the word *college* refers to all of them, but there are important distinctions among the institutions. Here are some strategies to help you gather specific information about colleges that may interest your students:

- *College websites.* Most colleges have developed robust websites with a wealth of information about their campuses, academic offerings, admission and financial aid policies and procedures, events, visitor information and more. Many also host or link to social media venues where you can connect to members of the college community. An individual college's own website is usually the first place counselors and students go for current information about that college. Unfortunately, not all college websites are the same in terms of user experience — some can be difficult to navigate. If a site map is provided, that is often the most useful tool for finding and linking to what is on the site.
- *College tours.* Most experienced counselors agree that the best way to familiarize yourself with a college is to make an in-person visit. In addition to contacting schools in your area to arrange a tour, you can ask college reps if their schools have counselor tour programs. Reps may not offer the information, but they should have it available if you ask. You can also check the Professional Development sections of the National Association for College Admissions Counseling website ([www.nacacnet.org](http://www.nacacnet.org), which has links to NACAC's regional affiliate organizations).

### TIP

"We use a website called Career Cruising: counselors and students are assigned a passcode. The site helps us research schools and take virtual tours, and students have the capability to create their course choice sheet online."

— **Sylvia Lopez**, Dallas ISD,  
Texas

- *Visits by college representatives and college fairs.* You can make use of the resources your school provides for students to research colleges. Experienced counselors recommend attending as many college rep visits to your school as you can. Not only will you be able to assist students with information they missed or didn't understand, you can help them distinguish between the marketing hype and the useful facts. College fairs also offer counselors (as well as students) the opportunity to talk to several reps in one night.
- *Counselor days/reverse college days.* Some colleges and counseling organizations sponsor programs that bring the school counselors to the college rather than the college representatives to the high schools. Counselors spend the day at various colleges talking to admissions deans. New and experienced counselors often like these programs because you can learn about quirks in a specific college's admission requirements. Also, local colleges sometimes ask school counselors to sit in on a typical admission session to observe how the application packet is reviewed.
- *Join NACAC's MemberToMember (M2M) Community and Public Forum.* M2M is an online, member-inclusive network where members can connect and share information. In the Public Forum, members and nonmembers can discuss topics related to the college admission process.

## Visits from college representatives

College representatives will visit your school in the fall to meet with interested students. As more and more students apply to college early in their senior year, it is a good idea to allow juniors and even sophomores to meet with college reps so they can sail into their senior year having made a personal connection to some colleges. The reps meet with students in small-group sessions and discuss academic programs, campus life, financial aid and admission procedures.

If your students are interested in a college that does not traditionally have a rep visit your school, call the admission office and ask if a visit can be scheduled. Colleges are eager to meet prospective applicants.

### TIP

"I meet with every student every year (310 students). Many have special needs. For several years we have **gone to the local community college** and used computers there to research colleges — it's an all-morning activity. And, of course, the college wants us there! This year the community college decided to bring its new mobile lab to our school. Every junior is required to participate. Of course, some students forget what they learned about colleges within a week, but for many, it's a great way to start this exploration."

— **Pat Rambo**, Springfield High School, Pennsylvania

### TIP

"I encourage students to **email the college representatives** who visit our school. It's nice to have that personal touch, and it gives students experience with communicating in the adult world"

— **Lisa Sohmer**, Garden School, New York

**TIP**

“Bridges’ Choices Planner does a good job assessing **trade schools and certificate-level programs**, like automotive or cosmetology programs.

We have significant numbers of students considering technical training beyond high school in addition to our traditional college-going population.”

— **Tom McNeil**, Winslow High School, Maine

A counselor should be available, whenever possible, to greet the college rep. In a recent discussion on the NACAC website on the topic of whether college Websites have reduced the need for college rep visits, many college representatives said not only did they value the visit, but a chief goal was to meet the *counselors*, and to create or perpetuate a relationship with them.

Students should be encouraged to meet with a number of college representatives. Quite often, the rep will be a reader of their application, and putting a face to a name is always helpful. Students might decide a college is not right for them after the rep visit — that helps them better define the type of school they are looking for.

If possible, sit in on the rep’s presentation. Often, students are shy, and the counselor can ease the tension by asking a few questions to get the discussion going. In addition, attending presentations is an excellent way to know what a college is really like. Be sure to get copies of recent materials from the rep to update your files.

Make sure all college reps receive each of these items:

- A school profile
- A college statistics list (colleges that students from your school have attended in recent years)
- Your business card
- Directions to other local high schools

Finally, make sure the representative feels welcome and appreciated. If possible, provide a quiet location in which they can meet with students (not the cafeteria during lunch). A convenient parking spot should be arranged if possible, and lunch or a snack should be provided if they are coming at midday. All of this can go a long way toward leaving reps with a positive impression of the school and its students.

You and your students can prepare for a rep’s presentation. See **Handout 3E**: *Questions to ask college representatives*.

## STRATEGIES FOR LEARNING WHAT COLLEGES ARE REALLY LIKE

“If at all possible, sit in on every college rep’s visit to your school.”

— **Steve DiPietro**, former school counselor

“I go on college tours (usually the counselor pays the air fare, and the colleges provide transportation, housing and meals). And whenever I’m near a college, I take the student tour. If it’s a college my students are typically interested in, I contact the person in admission who will be reading the applications from my school and talk with them.”

— **Peggy Hock**, co-director of college counseling, Notre Dame High School, California

“Combine brief college visits with your family vacation plans. If you are on a tight budget over the summer, ask about an overnight stay in a dormitory. Many colleges will be happy to accommodate you and your family in return for an hour or two of your time.”

— **William Yarwood**, Moorestown High School, New Jersey

“Not all online college search programs are legit. Some sites don’t actually have an official association. I check websites to see if they have any information for counselors. This usually tells me if they are legit or not.”

— **Tamuriel Grace-McKinley**, Beloit Memorial High School, Wisconsin

“It’s really important for counselors to visit colleges. They learn a lot about one college specifically, but they also learn about colleges in general, even from a single visit. And, of course, the bonding that occurs with the other counselors is of lasting value.”

— **Lynda Molyneaux**, Central High School, Nebraska

“If there is a college that you need to learn more about because your students are applying or plan to apply there, call the admission office and schedule a visit. You are all in the same business — they want to get to know counselors and prospective students.”

— **Susie Rusk**, counselor coordinator, Washoe County School District, Nevada