

ON EDUCATION / Elise Epner

Spring Break is for College Visits

You drive for hours, sneaking occasional glances at your prince in headphones staring at his silent cell phone. You picture your boy impressing the tour guide with questions about the college's physics major. You envision your inquisitive student chatting in a professor's book-lined office about research opportunities. And, imagining the admissions officer nodding approval at your child's beautiful high school transcript during a private interview, you can't help but grin.

While navigating through the well-manicured campus, you're consumed with worry about one thing: parking at the Admissions Office. You're rushing to make it to the information session on time.

At some point, though, you realize your boy, the prince still in headphones, is not moving from the car. You plead, beg and promise. He won't budge. He wants to go home. He just doesn't like this college.

As families schlep high school students to colleges this spring break, this scene or other blood boilers will repeat itself from Chapel Hill to Palo Alto. Despite our "adult" good intentions and compulsive planning, students may assess college fit by these drive-by first impressions. Sometimes, one look at the football stadium or a meal at the dining hall replaces our fantasies of a worthwhile college visit.

So, what's a parent to do?

Plan first college visits with one simple purpose: to let your child get a feel for the variety of colleges out there. Think locally, for starters. Smaller suburban schools like Fairfield University, Southern Connecticut or Wesleyan are simple trips. Urban schools, like Yale, NYU and Cooper Union are close as well. UConn, with its delicious and cheap Dairy Bar, is a great afternoon drive. Or, your princess can check out five different colleges, from big UMass to teeny Hampshire with a drive

to Amherst, Mass.

These junior year college trips help kids assess the college atmosphere: what *they're* wearing, what *they're* eating, where *they're* hanging out. Size, location, architecture and campus spirit all are best understood when experienced.

After these initial local excursions, build a college list. A private college consultant or school guidance counselor can help brainstorm good college choices based upon your child's observations of the right "fit" and his academic profile. Stay put on your couch for a while; use Web sites or the bazillion commercial guidebooks to learn about academic programs, faculty and extracurricular opportunities.

Once your child's preferences are narrowed, then it's time to do more traveling, if possible. Resources abound to make your journeys easier. College admissions Web sites and books like Mapquest, College Quest help organize trips. For discounts on

hotels and more, try Web sites like OneBigCampus.com (Philadelphia), BaltimoreCollegetown.org or Bostonvisit.com. Skip driving and take Amtrak up on their buy-one-get-one-free deals for college visits.

Hopefully, your more focused kid will be more ready to explore college life on these trips. Maybe he's ready to chat with professors and coaches, visit classes or stay overnight in the dorms. Maybe he'll interview to make his case for admissions. With time and information, maybe now your child can pick an early decision

or early action choice.

Letting your child take a leading role in this process isn't easy. Just waiting for him to exit the car and join the college tour – or to dislodge the headphones and talk to you – can try the patience of any mortal parents. Consider this slow torture as good practice for the excruciating pain of paying those imminent college tuition bills.

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