

Faring Well at College Fairs

As you walk through the big double doors, the noise is overwhelming. People cluster around what seems like hundreds of tables, filling out cards, leafing through brochures, and competing for the attention of nicely dressed admission representatives. This could be it, you think. You could find your dream college in this very room. College fairs are an exciting chance to talk to the people in the know. Admission representatives from a variety of colleges are all gathered in one place, just waiting to answer your questions.

But it's easy to get caught up in the crowds and confusion. Soon you're crisscrossing the room (or many rooms), stopping at any booth that catches your eye or seems popular. When that happens, you end up with lots of pretty brochures, but not a lot of clear impressions about which colleges you may be interested in. Making the most of a college fair means planning your strategy before you enter the double doors.

Making a list and checking it...

"Treat a college fair like a buffet dinner," advises Susan Hallenbeck, director of undergraduate admission at Saint Leo University (FL). "There will be more there than you can possibly take in, but then again, not everything is to your taste." Experienced buffet diners know that it's best to scope out their choices before they start filling their plate.

Savvy students can do the equivalent by looking over a list of college fair participants before the fair. Choose the colleges you most want to find out more about. If you have time, research these colleges by reading information in your guidance office or by checking out guidebooks or Web sites.

"Know what you want to find out at the fair," says Paul Marthers, director of admission at Oberlin College (OH). Write up a short list of questions to ask admission representatives. To compare several schools, plan on asking the same questions at each table. The questions you ask should be unique to your interests and not easily found in standard college materials. "The college fair is a good time to talk person-to-person with the representative of that school," says Janet Helfers, guidance counselor at Mariemont High School (OH). "Your job is to think of good questions."

So cross out the questions like, "How many people are in the freshman class?" Instead, ask what the two or three most popular majors are (that can give you a good idea of the main interests of the majority of the students). If you have a particular major in mind, don't ask "How good is major X?" No college representative will tell you that a program is bad. Instead, ask how many students take that major; what research faculty members are involved in (and the opportunities for undergraduates to participate in it); or what courses you would take your first year in a particular major. Students who are undecided should ask about what services and support are available to help them explore various majors. Other things you can ask about: extracurricular activities, what kinds of students the college is looking for, what percentage of students receive financial aid, and other concerns unique to your interests and situation.

Mapping out a strategy...

Before you leave for the fair, make sure you have the following supplies: a small notebook with your list of colleges and questions you want to ask; a pen or pencil; and a backpack or tote-bag to hold all of the college information you'll be collecting. Students with access to computers may wish to print up a few sheets of self-stick address labels. Include your name, address, phone number, e-mail address, high

school, year of graduation, intended major(s), and any extracurricular activities you're interested in. At the fair, slap the address labels on the college information cards to save you time in filling out the same information over and over at each college's table.

The real strategizing begins when you arrive at the fair. Look for a map of where each college is located. If it's a relatively small fair, all the tables may be in one large room, like a school gym. At big fairs, like NACAC's National College Fairs, hundreds of colleges may be spread over many rooms and even in different buildings. Especially at the larger fairs, it's important to map out your route. Note where each college is located and plan the most efficient way to visit the colleges on your list. (For example, you want to make sure to visit all the colleges of interest to you in one room before moving to the next.)

Also please make sure to check out the schedule of information sessions: many fairs have sessions on the search process, applications, financial aid, and other issues run by experts in the field. These sessions are a great place to ask general questions about the college admission process. Your notebook and pen are great tools for keeping all those conversations straight. After you leave a table, jot down your impressions of the college and the answers the admission representatives gave you. Try to do this before you visit the next table, while your impressions are still fresh.

Teaming up...

Depending on the time of day of the fair, both students and parents may be encouraged to attend. If a family member attends a college fair with you, talk about your plan ahead of time. You may decide to split up—perhaps a parent can attend the financial aid seminar at a National College Fair so you can visit more colleges. Another option is staying together for part or all of time. You may find that your parents or siblings ask different questions than you do. Also, it can be helpful to get a second opinion on your impressions of particular colleges.

Browsing...

Planning ahead ensures that you get to visit the colleges that most interest you. But also make sure to leave time for browsing. "Be adventurous! Don't just focus on 'name' schools," says Hallenbeck. "You may find that a school you've never heard of offers the exact major, extracurricular program, etc., that you're seeking."

Following up...

By the time the fair is over, you'll have a bag filled with information about colleges—and a possible case of information overload. Don't succumb to the temptation of just piling all those brochures in some obscure corner of your bedroom. If you're feeling overwhelmed, take a day or two away from the college search. Then get out all of those brochures, along with the notes you took while at the fair, and read through them. You may find that some colleges aren't as interesting as you first thought. Others only look better the more you research them. For those colleges, follow up by filling out the information cards in the brochures or by starting to schedule college visits.

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