

## College Search and Decisions Advice/ Fall 2021, COVID-19 Edition\*

For current high school students who were planning on starting their college visits now: there are [countless articles](#) on the merits of various “Demonstrated Interest” tactics, which include (but aren’t limited to) your actual loafers echoing on a campus’ leafy paths. It’s always advisable for students entering the admissions process to research how your schools weigh demonstrated interest in comparison to other factors in the admission process, but be aware that these metric could shift dramatically in the wake of the pandemic.

The good news is the same during a typical admissions cycle: while it’s nice, you do not need to visit campuses and do not feel bad or compromised if it’s not feasible.

Visiting—and applying to—a dozen or more colleges is a relatively new phenomenon, one that was typically only experienced by the wealthy. College admissions travel has spawned its own industry, fueled by the ease of applying to many colleges at once via the Common Application and social media FOMO from images of friends and relatives with their kids on tours at USC and Harvard. In this new entirely unnecessary and inequitable era of hyper-competitive college admissions, it’s important to remember that each fall tens of thousands of kids step onto their campus for the very first time and do just fine. If you’ve done your homework using the tools here you might just be better suited to your new school than your peers that visited. And remember: you’re not moving to school permanently. Typically you’ll be on campus for two, fifteen-week stints.

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You might not be able to visit campus IRL, but like a lot of situations right now there are some workarounds and many admissions offices are creating unique and valuable virtual events. The best of these include letting prospects “sit-in” on a remote class, and Zoom chats with a group of students with similar interests and extracurriculars. But admitted students *already know what the admissions office wants them to know*. This evergreen guide shows you how to go further, independently, online:

**Instagram:** Most schools have general Instagram accounts for the school, as well as admissions, alumni, newspapers, and clubs. But don’t stop there: follow hashtags on Instagram for the school and also your interests like #OregonState #VillanovaTrack #HowardUniversityBands (scholarships can also be tracked this way). Most importantly, check out the images posted by students—not the admissions office—via location tabs. What do the dorms really look like with students in them, unsupervised? What were students posting during March 2020 as they were being told they had to leave campus? How was that managed?

**Twitter:** Though less reliable and requiring more weeding than Google news, Twitter has one important use: many academics, provosts, and university presidents use Twitter over other social media platforms. Search their comments for insights that are often personal, not from institutional PR machines. Twitter is also full of misinformation so don't invest too much time in student comments. The same goes for Facebook, it's the Yelp of college reviews. And as always, be mindful of the subjective nature of all social media.

**If there is a school you are seriously considering, setting up Google news alerts is essential.** Why? Late-breaking news isn't going to be on the admissions site and there is some news the school might not want to share with prospects that could significantly affect your experience, especially during this time of tumult. If you are interested in a specific program, sport, or professor you can get tailored news delivered as it happens, or as weekly compilations. [www.popsoci.com/set-up-google-alerts/](http://www.popsoci.com/set-up-google-alerts/) You should definitely set this up once you've accepted your spot at a school, as breaking news is usually reported first, then churned through the school's PR machine before making it to your inbox.

**YouTube:** Many colleges and individual departments and professors, sports teams, clubs, debate teams, choirs, theater departments, and students post videos, not necessarily for PR purposes. If you're interested in a specific program check if there are any lectures posted online. Are the class sizes what you've been promised? Does it align with your interests? Make sure that the *facilities* and pedagogy live up to your expectations, especially if your major requires special accommodations like labs, training centers, theatres, and art studios.

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[www.campusreel.org](http://www.campusreel.org)

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While we're talking virtual visits, take street and aerial tours via **GoogleMaps**. Why? The admissions office isn't going to show you a picture of a dorm that backs up next to a freeway, a parking garage or a huge construction site; you can "drive" around the perimeters of campus to see what adjoining neighborhoods look like, where the bus stops are, the condition of the bike paths, and more. Whatever is important to you, you'll see it here. Find out how long it takes, door-to-door, from your house to campus, including taxis, mass transit options, and airplanes. Are there nonstop flights? This has become increasingly important during COVID shutdowns and work stoppages.

**Safety:** How safe is that campus and environs? Don't rely upon an admissions work-study student guiding an in-person tour to tell you this. You can enter a name or city and select categories at [this US Department of Education website](#) that tracks campus crime: [www.ope.ed.gov/campussafety/#/institution/search](http://www.ope.ed.gov/campussafety/#/institution/search)

How safe and supportive is it for LGBTQ students? [Campus Pride](#) is a national nonprofit organization working to create a safer college environment. Its index is the premier LGBTQ benchmarking tool with a database of searchable criteria and rankings by state. You can also follow them on [Instagram](#).

Searching the **Common Data Set** is invaluable for comparing schools side-by-side. Be sure to note the *first-year retention rates* along with *four-year graduation rates*. Transferring as well as needing an extra semester or longer to graduate can add significant expense, especially if the financial aid offer is limited to four concurrent years. [www.commondataset.org](http://www.commondataset.org)

#### **A note for Juniors and younger:**

In the best of travel times, those beginning the college search process should carefully weigh if time spent on campus visits would be better spent boosting attention to grades and activities at school, doing a summer internship and/or volunteer work. Moreover, that travel money will go a long way when the first tuition bill arrives and “other fees and supplies” ventures into the thousands, not hundreds, of dollars. And yes, there are valid reasons why students should fly in to visit a school, especially if they are in a special program; sometimes the school will offer incentives or even cover the cost, especially for low-income and BIPOC students. But starting with this at-home process will make sure that when the time comes you really know that this is a priority visit for you.

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#### **Want to know more? Read:**

**[Redesigning College Admission: COVID-19, Access And Equity](#) at Forbes.com**

Excerpt: “The opportunity to travel to college campuses has long been an exercise of privilege and though some colleges and universities have “fly-in” programs that will pay for underrepresented students to visit, often there is an application and/or nomination process associated with these opportunities. The students who most need the inspiration and information provided by setting foot on campuses rarely have the chance for this experience. This is especially true for colleges and universities at a distance, which could be more affordable or a better match, but simply are not in a student’s awareness (or within their financial reach to visit).

Wil Del Pilar, vice president for higher education at the [Education Trust](#) says “many institutions use interviews or campus visits as a sign of ‘interest.’” He points out that both the outbreak of COVID-19 and the ability to pay are limiting students' ability to visit campus. He adds, “virtual tours and/or alternative contact opportunities should be implemented that do not disadvantage students in impacted areas or those who do not have the resources to travel.” Jenny Rickard, executive director of [Common App](#) agrees, arguing that “in addition to compelling residential colleges and universities to rethink how they educate their current students, the impact of COVID-19 is driving new, creative thinking for providing virtual and other alternatives to the tried and true campus visit to market their institutions to prospective students.” She adds, “while in-person campus visits may present the best opportunity for students to get a more tangible sense of a college's campus and environment, unfortunately, underserved students and low-income students, in the healthiest of times, are most likely not able to experience a live campus visit for a number of reasons, including being unaware of the opportunities to do so, financial reasons, and more.”

Heath Einstein, dean of admission at Texas Christian University says that “COVID-19 forces us to creatively consider how to turn the in-person events into [virtual programs](#), applying a multi-channel approach. Since not everyone has resources to visit campus, these virtual options can have an equalizing effect.” He explains that “of course, we are aware that not everyone has internet access, but even the most impoverished students now typically have a smartphone. We can prove commitment to equity in ways that are difficult without seeing us in action and so while this crisis has moved us in a particular direction by force, it potentially provides a library of digital content from which we can draw once we move into a more stable future.”