

Everything counts in the campus visit



By **Beth Teitell** | GLOBE STAFF JUNE 11, 2015

Sarah Weiler and her high schooler, Simon, rose early, flew from Boston to Washington, D.C., rented a car, and drove an hour to McDaniel College in Maryland, one of the schools on their list.

But before mother and son got out of the car — before Weiler had even stopped the vehicle — McDaniel was ruled out. “I can’t go here,” Simon said.

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What? Had something horrible just happened that Weiler had missed? That depends on your definition of horrible.

“I don’t like that building,” Simon said, pointing to the admissions office. “It’s so old.”

College admissions are famously a game of numbers: How many students apply? How many are accepted? How many enroll?

But there’s one thing no statistic can capture: the vagaries of the teenage heart.

It’s a lesson many parents are learning, and relearning, on the college road trip — a rite of passage for high school juniors and seniors that has been supersized as more kids

apply to more colleges, and in some cases visiting a campus has become an important way to show you really want to go there (even if you don't).

Schools are seeing huge increases in the number of visits by students considering where to apply — a monumental decision that takes into account factors including a school's cost, reputation, course offerings, athletics, and, as one mother learned, the availability of bananas in the dining hall.

William Fitzsimmons, Harvard's dean of admissions and financial aid, is expecting about 40,000 prospective students and family members to register for tours of its campus this year — more than twice as many as a decade ago. More than 70,000 visitors attended Boston University information sessions and tours in 2014, a 33 percent increase from five years ago. Over 80,000 visitors checked out Northeastern University in 2014, up from 56,000 five years earlier. In Medford, 8,187 prospective students and parents toured Tufts University in the busy month of July 2014, up from 6,825 the previous July. UMass Amherst, which does not separate out visits by accepted students from those considering applying, had almost 46,000 registered visitors in the 2013-2014 academic year, up from 35,866 in 2010-2011.

In Massachusetts, so many parent-child teams — and groups of high schoolers — are now touring schools that the circuit generates an estimated \$68 million in hotel and restaurant spending annually, according to an estimate by the Association of Independent Colleges and Universities in Massachusetts. That figure doesn't include money spent while visiting public schools, such as UMass Amherst or Bridgewater State University, or on touristy things like visits to museums, Fenway Park, or Boston Duck Tours.

The trips are costly for parents, and they can be emotionally taxing, too. “You want to help them find the nirvana they are looking for,” said Sara Cornell, a Newton mother. “But at the same time, you are stuck in a car or an airplane with an agitated 17-year-old.”

Her daughter decided several hours into a Jet Blue flight to San Francisco — somewhere over the Rockies — that the University of California, Berkeley was too far away from home.

They toured Berkeley as planned, said Cornell, who blogs about life and relationships, but she found that the college-application process was more expensive than she had anticipated, and not the bonding experience she'd hoped for. “It's an exercise in emotional management.”



KAYANA SZYMCZAK FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Lisa Gannon, left and her daughter Eliza Hering, 17, tour of the Boston College campus.

The reasons college-bound kids say no to a school are many. They reject schools because the tour guide is too preppy — or not preppy enough. Because it was raining the day they visited, or they were fighting, by text, with a boyfriend or girlfriend who has nothing to do with the school.

The sometimes seemingly random decision-making style of their target market does not come as a surprise to the colleges and universities. As Andrew Flagel, a senior vice president for students and enrollment at Brandeis

University, put it: “My job is predicting and guiding and one might say steering the behavior of 17-year-olds. As many parents would tell you, this is an uphill battle.”

Brandeis highlights everything you’d expect on a tour — its high-tech classrooms and labs, students’ access to professors, the famous Rose Art Museum — but the school also employs a strategy more common among realtors than educators: “What could be better than the smell of fresh-baked cookies when they arrive?” Flagel asked, noting that the admissions building includes a small kitchen.

What’s better than cookies? For Harry Potter fans, it’s Quidditch, said Kelly Ruoff, chief creative officer of Ologie, an Ohio-based firm that specializes in higher education branding. “Every tour starts out talking about the school’s team,” she said. Mention of school’s a cappella groups comes in a close second.

Then there are the meals. Rouff said a common question on tours is: “Do you have soft serve ice cream in the cafeteria?”

Insignificant? Perhaps. But can a generation raised in a foodie culture be blamed for caring about what it eats?

That's what Jen Cusack, a Needham mother, asked herself when her son ruled out Oberlin College in large part because the tour guide said that the Ohio school's commitment to locally sourced food meant that in the dining hall they didn't serve bananas.

"That could be a deal breaker," Noah Baker told his mom. "I mean, four years without bananas? That's a lot."

(An Oberlin representative said the school does serve bananas, of the fair trade variety, albeit in limited quantities.)

"At first we were laughing about it," Cusack said. "But then we thought, maybe that's saying something about their philosophy. It's kind of extreme."

Indeed, no less an authority on admissions than Harvard's Fitzsimmons says that while trivial factors shouldn't be blown out of proportion, gut feeling is important, too.

"You try to do this careful intellectual analysis of why one college might be a better match than another college," he said. "But in the end, people realize that any of the big decisions in life cannot be made by intellect alone. I went to Catholic high school, and the nuns would say, 'Look into your soul, if any.'"

Meanwhile, in a buddy movie starring two players who aren't always buddies, the eye rolling goes both ways. On Wednesday morning, on the sun-drenched campus of Boston College, Eliza Hering, 17, a rising high school senior from Pennsylvania, took a moment out of listening to the tour guide to deride her mother's behavior on the college trail.

"She's overly gracious," Hering explained. "She's overly energetic to say 'thank you,' and she asks everyone questions, so everyone knows she's really happy to be there."

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