

5 fabulous questions to ask a college

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Ask these questions at your next college fair, and you'll impress the college representatives (and yourself). This article is sponsored by CollegeWeekLive.

You're ready to embark on this journey called the college search, right? You probably have lots and lots of questions.

Here's a little secret about college admission counselors: We love questions. We love to talk about the college search process and the institutions we represent. And we especially love when students ask us questions beyond the basic three: location, size and available majors.

Chances are, the first place you'll meet an admission counselor is at a college fair. College fairs are the buffet dinners of the college search process: You can taste many different options, but you can only digest a limited amount of information. So what information should you seek? And how?

Take advantage of admission counselors' gift for gab! Scott Ozaroski, associate director of admissions at Hawai'i Pacific University in Honolulu, notes, "A brochure may list the majors offered at a school, but taking the time to talk to an admissions counselor can give you so much more insight. We can tell you what kinds of classes are included in the major, what internships might be available, who some of the interesting professors are, and what types of careers that major might lead to."

So don't just swing by the table of Interesting University to pick up a brochure and smile meekly at the counselor before shuffling away. Instead, walk up to the table and introduce yourself. If you don't know where the school is located or what type of institution it is—public or private, large or small—ask.

If you know what types of academic programs interest you, ask if the school offers them. Then, if the school sounds like a viable possibility, ask the questions I call the "Fabulous Five."

I wish I could say that I invented the Fabulous Five, but they were actually born of conversations I had with savvy students who knew how to mine the riches of a college fair.

Fabulous question 1:

How would you describe the student body's personality?

Each college campus has a personality, revealed through its student body. Of course, not everyone on campus has exactly the same personality, but a student body tends to value certain qualities.

For example, some campuses are politically liberal; some are conservative. A student body might especially value the arts, or athletics or community service. This question helps you determine if you might fit in well among your potential classmates.

Fabulous question 2:

How is this school distinctive?

Each school has a unique story. In fact, most schools have many unique stories. Maybe you'll learn about a newly developed internship program; maybe you'll hear about an unusual curriculum or a special program for freshmen.

Because college administrators can't include every extraordinary opportunity in publications or on Web sites, this question is one of the best ways to learn about them.

(Hint: If the counselor mentions a program or opportunity that interests you, make a note to follow up with an e-mail or a phone call to get more information.)

Fabulous question 3:

How many students transfer to another school during or after their first year?

This question offers a glimpse of how satisfied current students are. You obviously want to attend a school where your peers are generally happy.

Sometimes a high transfer rate indicates that students aren't finding what they thought they'd find at the school; sometimes a high transfer rate is related to a change in curriculum or financial aid. If the transfer rate is high, ask why and listen carefully to the response.

Fabulous question 4:

How would you describe students' relationships with professors?

I like this question better than "Who teaches undergrads." Chances are, the admission counselor will answer this question by first telling you who teaches undergraduate courses—professors or graduate assistants.

The counselor might also tell you about opportunities for students to collaborate with professors on research. Or maybe she'll mention that professors give out their home phone numbers so students can reach them outside of class and office hours. You'll have a general idea about how accessible the professors are—an important part of your college experience.

Fabulous question 5:

How do you award scholarships and financial aid?

Ah, the money question. Colleges and universities have widely different policies about scholarships. Some schools require separate applications for scholarships; some simply award scholarships based on information in a student's application. A university might offer scholarships for specific academic programs or for artistic or athletic talent. You need to know not only how to apply for these awards, but also which qualities the scholarship committees weigh most heavily.

You also need to know how a college awards financial aid, which is based on your family's need. Often, colleges and universities require you to complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). But a college might have an institutional form you must complete as well.

Beyond the Fabulous Five

The Fabulous Five will help you determine if you should spend time learning more about a college. As you continue your college search, you'll develop questions that reflect your interests and values.

One more piece of advice: Keep in touch with the admission counselors who represent schools that interest you.

Maureen Barney, assistant director of admission at Seton Hall University in South Orange, N.J., mentions a benefit these ongoing conversations offer students: Admission counselors can put you in touch with alumni or current students who will give you information you could never find in guidebooks or on Web sites.

Ozaroski and Barney agree that an admission counselor's first job is to help you find the right "fit"—the school that will best serve your interests and develop your talents.

So stop by a few tables at the college fair and whip out the Fabulous Five. You'll surprise and delight a few admission counselors, but more importantly, you'll gather valuable information for a successful college search. Happy asking!

Hilary Masell Oswald is the assistant director of admission at Cornell College.

This article is provided by The Next Step Magazine (nextSTEPmag.com), a publication that helps students prepare for life after high school.