

MAKING THE MOST OF YOUR CAMPUS VISIT

By Michael Kalafatas

"A whaling ship was... my Harvard," Ishmael told us in Moby Dick. The whaling industry is gone from Massachusetts, but higher education remains a major industry, with 60 colleges in Eastern Massachusetts alone.

How do you conduct a search from among so many? Not monomaniacally, like Ahab. The goal is not to obsess about one college, or even to fall in love with one college, but to "fall in like" with several that meet your needs and objectives.

How can you tell if a college is right for you? Here are 15 tips to make your campus visit fun and useful:

- 1) Don't overdo it. Be sure to allow at least a half-day per campus.
- 2) Give yourself adequate travel time between schools. A rule of thumb: there's always traffic in Boston. Don't forget about rush hour (7-9 a.m., 4:30-6:30 p.m.) and if you're going to be late for an interview, call.
- 3) Don your best consumer glasses. Too often students worry so much about how the college will judge them that they forget to judge the college. Kick the tires. Ask tough questions
- 4) Develop critical skills close to home. Before you spend money on a major trip, visit a couple of colleges in your area. Tour a large and a small college. You'll see what you like and don't like, and you'll use your time on the road more efficiently.
- 5) Read before you visit. The college will gladly send you information. Just call. Also consult the college guidebooks at your school or local library. But don't mistake guidebooks for gospel. Remember, they only express someone else's opinions and sometimes are factually incorrect. Your watchwords should be "check it out."
- 6) Take the campus tour, but also roam widely. Spend time with students (either stay in a dorm or strike up conversations in the cafeteria). Ask for directions freely. It's a great way to get into conversations and talk to more than one student.
- 7) Get the scoop on academic life. Visit a class. Who teaches? Regular faculty or grad students? How large are the classes? Are the faculty excited about teaching? Are they accessible? And are the students energized?

- 8) While it's okay to visit in the summer (it's when you have time and the campus has some activity), fall and spring are ideal. Avoid visits during exam time or holiday breaks. The campus will look bleak and, during exams, students are generally stressed out and grumpy.
- 9) If the college offers interviews, schedule one. Call well in advance; some schools also offer an overnight stay in the dorms or a meeting with a faculty member.
- 10) Check out the dorms, libraries and computer facilities. And, if they interest you, visit the laboratories and arts and athletic facilities. Scan student newspapers and bulletin boards for tell-tale signs about campus culture and the level of extracurricular activity.
- 11) Look beyond the campus. Remember what Mark Twain said, "Never let your schooling interfere with your education." A great deal of what you'll learn during college will happen outside the classroom.
- 12) Notice how well the buildings and grounds are maintained. Both are clues into the college's financial health.
- 13) Make sure you'll feel comfortable at the school. Check out campus activities. Is everyone included? And what about safety and security on campus?
- 14) Seek a loose fit. You are a dynamic individual and your interests, both academic and extracurricular, are likely to change. Leave room for growth.
- 15) Relax. "Life is what happens when you're making other plans," John Lennon said. You don't want to miss out on this exciting time by obsessing too much about the college search. Remember, in the end, it is you yourself that remains the most significant part of learning.