

Campus Visit Drives College Choice

PUBLISHER'S NOTE

In my 25-plus years as a consultant in higher education, and in the course of innumerable recruitment studies conducted for colleges and universities of every size, affiliation, and mission over the years, one finding has remained constant: **the campus visit is the single most influential source of information for students in college choice.** While web sites now surpass publications as a source of influence over the college decisions of prospective students, the campus visit stands in a category all its own. Given the singular importance of the campus visit in college choice, I am astounded by the attention and resources lavished on printed materials and web sites while much of the campus visit is left to chance and the whims of inadequately trained or humdrum tour guides.

My disappointment with the general conduct of campus visits and tours comes from first hand experience, both as a parent of two sons who have now finished college and as a consultant posing with my colleagues as parents on campus tours led by student guides. Some examples: During one tour, the student guide never bothered to take me to the school's beautiful new high-tech education facility, even though I had explained before the tour began that my fictional high-ability daughter had a strong interest in elementary education. At another institution, an associate admissions director, referring to the college's core curriculum in a pre-tour meeting with me and other real parents and prospects, noted that "once students got all that junk out of the way," they could focus on courses in their major. So much for the liberal arts! Such examples are legion.

Clearly, with all that is at stake in college admissions, institutions would be well advised to carefully evaluate and refine various aspects of campus visit and tour programs, particularly in light of the findings reported in this issue of StudentPoll.

What we learned is that nearly all students — of every academic ability and income level — are visiting college campuses (and most reported visiting their first and second-choice schools). The findings reveal that the hospitable nature of the community and the friendliness of the people students encountered during these visits had a significant positive impact on their interest in a school. Moreover, seeing facilities of interest to them, talking to professors, and attending classes made students more interested in the institution that ultimately became their first-choice school.

While it's apparent that colleges can't do much about their size (too large or small) or location (in a rural area, in or near a city), they can take steps to ensure that the campus visit and tour consistently provide the information, insights, and experiences that engage visiting students and parents and compellingly communicate the true distinctions and character of each institution.

Richard A. Hesel
Publisher, StudentPoll
Principal, Art & Science Group, LLC

Findings and Supporting Data

Q How much influence do visits to college campuses have on students' college decisions compared to other sources of information?

A In two words, a lot. The campus visit figures prominently in students' enrollment decisions. In fact, even when we asked students which sources of information and advice were most influential in their decisions about *where to apply*, 65 percent indicated campus visits were very influential.

Specifically, 65 percent indicated campus visits were very influential in their application decision, followed by advice or information from parents or other family members (39 percent), current students or graduates of the school (33 percent), individual web sites of colleges and universities (26 percent), and catalogs, viewbooks, and print materials from schools (25 percent).

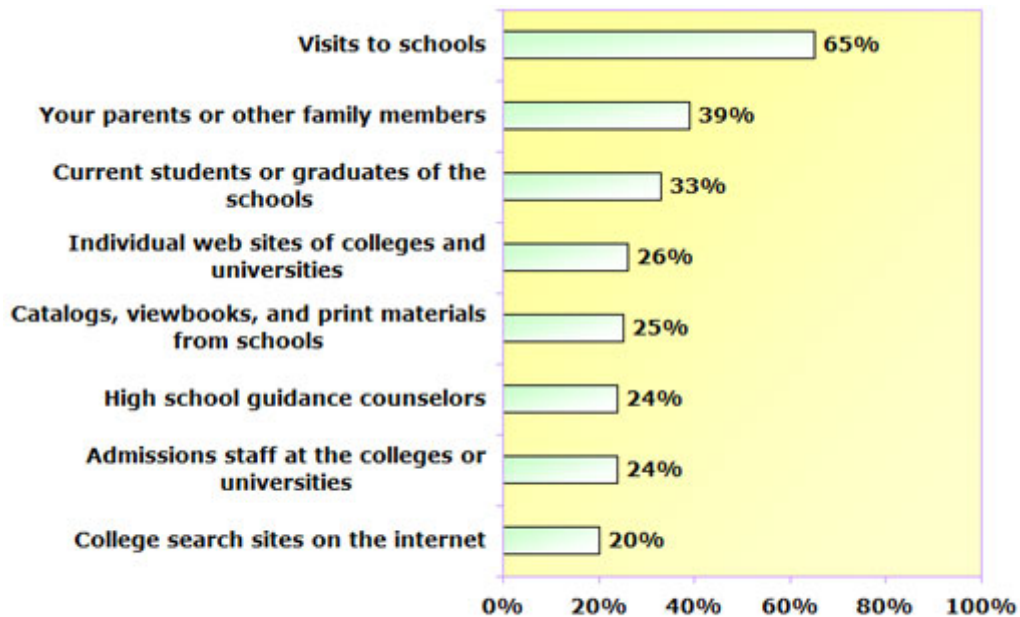


Chart 1: Most Influential Sources of Information in Student's Application Decisions

Q How many colleges did students actually visit when they were looking at schools?

A We asked 500 college-bound high school seniors to tell us how many campuses they actually visited when they were looking at colleges. Only 6 percent indicated that they did not visit a single campus. Some 18 percent visited 1 school, 23 percent two, 22 percent three, 13 percent 4, and 18 percent five or more schools. Not surprisingly, the number of campuses visited correlated directly with a number of factors related to affluence. The mean number of schools visited by respondents was 3.

Noteworthy subgroup findings included:

- Students with higher ACT and SAT scores were more likely to have visited four or more campuses than those with the lowest test scores. For example, 36 percent of students with SATs of 1270 or above, 45 percent of those with SATs in the 1090-1260 range reported visiting four or more schools compared to only 23 percent of students with SATs of 1080 or lower. A similar pattern emerges among ACT test takers.
- **By household income, the more affluent the family, the more likely it is that the student visited multiple campuses.** Thirty-four percent of students reporting family incomes of \$75K or higher reported visiting four or more schools, 31 percent of those with incomes in the \$50K-\$75K range, while only 17 percent of students with family incomes lower than \$50K reported the same.

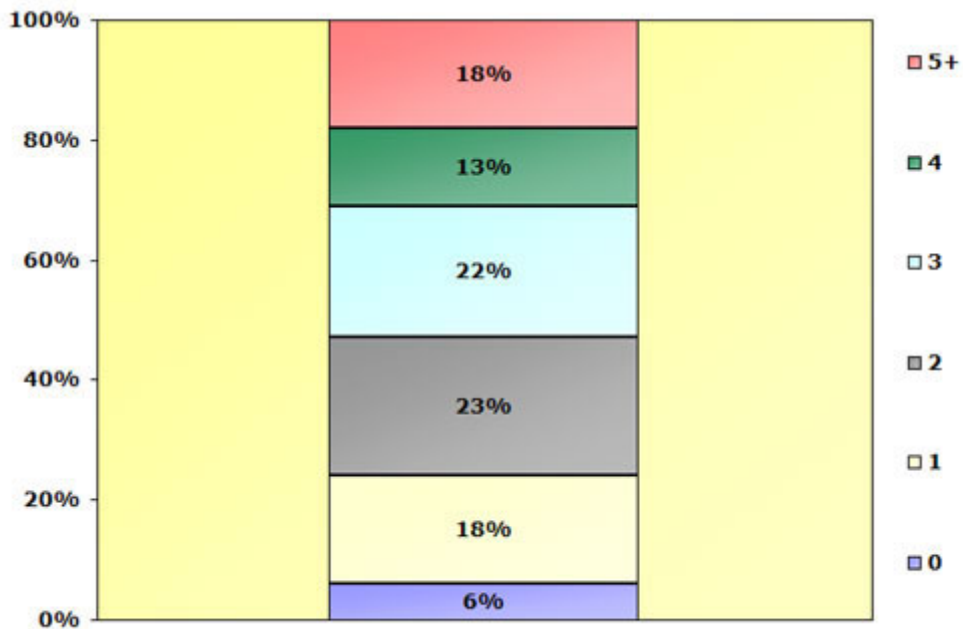


Chart 2: Number of Colleges Visited by Students

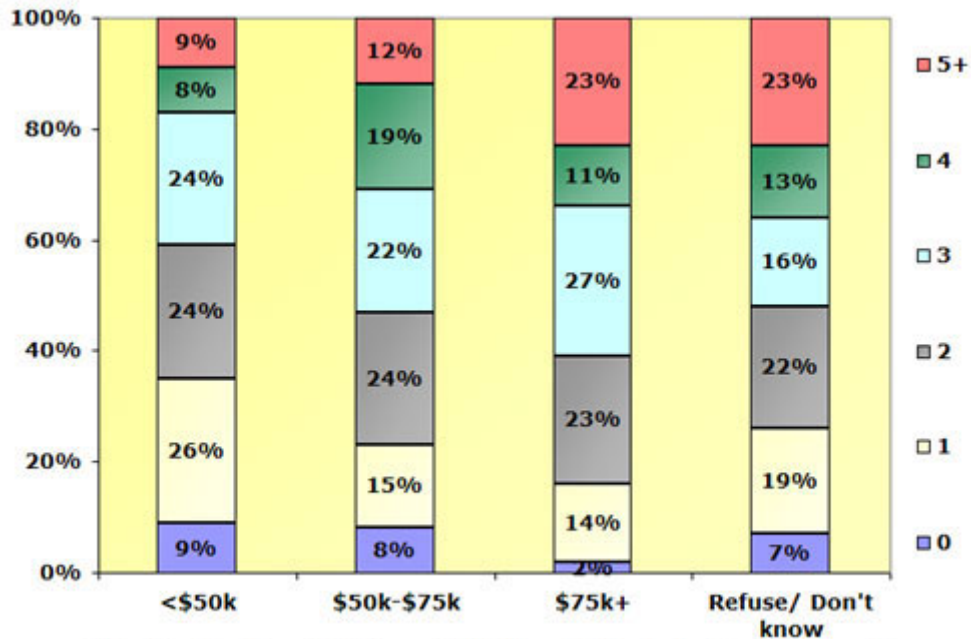


Chart 3: Number of Colleges Visited by Students (by family income)

Q What aspects of the campus visit had the greatest *positive* influence on students' college choice?

A Given the variety of factors that might influence students' impressions of a campus when they visit, StudentPoll asked the 472 students who reported visiting at least one campus to tell us what aspects of the campus visit—from the appearance of the campus and size of the school to the friendly atmosphere and facilities—had the most positive influence on their choice of a college.

Some 28 percent of respondents indicated that the appearance of the campus had the most positive influence while 28 percent also reported that the friendly people and friendly atmosphere on campus factored heavily in their choice of a college.

One interesting, statistically significant finding is that female respondents were more likely to say that the friendliness of the people and atmosphere on campus had the most positive influence compared to their male counterparts (32 percent versus 21 percent). However, 16 percent of male students reported that the facilities on campus (e.g., research lab equipment and resources) had a more positive influence on their college decision compared to 8 percent of female students.

Other interesting subgroup differences:

- Students of higher academic ability were more likely to report that the friendliness of the people and atmosphere on campus had the most positive influence compared to those with the lowest test scores.
- A high proportion of students from more affluent families were more likely to say that the quality of the residential housing had a greater influence in helping them decide what college to attend than those from families with lower household incomes.

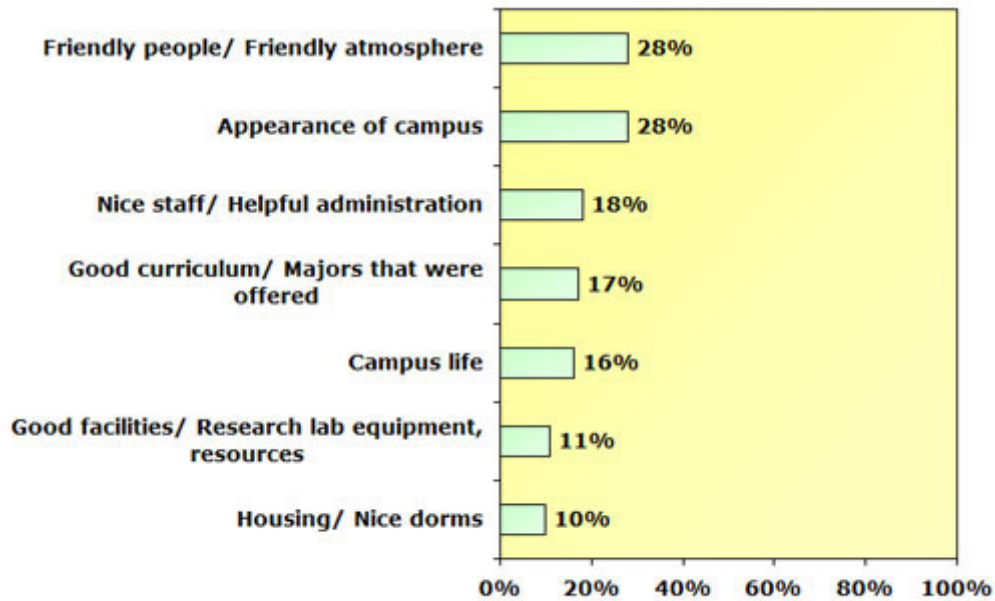


Chart 4: Percentage of Students Positively Influenced by Different Aspects of the Campus Visit (base=those who visited at least one college campus)

Q What aspects of the campus visit had the greatest *negative* influence on students' choice of a college?

A Among those who visited at least one campus, only one-quarter reported that they found nothing that adversely influenced their perceptions about a particular school. The overwhelming majority of students reported a variety of factors that they found negative or discouraging about the colleges they visited. Reasons most frequently cited about what aspects of the campus visit "turned them off" toward certain schools included: school too large (9 percent); campus appearance not appealing (8 percent); small campus (8 percent); out-dated dorms (8 percent); not clean - dorms and campus (7 percent); unfriendly atmosphere or discourteous, unfriendly students (6 percent).

By clustering factors associated with size (too large, small), campus (campus appearance not appealing, out-dated dorms, not clean) and location (rural location/urban, big city campus), we found that on a net basis, size was a negative factor for 19 percent of students, the campus for 16 percent, location for 9 percent.

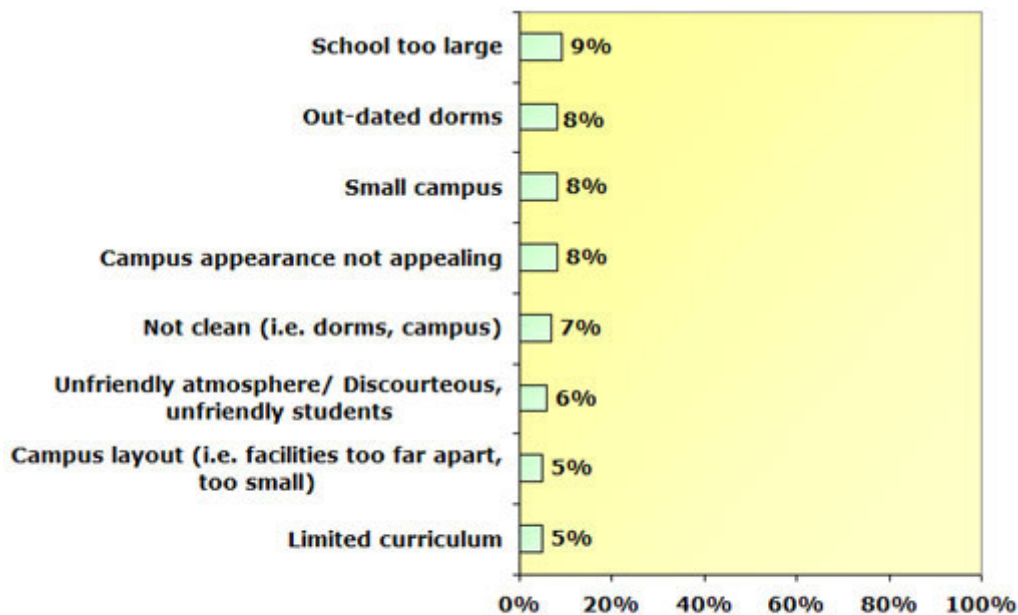


Chart 5: Aspects of the Campus Visit Negatively Influencing College Choice (base=those who reported visiting at least one college)

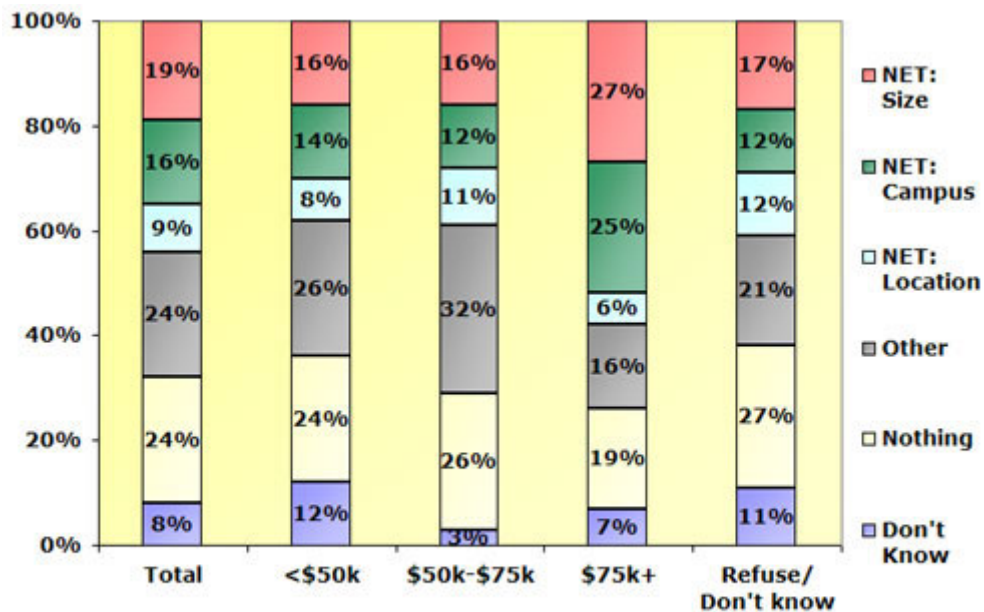


Chart 6: Size and Campus Factors Negatively Influencing College Choice (base=those who reported visiting at least one college)

Q How many students visited their first-choice school?

A Nearly all respondents who visited at least one college told us that they visited their first-choice school. In fact, only 4 percent did not. One subgroup finding of interest, 100 percent of students intending to major in business visited their top choice compared to 93 percent of those intending to major in the natural sciences, math, and engineering.

Q How many students visited their second-choice school?

A Of the nearly 300 students who visited at least one school and named a second-choice college or university, nearly 80 percent revealed that they visited their second choice. An even higher percentage of students from the Northeast and New England visited their second choice (87 percent) compared to 71 percent of students from the South. Students attending private high schools also were more likely to have visited schools identified as their second choice compared to those attending public high schools (92 percent versus 79 percent).

Q What kinds of experiences did students have when they visited their first-choice school?

A StudentPoll wanted to explore what type of organized or less structured activities or experiences students engaged in during their visit to their first-choice school. Of the 451 students who reported they visited their first-choice school, nearly all indicated they saw facilities of interest to them while 74 to 80 percent said they participated in the following: a formal tour of campus conducted by a student guide, a meeting with members of the admissions staff, and an exploration of the campus on their own without a tour guide. Some 61 percent of students also indicated that they talked to professors.

Interesting subgroup differences:

- Students intending to major in business were much more likely to have talked to professors during their campus visit compared to those intending to major in the natural sciences, math or engineering.
- By household income, 84 percent of students reporting a family income of \$75K or higher said they had explored the campus on their own, compared to 67 percent of those with family incomes in the \$50K-\$75K range and 71 percent of those with family incomes of less than \$50K.

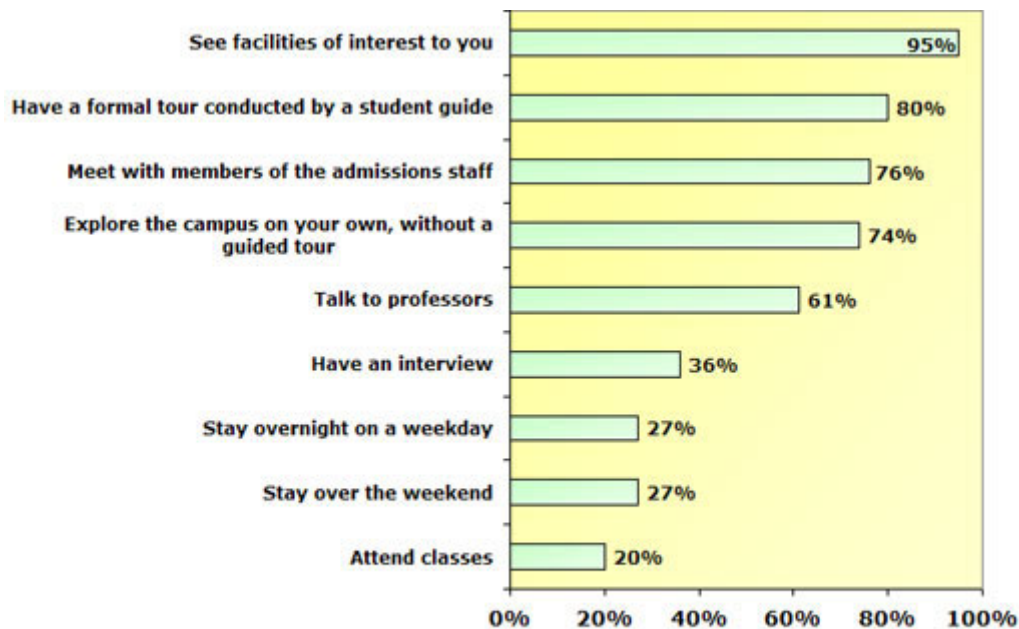


Chart 7: Percentage of Students Participating in Various Experiences During the Campus Visit at First-choice School (base=those who visited first-choice school)

Q Among those students visiting their second-choice school, what experiences or opportunities did they have during their visit?

A Given the importance of second-choice and backup schools in college deliberation and choice, StudentPoll wanted to understand the nature and substance of the campus visit students had when they visited their second-choice school. Of the more than 250 students who reported that they had visited their second-choice school, the overwhelming majority indicated that they had seen facilities of interest to them, participated in a formal tour led by a student guide, explored the campus on their own without a guide, and met with members of the admissions staff. Nearly half (46 percent) told us that they talked to professors during their campus visit, but only 20 percent reported attending a class. A very small proportion of students indicated that they stayed overnight on a weekday or weekend.

Statistically meaningful subgroup differences:

- Students reporting the highest household incomes were more likely to tell us that they explored the campus on their own compared to those reporting the lowest family incomes.
- Nearly three-quarters of the students attending private high schools indicated that they met with members of the admissions staff compared to 57 percent of students attending public high schools.

Q What aspects of the campus visit made students more interested in their first-choice school?

To gauge what effect certain aspects of the campus visit had on students interest in a particular school.

A

To gauge what effect certain aspects of the campus visit had on students' interest in a particular school, StudentPoll read respondents a list of various experiences and activities students in which they might have participated during a campus visit and then asked them whether each had made them more interested, had no effect, or made them less interested in their first choice school. Seeing facilities on campus of interest to them (90 percent), talking to professors (83 percent), and attending classes (81 percent) were aspects of the campus visit that made a high proportion of these students more interested in their first-choice school.

A higher proportion of female respondents told us that having a formal campus tour led by a student guide and meeting with members of the admissions staff made them more interested in their first choice college compared to male respondents.

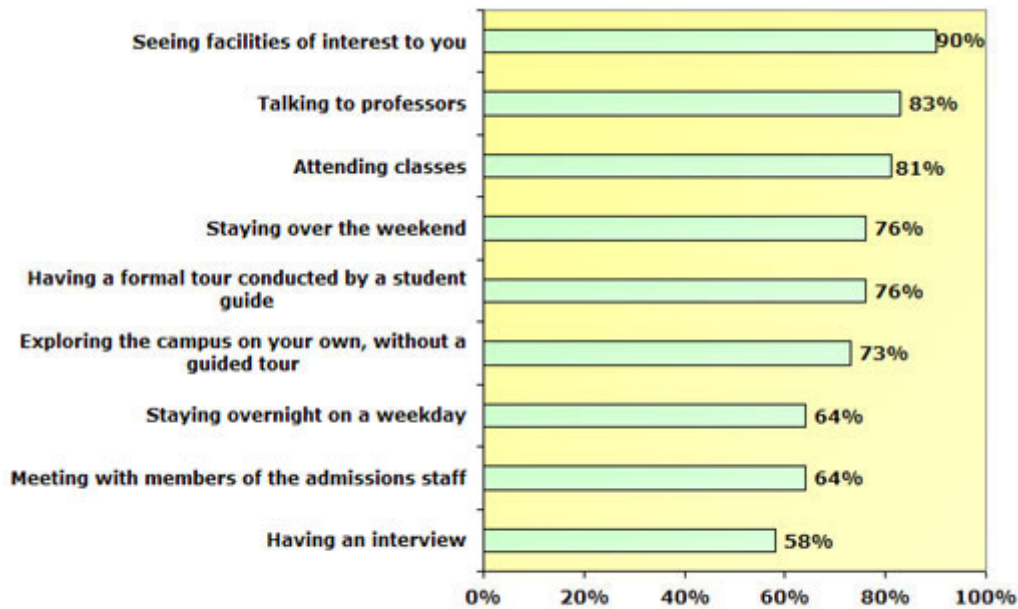


Chart 8: Aspects of the Campus Visit that made Students More Interested in First-choice School (base=those who visited first-choice school)

Q

What aspects of the campus visit made students more or less interested in their second-choice school?

A

Among those who visited their second choice schools, seeing facilities of interest to them (77 percent), having a formal campus tour led by a student guide (63 percent), talking to professors (57 percent), exploring the campus on their own (55 percent), staying overnight on a weekday (53 percent), and attending classes (50 percent) made a majority of these students more interested in their second-choice school.

In light of the fact students were asked about the positive and negative aspects of their visit to second-choice schools, it may not be too surprising that a higher proportion of students indicated that aspects of this visit made them less interested in the college. For example, 19 percent indicated that exploring the campus made them less interested in the institution. Similarly, 15 percent said that attending classes made them less interested in their second choice and 12 percent respectively indicated that having a formal campus tour, talking to professors, and staying overnight on a weekday made them less interested in their second-choice school.

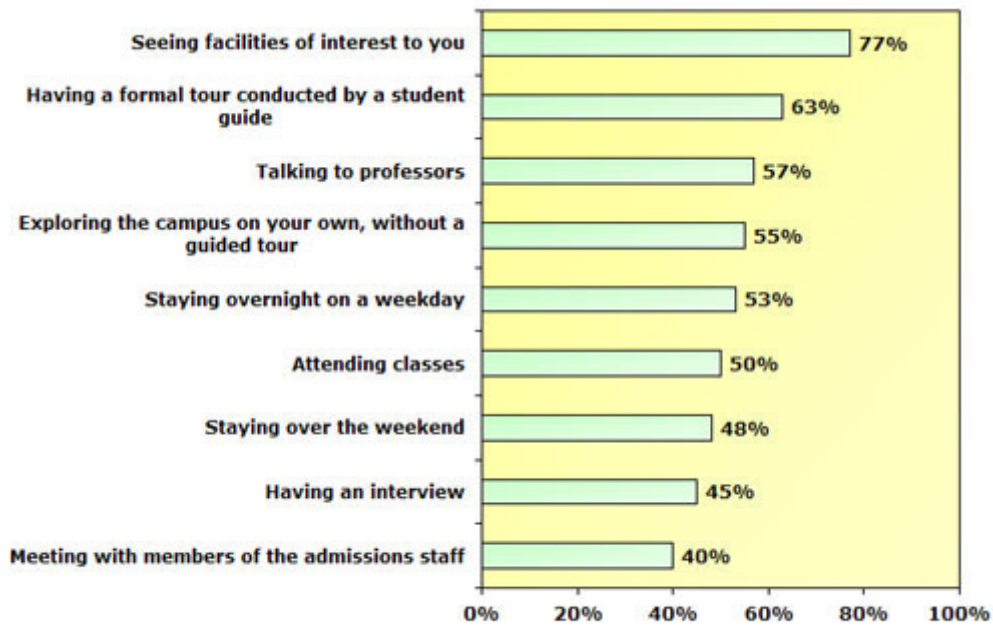


Chart 9: Aspects of the Campus Visit that Made Students More Interested in Second-choice School (base=those who visited their second-choice school)

StudentPoll is published by [Art & Science Group, LLC](#), a national leader in providing market intelligence to higher education and the non-profit sector.