**Guide for Using Your College Fair Effectively!**

**National Association For College Admissions Counseling**

Admission representatives from a variety of colleges are all gathered in one place, just waiting to answer your questions.

But it's easy to get caught up in the crowds and confusion. Soon you're criss-crossing the room (or many rooms), stopping at any booth that catches your eye or seems popular. When that happens, you end up with lots of pretty brochures, but not a lot of clear impressions about which colleges you may be interested in. Making the most of a college fair means planning your strategy before you enter those double doors.

[](http://www.nacacnet.org/EventsTraining/CollegeFairs/ncf/Pages/video.aspx)"Treat a college fair like a buffet dinner," advises a director of undergraduate admission from Florida. "There will be more there than you can possibly take in, but then again, not everything is to your taste."

Experienced buffet diners know that it's best to scope out their choices before they start filling their plate. Savvy students can do the equivalent by looking over a list of college fair participants before the fair. Choose the colleges you most want to find out more about. If you have time, research these colleges by reading information in your guidance office or by checking out guidebooks or Web sites.

"Know what you want to find out at the fair," says a director of admission at a college in Ohio. Write up a short list of questions to ask admission representatives. To compare several schools, plan on asking the same questions at each table.

The questions you ask should be unique to your interests and not easily found in standard college materials. "The college fair is a good time to talk person-to-person with the representative of that school," says one guidance counselor. "Your job is to think of good questions."

So cross out the questions like, "How many people are in the freshman class?" Instead, ask what the two or three most popular majors are (that can give you a good idea of the main interests of the majority of the students). If you have a particular major in mind, don't ask "How good is major X?" No college representative will tell you that a program is bad. Instead, ask how many students take that major; what research faculty members are involved in (and the opportunities for undergraduates to participate in it); or what courses you would take your first year in a particular major. Students who are undecided should ask about what services and support are available to help them explore various majors.

Other things you can ask about: extracurricular activities, what kinds of students the college is looking for, what percentage of students receive financial aid, and other concerns unique to your interests and situation.

Your notebook and pen are great tools for keeping all those conversations straight. After you leave a table, jot down your impressions of the college and the answers the admission representatives gave you. Try to do this before you visit the next table, while your impressions are still fresh.

**Teaming up**

Depending on the time of day of the fair, both students and parents may be encouraged to attend. If a family member attends the fair with you, talk about your plan ahead of time. You may decide to split up--perhaps a parent can attend the financial aid seminar so you can visit more colleges. Another option is staying together for part or all of time. You may find that your parents or siblings ask different questions than you do. Also, it can be helpful to get a second opinion on your impressions of particular colleges.

**Browsing**

Planning ahead ensures that you get to visit the colleges that most interest you. But also make sure to leave time for browsing.

"Be adventurous! Don't just focus on 'name' schools," says an admission director. "You may find that a school you've never heard of offers the exact major, extracurricular program, etc., that you're seeking."

**Following up**

By the time the fair is over, you'll have a bag filled with information about colleges--and a possible case of information overload. Don't succumb to the temptation of just piling all those brochures in some obscure corner of your bedroom. If you're feeling overwhelmed, take a day or two away from the college search. Then get out all of those brochures, along with the notes you took while at the fair, and read through them. You may find that some colleges aren't as interesting as you first thought. Others only look better the more you research them. For those colleges, follow up by filling out the information cards in the brochures or by starting to schedule college visits.

<http://www.nacacnet.org/EVENTSTRAINING/COLLEGEFAIRS/NCF/Pages/FaringWell.aspx>