

MAKING THE COLLEGE FAIR WORK FOR YOU

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After attending hundreds of college fairs in my previous lifetime as an admission officer, I felt it was unfortunate that high school students did not use these programs to their advantage. College fairs bring together representatives of colleges and universities to a central location to disseminate information, answer questions and recruit prospective graduates from their institution (long-term view). I would always wonder why most students did not use these resources to their advantage. Maybe they were never informed on “how to” attend a college fair. As I tell students, first impressions can carry a lot of weight so put your best foot forward!

Before the Fair

Conduct research ahead of time. I have heard too many times high school students walk into a college fair and complain, “What do I do now?” The planning needs to start even before you step foot into the fair. To save you from writing your name and address ten thousand times over and over and over again, create labels with pertinent information. Full name (no nicknames), current home mailing address, phone number with area code (optional), month and year of high school graduation, and an appropriate email address would be relevant information to be put on a label. With a dozen or two of these labels, you will be able to spend more time asking questions and less time massaging your cramping hand.

Come with a list of questions. Do not blandly intone “Uh . . . what do I need to get into your school?” Try “Can you tell me the averages or range of academic credentials of students admitted last year?” Instead of the “How strong is your psychology department” question, try asking “Tell me more about your psychology department?” Bring a writing tablet and pen to jot down the answers to your questions.

At the Fair

Bring a backpack for pamphlets and brochures, but take only what you need. In addition to your list of schools, investigate others that might be of interest. Ask intelligent questions! College reps want to discuss their school with interested students, not rattle off statistics about cost and admissions standards. If there is something that you definitely want in your college of choice, be sure to ask colleges and universities if they can accommodate your area of interest.

Ditch your friends and do your work! Depending on the size of the college fair, representatives of many institutions are eager to engage you in conversation about their school and your college search process. Use this time wisely! Social hour can wait till later.

Check out schools you may have never heard of or that have not come up in your college search. As always, ask questions.

Introduce yourself to the college representative, shake their hand and state your interest in their school. It seems like a little thing, but this makes a tremendous first impression!

If you like a school already or develop an interest in one, get the name of the rep at the program or the contact person at the college. In short, ask for a business card. If you have a sincere interest in a school, it may play a part in the admissions decision down the road.

After the Fair

Organize. Buy one or two plastic crates for the information you have collected. The interest cards you filled out will yield more brochures through the mail over the course of the search process. File publications accordingly. Students should take some time to file college information - such as emails - in an electronic format as well.

If you have not put your name on a college mailing list, do so. The preferred way to get this done would be online. Colleges and universities encourage and prefer students accessing their admission’s web site for additional information.

Transcribe your notes into a format that helps you compare schools on your list. You may want to send a letter or email to the college reps you met to reiterate your interest in their school. Start making plans to visit schools that rank high on your list.

The experience at a college fair program can be overwhelming: dozens upon dozens of colleges and universities, high school students milling around, colorful publications of students learning and having fun, etc. To help make sense of this information overload, one must do their homework beforehand. The knowledge gained and contacts established will help students navigate the path toward their school of destination.