

Armchair College Fair

Before you go, it's best to know all the facts

By Rob Cullivan
Staff writer

Before visiting any college or university, anyone interested in a higher education degree needs to invest in two key items — a pen and a notepad. That advice comes from Mark C. Milroy, chief officer of programs and services for the National Association for College Admission Counseling.

"I was always impressed by the student who pulls out a pad or a list of questions because that shows that a lot of thought went into the interview," he said in a phone interview from the association's headquarters in Alexandria, Va.

Milroy, whose organization consists of 6,300 high-school and college admissions counselors, stressed that students — and whoever foots their bills — learn as much as they can about the institutions they are considering.

Milroy's belief that no student can know too much about colleges is a view shared by Jo Ann Tooley, senior editor of "America's Best Colleges," an annual supplement published in September in the weekly magazine *U.S. News & World Report*. The supplement ranks U.S. universities and colleges and contains several articles on such issues as academics, social life and housing.

"There are lots of questions you should ask about financial aid ... class size ... and what sort of housing provisions the schools make when they find themselves overcrowded," she said in a phone interview from the magazine's offices in New York City.

Parents and students should also be unafraid of asking what might be considered uncomfortable questions. For example, parents should ask questions about regulations that define student-professor relationships, including romantic ones, according to Martin Anderson.

Who will teach me? Real live professors or graduate students?

What kinds of financial aid — loans, work-study, scholarships or gifts — are available, and what are the requirements for getting them?

What extracurricular activities — sports teams, academic or cultural clubs, theater groups, or student government offices are available on campus?

Anderson is a senior fellow at the Hoover Institution, which conducts research in such areas as economics and government policy, at Stanford University in California. A former senior domestic policy adviser to Presidents Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan, Anderson wrote a scathing critique of higher education in 1992 titled *Impostors in the Temple: American Intellectuals Are Destroying Our Universities and Cheating Our Students of Their Future*.

In part, Anderson's book examined how many highly acclaimed universities and colleges use the names of prominent professors to lure students to their campuses, only to use graduate — and in some cases, undergraduate students — to actually teach.

"An increasing number of professors not only do not like to teach (and avoid it whenever possible) but, even worse, have little regard for the teaching efforts of their colleagues ...," he wrote. "Professors don't lecture or lead classroom discussions? Don't grade? Don't counsel? Then who does? Students."

His book pointed out that a combination of several factors has led to this situation. One is the fact that many professors neglect their teaching duties so that they can research, write and publish papers that earn their schools prestige, yet which more often than not, are read by almost nobody.

In a phone interview with the *Courier* from his Stanford office, Anderson urged the parents of high school seniors to remember that they will be shelling out thousands of dollars to pay for an education that may appear to be a lot better on paper than it is in reality. Hence, no question should be considered beyond answering by any staff person at any college or university, he said.

"If you run into a school that's arrogant, you may want to go someplace else," he said.

Milroy, Tooley and Anderson all pointed out four key areas for students to explore when deciding whether to attend a particular college or university: academics, financial aid, housing and campus life. What follows is a list of some of the questions the experts said should be asked of any institution before a student enrolls in it.

ACADEMICS

Who will teach me? Real live professors or graduate students? And how will I be graded by particular professors? Will my grade be based on classroom discussion, test performance, or writing assignments? What will I be tested on — the lectures I hear, the material I read, or some combination of both?

What is the average size of a class in my major? Tooley said some lecture classes today contain as many as 900 students. However, both Tooley and Anderson added that some students may be willing to endure large classes at famed universities because they know the institutions' names are a ticket to suc-

cess in the job world.

What is the average grade point average of an incoming freshmen class, and what is it at the end of that class's first year? Some institutions inflate students' grades, Anderson said, even of students who were somewhat average in high school.

"If they're giving out high grades like box tops, then the parents shouldn't be surprised when their kids are so smart," Anderson said.

Milroy also cautioned students and parents to be wary of any institution that tries to sell itself by belittling the competition. College is an extremely personal choice, he said, and any college official should be ready and willing to point out that his or her institution may not be the right fit for a particular student.

Milroy also stressed that students should find out what kinds of tutoring services are available when they are having difficulty in their classes. Students should also find out what kinds of internships are available to them, and what kind of career counseling the college offers, he said.

FINANCIAL AID

What kinds of financial aid — loans, work-study, scholarships or gifts — are available, and what are the requirements for getting them? What are the application materials needed for financial aid, and what are the deadlines for submitting financial aid forms?

Will my request for aid affect my chances for being admitted to your college? Will any schol-

arships I have received or may receive reduce the amount of financial aid for which I'm eligible? What government financial aid programs are available for me?

Does this college allow me to pay my tuition in installments? And where can I find sources of financial aid not available through the college?

Tooley also urged students to ask whether or not a large financial aid award given freshman year will be there for the rest of the student's years at the college. Otherwise, a student may have to withdraw in his or her sophomore year, she said.

HOUSING

What kind of on-campus housing is available? How are my roommates selected? And what happens if we don't get along?

Where will I stay if the school dormitories are overcrowded? Tooley said some schools have been known to place freshmen in student lounges when too many students show up for too few rooms.

Is there housing available through fraternities and sororities? If so, what does it take to get into the "Greek" life?

If a dormitory is co-ed, will I be sharing a bathroom with members of the opposite sex?

How safe is the campus? Is there security provided in the dormitories? How safe is it to live off-campus in the college's surrounding neighborhoods? Where can I get statistics on crimes committed on your campus?

What authority do residential directors or residential assistants have over me? What kind of visitation policies do you have? Is alcohol permitted on campus?

CAMPUS LIFE

What extracurricular activities — sports teams, academic or cultural clubs, theater groups, or student government offices — are available on campus? What types of entertainment are available both on and off campus?

Anderson joked that students may light up at the prospect of attending a "party" school. But their parents should look for a more sedate academic environment, he said.

All three experts also urged students and parents to ask questions of the college's students and employees.

"Go into the campus coffee shop and talk to the students," Anderson said.

Anderson also urged prospective students to visit colleges when they're in session, and not while the school is on break.

Milroy reiterated his point that students can't learn too much about their prospective intellectual homes. Where they go to college may affect everything they eventually do as adults, he said, including what they do for a living, who they marry or where they live.

"There really isn't an unfair question," Milroy said. "For many families, or for most families, this is the most important decision that the student will make in their life."



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