***Making the Most out of a Virtual College Tour***

Whether you've been talking to your school counselor, your parents, friends, parents' friends, friends' parents, or any other combination thereof, you've probably been told that it's a good idea to [visit the campuses](https://insights.collegeconfidential.com/3-types-college-tours) of the colleges you're strongly considering before committing to go there. After all, what seems like a dream college on paper to other students can sometimes feel like a nightmare to others. Trust me — any time you might save now is going right out the window if you have to [transfer to another school](https://insights.collegeconfidential.com/how-to-transfer-colleges) later on!

However, the reality of the situation is that we can't always travel to every school. Distance is a consideration, and with that, the cost of traveling. It's one thing to check out the local schools — and you should always start there, just so you have a sense of what to look for once you start getting further away — but it's another to visit an overseas campus, or one thousands of miles away. Colleges understand this, which is why many do their best to offer online tours of their campus. They're no substitute for the real thing, but they're better than nothing at all, and now more than ever, with [COVID-19 temporarily shuttering many physical locations](https://insights.collegeconfidential.com/cant-visit-campus-coronavirus) and rescheduling travel plans, it's worth checking them out.

**Take Notes and Screenshots**

The one advantage to an online tour is that it's much easier to record your thoughts than when you're trying to keep pace with a group of other people. Feel free to take a screenshot of any image that catches your fancy, or bookmark the page if it has a direct URL. Also make sure you interact with images as much as you can. Some may be static photos, but you may encounter some panoramic views that you can rotate around.

* **Tip 1:** Write down your first impressions and then, later on, revisit them and see if you still feel the same way.
* **Tip 2:** Always come up with at least one question to ask. This ensures that you're more actively looking at these images than you would be otherwise.

**Maintain the Big Picture**

Many online tours will show you both a street-level view *and* a bird's-eye map of the location. This helps you to get perspective that is missing from a remote tour, where you're not physically walking between locations.

* **Tip 3:** Record the distance between common places on campus and replicate that walk in your own neighborhood. It's important that you know what that distance feels like — small things like the hike from your prospective dorm to the dining hall can add up when you have to do them multiple times each day.
* **Tip 4:** For extra credit here, check the weather listings for that campus, or try to find the average highs and lows over each semester. If at all possible, try to take your walks at different times of the year. If you're not normally a cold-weather person but you're set on a northern college, you might be looking for a smaller, more centrally located campus.

**Get a Second Opinion**

When you're on an actual tour, you don't have to assume that everything you're being told is accurate. That's because you can ask other students on the campus what they think and ask follow-up questions of your in-person tour guide (as opposed to a virtual host). But guess what? You can still do that with these online, remote tours. It just means that you're going to have to reach out to students, alumni, and admissions officers through email.

* **Tip 5:** Always reach out to an admissions officer with specific questions. Not only will this get you some much needed clarity on the things that the virtual tour cannot show you, but will also help you make an impression with the school. It may seem like nothing to send an email, but that one little action can go a long way in helping to set you apart from other students, especially if you ask specific questions that can't simply be answered on their website.
* **Tip 6:** Though it may be a little more difficult, try to reach out directly to current students or, barring that, alumni. (This is what we've done with our book [The Best 385 Colleges](https://www.princetonreview.com/college-rankings/best-colleges?exid=cb132924-36a4-4676-a2fe-06420599d844), which is filled with insider observations from current students.) While this sort of outreach won't win you any points with the admissions officials, it will provide you with the sort of firsthand knowledge about the unseen pros and cons of the school and the curriculum that you can't get from simply browsing pictures online.

The moral of this story is very simple: Even if you can't physically visit all the schools you're considering, that doesn't mean you should skimp out on your research — it just means you have to get more creative about the ways in which you gather it. For instance, consider using an online map service to get street-level views of any nearby off-campus hotspots as well! There's no need to make assumptions about what you'll have access to once you make this commitment. Take action to get the answers you need ([we'll help as much as we can](https://www.princetonreview.com/college-rankings/best-colleges?exid=cb132924-36a4-4676-a2fe-06420599d844)).