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8 Questions for Prospective College Students to Ask at a College Visit

How many of my classes will be taught by faculty vs. graduate assistants?

Many graduate assistants are good instructors, but full-time faculty (especially at teaching, vs. research institutions) are subject to rigorous ongoing review of their teaching. They are almost always more experienced in the classroom, and they have access to a wide range of professional-development resources to continuously improve their teaching.

What percentage of classes are taught by full-time vs. adjunct faculty?

Adjuncts are a valuable resource for colleges and universities. They can provide very specialized expertise and the insights of active practitioners. Most institutions have a cadre of excellent adjunct instructors who cover some courses across the curriculum. Unfortunately, there are also numerous institutions where full-time faculty members teach only a minority of classes. This presents students with less continuity and limited accessibility to their faculty outside of class. Ideally, at teaching institutions, about 80% of classes should be taught by full-time faculty.

What is the student-faculty ratio and the average class size?

Lower student-faculty ratios increase individualized learning opportunities. Tutorials (office hours included), guided independent work, and out-of-class interactions with faculty are hallmarks of deep learning experiences. Because teaching loads vary by institution, average class size is not always parallel with student-faculty ratio. A recent marketing study showed that many prospective students associated small class size with remediation. Small class sizes allow students to be more actively engaged and classes are more individualized to the students. For some activities, a large class can be preferable, like symphonic band. In laboratories and most traditional subjects, smaller is almost always better.

What is the 4-year and 6-year graduation rate?

Investing in a college education is equated with investing in the advantages associated with completing a degree: career opportunities and often significantly enhanced earnings.

Nationally, only 1 in 4 students that enroll in college will earn a degree (associate's or bachelor's) in 4 years. The average graduation rate for four-year institutions is 60.4%, but that is based on completing in six years.

In many regions of the U.S, students may be delayed in graduating because of limited access to some requirements. In Pennsylvania, the private sector has higher graduation rates than the state-affiliated institutions, and those private schools have a much higher rate of completion in four years.

What percentage of graduates have completed an internship, job, or research project that demonstrated that they could apply what they learned in class to real-world tasks?

Some degree programs include internships as a graduation requirement. Student teaching for education students was one of the first, but experiential application of what one learns in the classroom has become acknowledged as a best practice. It allows students to use and internalize what they have learned with an opportunity to reflect and consult on the experience with a faculty advisor. These are the graduates who not only have good transcripts, but also compelling resumes.

Ideally, students should be able to have some of these experiential opportunities early on in their studies as a way of discerning their true affinity for career paths they are considering.

What percentage of graduates complete a study-away experience, and how is it supported?

Study away in which students meaningfully engage with a culture different from their own provides a truly profound learning experience. It is one of the principal high-impact practices in higher education, especially for diversity and global learning. Even so, pre-pandemic, only about 11% of college graduates had studied abroad. Institutions with high study-away rates have infrastructures and academic support to help students get the most out of their cultural immersion.

Institutions that offer a study-away experience means it is integrated into the life of the university. Rather than being "academic tourism," it is tied to the university's learning goals with classes to prepare students for the experience and to interpret what they learned afterward.

How is writing taught during the first year?

Clear effective writing is one of the most valuable skills in the workplace. Students arrive at college less and less well prepared as writers. Ideally, writing will be taught across the curriculum. First-year writing programs are especially helpful in setting students up for success throughout their matriculation.

Be sure to ask about out-of-class support, like a writing center or peer tutoring. In my experience, the students who most frequent writing centers are those who need some extra help and the best students at the university. The latter know that an extra set of eyes and peer review make their work even better.

What are their job and graduate-school placement rates?

These rates are meaningful in revealing how well students are prepared for post-graduate success. They also are a good indicator of how well the career center supports and guides students as they transition into careers and post-baccalaureate education.

Other Considerations for Your College Search

Don't assume a school (especially private institutions) is unaffordable until you have gone through the financial-aid process.

Private and public institutions have significant financial aid to recognize merit and need. In many cases, private institutions with high price tags may provide the most affordable options to students once financial aid has been awarded. These same institutions are likely to have answered the previous questions more favorably than their seemingly more affordable public neighbors.

Be sure to choose a college that will challenge you.

A college should provide a transformative education. It should provide opportunities for students to discover capacities they did not know they possessed. Often talented students who have had limited educational opportunities before college will settle for an institution that won't stretch them. Ethical institutions only admit students who can succeed on their campuses. Be sure to pick one that will help you develop the most fully before and after graduation.



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Do you have any more questions?



Don't be afraid to consult with a financial planner. Give us a call or email Advent Partners today to set up a free meeting to discuss educational planning or any other topic!

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