

SOCIAL TONE: MANAGING THE “TOUCHY FEELY” FACTORS IN COLLEGE SELECTION

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The social tone, or campus culture, can make or break a student's happiness and success in college. It's also one of the most difficult campus qualities to understand.

Campus diversity, religious affiliation, degree of liberalism/conservatism, and style of the learning environment “jell” together to create the unique campus experience. A student must feel comfortable in the environment in order to engage and receive the learning. A bad reaction to campus life could result in detachment, boredom, or a feeling of isolation.

Educational consultants can provide value-added service by making a client aware of the benefits and challenges of different cultural styles on campus, and by helping to define fit on this basis. Some baseline data are available, but specific examples of the schools' philosophy in practice, and whether it impacts all students, are very enlightening.

Over two-thirds (70%) of the students surveyed in the 2006-07 Post-Secondary Planning survey from the National Research Center for College & University Relations (NRCCUR) prefer a “moderate social environment” on campus, 10% prefer a conservative environment, and 20% prefer a liberal environment. More than 42% of students prefer a denominational, religious-affiliated college.

There are no independent statistics that classify all colleges by whether they are liberal, conservative or “moderate.” Young American's Foundation identified its Top Ten Conservative Colleges through a review of stated missions and identification of programs that emphasize principles of smaller government, strong national defense, free enterprise, traditional values, and an emphasis on Western civilization studies.

Generally, the larger the campus the less likely it is that extreme liberalism or conservatism will dominate the environment. On the other hand, minority groups can cling together at larger schools, making it harder to experience this kind of diversity, unless it is “institutionalized” in the classroom and student housing environments.

In the classroom, the extent of student/faculty collaboration, and the level of student competitiveness, reflect the campus culture and are palpable. “Collaborative learning” is a result of the social experience

of working together to solve a problem, complete a task, or create a product. An indication of a college's level of commitment to collaborative learning is the number of “interdisciplinary courses” offered. These courses allow students to enter and leave with very different technical skills, but to learn while developing collaboration skills. Teachers from different departments also often collaborate in creating the coursework.

The best time to dig deep into a college's culture is after the client has determined that the college meets the student's academic, financial, and practical needs, and has visited once. When your client has put together a final list of eight to ten colleges that meet all of the student's basic criteria, it's time to further evaluate the student's chance for success at them:

1. Read about the college's mission statement and strategic plan, and look at the president's message on the Web site. Ask to see the most recent student satisfaction survey, which should be on file in the president's office or posted on the Web site.
2. Encourage your client to ask college representatives about the social tone, campus culture (or campus climate), and to provide examples of how they personally experience it. Don't assume that a college affiliated with a religious institution will be evident in daily campus life.
3. After the client has been accepted, but before the financial aid offer is accepted, encourage a second visit to take advantage of overnight stay programs that may be offered. Barring that, the client should pay attention to verbiage used in event posters, student newspapers, and presentations, and ask random students on campus for their opinion about the campus climate.

It may be possible to visit or call the residence halls, and ask the same questions that were asked of official representatives. Barring that, published student-written guides and online forums about campus life can be consulted for objective feedback on specific colleges.
4. Interview faculty members (especially those in the chosen field of study). Ask for specifics about:

- Activities in which students from different backgrounds meet and work together, and which impact the majority of students, not just members of club or academic program.
- How often students work in teams to complete assignments, solve problems, or apply course content. How frequently students engage in service learning or take part in community-based projects, to fulfill class requirements.
- How many students collaborate on research with faculty members. How many interdisciplinary courses are offered and whether they are open to all students.
- How many students are involved with living and learning communities. Ask how the faculty is involved with these communities. A “supportive campus environment” is correlated best with colleges that have strong retention and graduation rates.

While you can discuss campus culture and make your client aware of its impact on happiness and success, don't expect tremendous insight from a young student. Coach parents to withhold their personal judgments about campus cultures and to listen for genuine enthusiasm from their child to zero in on their final selection.

Jill Bernaciak is author of the What's Your Major portfolio/workbook. For more information, visit www.whatsyourmajor.net.