



How to Make the Most of an In-Person College Fair Experience

You walk into this giant room lined with rows and rows of tables filled with college reps and nervous students lined up ready to ask their questions and your first reaction is like, "Whuuuuuut" and then (if you're kind of an introvert, like me) you want to either run the other way or just go sit in the corner somewhere and text your friend, "Where u at?"

Here's a secret: you're not alone.

There are tons of students and adults and (let's face it) even college reps who are overwhelmed by college fairs too.

But guess what? There's a way to make your college fair efficient, productive and (get this) even fun.

How? Below are five ways.

1. Decide on a goal for your college fair experience. Why are you going in the first place? Here are some reasons that students at the above college fair shared with me when I asked them why they were there:

- "To like, find out about some schools."
- "To learn about, like, college...?"
- "Because my counselor/parents are making me." (Props for being honest, at least.)

Here are some better reasons to go to a college fair (that will actually help you get into college):

- To make a meaningful connection with a rep from a college that a) you're interested in and b) that tracks demonstrated interest.
- To generate content for your "Why us" essay.

Lemme break those down for you right quick:

Demonstrated interest is a system some colleges use to track which students are super duper interested in their school (and therefore more likely to attend). Think of it as "scoring points" with a college. Some ways you can score demonstrated interest points include a) requesting information from the college, b) attending a virtual information session or student panel, c) interviewing with an admissions rep or alumnus.

For more on "demonstrated interest," check out this blog post called [Demonstrated Interest: A Brief and Practical How-To Guide](#)

Or this [podcast episode with Monica James](#)



The **"Why us" essay** is a supplemental essay required by many schools that asks some version of, "Why would you like to attend our school?" Why am I telling you this? Because (write this down): You can ask the school rep some specific questions and, in effect, have that rep help you write your "Why us" essay. (I'll explain how in a sec.) Plus, you can write in that essay, "When I spoke to [insert rep name] at [insert college fair] she shared that..." which could demonstrate even more interest. #DoubleBonus

How do you check the demonstrated interest box and generate great material for your "Why us?"

2. Prepare 3-5 interesting, specific questions for the college reps.

Why do this? Because specific, interesting, questions will lead to more specific, interesting conversations, and the rep is more likely to remember you. Why is that potentially a good thing? In some cases, the rep you meet at the college fair may be the one who ends up reading your application. (Really? Yes.) Not all the time, but sometimes--and this is especially true for smaller schools.

What should you ask? Here are some quick DOs and DON'Ts:

DON'T

Don't ask anything you can easily Google:

"What's your student-to-faculty ratio?"

"Is it cold there?"

"Do you have Biology?"

DO

Do ask specific questions that invite a personal response.

"What are the three coolest things about your school?"

"Where do you like to eat on campus?"

Don't ask general questions:

"What's your school like?"

"Is your [fill in the blank] program good?" (They'll all say it's great.)

Do ask specific questions relevant to your major:

"Do students have access to film equipment during their freshman year?"

"How easy is it to take classes in the School of Journalism if I major in Physics?"

Stressed about the questions? Not sure what to ask?

Then do this: Go up to the rep, smile, and introduce yourself. Then ask that exhausted rep how they're doing. (Really? Yeah.) Just connect on a human level. Be present, then just see where the conversation takes you. Monica James (of the podcast I mentioned above) advises students to treat these interactions like a mini mini interview, saying "more than anything, it's about your Presence." So stay curious, and ask some questions.

Want to know another way to avoid being overwhelmed?



3. Spend an hour putting together a preliminary college list before you go.

How? Use this resource: [How to Create a Great College List](#):

Then:

4. Pick 3-5 schools from your preliminary list that you really want to talk to.

Why 3-5 reps? Because depth is better than breadth. I'd say it's better to have 10-minute conversations with 3-5 reps than 1-2 minute conversations with 25 reps.

Also: you're more likely to hit the 3-5 goal. Once you do, if you feel like it, talk to a few more—BY THAT POINT YOU'RE IN BONUS TERRITORY.

5. Talk to a rep from a school you've never heard of, especially one who has no one in front of them. Why? First, it might help you expand your sense of what kinds of colleges are out there. Second, those reps are more likely to be the actual person reading your application.

In fact, at a recent college fair I went up to five reps who had no one standing in front of them and I asked all five, "Do you track demonstrated interest?" All five said yes. Then I asked, "What are the odds that you'll be the application reader for a student that you meet here today. Four out of five said yes and the fifth one happened to be a Dean of Admissions for her school, filling in for a rep on maternity leave—BUT HEY, SHE WAS THE DEAN.

Why are these small schools at these fairs? Chances are they are recruiting in your area. In other words, many smaller schools are often "under-represented" from certain parts of the country (yours?), so they're at the college fair trying to get more students to apply. What does it mean if they don't have many students from your area? Because schools value diversity (and because there is such a thing as "geographical diversity") you may be just the kind of diversity they're looking for... this sometimes means your application may be seen more favorably AND you might even get a little scholarship money. So go talk to these folks!

So let's recap:

1. Have a two-pronged goal:
 - a. To "demonstrated interest" in a college AND
 - b. Generate one gem for your "Why us" essay
2. Prep 3-5 great questions (or just smile and make a personal connection).
3. Work on your college list before you go, if you can.
4. Pick 3-5 schools (not 8-10) to talk to.
5. Talk to at least one rep from a school you've never heard of.